



SA Federation for
Mental Health

NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

What it is:

Autism spectrum disorder is characterised by a limited ability to communicate and interact with others, as well as restricted repetitive behaviours, interests and activities. Autism spectrum disorder is now defined by the DSM 5 as a single disorder that includes disorders that were previously considered separate - autism, Asperger's syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified. The term "spectrum" refers to the wide range of symptoms and severity. Although the term "Asperger's syndrome" is no longer in the DSM, some people still use the term, which is generally thought to be at the mild end of autism spectrum disorder. Severity for autism spectrum disorder is measured depending on the level of support required for both social communication and restricted, repetitive behaviours.

The symptoms of autism spectrum disorder are present from early childhood, and they limit or impair functionality in everyday activities. The impairments and limitations in communication can vary in severity. In verbal communication limitations can include lack of speech or delayed development of speech, overly literal speech or echoed speech. Even when the individual's formal language skills such as vocabulary and grammar are good, their use of language for social communication may be impaired. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder generally have an impaired ability to engage with others and to share their thoughts and feelings. They may also struggle to understand social cues, and appear unaware of other people's feelings. With non-verbal communication, individuals with autism spectrum disorder may be reluctant to make eye contact with others, they may lack expressive facial expressions when speaking. They may struggle to understand when certain types of behaviour is appropriate and when not, as well as the different ways that body language can be used to communicate.

Restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities include repetitive physical movements such as rocking back and forth or hand flapping; repetitive use of objects, such as lining up toys or spinning a wheel of a toy car repeatedly; and repetitive speech, such as repeating words or the parroting of words heard. Individuals with this disorder may also be very resistant to change, and may display an excessive adherence to routine and structures that they feel comfortable in. They also tend to have highly restricted and fixated interests, which may be abnormal in intensity and focus.



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Common symptoms:

1. Avoiding eye contact or using facial expressions that don't match what the individual is saying
2. A lack of interest in other people or in sharing interests or achievements
3. Unlikely to approach others or pursue social interaction, prefers to be alone
4. Difficulty understanding other people's feelings, reactions, and nonverbal cues
5. Resistance to being touched
6. Delay in learning how to speak, after the age of 2, or doesn't speak at all
7. Speaking in an abnormal tone of voice, or with an odd rhythm or pitch
8. Repeating words or phrases over and over without communicative intent
9. Trouble starting a conversation or keeping it going
10. Taking what is said too literally, for example missing humour, irony, and sarcasm
11. Repetitive body movements, such as hand flapping, rocking, spinning
12. Preoccupation with a specific topic of interest
13. A strong need for sameness, order, and routines. The individual gets upset by change in their routine or environment

Causes:

No clear causes or risk factors for autism spectrum disorder have been identified. Advanced parental age, low birth rate, or foetal exposure to medication such as valproate may all be potential environmental risk factors. A known genetic mutation may also be a risk factor. Autism spectrum disorder has been diagnosed more frequently in males than in females.