

What is Autism?

Autism is a disability which affects the way a person communicates and how they experience the world. Autism is a spectrum, which means everybody with autism is unique. Some autistic people are very self-sufficient, but many face difficult challenges.

Autistic people may act in ways that seems unusual. For example they may:

- find it hard to communicate and interact with other people,
- find it hard to understand how other people think or feel,
- find things like bright lights or loud noises overwhelming, stressful or uncomfortable,
- get anxious or upset about unfamiliar situations or social events,
- take longer to understand information, and/or,
- do, or think, the same things, over and over.

Meltdowns and shutdowns

When an autistic person is overwhelmed, they can go into meltdown or shutdown, which are difficult and tiring episodes.

During a **meltdown**, an autistic person will briefly lose control of their behaviour. This can be verbal (e.g. shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (e.g. kicking, lashing out, biting) or both,

During a shutdown, an autistic person will “switch off” and be unable to think or react. This is as draining as a meltdown despite appearing more passive.

Over- or under- sensitivity to light, sound, taste, touch.

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. Many autistic people avoid everyday situations due to their sensitivity issues. Simple adjustments can be made to make environments more autism-friendly.

Autism in young children

Signs of autism in young children include:

- not responding to their name,
- avoiding eye contact,
- not smiling when you smile at them,
- getting very upset if they do not like a certain taste, smell or sound,
- repetitive movements, such as flapping their hands, flicking their fingers or rocking their body,
- repeating the same phrases, and/or
- not talking as much as other children.

Autism in older children

Signs of autism in older children include:

- not seeming to understand what others are thinking or feeling,
- unusual speech, such as repeating phrases and talking ‘at’ others,
- liking a strict daily routine and getting very upset if it changes,
- having a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities,
- getting very upset if you ask them to do something,
- finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on their own,
- taking things very literally – for example, they may not understand phrases like “break a leg”, and/or,
- finding it hard to say how they feel.