

Understanding autism in adults



Autistic children grow up to be autistic adults. Autism is not something that you grow out of – it is an intrinsic part of who autistic people are, and while autistic adults face difficulties from living in a neurotypical world, many would not want to be any other way.

Most of the writing and resources available about autism is focused on autistic children. This is understandable – in some places at least, there is now much better provision for identifying autistic children and supporting them than used to be the case, and parents of autistic children want to learn about neurodivergence and help their children as much as they can.

But autistic adults often also need support and should not be forgotten. Many people who are adults now went through the education system when identification and diagnosis of autism was much patchier, so they may not yet be diagnosed or even recognise that they may be autistic.

They will almost certainly be aware that they are different in some ways from most other people and that they experience the world differently in some respects.

This resource is aimed at setting out the issues which can be faced by autistic adults, the types of support that may be required and the enormous strengths that autistic adults can bring which are sadly massively under-utilised in many cases.

As always when dealing with autistic people, remember that they are all different and autism affects each of them in different ways in a unique combination of impacts. In all cases, it is essential to discuss needs and issues with the individual concerned to determine what works for them.



How can autism affect adults?

Autistic people are not better or worse than others, just different. While there is no single trait of autism that is present in all autistic people, there are a number of areas where many autistic people experience differences which can be challenging to manage in a world designed for non-autistic people.

A very common area of difference is sensory experience. Many autistic adults are over or under sensitive in certain areas. You may be used to autistic children who need ear defenders in loud environments or who struggle with bright lights or certain textures of clothes, and these sensory differences continue into adulthood. But as with many areas of life, what can be acceptable for young children in society can be less tolerated and accommodated in adults.

Autistic adults may also struggle greatly with social skills. Eye contact can be hard, and things like small talk and social situations with new people can be incredibly stressful. As much of our society operates with regular socialising as a norm, difficulties in this area can seem strange and cause isolation for or prejudice against autistic adults.

Our world frequently operates using unwritten rules, which you may or may not even realise that you are following. Much is communicated with things like tone of voice and body language, even when the words used may imply an opposite meaning.

Autistic adults are often very literal and struggle with these other forms of communication, so may find it hard to understand these unspoken messages. They may sometimes come across as blunt or rude because they will convey their thoughts more plainly rather than, for example, saying that they like something while giving signs that they do not through tone or body language. Autistic adults often find the way that much of the world operates through saying one thing while meaning another very confusing!



While many autistic children are non-verbal at first, a good number of these do go on to speak normally by the time they are adults even if it takes a little longer to develop than in other children. However, some autistic people remain non-verbal into adulthood, but this need not be a barrier and is no reflection on their intelligence or abilities in other areas. The technology available today, particularly autism apps and alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) methods such as app2vox, can make a huge difference.

Getting a Diagnosis

Obtaining a diagnosis of autism for anyone can be difficult and take a long time, but while there are at least mechanisms in place for children to be diagnosed, often through the education and primary healthcare systems, getting a diagnosis as an adult can be even harder.

While pursuing a diagnosis as an adult can be a big step and is a personal decision, there are now some advantages in doing so in terms of legal rights to equality for protected characteristics and availability of support. It is also great to be able to connect with others facing similar issues.

Autistic Adults at Work

One huge area of difficulty for autistic adults is employment, with less than 20% of autistic adults thought to be in work though many more than this are able and willing to be employed. There are a number of reasons for this, chief among them being education and understanding about what autism actually is and how it impacts what people can and cannot do.

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Some employers may have an outdated view of autism, seeing it as the label given to naughty little boys or thinking of toddlers throwing themselves to the ground in a temper tantrum. They do not appreciate that autism can bring huge strengths that can benefit their business or organisation in return for what are often very small and simple adaptations to working practices.

Autistic people face barriers in both securing employment and performing well when they are employed.

The traditional interview can be a huge barrier for many. Making eye contact and small talk with a few complete strangers in a new environment can be one of the most difficult things you could ask an autistic person to do, but all it really tests is how good the candidates are at interviews, which are not part of most jobs!

Autistic candidates are much better served and more fairly assessed through methods which show how well they can perform at the work involved and by talking to others that know them well and have worked with them.

Once in work, securing adaptations needed to perform well can be hard for autistic adults. Sensory issues mean that large, bright, open-plan offices can be hugely difficult, and a culture of meetings can be hard to thrive in for those that struggle with social skills. But a few adaptations can make a world of difference.

Quieter areas of the office where people can work without being completely isolated from their teams and recognising that some work can be just as well progressed through mediums other than meetings such as text-based chat can really help some autistic adults.

Autistic adults have a huge amount to offer in the workplace, but still too seldom get the chance to contribute.

Mental health

While autism is not a mental illness, sadly large numbers of autistic adults do suffer from problems with their mental health. This frequently arises from having to cover up autistic traits and play the role of a neurotypical person in large parts of their lives, a practice known as masking. Acting out a role instead of being your true self for much of your life is exhausting and mentally damaging.

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While these conditions can and should be managed and treated by health professionals, they are often impossible to completely cure, and it is worth remembering that an autistic adult may well be dealing with other issues of this type as well as trying to thrive in a world designed for people that experience it in a very different way from them.

Relationships

It can be difficult to build and maintain successful relationships when you find socialising hard. However, many autistic adults need and have excellent relationships with their families, partners, children and friends.

What autistic adults tend to value in relationships is being able to be their true selves and valued for who they are, not who they can pretend to be.

As discussed earlier, many autistic people have to put on an act for much of their life, so they need to be able to be themselves when at home or with friends. They may also prefer to keep in touch in a somewhat different way from others – many autistic people prefer text-based communication to face to face or phone a lot of the time and may quickly grow tired in social situations.

But autistic adults value good friends that genuinely care about them, value them for who they are and do not judge them for being autistic hugely valuable and are often brilliant and loyal friends in return.

Gifts and positives

What is often overlooked about autism is that it can bring huge strengths as well as difficulties. Indeed, the difficulties often arise not because there is anything wrong with the autistic adult but because they are living in a world that is not set up for how their brains work and experience it.

Many of the strengths which can be present in autistic adults can be enormously valuable in employment, home life and many other areas.

For example, autistic people see the world differently, which means that they also see problems differently and may therefore identify possible solutions missed by others. Autistic brains generally have more thoughts than others.



This does not mean that autistic people are more intelligent, but it can mean that they are very creative and a great source of ideas. Autistic brains may make connections between things that seem unrelated or recognise patterns that are missed by others. These can all be valuable skills.

Autistic adults can also have the ability to become hugely focused on a task or topic, to the extent that they may not even notice that they are being spoken to or other things are going on around them.

This can be a huge strength in being productive, innovative, and progressing work and projects.

The apparent bluntness of some autistic adults can also be a strength. All organisations can benefit from challenge as it is a source of improvement, and autistic adults are often able to point out issues that others do not raise. Similarly, autistic people are often very keen to see others treated fairly and justly.

Autistic adults have so much to offer if they are just given the chance.

Support

We all need support, and autistic adults are no different. They can benefit greatly both from friends and family that understand and accept them as their true selves, and from communication with other autistic adults to help them recognise that they are not alone and share strategies for overcoming barriers.

There are a large number of organisations offering support for autistic adults, such as the National Autistic Society, Mind and Autistica. Seeking help and support is never a weakness – it can be one of the bravest things you ever do.



Conclusion

Autistic adults are an often forgotten and overlooked group in society. Like other adults, autistic adults can be of all genders and races, and are all unique individuals.

Autism is a huge part of who they are, similar to being short or tall, fast or slow at running and so on. They do not “suffer” from autism and most do not want to be “cured”. Life can be difficult because the world is not set up for them, but with support, understanding and a few adjustments autistic adults can and do thrive and make huge contributions to society.

