

Enhancing understanding of autism in healthcare context

Topic 1 – Welcome and introduction

Welcome

Narration:

Welcome to the module “Enhancing understanding of autism in healthcare contexts”.

The module will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You may notice we use “Autistic person or people” throughout the modules to reflect the language preferences of the autistic community. But it is always respectful to ask the language preferences of the person you are supporting.

Overview

Narration:

On the screen is a summary of the main points that will be covered in this module.

This module focusses on understanding Autistic people and how to support them in healthcare contexts. It aims to help you understand that Autistic people will have different perinatal experiences.

The information is based on research, lived experience and the expertise of Aspect, Autism Spectrum Australia.

Topic 2 – Understanding hidden disabilities and autism

Supporting Autistic people in healthcare settings

Narration:

This module is important in so many ways. Approximately 1 in 40 people in Australia are on the autism spectrum. Every Autistic person is different to every other. Which is why autism is described as a spectrum.

Hidden Disabilities are physical, mental or neurological conditions that impact a person's movements, senses, or ability to engage in activities. They are called ‘hidden disabilities’ because they are not visible to other people. Autism is included under this umbrella term.

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition affecting social interaction, communication, thinking, and sensory processing.

Supporting Autistic people in healthcare settings

Narration:

Most Autistic people express a desire for relationships and families, so many will need perinatal healthcare.

However, core characteristics of autism can influence how Autistic people experience pregnancy, childbirth and early parenthood.

Autistic people often have poor health outcomes and report negative interactions with healthcare workers.

Poor health outcomes can include higher risk of perinatal depression and anxiety, lower satisfaction with their perinatal experience, higher rates of preterm birth, caesarean delivery or pre-eclampsia.

To effectively support Autistic people in healthcare settings it's important to understand autism.

Communication differences

Narration:

The first thing that is important to understand is Autistic people may communicate differently.

Autistic people will often require extra time to process what you are saying to them or to get across what they are trying to say to you.

Autistic people prefer direct, honest, and literal language, sometimes relying on scripts, gestures, or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

They may prefer to communicate without making eye contact, use fewer gestures or body language, and may choose different ways to interact with others socially.

Autistic people may have difficulties describing pain and internal physical changes, or answering open-ended questions such as 'how is the pregnancy going?'

Autistic people often feel a mix of emotions when attending appointments. Fear, anxiety, embarrassment, or frustration – these emotions can make it difficult to engage with healthcare providers and follow through with treatment.

Communication differences

Narration:

Many Autistic people find it difficult to communicate their needs and symptoms to healthcare professionals. Similarly non-autistic health professionals can find it difficult to effectively communicate with Autistic people leading to misunderstandings which can result in poor treatment outcomes.

In healthcare settings this challenge intensifies into a Triple Empathy Problem where Autistic patients struggle to see their doctor's perspective, and doctors can also struggle to see their Autistic patients' perspectives.

As a healthcare professional interacting with Autistic people, it's important to understand each Autistic person is unique and to be supportive by listening actively and accepting that there may be a mismatch between the patient's words and their body language or facial expressions, for example, appearing to be in significant pain while telling you they're fine. Be prepared to adapt to accommodate the social challenges that Autistic people may be experiencing when they present to you.

Video transcript:

All people communicate differently. While many people consider speech or verbal communication the primary communication, body language is actually the most common way to communicate.

Many people on the autism spectrum can be overwhelmed by verbal language. Some can find it overwhelming to communicate with others verbally. Some may have difficulty understanding what others are communicating to them. Autistic people often require extra time to process what you are saying to them or to get across what they are trying to say to you.

Everyone communicates with a purpose, whether that is to get your needs met, to share joy, or engage in social interactions with others. Social communication etiquette such as small talk is often challenging for autistic people to engage in.

I've always struggled to understand why people always want to talk about the weather. Why the weather? Weather does not interest me! And I will not generally engage in a conversation about the weather. But if you come up and start to talk to me about World of Warcraft or the Kpop boy group BTS, I'll gladly talk to you for hours.

We can find metaphors or indirect messages confusing, including the use of jokes or sarcasm.

Sensory experiences

Narration:

Another important thing to understand about autism is Autistic people process the sensory environment differently.

This can mean Autistic people can become more easily overwhelmed by the environment.

The bright lights, loud noises, and busy, unpredictable environments typical of many medical facilities can be overwhelming, exacerbating their anxiety.

Some Autistic people might respond to this by withdrawing (e.g. put their fingers in their ears, close their eyes) others may self-stimulate or 'stim'.

If they are not able to deal with the stress of a situation and become overwhelmed, an Autistic person may experience a 'meltdown or shutdown'.

Stimming

Narration:

Autistic people may display repetitive behaviour patterns, for example, hand flapping, finger flicking, rocking and pacing. This is often called stimming. The stimming can often be calming for Autistic people.

Autistic camouflaging

Narration:

Camouflaging (or masking) refers to the strategies autistic people use, consciously or unconsciously, to alter their behaviour, to appear non Autistic, to blend in, cope with the world and be more accepted. It can also be a response to feeling unsafe.

It is common and can have a significant mental health impact due to the individual expending a lot of energy masking their Autistic characteristics around other people.

Women and girls on the autism spectrum may be better able to camouflage or mask their challenges through social imitation. Autistic women may respond to feeling 'different' by learning strategies to 'mask' to fit in socially.

Awareness of camouflaging in Autistic people is important to avoid any misunderstandings between medical professionals and patients, for example the assumption that the person isn't experiencing difficulty.

Autistic people may also experience differences in interoception, which is the ability to be aware of internal body cues like pain and hunger, or may struggle to recognise other internal body cues important during birth.

Meltdowns and shutdowns

Narration:

A meltdown or shutdown is an uncontrollable response to overwhelming feelings. It is an involuntary reaction.

They occur when an Autistic person is extremely stressed, fearful, or sensory uncomfortable.

Being pregnant can increase a person's stress and anxiety. At times, this, along with the additional changes to their bodies may cause an Autistic meltdown.

As a healthcare provider, it is important to recognise this and know how to support someone. We will look at strategies for providing support in the “Implementing good practice principles in clinical care” module.

Supporting Autistic people in healthcare settings

Narration:

Reflecting on your experience in healthcare and what you’ve learnt about the nature of autism, what are some common situations or experiences that might arise for Autistic patients in a healthcare setting?

Summary

Narration:

Thank you for completing Aspect’s module “Enhancing understanding of Autism in healthcare contexts”.

We hope you now have a greater understanding of Autistic people.

We also hope you recognise that Autistic people can have different perinatal experiences.

If you'd like to review some strategies to support Autistic individuals during pregnancy, birth, and early parenthood we suggest you complete the “Implementing good practice principles in clinical care” module next.

You will also find a wealth of practical ideas and suggestions on our Aspect Autistic Pregnancy and Parenthood Hub.