



Autism Awareness Training

West Midlands Police - EDHR

What is autism?

- > Autism and Asperger syndrome can be grouped under the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and is a term used to describe people with a range of developmental disorders.
- > It is a life-long condition affecting around 1.1% of the population.
- > It is a spectrum condition meaning that it affects people differently and to varying degrees.

‘When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism’.

- > It is important to remember that autism is not a learning disability or a mental health difficulty, but a developmental disorder.
- > There is no cure for autism but early childhood diagnosis and specialist support has been shown to improve the quality of life of people with autism.

Triad of impairments

Autism is broadly defined as affecting three main areas:

- > social communication
- > social interaction
- > social imagination

Social Communication

People with autism have difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal language. Many have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say. They can find it difficult to use or understand:

- > facial expressions or tone of voice
- > jokes and sarcasm
- > common phrases and sayings: example's of which are 'It's cool', 'has the cat got your tongue', or 'come on – hop to it'.

Some people with autism may not speak, or have fairly limited speech. They will usually understand what other people say to them, but prefer to use alternative means of communication themselves, such as sign language

Social Interaction

People with autism often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings, and expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially. They may:

- > not understand the unwritten social rules which most of us pick up without thinking: they may stand too close to another person for example, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation.
- > avoiding eye contact and appear to be awkward or dismissive.
- > appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling i.e. ' I was dumped probably because he thinks I'm fat.....well, yes you are fat!'
- > prefer to spend time alone rather than seeking out the company of other people and not seek comfort from other people
- > appear to behave 'strangely' or inappropriately, as it is not always easy for them to express or control their feelings, emotions or needs i.e. funeral and may appear to lack emotion or sympathy, or in other social gatherings are too emotional.

Difficulties with social interaction can mean that people with autism find it hard to form friendships: some may want to interact with other people and make friends, but may be unsure how to go about this.

Social Imagination

Social imagination allows us to understand and predict other people's behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. Difficulties with social imagination mean that people with autism find it hard to:

- > understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions
- > predict what will happen next, or what could happen next i.e. think outside the box.
- > like a set of rules and overreact to peoples infringement or changes in routine i.e. time of eating habits or watching a favourite t.v. programme at a particular day/time.
- > understand the concept of danger, for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- > cope in new or unfamiliar situations.

Please Note. *Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination. Many people with autism are very creative and may be, for example, accomplished artists, musicians or writers.*

Characteristics of autism

Sensory Stimulation

People with autism may experience some form of sensory sensitivity. This can occur in one or more of the five senses - sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. A person's senses are either intensified (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hypo-sensitive). Examples of which are:

- > sensitive to loud noise i.e. loud music, shouting, group conversation.
- > enjoy the stimulation of bright or colourful lights i.e. lava lamps, to emergency vehicle.
- > associate the smell of a person or object with familiarity and 'being safe'.....good memory or bad.
- > a need to lick everything they touch and feel its texture or taste..... ranging from a persons hand, a window, to the pavement.
- > (hypo – sensitive) may not feel the pain in extreme changes in temperature.
- > rocking, flapping motion, tapping of fingers to head/body when under stress or challenged

Key behavioural signs

- > avoid eye contact – look down or away when under pressure.
- > rocking, flapping motion, tapping of fingers to head/body when under stress or challenged.
- > unwillingness to remain seated and a need to pace the room.
- > covering of ears.
- > humming, singing or talking to self.
- > offence to the slightest touch to the point of revulsion e.g. causes pain from 1hr to days.
- > not respond to questions or instructions.
- > lack of understanding as to what is being asked.
- > unable to hold a conversation and use of formal one word questions and answers.
- > display of honesty to the point of being blunt or rude.
- > switch off and talk about another subject that is of interest to them but totally unrelated.
- > mimic what is being asked i.e. repeat the phrase.
- > agree to what is being asked and then to show confusion and total disregard and an unwillingness to co-operate.
- > sensitivity to the sight and smells of a police officer in uniform and associate this with a bad memory.

Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is at what is called the 'higher functioning' end of the spectrum. This means that whilst you are likely to have an average, to above average (higher) intelligence level than the average person, and in some be academically gifted. Learning new skills may not be a problem but there are areas such as social interaction and communication that may prove difficult.

Whilst those with ASD would in general have a 'hidden disability', this is more prominent in those with Asperger's where the traits are not as pronounced. This means that you can't tell that someone has the condition from their outward appearance as there are generally no physical characteristics although they have some similar traits to those on the spectrum.

The traits are broken down into three different areas; communication, social interaction and flexibility of thought. High levels of anxiety and sensory issues are also strongly linked with a diagnosis of AS.

Socially, may prefer to:

- > engage socially but may find difficulty in understanding the social rules.
- > prefer to be on their own.
- > not be in close proximity to others and the slightest touch can cause offence or revulsion.
- > avoid eye contact
- > engage by e-mail or text as social communication may be difficult as time is required to process the information exchanged.

Asperger Syndrome (continued)

Language and Communication

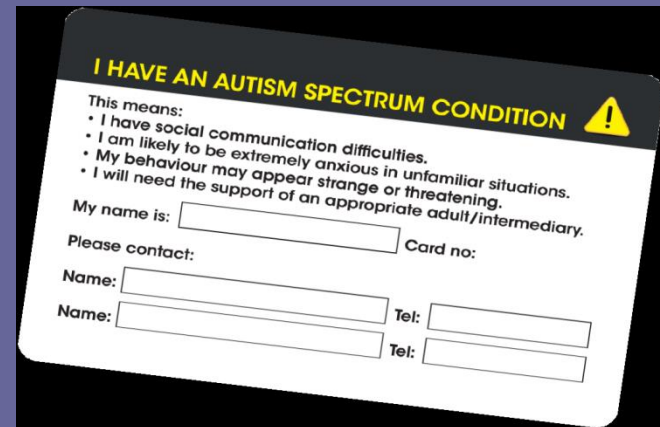
- > humour and sarcasm can be difficult.
- > take offence to banter and jokes amongst friends and colleagues.
- > saying words or phrases in the wrong context and conversation.

Flexibility

- > prefer a set routine i.e. eating times, catching public transport, t.v. programmes etc.
- > have a special interest or hobby which they are proud to talk about i.e. cars, movie collections etc.
- > understanding of other peoples emotions and how they are feeling.
- > anything new can be difficult. Different surroundings, places, and people, can cause a great deal of stress and anxiety.

Please Note. Such episodes of a routine being broken or work pattern change, can lead to extreme anxiety. Where this occurs, this can be too much to handle and comprehend, leading to the person experiencing, what is termed, 'a meltdown'. Such episodes and their consequences are different to all with autism i.e. from someone becoming withdrawn, to another becoming or appearing to be aggressive through being agitated.

Autism Attention Card



Autism Attention (or Recognition) cards have been developed nationally and will differ from each geographical area in terms of its styling and partnership details including its local police force.

The Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) 'Attention Card' for use in encounters with the Emergency Services. More than 2000 people with ASD already carry this card within the West Midlands. They have found it useful in a variety of situations including:

- When dealing with the police
- When they are attended to by Ambulance Staff or at Accident & Emergency Departments
- When having difficulties on public transport
- When having difficulties at Council or Benefits Offices

Autism Attention Card

The attention card displays on the reverse the contact details of a person that the individual trusts and who should be contacted in stressful situations to provide advice and guidance and if required, to attend the local station as a supportive appropriate adult.

These cards can only be issued within the West Midlands by Autism West Midlands (AWM) via an on-line application with all details being verified and recorded on their database.

Once brought to the attention of WMP, the information should be treated as 'true and valid' and the individual should be treated with the appropriate due care, professionalism and dignity that their disability respects.

N.B. the Attention Cards are not mandatory and not all persons with ASD will carry one; or there will be those that show all the recognised traits without ever being medically diagnosed. Where this occurs, officers should obtain further advice and guidance, and seek clarification.

Failings of the police

1) Metropolitan Police (Met) officers assaulted a 16-year-old boy with severe autism by forcing him into handcuffs and leg restraints during a school trip, the High Court has ruled. The judge said the boy, now 19, also had his human rights breached. The boy, who also has epilepsy, was subjected to disability discrimination and false imprisonment, it was ruled.

He was awarded £28,250 in damages following the incident at a swimming pool in Acton, west London, in 2008.

2) A peer has criticised the "callous, racist attitude" of two police officers to a "vulnerable and disabled man".

Baroness Uddin made the comments in the House of Lords on the case of Faruk Ali, who has autism. Two officers were found not guilty of misconduct in public office after chasing Mr Ali in a police car. The pair are currently subject to an Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) investigation. Labour peer Baroness Uddin described the treatment of 33-year-old Mr Ali, who has a mental age of five, as "outrageous victimisation".

N.B. on both occasions the police were either shown an Autism Recognition Card or informed by family at the time of the individuals Autism and reasons as to their strange behaviour

Advice for police and Criminal Justice Sector

Remember a person with autism will 'in general' not understand the implications of their behaviour or the consequences of their actions even if their actions are aggressive. However, it should also be noted that they too are fully aware of their actions. They may run, failing to respond to an order to stop or drop to the floor or begin to rock back and forth or avoid eye contact. Officers should not misinterpret these actions as a reason for increased use of force as this may cause the autistic person's behaviour to escalate into more violent or aggressive behaviour

The following may be helpful when communicating with someone who has autism:

- > Try to calm the situation by speaking clearly, slowly and not shouting
- > Do not attempt to stop the person from flapping, rocking or making other repetitive movements as this can sometimes be a self-calming strategy and may subside once explained more clearly.
- > People with autism may carry an object for security, such as a piece of string or paper - do not remove this object as this may raise anxiety and cause distress.
- > If sirens or flashing lights are being used, turn them off to avoid alarm and distraction.
- > If possible, and if the situation is not dangerous or life-threatening, try to avoid touching a person with autism, as they may respond with extreme agitation due to their heightened and acute sensitivity.

Advice for police and Criminal Justice Sector

> People with autism may have an unusual response to pain and not report or be able to communicate injury. Check the person for any injuries in as non-invasive way as possible, looking for unusual limb positions (e.g. limping or hanging arm) or other signs, such as abdominal pain.

Communication and Contact in Custody.

- > seek the support of an appropriate adult via the 'Attention Card' or AWM for individual advice and guidance as to behavioural patterns etc., and help prevent unnecessary anguish and distress.
- > treat the individual as vulnerable and ensure they are placed on a constant watch.
- > ensure all related disability information is recorded and that all custody officers are made aware of patterns of behaviours and their triggers i.e. shouting in the custody block on arrival by other detainees could cause emotional and physical triggers (sensory overload), leading to violent behaviour.
- > never interview an individual with autism unless an appropriate adult is present. They will assist in calming down a stressful situation and help support any questions asked for the individual to understand.
- > always avoid the prosecution route (where possible) and seek alternative methods should there be a need to charge the individual i.e. restorative justice. Court cases have been dismissed where it was considered that the individuals disability and their learning/development was a key factor.
- > the Criminal Justice Arena is a stressful situation for all and the police should attempt to avoid placing further stress on the individual and alienating any further contact with the police uniform.

Advice for police and Criminal Justice Sector

Communication with Witnesses

- > seek the support of an appropriate or trusted adult via the Autism Attention Card
- > never assume that a refusal to shake your hand is a dismissive attitude. The individual may not like being touched.
- > visual support / aids (drawings or photos) may be better understood than the spoken word
- > try to explain slowly, clearly, simply and calmly why they are there and calm down any fears
- > ensure that you give the individual time to answer EACH question by allowing them to digest what is being asked.
- > use their first name by obtaining their trust and that the question is being asked of them.
- > avoid using sarcasm or irony as people with ASD may wrongly interpret the question being asked leading to a mistrust of the officer, possible tension, and a confusion in their evidence.
- > understand that the individual may have strong behaviour patterns as to the time they eat or be at another appointment. They may want to leave the room without notice and any failings to help support and acknowledge their needs can lead to a 'meltdown' with severe consequences.

Autism and Disability Hate Crime

Hate crimes and incidents are any crime or incident which is targeted at a victim because of the offender's hostility or prejudice against an identifiable group of people. So any incident or crime, which is perceived by the victim or any other person to be motivated because of a person's **disability** or perceived disability will be recorded as such. This can be committed against a person or property.

A disability hate crime is:

“Any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based on a person’s disability or perceived disability.”

The Equality Act 2010 (EA) generally defines a disabled person as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

> all perceived hate crime against people with ASD seriously should be RECORDED and treated with the utmost importance. Failure to do so will not indicate any possible connection to the individual, their autism, and why they and their disability are a target.

'Bullied' teen Joshua Davies told he will not walk again

Joshua Davies, 18, of Pontypridd, Rhondda Cynon Taf, broke his spine in four places in the fall.

His family said police had been contacted 15 times about attacks on the teenager, who has Asperger's syndrome.



Further information and advice

> Autism West Midlands (AWM)

<http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk>

0121 450 7582

> The National Autistic Society

<http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism.aspx>

> True Vision – Hate Crime

http://www.report-it.org.uk/disability_hate_crime1

> Martin Keating

Equality and Diversity – WMP

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