



7-minute briefings: Working with adults who have autism

Background

According to research, approximately 70% of autistic young people experience mental health issues, and between 40-50% meet the diagnostic criteria for two or more psychiatric conditions, with internalising conditions such as depression and anxiety most common.

Late diagnosed autistic adults appear to be at the highest risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours: 66% of newly diagnosed autistic adults reported feeling suicidal, and 35% had attempted suicide at some point; 72% of autistic adults, most of whom had been diagnosed as adults, scored above the clinical cut off on a suicidality screening tool.

People with autism are up to seven times more likely to die by suicide than the general population.



Why it matters

Researchers and autistic people's accounts suggest a number of potential risks specifically for autistic people. Those with autism may also experience bullying, social isolation/rejection and loneliness. They may self-harm and find it difficult to understand their own feelings or learn to manage them (also known as emotional regulation), which can lead to camouflaging (hiding or masking autistic traits or behaviours).

Some adults will receive a late diagnosis of autism, which indicates a lack of support in earlier life, and some adults will experience difficulty accessing post-diagnosis and mental health support.

Autistic people report that social isolation and loneliness are the most common reasons for suicidal thoughts.

What is autism and what does it mean to be autistic?

Autism is described as a lifelong complex developmental condition that affects how a person communicates and interacts with other people. The National Autistic Society (NAS) defines autism as, "A disability which affects the way in which a child communicates and relates to people around them... all those affected have a **triad of impairments** in:

- Social interaction
- Social communication
- Imagination

Often, those with autism will also experience additional difficulties such as sensory; mental health; and physical difficulties. These could include:

- cannot bear loud noises;
- maybe hypo or hyper-sensitive to touch, clothes, pressure;
- mood disturbances e.g. anxiety, aggression, or depression;
- motor difficulties e.g. Walking on tip-toes, clumsiness;
- attention difficulties e.g. Easily distractible;

Autism is a continuum and different forms of autism are reflected in a spectrum of conditions known collectively as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) which could include specific learning difficulties, ADHD, Tourette's, anxiety, depression, and extreme ability in certain areas.

Social interaction

Adults with autism often have difficulty in understanding how to behave and interact with other people.

This could include inappropriate touching of other people; difficulty understanding and using non-verbal behaviour e.g. eye contact, facial expressions or gestures; they may stand too close to people; be unaware of the different ways to interact with friends, staff, strangers, etc; they may have the desire to have friends and relationships but struggle to initiate and maintain these.

This can make it very hard to navigate the social world. Autistic people may appear to be insensitive and may seek out time alone when 'overloaded' by other people.

Communication, social and sensory differences

Adults with autism can exhibit difficulties in their ability to communicate effectively with other people. This means they may ask repetitive questions; cannot 'read between the lines' of what people mean; talk about their own interests regardless of the listeners response; make factual comments inappropriate to the context; have an absence of desire to communicate; communicate for their own needs rather than for 'social' engagement.

Adults with autism may have impairment in imagination: difficulties in flexible thinking regarding interests, routines, perspectives and rules. They may: not understand other people's points of view or feelings; get agitated by changes in routine; struggle to generalise information; have special interest; take everything literally.

Sensory processing can appear different to adults with autism as well; they may be hyper or hypo-sensitive, to touch, smell, vision, so may use tinted glasses, or a weighted jacket for example. For an adult with autism, routines can increase predictability and bring some security. Autistic people like to know what is going to happen, like sticking to a routine, e.g. travelling the same route, eating the same foods, dressing the same way. They will often be conscious of the 'right' way to do things, so planning and preparing for change is important.



Reflections

It is important to have an understanding of autism, and how people with autism may respond differently to triggers; to understand the diagnosis and its meaning for how we work with an adult. It is important to have a meaningful sharing of information with any other professionals involved. Professionals working with autistic adults will find it useful to see the behaviour of the autistic adult as a form of communication, and to 'see' the whole person, rather than just a diagnosis. It is important to use a strengths-based approach to engaging and supporting adults with autism, and to employ persistence and consistency – never give up. Past feedback indicates that families value ongoing support, with one point of contact, a proactive rather than reactive response, and consistent relationships with professionals.

Autism is a lifelong condition; a spectrum; everyone is different and each autistic person experiences autism in a different way. Everyone who is autistic learns and develops – this can be limited by poor practice when assumptions are made, and people do not get the right help. Being autistic does not stop you being happy, having a good life, getting a job, friends or relationships, it just means you may need some extra help with these things.

Questions to consider

What is being communicated by this behaviour?
Are there any co-occurrences present?
(e.g. mental health, substance use).
Does the adult have any current support in place?
What background information can you gather?
Am I informed?

[NSAB Procedures](#)

[Care Act Statutory Guidance](#)

[National Autistic Society](#)

[Autism - NHS](#)

[Autism | Autistica](#)

[Autism East Midlands](#)

[Asperger's syndrome | Nottinghamshire County Council](#)

To find out more contact NCC Adult Social Care by:

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