

What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and **autism** are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. With the May 2013 publication of the fifth edition of the ***American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*** (commonly referred to as the DSM-5), all autism disorders were merged into one umbrella diagnosis of ASD. Previously, they were recognized as distinct subtypes, including autistic disorder, **childhood disintegrative disorder**, **pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)** and **Asperger Syndrome**. The DSM is the main diagnostic reference used by mental health professionals and insurance providers in the United States.

You may also hear the terms Classic Autism or Kanner's Autism (named after the first psychiatrist to describe autism) used to describe the most severe form of the disorder. Under the current DSM-5, the diagnosis of autism requires that at least six developmental and behavioral characteristics are observed, that problems are present before the age of three and that there is no evidence of certain other conditions that are similar.

There are two domains where people with ASD must show persistent deficits:

- 1) *persistent social communication and social interaction***
- 2) *restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior***

More specifically, people with ASD must demonstrate (either in the past or in the present) deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction and deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships. In addition, they must show at least two types of repetitive patterns of behavior, including stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, insistence on sameness or inflexible adherence to routines, highly restricted, fixated interests, hyper or



hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment. Symptoms can be currently present or reported in past history. In addition to the diagnosis, each person evaluated will also be described in terms of any known genetic cause (e.g. Fragile X syndrome, Rett syndrome), level of language and intellectual disability and presence of medical conditions such as seizures, anxiety, depression and/or gastrointestinal (GI) problems.

The DSM-5 has an additional category called **Social Communication Disorder (SCD)**. This allows for a diagnosis of disabilities in social communication, without the presence of repetitive behavior. SCD is a new diagnosis and much more research and information is needed. There are currently few guidelines for the treatment of SCD. Until such guidelines become available, treatments that target social-communication, including many autism-specific interventions, should be provided to individuals with SCD.

To read the whole DSM-5 criteria, please visit autismspeaks.org/dsm-5.