



**autism friendly**  
an Autism SA initiative



# WHAT IS AUTISM? FACTS AND MYTHS

- Autism is a diagnostic term used to describe a lifelong condition that affects the way an individual communicates with others around them and how they relate to others.
- Autism is not a mental health condition. It is a neurological condition.
- People with autism often find the condition is misunderstood, as it is not a physical impairment that is visible to others.
- The term 'spectrum' is used to indicate that no two people are the same. The differences depend on a combination of social ability, communication level, cognitive ability, age, personality and many other factors. You may also hear the terms, Asperger Syndrome, autism, the autism spectrum, high functioning autism, autistic and many other variations. How an individual defines their diagnosis is their choice. However, all these terms reflect current diagnostic criteria.
- Being on the spectrum doesn't mean a lack of intelligence nor does it mean the individual has an intellectual disability.
- Individuals on the spectrum are sometimes viewed as having extraordinary capabilities. However, the occurrence of 'geniuses' with autism is the same as in the general population.
- Just like people without a diagnosis, everyone with autism is different. Each individual will have different strengths and abilities, however people with autism can experience challenges in recurring areas such as:
  - Communication and language - It can be difficult for people with autism to process long and unclear instructions. It is best to use visuals where possible and speak in short, clear sentences when communicating to someone with autism.
  - Sensory issues - Individuals may be 'sensory seekers', 'sensory avoiders', or a combination of both. They may have strong reactions to smells, textures or lights.
  - Coping with change - Sticking to a routine can make people with autism more comfortable, while anything out of the ordinary can cause anxiety, frustration and stress. Planning ahead can reduce the risk of stress and increase an individual's ability to self regulate emotions.
  - Social issues - Making friends can be difficult, as can understanding how others feel. There are also many social rules that individuals find difficult to understand, such as the appropriate personal space to give someone, or how to initiate appropriate conversation.
  - Special interests - Individuals with autism may have special interests that occupy their time and thoughts. Sometimes, they may need assistance to direct their attention to other things.

**For further information, please contact the Autism SA Infoline on 1300 AUTISM (1300 288 476)**

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# CREATING AN AUTISM FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

Each person on the autism spectrum is unique and has both strengths and challenges. Helping someone on the spectrum begins with acceptance, knowledge and understanding of autism and the individual. When we talk about an environment, we are referring to a space, area, room or building that a member of the public may use. For you, this may mean your shop, centre, theatre or any public space you provide.

What can you do to make your environment friendlier?

Ensuring your staff are trained in autism awareness, which will promote and create understanding. Staff will also be aware of where they can go to find out more information should they wish.

**Be aware of the environment and simplify where possible** - This includes what people can see, smell and hear.

- Individuals on the autism spectrum can find too much visual stimulation overwhelming. Cluttered environments with lots of furniture can be too much to take in. For example, not having a clear pathway through a store can create confusion and result in the individual becoming disorientated. Similarly, using too many patterns, shapes, colours and surfaces within decoration can be too visually stimulating.
- Over lighting of areas - using options such as fluorescent light - can also have an impact. Consider using softer, natural, or less invasive lighting.
- The smells in an area can be overwhelming to somebody on the spectrum. Many people use different kinds of deodorant, lotions and perfumes. To limit this, staff may be advised to avoid strong body products in the work environment. There are many smells in environments that can't be minimised, such as the smell of food cooking. Therefore, it is important to be mindful that they may create reactions in individuals.
- Being aware of the sound levels you can control is important. For example, many public places - such as shops - have music playing. If somebody in your facility appears anxious or distressed, minimising sound levels by lowering or turning off music may assist to calm the environment for them.

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# CREATING AN AUTISM FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT (CONT.)

## Communication

- Take time to listen and communicate. Some people on the spectrum find it difficult to communicate. Taking time to really listen and clarify your understanding can go a long way.
- Use clear and simple language. This will assist individuals to process information more easily.
- Individuals on the spectrum can often process images more quickly than spoken or written communication. You might like to consider using signs incorporating images to indicate the use of an area within the environment, along with written signs.
- A literal understanding of language is common among individuals on the spectrum, so it is important when creating signage that you consider the literal meaning of the sign. To assist, consider pairing an image with a written sign. Literal understanding is also something to consider when verbally communicating.
- Helping people distinguish staff from the public can also assist individuals to recognise who they need to approach if they need assistance. This can be done by introducing name tags or uniforms for staff, or perhaps by maintaining a wall of staff photographs.
- Providing warning of upcoming changes. If your environment is changing - for example, if you are moving location, refurbishing or just rearranging stock displays - it is important to inform the public as best you can and as early as you can. You may have a regular customer who is on the spectrum and doesn't adjust well to change. You may be able to minimise a person's unease with change by using visual posters notifying customers or - if you are aware of a regular customer who is on the spectrum - by reminding them of the pending change each time you see them.

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# HOLDING AN EVENT SPECIFICALLY FOR PEOPLE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

In today's society, there are a number of different events being held at any given time. These can vary widely from birthday parties and meetings to workshops and public gatherings. In order for maximum engagement, participation and enjoyment to occur, it is vital that consideration is given to the needs of attendees on the autism spectrum.

Below are some ideas to consider:

- **Seek feedback from individuals on the autism spectrum** regarding the setup of the event. Ask questions around the physical set up and structure of the event, particularly if it is meeting or workshop based.
- **Communication** - Have posters with both words and images that communicate the schedule of the event as well as important information. If using an audio system (e.g. microphone), keep messages brief and to the point. If using speakers for music, ask individuals for feedback on the volume.
- **Keep the physical environment free of unnecessary distractions.** Make sure the environment 'speaks for itself', with plenty of space in which to move around. Ask individuals if bright lights or loud sounds are upsetting for them. For children, ensure the space is enclosed and secure. For adolescents and adults, ensure there are safe exit points.
- **Where possible, allow the individual/s to know the structure of the event.** A timetable can be helpful. Make sure parents and other adults know their roles throughout the event. Giving the individual a role to play/responsibility can also help lower anxiety levels, as they feel more in control.
- **Time limits** - As much as possible, stick to the plan in terms of time management.
- **Keep unstructured play/activities to a minimum.** For example, at a birthday party, have short, simple games running one after the other. At meetings, for example, ensure the agenda is as clear as possible.
- **Offer a quiet space.** If an environment is overwhelming for and an individual, having an option to go to a quiet space with low stimuli can assist them to manage over stimulation.
- **Get creative!** For example, if the parents of a child on the spectrum have alerted you to the fact their child doesn't know a certain game, create a colourful step-by-step picture chart. In workshops, set up a system where people can communicate ideas in various ways other than talking - e.g. jotting down notes or pictures on paper, texting questions to a certain number etc.

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# AUTISM FRIENDLY CHARTER OUR COMMITMENT

IN RECOGNITION OF OUR COMMITMENT TO CREATING A SOCIALLY-INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT, WE HAVE SIGNED-UP TO THE AUTISM FRIENDLY CHARTER.

We are committed to upholding the following principles:

- Ensuring our staff are trained in autism awareness, which will promote and create understanding. Staff will also be aware of where they can go to find out more information, should they wish.
- Making our staff aware of the different ways people with autism may communicate. Communication is a very broad term to describe how we interact both verbally and non-verbally. Our staff will try to communicate in whichever way the individual on the autism spectrum chooses.
- Ensuring our staff make reasonable adjustments should they suspect or be informed that an individual has autism.
- Taking suggestions and feedback from people with autism to make our environment autism friendly.
- Creating an environment where our staff also feel comfortable disclosing their autism.
- Providing all staff on the autism spectrum with a supportive working environment.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and Position

\_\_\_\_\_  
Organisation

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Autism SA

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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