

WHAT IS AUTISM?

- **What is autism?**

Autism is a developmental disability which affects language and communication, sensory processing and motor skills, cognition, and social interaction.

- **What does that mean?**

The autistic brain develops differently from birth. This means that autism is just another way of seeing the world. The different ways the autistic brain develops effect an autistic person's language and communication, cognition, sensory processing, motor control, and social behaviors in certain predictable ways. All of these differences, together, make up a developmental disability we call "autism." Autism is disabling because our society is not designed to work for people with autistic brains.

- **How is the autistic brain different?**

Sensory processing

Autistic people process and use our senses differently from most people. Our senses are more intense, and more difficult to understand and manage--or less intense, and harder to use. We might be more sensitive to loud noises or bright lights, or not be able to follow two people talking at once. We might be extra sensitive to certain smells or textures. We might not like being touched, or we might really like being squeezed in a tight hug. Every autistic person is different.

Because our senses can be overwhelming or hard to use, many autistic people engage in repetitive movements. These repetitive motions--rocking back and forth, flapping hands, tapping fingers repeatedly against palms, twirling, shaking a string of beads in front of our face, etc.--are known as motor stereotypies, or "stimming." Stimming helps an autistic person sooth and calm ourselves, regulate our senses, process our environment, and think clearly.

Language & communication

15-20% of autistics do not develop oral speech.

These autistics use augmentative and alternative communication methods such as typing, sign language, picture exchange, pointing, and other methods to communicate.

Many autistic people, even people who can speak, also need to use some of these communication methods in their everyday life to say what they really mean.

Most autistics do develop the ability to speak.

Some autistics develop speech later in life than our peers.

Some autistics develop speech, but primarily communicate by repeating things other people have said. This is called echolalia.

Some autistics have fluent oral speech

Our language might be scripted, verbose, literal, circumspect, or otherwise different. We might have a difficult time with grammar, pragmatics, or social communication.

Most autistic people also have a hard time with receptive communication

This means we might have a hard time understanding what another person is saying to us.

Especially if they are using language abstractly or metaphorically, or using a lot of words.

Many autistics use or understand language very concretely and literally.

Cognition

Many autistics might be described as "rigid," "inflexible," or black-and-white thinkers. We may not be comfortable with ambiguity, change, or lack of structure. We may seem particularly ritualistic, compulsive, or detail-oriented.

Many autistics have problems with executive functioning--the ability to stay on task, pay attention, switch between tasks, initiate new tasks, use our memory effectively, and control impulses.

Autistic people often have difficulties with sequencing the parts of, or the steps in, tasks, ideas, sentences, words, or even physical movements. This can make planning projects or daily tasks difficult for us, or make it harder to initiate actions or communicate in ways other people can understand.



April is Autism Acceptance Month. Acceptance is an action.

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- **How is the autistic brain different? (continued)**

Some autistics also have a diagnosis of intellectual disability or a learning disability. Autism is not the same as an intellectual or learning disability, but some people have both. Research is finding that the number of people who are both autistic and intellectually disabled is much lower than it used to be thought. Many traditional IQ tests do not accurately reflect an autistic person's ability, because our communication impairments and other autistic features interfere with assessment.

A common characteristic of autism is hyper-focus, or "perseveration"--intense focus on one subject, special interest, or part of a larger system or object. This can be anxiety-producing (for example, perseverating on whether or not you remembered to turn the stove off,) incredibly useful (for example, an autistic person who is obsessed with astronomy might have a very successful career studying their interest,) or just fun or relaxing (for example, stamp collecting.)

Motor skills

Many autistic people have delays in fine or gross motor skills or coordination. Sometimes this leads to an additional diagnosis of dyspraxia or apraxia. For some autistic people, this means that oral speech is impossible, or that pointing, shoe tying, initiating movement, and other things are difficult or impossible.

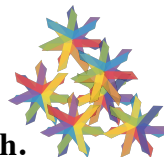
Social behaviors

Much of communication in general is non-verbal. Autistic people may have a difficult time reading other people's body language, tone, and nonverbal cues. Autistic people often have unique or eccentric ways of communicating and expressing ourselves non-verbally. This can also make it difficult for us to interpret the non-verbal communication of others.

Many autistic people find eye contact uncomfortable or may forget to or be unable to make it at times when it may be socially expected. The ability to make eye contact can vary a lot depending on the situation, the people involved, and the amount of stress that we may be under.

Perspective-taking is an important part of social interaction. Many people rely on their own intuitions of how they would behave when trying to take the perspectives of others. Autistic people, due to differences in cognition, communication, sensory processing, and motor planning, tend to have very different perspectives and reactions that many people. This can make perspective-taking and social interaction more complicated for us.

Because of all of our differences in sensory processing, communication, language use, nonverbal communication, and cognition, it may be very difficult for autistic people to make or keep friends, or engage in large amounts of social interaction.



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