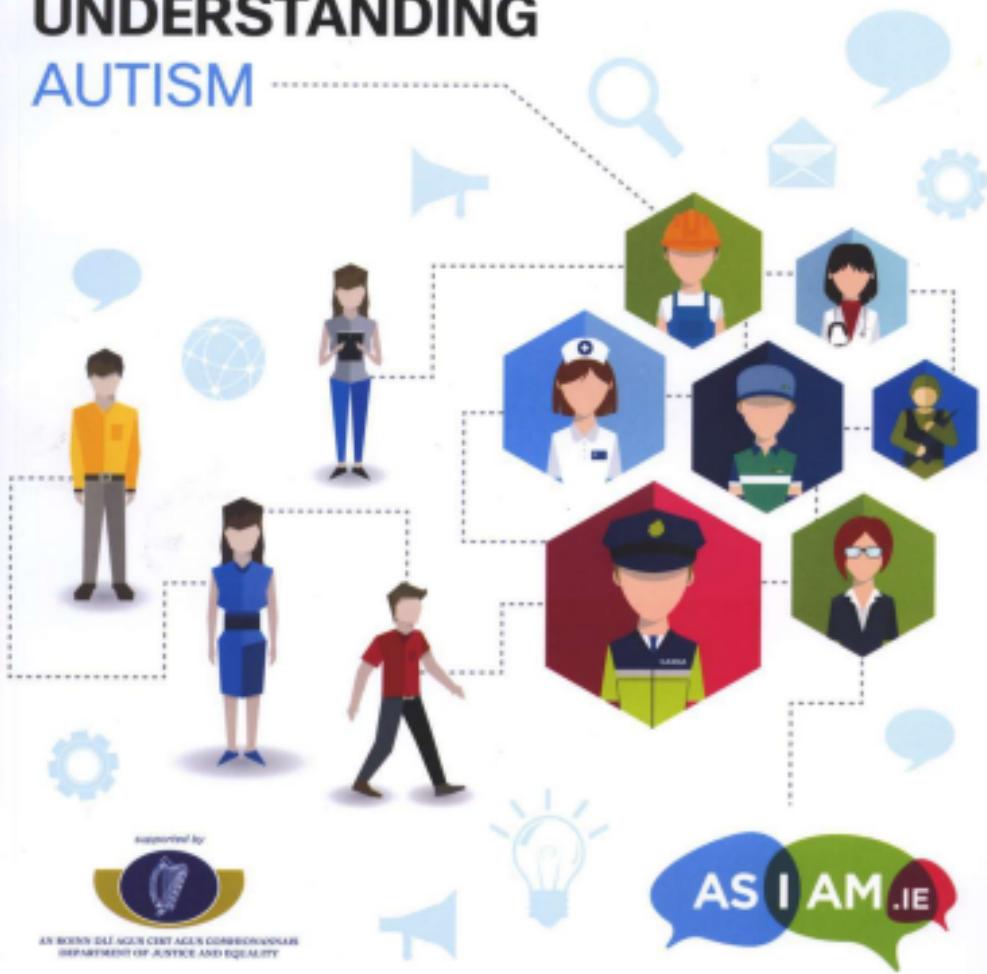


# HANDBOOK FOR

## Public Servants

### UNDERSTANDING AUTISM



supported by



AN RICÉIN DIL AGUS CÉRT AGUS COMHSHOINNÍS  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

AS I AM .IE

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Foreword from Adam Harris</b>	2
<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>Autism &amp; the Law</b>	4
<b>What Is Autism?</b>	6
<b>Living with Autism</b>	8
- Common Traits & Autism Myths	10
- Communication	12
- Alternative Means of Communication	16
- Social Imagination	17
- Sensory Processing	19
- Concentration & Stimming	21
- Anxiety & Meltdowns	24
<b>Autism Strengths</b>	27
<b>Barriers to Access</b>	28
<b>Being Autism-Friendly</b>	30
- Communication	32
- Predictability & Control	34
- Sensory Environment	36
- Staff & Public Understanding	39
- Examples of Autism-Friendly Practice	41
<b>Steps to Become Autism-Friendly</b>	44
<b>All About Me</b>	47
<b>Social Stories</b>	59
<b>Sensory Checklist</b>	64
<b>Glossary</b>	71

# FOREWORD FROM ADAM HARRIS

Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to pick up our *Handbook for Public Servants*, developed with the support of the Department of Justice and Equality.

As you may be aware, this handbook goes hand-in-hand with our online training course for public servants. Each aims to provide a practical reference for ensuring that your service is accessible for and inclusive to the autism community.

'Accessibility' is a word that's frequently used by public services, yet many people are unsure how, if at all, this would apply to an autistic person. Autism has become an increasingly common term and something we have all become more aware of, yet there is much still to be done to ensure that the condition is truly understood. As more and more people are diagnosed and live independently within their communities, it's vital that there is an awareness and an understanding of the obstacles they experience daily.

Autistic people communicate, think and experience the world very differently to those who do not have the condition.

This means how services work, how buildings are designed and how communication is conducted is often wholly unsuitable for members of the public who think autisticly. The consequences of this are significant – social isolation, judgement and misunderstanding and a lack of parity of access are day to day realities for many within the community. The barriers which create these realities are often man-made and preventable. Equally, the solutions are often easy to implement with little or no cost.

There is a huge interest and willingness to learn about autism and to build a more inclusive society for those with the condition. The gap is often the lack of easy to understand information for people to access and implement. We hope that this guide serves that purpose and will enable you to make small changes which in turn will have a hugely positive impact on the lives of autistic people and our families.

Thank you for your interest and support



Adam Harris  
Founder-CEO AsIAm



# INTRODUCTION

## WELCOME TO OUR UNDERSTANDING AUTISM E-LEARNING COURSE!

Most of us will have heard the phrases “autism” or “autistic” at some point in our lives, and might have an image of what autism ‘is’ in our minds. It might be a celebrity, a friend or family member, someone we work with, or a character from a film or TV series.

Autism is widely known yet it is not widely understood. No one can ‘look’ or ‘sound’ autistic. No two people with autism experience the condition or process their surroundings the same way. It is an invisible disability that impacts different people to different degrees across all ages, ethnicities, genders, nationalities and sexual orientations.

This training module, and its accompanying booklet, clarifies autism’s definition as a lifelong developmental disability; how it can complicate those living with it from accessing public services, and where you as a public servant can help. We hope that it inspires fresh conversations and new ways of thinking about autism and for future partners, across the public and private sectors, to join us on our journey to build an inclusive and understanding Ireland for all.

### Note on Language:

Note on Language: Many within the autism community prefer to use identity-first terms when talking about themselves and their condition. That is to say, they might refer to themselves as “I am autistic” instead of “I have” or “I’m living with autism.” They see their autism as an integral part of their personal identities and not as a disability. It is important to acknowledge this and good practice to follow their example when interacting with autistic service users.

To access the e-learning module, email us at [info@aslam.ie](mailto:info@aslam.ie)

# AUTISM & THE LAW

## WHAT THE LAW SAYS ABOUT AUTISM

Several legislative measures for disabled citizens have been introduced in Ireland over the last twenty years, positively impacting on autistic people's lives.

On 31st December 2005, an obligation will be placed on all public bodies to ensure that services provided to them by third parties, including the supply of goods, are accessible to people with disabilities. The main laws which enshrine a right to accessibility of public services are the Equal Status Acts, 2000 - 2015 and the Disability Act, 2005.

As service providers, it is essential that public servants inform themselves of their legal obligations to support autistic customers and service users by ensuring that all aspects of their workplaces and utilities are accessible.

## EQUAL STATUS ACTS, 2000 - 2015

The Equal Status Acts 2000-2015 (also known as 'the Acts') prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education, for all Irish citizens. The Acts also outlaw discrimination in the provision of accommodation services against people who are in receipt of rent supplement, housing assistance, or social welfare payments.

Regarding people living with disabilities, the Acts outline a clear obligation on bodies selling goods or services to provide reasonable accommodation in situations where it would be unduly difficult for a person with disabilities to avail of the goods and services.

Public services (such as the Health Service Executive, local authorities, and so on) are covered but there are some exemptions.

You can read more about the Equal Status Acts and their provisions from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's website here:

SCAN  
ME!



<https://www.ihrec.ie/guides-and-tools/human-rights-and-equality-in-the-provision-of-good-and-services/what-does-the-law-say/equal-status-acts/>

## DISABILITY ACT, 2005

The Disability Act, 2005 places a statutory obligation on public service providers to support access to services and facilities for people with disabilities.

On 31st December 2005, an obligation will be placed on all public bodies to ensure that services provided to them by third parties, including the supply of goods, are accessible to people with disabilities. The exception however, lies in cases where such access would:

1. Not be practicable.
2. Not be justified by the cost involved.
3. Cause unreasonable delay in making goods and services available to other people.

Complaints may be made to the public body if it is considered that the public building or goods and services are not accessible.

The Act also deals with the extension of the NDA Act (1999) to set up an Authority within the National Disability Authority (NDA) to be known as the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. This Centre will promote standards and principles of universal design in the education and training of designers (for example, architects, town planners, transport providers, software designers, systems analysts, engineers) and promote public awareness in this area.

You can read more about the Act and its provisions from the Department of Justice and Equality's website here:



<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/DisabilityAct05Guide.pdf/Files/DisabilityAct05Guide.pdf>

# WHAT IS AUTISM?

## BACKGROUND

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that is as varied in its traits and how they appear as the different kinds of people who are diagnosed with it. There are many individuals who don't have a formal diagnosis and, for the most part, their condition doesn't significantly impact on their lives. Autism can nonetheless pose huge challenges in performing day-to-day tasks and in our relationships with people we live and work with.

There are some life experiences that cause more stress and anxiety than others, and the public sector is one of the toughest environments for autistic people to access because of its services' size and scope. The autistic spectrum is broad, with people affected in a variety of ways, to varying degrees. No two people on the spectrum are affected the same way. However, the areas of difficulty for those on the spectrum can largely be summed up under *four headings*.

- Social communication
- Social interaction
- Social imagination
- Sensory processing

## WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

Beyond defining autism, it's important to begin by setting out some basic facts about the condition. When we talk about disability, we hear a lot of different categories mentioned such as a **physical disability** (e.g., paralysis) or **sensory disability** (e.g., blindness). Most people assume that autism is an intellectual disability because autistic people don't necessarily look different to those who aren't autistic. Autism is a **neurodevelopmental disability**, meaning that those born with the condition's brains are wired differently. This becomes evident over time, usually when the person is around two to three years old. Other examples of neurodevelopmental disabilities are ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Autism can only be diagnosed as a person begins to develop. Autistic people often experience delays in developmental milestones such as speech delay, difficulty with coordination, or interacting with peers. Autism is diagnosed by observation by a multi-disciplinary team using clinical tools such as ADOS. While the condition can be diagnosed in some cases from around 18 months, other people may be diagnosed significantly later, into adolescence or adulthood. This is not uncommon and might be because other possibilities were diagnosed or presumed, because the person slipped through the cracks or because autism wasn't as understood when they were a young child.

Autism is invisible. No two people with the condition look or sound the same. Equally, no two people experience autism in the same way. This is because **autism is a spectrum and impacts different people in different ways, to differing degrees at differing times**. Some autistic people may be very independent and you may not even be aware they have the condition, whilst others diagnosed with it may require lifelong support.

- Autism is not a rare condition. A recent DCU study found the condition affected around 1% of the population in Ireland<sup>1</sup>, while the National Council for Special Education has reported 1 in 65 students (1.55%) in the Irish school system have a diagnosis of autism<sup>2</sup>.
- Think about this: we all know a lot more than 100 or even 65 people. Statistically, this means we all either know or have met an autistic person in our lives; yet we might not all be able to name that someone. This highlights a need for a growing understanding of this invisible condition to prevent accidental exclusion, misunderstanding or isolation.

**Autistic people each have different experiences, yet they share a number of common challenges in their communication and interpersonal skills, social imagination and sensory processing.**

A final important note is that a large percentage of autistic individuals also have other additional needs or disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, epilepsy or another neurodevelopmental disability.

## COMMON MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Just as important as it is to know what autism is, it is equally vital to understand what autism isn't or what is untrue about the condition.

When we don't fully understand something or when we are dealing with complex subjects, rumours, myths and false news can often fill the vacuum in public discourse. This can have immensely damaging results and can even have dangerous consequences. It can lead to people being stereotyped, excluded or isolated or can result in people availing of dangerous 'therapies' and 'interventions' which have no scientific basis.

We might read in the press, for instance, about the alleged 'causes' behind autism or about a so-called 'cure.'

**No one knows the root causes behind autism yet.** We know that the condition has a genetic element to it and that there are many families with more than one member on the spectrum, but we don't yet know why some people are born autistic and some who are not. There are a range of different theories and research is ongoing but there is no definitive answer.

Equally, there are no medical 'cures' or 'therapies' for getting rid of autism. The suggestion that vaccines contribute to the condition's cause in unborn children's brains has been widely discredited by physicians, psychiatrists and numerous independent studies.

**With the right supports, autistic people can learn to manage the particularly challenging aspects of their condition.**

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Autism Counts at 1%', 2nd April 2016. Available from Dublin City University website: <http://www.dcu.ie/news/2016/apr/s0416b.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> NCSE Policy Advice - *Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools: A Guide for Parents/Guardians and Students (2016)*. Available at: [http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/3\\_NCSE-Supporting-Students-with-ASD-Guide.pdf](http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/3_NCSE-Supporting-Students-with-ASD-Guide.pdf).

# LIVING WITH AUTISM

We try and help people to ‘empathise’ with someone with the condition by giving a person a sense of what it is like to ‘walk in the shoes’ of an autistic individual.

## EXAMPLE

Imagine what it would be like if you were to be picked up suddenly, without any explanation or notice, and dropped into the middle of a very crowded subway in downtown Tokyo. To begin with, you’d be extremely overwhelmed by the sheer number of people in your personal space – the subway is so packed you literally cannot move. Lots of people are talking to each other all at once, as well as the loud noise of the sub itself, to the point that you can barely hear yourself thinking. Maybe one person standing next to you is wearing very strong, overpowering perfume. Another might have forgotten to brush their teeth that morning and have bad breath. You are extremely uncomfortable in the environment and you simply can’t wait to get off and out into the city.



The subway arrives and everyone disembarks. Every other person simply begins to walk in the direction they need to go in. But you have no idea how to get out of the building and find it hugely confusing. Doing the logical thing, you approach another passenger to ask for directions. You may speak a bit of Japanese, but you still have no idea what the person is saying to you. You can't tell from their body language or facial expression if they're happy to help or annoyed to be stopped. They seem to be speaking quickly and using local slang you're unfamiliar with. You can't follow their instructions and you're unsure if what they are saying should be taken literally or if they are using figures of speech.

At this stage, you are highly anxious – the unfamiliar, busy environment is overwhelming and you are unable to communicate effectively with those around you. You try to go it alone, you look for signs on the wall and try to follow them towards the exit, as you do this, you begin to relax as you feel you are making progress and moving in the right direction. However, you are now totally reliant on those signs

to get out. As you approach the final turn before the exit, the sign is missing. While for everyone else in the station it's obvious how to get out from this point, you have no idea and find yourself right back at square one.

## WHY DO WE USE THIS EXAMPLE?

Living with autism is like living in a world 'not built for you.' The example of the Tokyo subway rush helps us highlight some fundamental realities of the condition.

- It captures some of the key challenges autistic people face in communication, in sensory processing, in reading social situations and managing anxiety;
- It highlights cultural differences – the subway, in this example, is very different from a rush hour train service in Ireland. Autism is a pervasive condition. It influences all aspects of a person's thought. Some of autism's aspects can be very challenging but others are hugely informative of someone's personality, how they think and who they are. In that sense, when we talk about autistic people, we must understand that their thinking is not necessarily incorrect, but different and so **we must find ways to translate autistic thinking and neurotypical (non-autistic) thinking into a dialect we can all understand and respect.**
- It helps you to understand being the minority – while no doubt even the thought of being in the situation described in this example is probably frightening or unpleasant, we had to use a very extreme example to help you empathise. **An autistic individual may experience a similar level of culture shock doing very basic day-to-day tasks you mightn't even need to think about like going to the supermarket when it's busy, using public transport or attending a public office.**

*supported by*



AN ROINN DLÍ AGUS CIRT AGUS COMHIONANNAS  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

AS I AM .IE

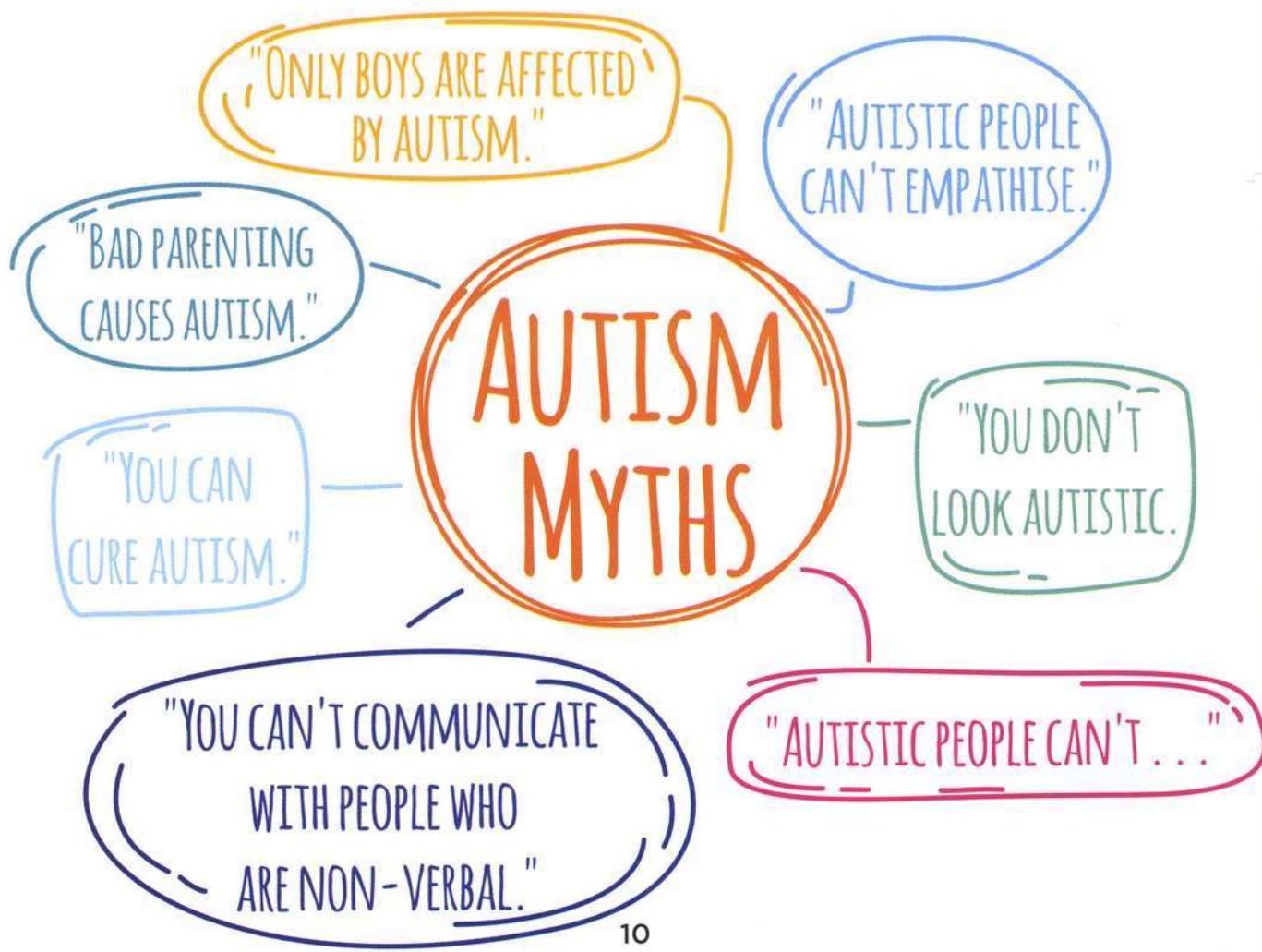
# COMMON TRAITS & AUTISM MYTHS

There are many different traits and characteristics associated with autism. The condition is so complex that at times, common traits and characteristics can contradict one another. One autistic person, for instance, may be extremely organised and become flustered when items are not sorted in a particular way or their daily routine is disrupted. Another person on the spectrum, on the other hand, might be poorly organised and find it especially hard to stick to a routine every day.

**Autistic individuals often have 'scattered skill sets' - this means a person may be very strong in some areas and find other areas extremely challenging.** While this may be true of all of us it may be more pronounced or noticeable in someone who is autistic.

We will look at some of the major common traits which we feel it is most important you, as a public servant, to have an understanding of as you go about your job. The traits we'll be looking at aren't intended to be an exhaustive list, nor may they apply to everyone you meet. Just as you are different to everyone else, so too is every person living with autism different. As the saying goes within the autistic community; "if you've met one person with autism, then you've met one person with autism."

We must never presume that someone is unable to do something or stereotype the person before we actually meet them or interact with them in a certain situation. Rather, we should consider how we can make situations as accessible as possible for everyone.



# COMMON TRAITS OF AUTISM

## SENSORY PROCESSING & MOTOR DIFFERENCES

Particularly strong lights, odours, noises and textures can overwhelm a person's senses. Will avoid these wherever they can

## COMMUNICATION & SOCIALISING ASPECTS

Struggle to express needs and often accompanies speech with gestures. Very direct in expressing their thoughts and opinions

## IMAGINATIVE SKILLS

Literal thinkers who respond well to visuals, routine and clear directions. Rote instructions can be hard to grasp

Engages in 'stimming' as a response to different scenarios, typically when excited or distressed

Varied capabilities in speech. Some individuals may be verbal, others less so and others may not be verbal at all

Intelligent, but often miss the meanings behind casual innuendos, metaphors, slang and sarcasm

Hypersensitive individuals dislike being touched. Hyposensitive may injure unintentionally themselves when exploring stimuli

Usually content with one's own company. May be reluctant to engage in group or interactive activities

Excellent memories but commonly struggle with understanding ranges of different facial expressions and body language

Problems planning personal movement. Motor control - force, direction and timing of movement - is difficult

Makes little to no eye contact, especially whilst speaking or being spoken to. Rarely initiates conversation

Misunderstand or are unaware of 'unwritten' rules and social cues

Too much information can overload a person, causing distorted perceptions of what's going on around them or meltdowns

Repetition of certain words and phrases (echolalia) is common. The person may repeat what you say because they don't understand the question or how to respond

Self-organisation and time management can be a challenge. May miscalculate scheduled times and dates

# COMMUNICATION

Communication cuts into every aspect of our life. It underpins how we exchange and understand information. Autistic individuals may find understanding how other people communicate, and indeed, communicating a message of their own to be challenging.

## BY SPEECH

Speaking is a major part of communication for most people; verbal communication can be especially difficult for autistic individuals.

Some people are non-verbal, meaning that they cannot or do not speak. Some develop the use of spoken language, others do not, while others lose the ability to communicate verbally when they are in a stressful situation or environment. **Just because an autistic person does not speak, doesn't mean that they don't have anything to say. Their efforts at communication, however, are often misunderstood and even dismissed.**

Following verbal communication can also be challenging, even for autistic people who are verbal themselves. People with autism often require longer to process information and so can get lost when issued rote instructions, multiple questions or by a conversation's quick pace.

This does not mean you should speak slower or louder to autistic people; rather, it means you may need to provide alternative communication options, avoid rote instructions and give a person sufficient time to answer your question before asking another.

## EXAMPLE

Brian is thirty-two and is non-verbal. He understands people around him but doesn't use speech to express himself. He normally uses sign language to communicate with his inner circle but relies on a family member to interact with a stranger. Today, Brian is visiting his local GP for a check-up on his own. The doctor who usually sees him is not here and is unaware that Brian is non-verbal. Her questions are straightforward, but he struggles to successfully explain how well he feels. A rapport is eventually established, and Brian is cleared for any problems, but he's apprehensive about future visits to the surgery now.

**In this example, Brian is showing some of the difficulties typically encountered by autistic individuals when trying to explain themselves.**

Dómhnall is eighteen years old. He is in his first year of college and is about to meet with one of his lecturers about an assignment deadline he is struggling to meet. Dómhnall does well academically but often struggles to express his needs and concerns to others when he needs help. Whilst discussing his difficulties with his lecturer, Dómhnall becomes increasingly anxious and his speech reflects this. He does not plan his sentences out in his mind and mixes his words up. His lecturer is patient and responds to his concerns, but Dómhnall cannot process everything she says to him.

**In this example, Dómhnall is showing some of the challenges associated with communication in verbal autistic individuals.**

## DECODING LANGUAGE

Verbal communication has more to it than the ability to speak. When most people are very young, they learn most of their communication skills from their parents - this includes things like jokes, figures of speech and slang.

For autistic individuals, many of the unwritten rules of day-to-day conversation must be learned. Due to communication's individual nature, however, it can be particularly tricky to actively teach those rules that work. This is because there are lots of grey areas and autistic peoples often think in very concrete, literal terms. This can cause lots of difficulty in language - when someone uses a figure of speech are they telling a joke or are they lying, for example?

These breakdowns in communication can cause lots of anxiety for autistic individuals in their daily lives and make the prospect of talking with someone very daunting. When we use language when interacting with an autistic person, it is important to be clear and more speech can often be less. It can take a little longer to think through at first, as we so naturally use idioms. Gradually, however, it becomes much easier and actually saves time in the long run by avoiding confusion.

### EXAMPLE

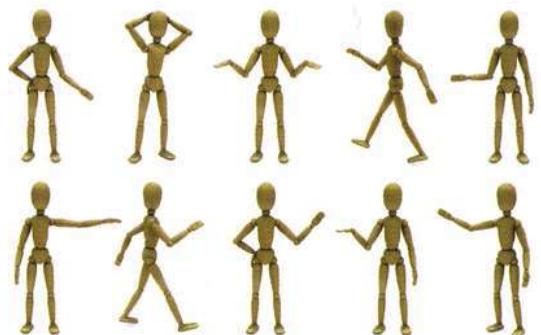
Niamh is twenty years old. She has just started a new job in a team-based environment where she will also be regularly interacting with members of the public. Her coworkers know she is autistic but have very little knowledge about the condition itself. Niamh has limited experience in working within a person-intensive setting and is new to the notion of office politics. She struggles to understand when it's appropriate to share a joke or to tell the difference between genuine disagreements and workplace banter. This can result in her feeling misunderstood and particularly isolated in her job.

**In this example, Niamh is showing some of the difficulties typically encountered by autistic individuals when trying to decode language and understanding that communication extends beyond speech.**

## BODY LANGUAGE

So much of how we communicate does not require language - our bodies, our faces and our tone of voice to get our message across.

If you thought about when exactly you learned to frown or smile, you probably can't pinpoint a moment. Yet for autistic people, non-verbal cues are often very hard to understand and can cause huge confusion.



## TONE OF VOICE

It is important when communicating not to rely on the tone of voice and to be understanding if a person gets confused if you're using irony or sarcasm and they don't understand it.

An autistic person, for instance, might take a phrase like "Oh gosh, thanks!" as a genuine expression of gratitude, regardless of how it was said or who said it.

## FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

If you need to learn facial expressions and how to read them change, it can be exceedingly tough. How it comes across in animation doesn't match anyone's face, and even a simple expression like a smirk can be either genuinely happy or secretly sinister.

This not only means that **autistic individuals can be confused by facial expressions, but equally their own facial expression may not always match how they are feeling themselves at a particular moment in time**. There are many autistic people who near constantly grin or frown, but this does not necessarily reflect how they are feeling at a particular point in time.



### EXAMPLE

Eimear is thirty-nine years old. Her car has been bumped into by another driver on a busy street. A pair of uniformed Gardai suddenly arrive to assess the situation. No serious damage to either person or their cars have occurred. This is Eimear's first serious interaction with the Gardai however, and their demeanour has made her feel that the situation is far worse than it is. Their direct line of questioning and requests to see Eimear's ID makes her feel that she is under suspicion of committing a serious criminal offence.

In this example, Eimear is demonstrating some of the typical challenges autistic people experience when attempting to read facial expressions and understand body language.

## CLEAN, CLEAR COMMUNICATION

So how do we communicate with autistic individuals? It's important when using written or verbal communication to be clear and concise; avoid relying on body language, facial expression or tone of voice to deliver your message.

There are lots of ways to do this - in our example, we changed the sentence from:

*"Meet me anywhere down the town around 3pm!"*

To

*"Meet me at the garage at 3pm. If I'm late, you can give me a call and see where I am."*

What have we done there? We have given a) a precise location, b) a precise time and c) we have given the person a reassurance of what they can do if something goes wrong - often the "what if" elements of interacting with other people can be stressful for someone with Autism so, in our example, we are providing the person with a reassurance and a practical tip if something changes in the plan without warning.



**CLEAN, CLEAR  
COMMUNICATION**

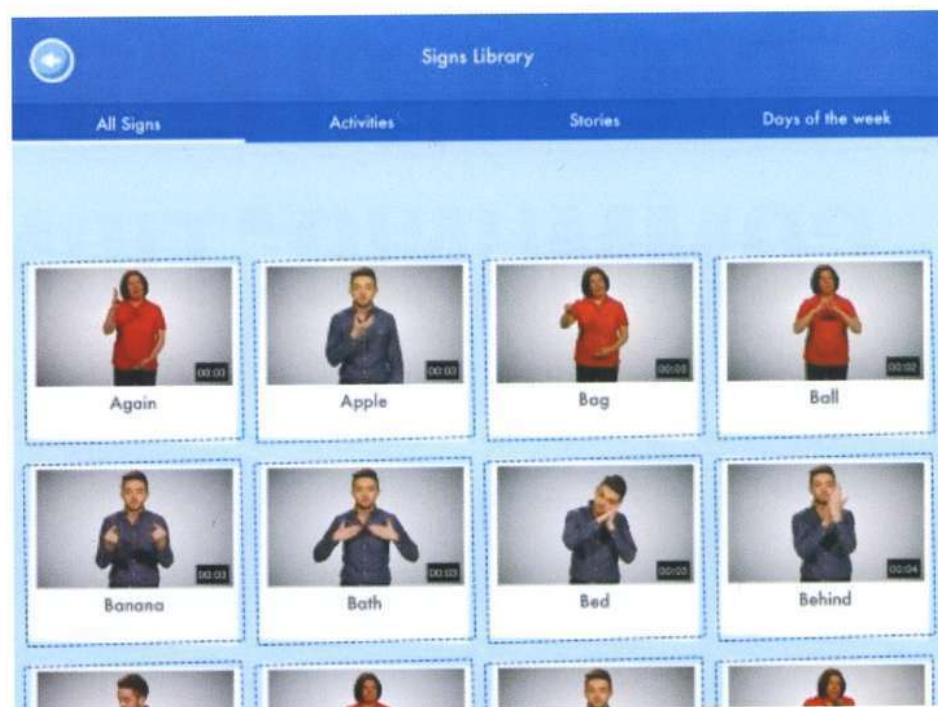
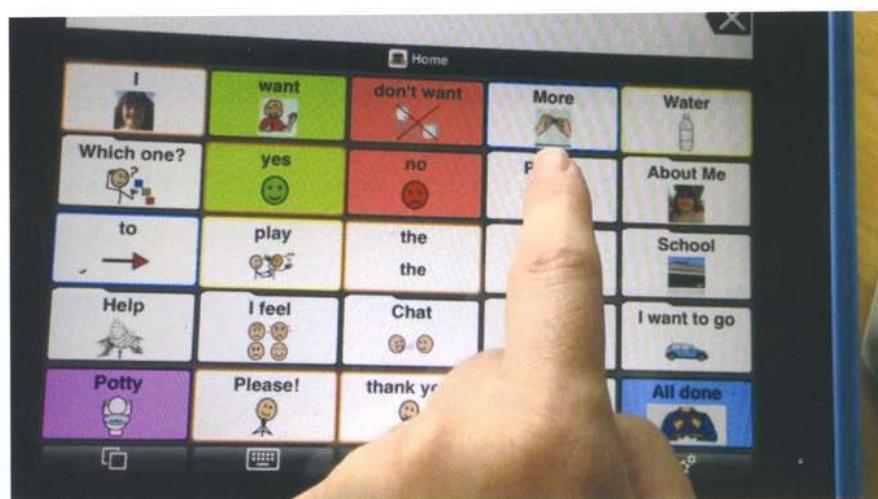
# ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Autistic individuals often use alternative means of communication.

As many autistic people are visual thinkers, many of those whom they live and work with use **PECS** (**Picture Exchange Communication System**) to communicate. Initially, this system was in a special book which the person would carry, but there are now also a number of picture-based communication apps for smart phones and tablets.

**Lámh** is a form of sign language for autistic people which is also used.

Aside from more formal alternative communication systems, people with autism may draw, gesticulate, type or have other means of communicating. Often those closest to an autistic person will understand their needs better than anyone, yet with time and patience, it is also often possible for strangers to work out what an autistic individual is trying to say through their personal method of communication.



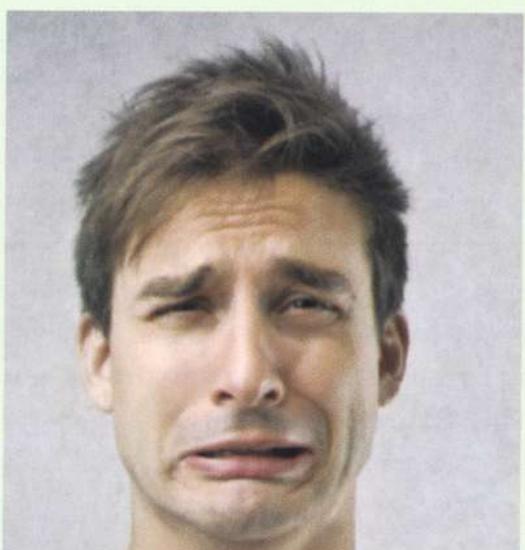
# SOCIAL IMAGINATION

How could you tell if someone was upset?

Would you say they're crying?

They're visibly tense?

Take a look at these faces. Do you think everyone here is upset?



Your ability to separate these two images comes from your brain's ability to understand context. Context, like the zoom out feature on a camera, helps you to see and interpret the subtle differences in everyday social situations. It's the common sense which helps you apply everyday rules.

For example, when you were young you may have been told "*if the light turns red wait until it turns green again to cross the road,*" however you probably don't stop if the light changes when you are in the middle of the road - this is because you can see the subtle but vitally important details which affect how we respond to different situations.

This ability to read and understand situations also makes day to day life less stressful. It means you can adapt to changes in plans or trying new things easier because you can constantly decode what is going on around you.

It can be difficult to interpret and understand the context of social situations for autistic individuals. Indeed, **autism is sometimes described as 'context blindness.'** This means every change in plan, every new person, and every situation can seem unfamiliar and overwhelming. People with autism can gradually hone their skills at interpreting context over time, yet it nonetheless requires some degree of guesswork.

Think of a very awkward social situation you were in which you were unsure of how to respond to - for many autistic individuals, this is often how they experience many day-to-day social situations.

When you guess, you'll sometimes guess wrong. This may mean at times, autistic people's behaviour might be seen as wholly inappropriate or they might say the wrong thing at the wrong time. There is no malice behind their behaviour rather a genuine misunderstanding of a social situation.

It also may mean that autistic people can take that little bit longer to process a social situation or might seem hesitant. This is because the person needs to 'pause real time' in order to interpret what to do next. Some autistic individuals may script social situations from past experiences or even from television or film in an effort to try and work through the social situation using something which is tried and tested.

As you can imagine, when every social situation can seem unfamiliar and overwhelming, this can be exhausting and lead to lots of anxiety. As a result, **many people with autism like routine, can be hesitant about trying new things or going new places and like to have as much information as possible in advance - as this helps to person to 'fill in the blanks' of a situation. Whilst you may be able to imagine for example, what might happen when you go to a hospital, an autistic person may find this difficult.**

Autistic individuals often use tools such as social stories and visuals to prepare for new social situations and to manage anxiety.

# SENSORY PROCESSING

We interpret and experience the world through our five senses. We also use proprioception, to coordinate our movements, and our vestibular system, to maintain our balance.

Autistic people use these same sensory tools to experience and engage with the world. However, for many of those individuals, they can work quite differently to those who do not have the condition. Autistic people can be either **hypersensitive** or **hyposensitive** to the sensory environment, or a **mixture of the two**.

## HYPERSENSITIVITY

Think about your environment right now.

You may be looking at your computer screen, sitting in a chair, listening to the radio. Perhaps there are certain odours in the room; perhaps a colleague is talking on the phone next to you or there are noises in the corridor from time to time. Perhaps there are several objects and flickering lighting in the room. While all this different information is going on around us, most of the time our brains can filter it out and focus on the one thing. Indeed, you may not have even thought about the other activities in the room, until we drew your attention to them. So, in other words, you're able to tune in and out of different pieces of sensory input, at different times.

For a hypersensitive individual, this may not be possible. They may experience tastes, scents, textures, lighting and noises significantly stronger than other people. They might also struggle to filter out the various activities going on around them. As a result, daily environments can be particularly overstimulating.

Autistic people can be overwhelmed by their sensory environments. They cannot focus and may experience extreme discomfort or even outright pain. This may lead them to undergo a meltdown, withdrawal or display challenging behaviour.

**It's not that the individual doesn't like certain things, but rather, they physically and psychologically cannot tolerate them.**

Imagine the noise nails make scraping against a blackboard. Few of us can bear it on its own, much less while we're trying to complete tasks. We can't focus on anything until it's removed from the environment.

### EXAMPLE

Máire is forty-seven years old. She visits her local post office regularly to deliver parcels to her children who are now living abroad. It is Christmas time and the office is far busier than at any other time of the year. Máire often struggles to filter out the important information about when and where she needs to go to send her items. The cashier speakers' noise levels, cramped space and the movement of so many people in different directions can overwhelm her senses. She has a very low pain tolerance and will go to lengths to avoid crowds and bumping into other people, even if it means waiting until the very end of the day to send her parcels off when it's quieter and risk closing time.

**In this example, Máire is showing signs of hypersensitivity to sound, touch and movement.**



**Because sensory environments and triggers can be so overwhelming, many autistic individuals will avoid busy places or find it very hard to cope in day to day environments like shops, public offices or on public transport.**

## HYPOSENSITIVITY

Hypersensitivity may make it challenging to interpret surroundings, to coordinate your body or to identify pain. Where someone is hyposensitive to their environment, they may not get the same experience of their surroundings as others. In fact, they may feel little or nothing at all.

These individuals, as a result, might need particularly obvious and assertive inputs to fully interpret their surroundings. They may like being in busy and crowded environments, they may need to move around a lot or prefer stronger tastes and odours when eating or drinking.

**Autistic people may take certain steps to 'curate' their sensory environments.** They might, for instance, use ear defenders to reduce noise or choose to visit places earlier in the morning or later in the evening when it's less busy. Additionally, certain sensory inputs may help the person to relax such as a favourite object or particular materials such as a stress ball or a certain fragrance.

### EXAMPLE

Fionn is eight years old. He likes to roll around the floor and squeeze himself into tight positions whenever he's sitting or lying down. Fionn touches everything that he can get his hands on, including sharp objects like compasses and scissors. He is waiting with his father at the therapist's office. There is little to occupy his attention and he begins to run up and down the corridor on the tips of his toes. He then repeatedly tears up colourful magazines and newspapers in the waiting room, trying to see which makes the loudest tear. He scrunches the paper up and holds it tight in his hands.

**In this example, Fionn is showing signs of hyposensitivity to sight, touch and sound.**

# CONCENTRATION & STIMMING

Staying concentrated can be a major difficulty for autistic individuals. A common myth about autism is that everyone diagnosed with it has extraordinary concentration abilities.

## THIS IS NOT THE CASE

Autistic individuals are all different and are equally impacted by their diagnosis differently. Some people can focus their attention on interests to an exceptional level. Others, particularly those who are sensitive to sensory overloads, struggle daily to concentrate. This means that waiting for long periods of time, staying on basic tasks, or even following a conversation is a challenge. How hard it is will vary across the spectrum, since no one person with autism is affected the same way as another with the condition.

Many autistic people live with co-morbid neurodevelopmental disorders affecting their attention spans and behaviour. These typically include, but aren't limited to:

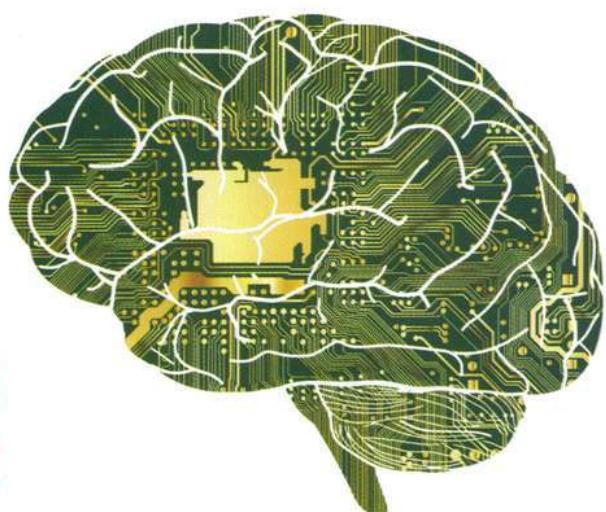
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- Attention Deficit (Hyperactive) Disorder (ADHD)

Nowadays, families of children who are diagnosed with autism will usually be notified if their child has any other condition during their wider clinical assessment for autism. This makes planning strategies for their additional needs much easier in the long term. However, not every person on the spectrum is necessarily diagnosed with these alongside their autism and may not be aware of what their additional needs are to help them manage. This is especially common in older autistic people, who would have been the typical diagnostic age for autism when these conditions were poorly understood.

There is therefore an onus on public servants to be aware and appreciative of the traits linked to these conditions.

Understanding how an individual on the spectrum thinks can be tough for anyone who isn't, even those with the most open mind and positive attitudes towards autism. It's complicated further with additional conditions added into the mix.

**Think of an autistic person's brain as like a computer. It's processing a huge amount of information from the world around it. Attempting to predict social situations, accurately read faces and body language, gauge other**



people's tone of voice, coordinate motor skills, filter out background noises and images – all maybe during an anxiety attack. Like a computer, an autistic person's brain overheats when it's overworked. It needs to vent excess energy and cool down to properly restart itself. This is called stimming.



# CONCENTRATION & STIMMING

## STIMMING

Stimming (Self-Stimulator Behaviour) is a repetitive action, or series of actions, which an autistic person may do when they are excited, stimulated by their environment, anxious or have been sitting still for a long period of time. Every individual will stim differently. For one person, it may be something very visible, like tapping their hands repeatedly, rocking back and forth, or running around. Another, on the other hand, might be subtler. They may twist a lock of hair, rub their hands, crack their knuckles or fiddle with a piece of jewellery. Echolalia, (the repetition of certain words and phrases), is another common form of stimming.

By doing this, the autistic person regulates themselves. It is a positive behaviour which helps them cope in day-to-day life. It can also indicate how the individual is feeling at a particular moment.

Accurately interpreting this behaviour, however, is often difficult for other people, especially for strangers and in public places. When we see someone stimming it's easy to jump to conclusions; if an adult is rocking back and forth, for instance, we might presume they are intoxicated. Moreover, autistic people often do not realise that they are stimming and might become embarrassed if attention is drawn.

It is important to challenge anyone who may be jeering the person in public or who may be quick to identify the person as a vulnerable individual and seek to take advantage.



# ANXIETY & MELTDOWNS

## ANXIETY

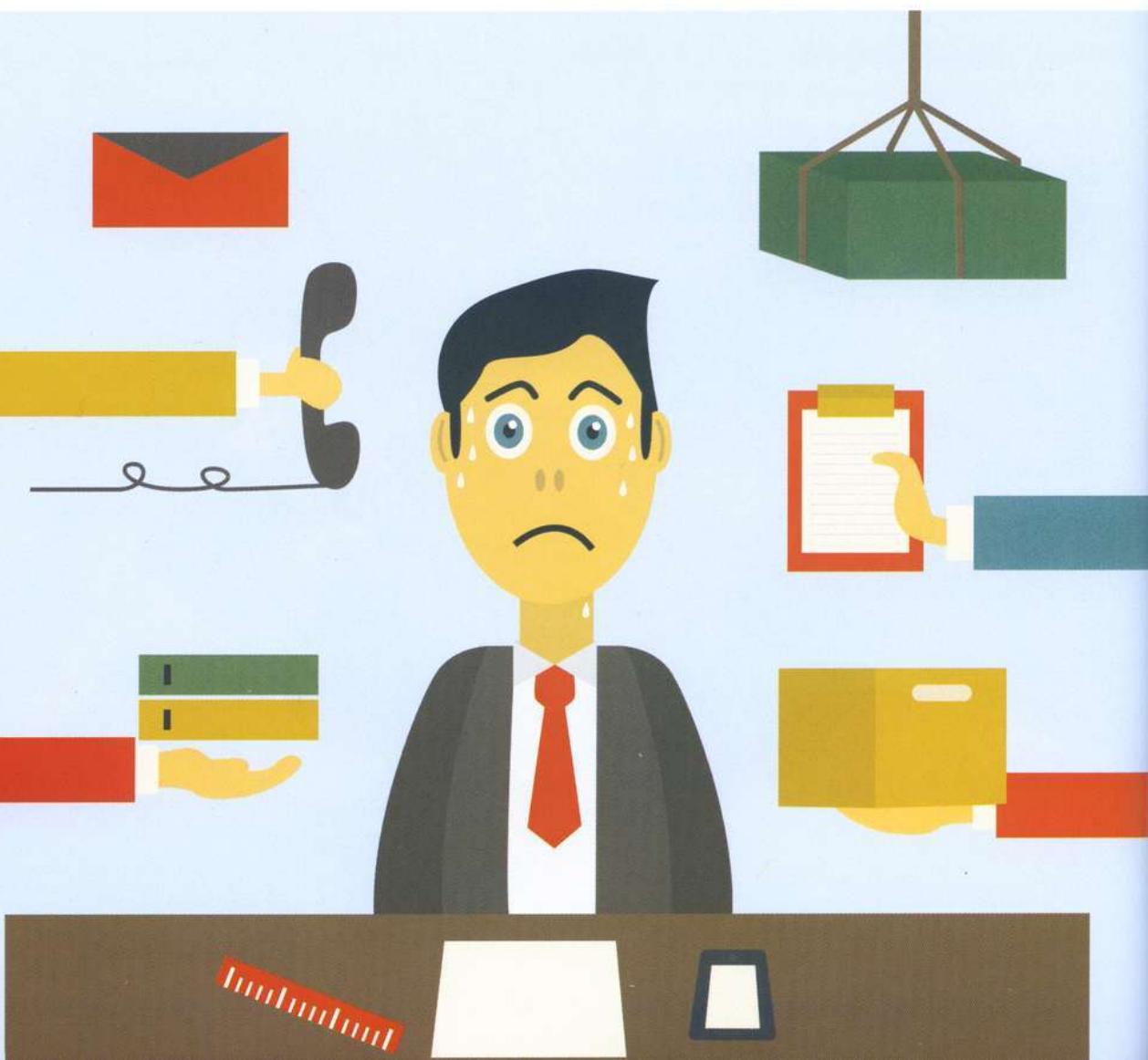
We all know what it is like to be anxious and worry about certain things. We might be nervous about starting a new job, beginning a new hobby or meeting a date for the first time.

Equally, we might fret over something bad occurring, like if we forgot to switch the stove off when we left the house, missing that month's rent or the consequences of failing to meet a deadline at work.

Anxiety often stems from the unknown or of forces wholly out of our control. For autistic people, anxiety can be a near-constant state of daily life and may be exacerbated by very minor day-to-day situations. This makes sense when you

consider how most autistic individuals attempt to anticipate and manage the unknown and the unfamiliar in their lives.

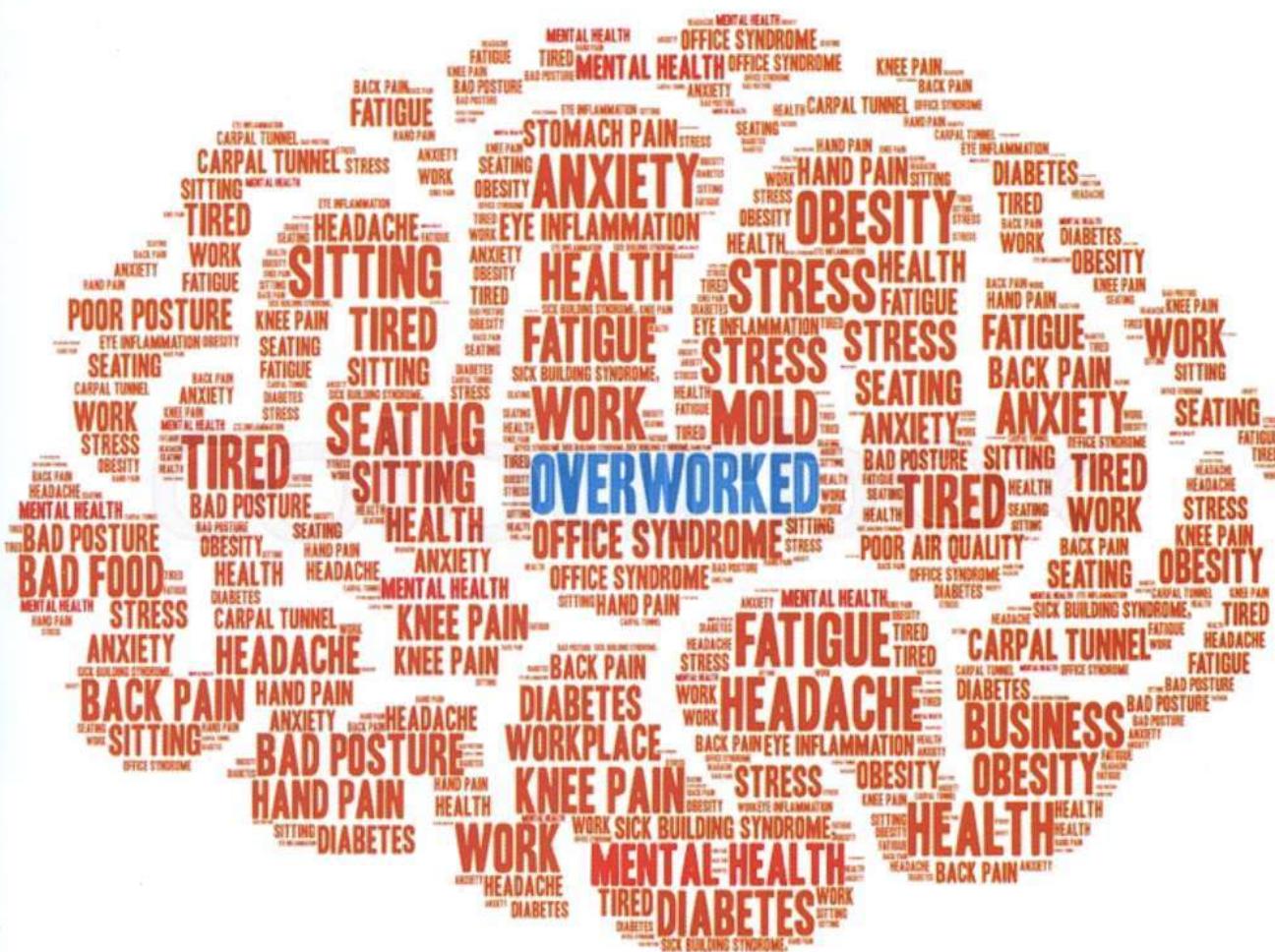
Anxiety spells complicate the condition's other aspects, namely sensory processing. This can become even more overwhelming or it can be more difficult to communicate with others. It is important to be aware of the central role anxiety in autism and how helping to reduce it by providing predictability, reassurance and context, can be a major support for those with the condition.



# MELTDOWNS

As we've seen, managing a busy sensory environment, changing social situations and adapting to unsuitable communication styles can become hugely overwhelming for an autistic person. Indeed, they may become so overwhelmed by the situation that they experience a meltdown.

A meltdown can often be misinterpreted as a temper tantrum or anti-social behaviour. The individual has done their best to adapt to their surroundings, but as reached a point in which they are no longer able to cope or process anymore. When a person experiences a meltdown, it may be expressed verbally (crying, shouting, screaming) or physically (scratching, biting, kicking) or both.



When you see someone experiencing a meltdown, it's crucial to know what to do and what not to do. Generally, if we see someone upset our human reaction is to reach out to provide them with comfort and reassurance. On the other hand, if we interpret their behaviour as challenging, our reaction may be to restrain the person or to directly confront them. In the case of a meltdown, different steps must be taken to effectively manage it:

- During a meltdown, a person's mind is already overwhelmed and cannot process more information. Consequently, avoid trying to reason with or engage the individual;
- If you need communicate with them, have only one person speaking and using as few words as possible;
- Avoid touching the person or trying to console them. Instead, give them as much space as possible. Only move the person if they are in a potentially dangerous environment;
- Should you need to move the person, it is important that you inform them of what you are going to do, using simple, clear and calm communication, prior to doing it. Ideally, use visual tools, like pictures and signs, to communicate your message;
- If the person is with a friend, a family member or a carer, let them take the lead. They will understand the individual and their meltdowns the best. Crucially, they are also most likely to be trusted by the person experiencing a meltdown;
- Ideally, try to calm the sensory environment around the person such as by reducing noise, turning off music or dimming the lights.

**Meltdowns are triggered by a range of different causes;** namely by changes in routine, high anxiety levels or overstimulating sensory environments. Generally speaking, someone closest to the autistic individual will have the necessary strategies to manage meltdowns, or may be able to identify the warning signals prior to a meltdown and take steps to prevent it. This is where spaces such as Quiet Rooms can be extremely helpful.



# AUTISM STRENGTHS

We've looked at the challenges experienced by autistic people and this is vital in helping you understand the changes and adaptations needed to make public services accessible and adaptable.

It would be remiss not to highlight, however, many strengths of people with the condition and the contributions so many make or wish to make, if given the opportunity, to our society.

Think about the word **DISABILITY**.

The much larger part of the word is **ABILITY**, yet it's often the **DISability** we home in on. We focus on what the person is unable to do, reducing the person to a list of 'can't's' instead of looking at their individual abilities and asking how can we help them succeed in using these. Everyone has their own strengths, skills and abilities; autistic people are no different.

Autistic individuals communicate differently, think differently and experience the world around them differently. We need different ways of thinking and understanding in our society. Perhaps an alternative word for different is the word "innovative" which is something we look for in businesses, in policies and in services.

- **Autistic individuals often have enormous attention to detail. This is a highly marketable skill, useful in various industries ranging from the creative to the scientific, even in daily life.** This can manifest differently from person to person. It may be an extraordinary memory in one individual, able to recall swathes of statistics or even entire scripts. To another, they may be able to identify the smallest changes in patterns or coding.
- **Autistic people often have a special interest in one specific topic, of which they can learn everything about and excel in.** These topics are as varied and numerous as there are people living with the condition. It is a highly transferable and practical ability to have, able to motivate autistic people to socialise, seek employment and inspire hobbies.
- **As autistic people usually think in literal ways, loyalty and honest tend to be very strong attributes of theirs. It can often take longer to make a friend or find a job, but when the person successfully does either it will be for life.** Most people with autism find it very difficult to lie and this is also a very valuable quality in our society though, as we always remind people, only ask an autistic person an honest question if you really want an honest answer!

# BARRIERS TO ACCESS

So, what are the accessibility barriers faced by autistic people, interacting with public services?

As you know, **the experiences of autistic individuals can be very different**. What poses a challenge to one person with the condition, may be very different from what poses a challenge to another. Similar to the degree to which these challenges encroach on someone's experience might differ – while one autistic person may struggle with sound and so, for instance, be unable to cope at a busy train station, someone else on the spectrum might still struggle with sound but will still go to the train station, though they may find it an immensely uncomfortable and difficult experience.

What this highlights is the need for Access Officers to be available to hear the concerns of autistic customers. The needs of individuals can be quite different and so there must be a willingness to be open to adaptations and flexibility for the community.

That said, there are some common challenges which many autistic individuals experience, and which may impact on a person's ability to easily access public services like someone who is not autistic. Understanding these basic challenges is an important first step in making your public services autism-friendly.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication can work very differently for autistic people. Consequently, interacting with public services can be challenging. While interacting with someone face to face, at a counter, in a meeting or while being provided with a service, can be challenging it does not stop there.

Understanding written correspondence, interacting on the telephone and following instructions can also be hard. This difficulty around communication can lead to misunderstandings, high levels of anxiety, confusion and an inability to engage with systems or statutory obligations.

### EXAMPLE

Around 20% of autistic people are non-verbal and don't use speech at all when interacting with others.<sup>1</sup> This can seriously stymie their accessibility to public services, particularly when using transport or reaching out to healthcare professionals. Technology has opened new ways for alternative communication, but it's crucial to appreciate that not everyone on the spectrum will use the same method. When asking for directions at a busy bus station, a non-verbal person may struggle to approach a staff member because they might think the staff won't understand their individual mode of communication.

<sup>1</sup>*Reasonable Accommodations For People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (June 2015). Available from: <http://ind.ie/Publications/Disability-Supports/Autism/Reasonable-Accommodation-for-people-with-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-2014-updated-2015-.html>*

## DEALING WITH CHANGE

When you're autistic, the world can seem unpredictable and unsuitable. As a result, autistic individuals often rely on routine, predictability and a level of personal control to cope in day-to-day life. While some people can deviate from their routine with advance notice and planning, others might find this to be a hugely stressful ordeal. Going to an appointment, entering a building for the first time, knowing how to behave can all be challenges for autistic people. Consequently, using public services can often cause high levels of anxiety.

## MANAGING THE SENSORY ENVIRONMENT

Public services exist for a reason. They are needed and there is a demand on their continued service. As we all know, they are often busy places. Equally, when you interact with certain public services, namely with the emergency services or public transport, it's likely that you're going to be dealing with high pressure environments. These sensory challenges can make participation very difficult for someone with autism.

## BEING JUDGED BY OTHERS

A key barrier to participation for many autistic people can be outside of the direct control of public services. Many of these individuals, and their families, can feel judged by wider society. An autistic adult may be embarrassed by people staring when they stim. An autistic child's parent or carer may be self-conscious about how members of the public react when they see their child experiencing a meltdown. Other people's opinions can often be harsh due to autism's invisibility as a condition.

**A key step public services can take is to highlight the invisibility of such disabilities, and try to build a culture of understanding among their employees and customer base.**

## DISCLOSURE

One of autism's toughest challenges is deciding whether or not to disclose their diagnosis to people around them. Self-consciousness is a major factor here, yet this in itself is because of the lack of public education about autism. It's not uncommon for people to behave differently, for example to be patronising or uncomfortable, after a person discloses.

People also have a lot of underlying assumptions or stereotypes in their head when it comes to autism and so this can lead to a lot of misunderstanding. However, because many autistic people are reluctant to disclose their diagnosis, this can make it harder for providing supports within the community - this is why it is essential for public services to highlight the fact that they are inclusive towards those with autism and to, as far as possible, implement autism-friendly practices into mainstream practice so that supports do not have to be requested.

*supported by*



# BEING AUTISM-FRIENDLY

When we use phrases like "autism-friendly," it can sound a little overwhelming. It's easy to assume that enormous professional expertise would be required or that it's something extremely complex. Equally, it's a relatively new term and one which you may not have heard before.

**Autism-friendly practices can be defined as "being aware of social engagement and environmental factors affecting people on the autism spectrum, with modifications to communication methods and physical space to better suit individual's unique and special needs."**

In short, it means being open to making changes to enable an autistic person to participate. Recognising the fact that the person with autism has already had to make a lot of adjustments to cope with the world around them.

In the past, the prevailing thought process was that autistic individuals needed to be treated in order to cope in society; that an autistic person needed to adjust to the world because the world wasn't going to adjust to them.

While, certainly, autistic people need to be given skills and tools to cope in the world, we know that even with all of this support, a person will remain autistic and so face accessibility barriers everyday. We also know that while some people can learn to cope in many different ways, other people may not be able to acquire these skills so easily and may always need a lot of support.

We then come to a simple question - do we simply say the person who cannot adopt or who has adopted a lot but still faces significant struggle should be left out or cannot access services? Or do we say the world needs to adapt a little to meet this person's needs?

The latter option is what autism-friendly practice is all about - making small changes to how things are done which can have a hugely positive impact on the experiences of an autistic customer.



## **AUTISM-FRIENDLY PRACTICES**

There are many different changes which can be made to the work of your organisation, in order to make it more accessible for those with Autism. Later, in this booklet you will have an opportunity to assess your own organisation or team and the practice you currently employ.

First, however, we want to provide you with an overview of some common elements of Autism-Friendly Practice, grouped into 4 key headings:

**Communication**

**Predictability & Control**

**Sensory Processing**

**Staff & Public Awareness & Understanding**

# COMMUNICATION

Communicating with the general public is something which every public service does, one way or another - whether it is meeting a customer at a counter, sending a letter or email or interacting over the telephone.

Autistic people may communicate differently to most people and so find these communications to be confusing or anxiety inducing. Additionally, it is possible for communications to lead to misunderstandings or, due to a breakdown in communication, to yield no results.

## MODES OF COMMUNICATION

When communicating with someone who's autistic, it is important to allow that person to decide how they feel most comfortable communicating, as each mode of communication presents opportunities and challenges for those on the autistic spectrum.

**Telephone** Some autistic people like using the telephone, as it enables you to communicate without leaving the comfort of your own home and allows for instant reassurances if someone becomes worried or stressed about something. At the same time, many other autistic individuals find the telephone to be extremely stressful; calls can come unexpectedly, a person needs to be able to formulate a response instantly, it can be harder to judge a person's intention or demeanour and background noise can be hugely distracting on the other line. Moreover, telephone communication is not suitable for non-verbal individuals.

## IN PERSON

Some autistic people will like to meet face-to-face and find it easier and more reassuring than a phone call or written communication. It's not without its challenges, however. When interacting with a public servant in person, it may well be in a rushed setting, such as at a busy counter in a public office. An autistic person will feel pressured, they may struggle to read body language or facial expressions and the entire visit may involve a change in their daily routine.

## WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE

While some autistic people may prefer the precision and clarity of written communication, others can find its unexpected timing and nature hugely stressful. Standardised messages and letters can cause distress (for example, memos about compliance might be interpreted as a personal attack or warning) and it is not always easy to pick out step-by-step instructions. It can also be hard for an autistic individual to visualise what they're being asked to do. Because many on the spectrum are visual thinkers, written communication can complicate instructions and messages.

It's a good idea to have a variety of modes of communication on offer and to let the person know that they can select a mode of communication most suited to them.

## PROVIDE CONSISTENCY

Whatever mode of communication is used, try to be consistent in how it is applied - this will mean the person feels more comfortable and is more easily able to predict what to expect and so is less anxious. Ideally, assign one person to communicate with the customer so that a rapport can be developed.

## GIVE THE PERSON ADVANCE NOTICE

If you are going to call or need to meet someone, give them advance notice of this, or if you are going to write to a person, give them an indication of when they can expect to hear from you next. This will help to reduce their anxiety by providing certainty that communication is incoming.

## CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENT WHERE THE CONVERSATION IS TAKING PLACE

Are you talking to someone on the middle of a noisy street or in a packed public office? This may influence how well a person can concentrate and comprehend a conversation. It may mean they are also very stressed by the environment. A suitable environment is a vital part of effective communication.

## STATE YOUR INTENTIONS CLEARLY

While most people may be able to judge quickly why you are interacting or getting in touch with them, it may not be the case for an autistic individual. Give them an overview of why you are communicating with them and what you want to achieve at the start - this provides clarity and helps to reduce anxiety.

## USE CLEAN & CLEAR LANGUAGE

Avoid using slang, figures of speech, complex sentences or imprecise terms. Say exactly what you mean, clearly and succinctly. This helps to limit confusion and makes it easier for an autistic person to follow instructions.

## PROVIDE VISUALS

What is it you are trying to explain? Are you relying just on words to do this? Is there a way to provide a visual instruction in pictures or videos? This may be much easier for the person with autism to understand.

## AVOID ROTÉ INSTRUCTION

Avoid roté instruction or long paragraphs which you must pick instructions out of. Instead, provide clear, step-by-step instructions in written communication. In spoken communication, give one instruction or make one point at a time - offer the person a written version of these steps or the main points of what you have said if this will be helpful.

## PROVIDE INFORMATION ON WHAT TO EXPECT

Do you have standard processes in place? Do customers, for instance, come to get passports stamped or to have routine meetings? Provide an overview of how these processes work - preferably visually - so that the person is best able to prepare. When a person is less anxious it is much easier to communicate.

## ALLOW THE PERSON TO NOMINATE SOMEONE TO SUPPORT THEM IN COMMUNICATION

If a person finds communications stressful or confusing, allow them to nominate someone to assist them - by coming to a meeting or joining in on a telephone call. This will provide reassurance, avoid confusion and ensure that those who are not able to communicate independently can still interact with public services.

## PATIENCE & RESPECT

Communicating with an autistic individual can be challenging, just as communicating with a non-autistic person can be difficult for someone with the condition. It takes time and energy and isn't always easy. However, the most important thing is that you are patient with the person you are interacting with, that you make the effort to understand how they are trying to communicate and that you are respectful in your interactions. Even if you can't always understand the individual, your efforts to communicate will not go unnoticed and unappreciated.

# PREDICTABILITY & CONTROL

Autistic people can often find it hard to visualise and read social situations, this can lead to great confusion and frustration. It can mean a person doesn't feel in control of what is going on around them.

As a result, **routine and predictability are very important for many autistic individuals**  
- restoring a sense of safety and control and helping to reduce anxiety.

It is much easier for autistic people to participate when they are prepared and comfortable with what they are engaging with. You can help an autistic person engage with your public service by providing predictability, and you can do this in a number of ways.

## WEBSITES

Websites are great platforms to provide autistic people with as much information as possible ahead of their interaction with your service. Perhaps you could setup a section of your website, specifically for autistic users, to access the information they need ahead of engaging with you.

## SOCIAL STORIES™

Social Stories are a tool used by autistic individuals to prepare for new social situations. It enables the person to know what to expect, understand how other people will behave and what will be expected of them. The story will usually contain short sentences explaining the situation and be coupled with images which take the person through each stage in the process. Social stories are extremely useful and relatively easy to put together. You can have a social story providing a broad overview (*i.e. Getting the Train*) as well as describing something more specific (*i.e. Going to Connolly Station*). Additionally, you can have a social story which describes a process (*i.e. Applying for a Passport*). Social Stories can also be done by video.

## VIDEOS & 360° DEGREE TOURS

Since many people on the spectrum can struggle to visualise new places, activities and social situations, video and 360° tours are very helpful in providing the person with an image of what to expect and enabling a person to prepare (giving them the control to take their time in exploring the environment - pausing, scrolling and preparing for the noises and environment by desensitising).

## FAQs / ASK A QUESTION FEATURE

Providing a Frequently Asked Question resource is helpful to everyone. However, it can be especially helpful to autistic individuals who may be trying to think through the "What if" scenarios in their head. It is useful if the FAQ resource is written as clearly and simply as possible. Having a feature which enables people to ask questions or submit queries can also be a helpful follow up.

## CLEAR SIGNAGE

Navigation can be a real challenge for autistic people, and so ensuring there is clear signage at your public office is vital. It is also important to ensure that the signage contains visual images and not just words.

## **NOTIFICATION OF UNEXPECTED CHANGES**

A big challenge for autistic individuals is unexpected change. This can cause huge stress and even lead to a person being reluctant to go somewhere again. Providing a notification system when changes are made can be hugely helpful – will a particular office be closed, is there construction work ongoing, is there a change in procedure? A simple notification can enable the person to prepare and prevent further difficulties.

#### **LET THE PERSON KNOW WHAT THEY CAN DO**

Due to the sheer diversity of the autistic spectrum, you can't always do everything for everyone - for example, while one person the spectrum might feel relief in high noise levels or loud music, another might experience intense discomfort. What you can do though is provide as much information about what to expect and what supports are in place and then also highlight things a person could do for themselves - such as bringing a hand fidget or ear plugs.



# THE SENSORY ENVIRONMENT

The sensory environment can pose significant challenges to participation for those on the autism spectrum. It's not something which should be underestimated or considered as merely novel when talking about accessibility for autistic people - challenging environments make things much harder for them and can also lead to a person choosing not to engage or interact with a service.

Autistic individuals may take their own steps to 'curate' their sensory environment. One person may, for instance, wear ear plugs or headphones, or may choose to go somewhere at times which avoid crowds. **There is a limit to how much a person can do however, and there are some concrete steps which public services can take to make their sensory environments more easily manageable for autistic service users.**

While everyone's sensory needs are different, it's generally easier for everyone to manage, and to adjust according to their own needs, in a calm and quiet environment.

## SENSORY AUDIT

No two sensory environments are the same and so a tailored approach to addressing this need is required by every individual building or service.

The first step in meeting this accessibility need is to conduct a sensory audit - this involves walking through your office or service and identifying potential sensory challenges such as lights (are they old halogen lights?), sounds (do you have hand dryers or noises, alarm systems?), smells (is there a canteen?), textures (what are the different surfaces like?) and tastes (if a medical service, do you have lots of different substances which people must use or take?). This audit will inform you in identifying areas you could adapt or change. Equally, it will enable you to provide a detailed description of your sensory environment which autistic people can access on your website in preparing to use your public service.

As an autistic person may find some sensory inputs very challenging, which you may not even notice or be aware of, it is advisable to involve autistic people in conducting your sensory audit.

## QUIET TIMES

You may not be able to control an environment all of the time. You may have periods when you're especially busy or times when work involves high levels of noise or bright lights. There's still a means to make your service accessible however by selecting a time each week known as a 'Quiet Period.'

It may be that one of these periods exists naturally already (for instance, a day or a period of a day where you know you that won't have many customers). Advertise the time as a period suitable for people with sensory issues. Remove background noise such as music or the use of a tannoy system and look to reduce all other noise, dim the lights so that they are less glaring and try to avoid any activity which

would add any additional sounds, odours, lighting or textures to the environment.

Ensure you have staff on hand who have an understanding of autism's traits as a condition. This is a great way to ensure that autistic individuals can still access your service. It will also benefit other cohorts such as people who experience migraines, those with hearing impairments or people who just like things to be that little bit calmer.

## OFFER APPOINTMENTS

Alternatively, if you're not in a position to facilitate a Quiet Period, you might offer an appointments-based service to customers with sensory difficulties.

Drop-in based services can be very challenging for autistic individuals as waiting rooms are often busy environments. By offering an appointment, you provide certainty as well as calm, and this could be extremely helpful. Where appointments are offered it is important to be clear – for example, if it is likely appointments are often delayed in beginning it would be important to let the autistic individual know this so they can prepare themselves.

## QUIET SPACES

A big fear that many autistic individuals live with is becoming overwhelmed while out and about – there is a fear of being helpless, of having nowhere to go and of being judged or misunderstood by others. This can lead people on the spectrum becoming more insular and avoiding contact. When a person does participate and become overwhelmed by their environment, or experience a meltdown, this can be an embarrassing experience – yet it's often a very preventable experience.

If a person has somewhere to go to collect themselves when things become too much, or they need a break this can make participation in the community much easier and more pleasant for all involved. You can help achieve this by providing a Quiet Space in your office, building or transport service. A Quiet space is something quite simple – it is a room away from the noise and crowds where a person can come to have a moment. The room should have as few distractions as possible – you may consider dimming the lights and providing some calming lighting, such as fibre optic lamps or fairy lights. You may also provide some hand fidgets which would assist the person in calming their mind.

Quiet Spaces should not be confused with multi-sensory rooms which are expensive installations – rather, this is something which can simply be provided with no equipment, perhaps just some comfortable seating, or with very cheap items to add a relaxed atmosphere to the space.

## SENSORY ALERTS

With the sensory environment posing so many challenges, a key concern for many autistic individuals is the unexpected. That a person will go somewhere and unexpectedly encounter a very challenging environment or one of their sensory triggers (such as the smell of wet paint or the noise of a drill). Knowing in advance enables a person to prepare or to decide to opt-out. It gives the person a sense of comfort and control.

A helpful way of supporting this is by providing sensory alerts on your website; for example, letting

people know when building work is in progress, when the fire alarm is being tested or when the building is being painted. This simple measure could make a hugely positive difference to people on the spectrum.

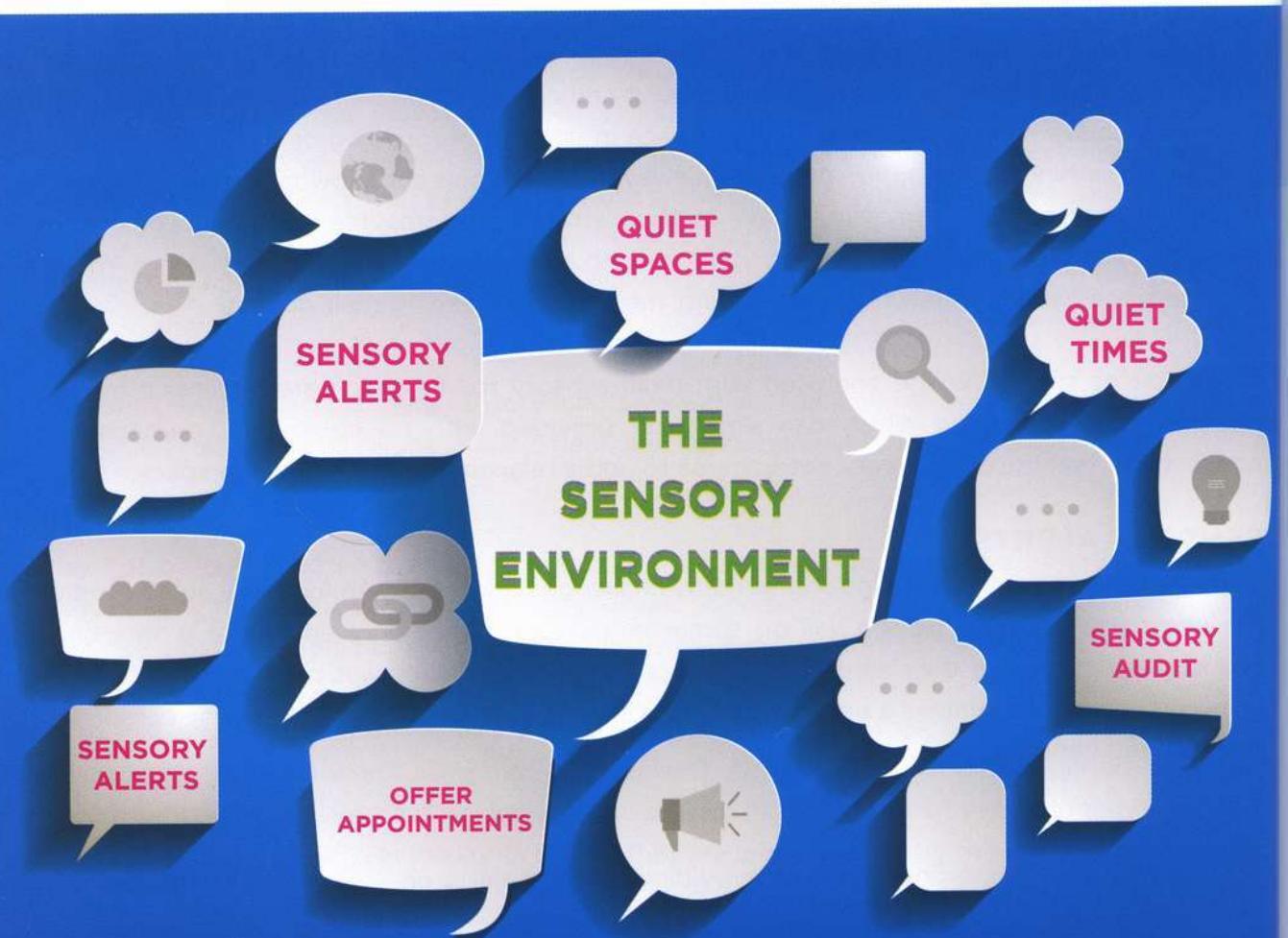
## DE-SENSITISE

Linked to our last point, preparation can be everything for a person with sensory processing difficulties. One way that autistic people often do this is by de-sensitising – by exposing themselves, in a controlled way and becoming more comfortable or better able to manage over time.

You as a public servant can help this process by considering key sensory inputs in your service – is there specific sounds in your building or work? Are there particular light types? If you're a medical or emergency service, do you use different textures as part of your work? Provide videos and audio recordings of the noises and lights, on your website, so that a person can prepare themselves while staying in control of the input. If there are certain textures involved in your work, can you make samples available in advance?

## PERSONAL SPACE

Personal space is often very important to an autistic person – understand that the person may not be able to cope with handshakes or having your hand placed on them (on an arm or shoulder during a conversation, for example). Respect personal space and always let someone know if you need to come into physical contact with them. If conducting a procedure, always demonstrate and allow the person to try, prior to coming into physical contact.



# STAFF & PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

While we have spoken a lot about the very specific steps you can take to make your public service more autism-friendly, it is important to realise that at the centre of any effort must be the right attitude and culture.

Due to the diversity of the autism spectrum, even implementing every measure we suggest, it can be difficult to create the ideal public service. This because **no two people with autism are the same**. It may be that the challenges a person experiences are very individual to them, and so you may not be aware of – therefore having staff who understand autism's traits and open to trying to help and trying to understand a customer with the condition is a crucial first step. **It means a huge amount to the autistic community when someone takes the time to provide that little bit of extra help or when someone is patient when a person is just finding something confusing or overwhelming. This respect and positive attitude is the most important part of any autism-friendly policy and all the other changes we propose will naturally flow from that openness and knowledge.**

That said, it is not only staff who need to be understanding and empathetic of the needs of an autistic person. Since autism is an invisible disability, and as those with the condition might behave differently to non-autistic people, it's very common for individuals on the spectrum and their families to be misunderstood or judged by members of the public who don't understand why someone is behaving in a certain way. One unkind or ignorant remark could have a huge impact on an autistic person and prevent them from participating in the future. It's important, as you introduce autism-friendly measures, to remind the general public that not every disability is visible.

## AWARENESS POSTERS

Consider running a poster campaign highlighting some of the topics we have discussed in this course, and how they interact with your own work environment. This may challenge members of the public to think when they see someone behaving differently.

## DISABILITY SIGNAGE

A key challenge for autistic people can also be how disability supports are highlighted, chiefly through the wheelchair symbol. This means an autistic individual using a disabled bathroom, perhaps because of the need to go somewhere quiet or because of not being able to cope with the noise of hand-dryers, or a disabled seat on the bus due to poor balance, can be interpreted as ignorance on their part. Consider how you could make clear that these supports are for people with invisible disabilities as well.

## AUTISM INCLUSION SIGNAGE

Sometimes things would be easier if a person was able to let you know they were autistic - it may mean you can employ some of the steps we've discussed in this course (though you don't need to wait until someone tells you if you think it may be helpful), or that you could listen to their own challenges and how they interact with your work. However, autistic people can often be reluctant to disclose for fear of being patronised, excluded or misunderstood. Highlighting the fact that you are a public service, which understands autistic and is willing to help, will make it easier for autistic people to disclose and ask for help.

## 'ALL ABOUT ME' BOOKLETS

At the end of this module, you will find a resource called 'All About Me' it enables an autistic individual to explain their specific challenges, strengths and needs in a very concise, easy to understand manner. We have adapted this document for public services who may be having deeper engagement with a autistic person (such as with a medical professional, a key worker or case officer). This will provide a tool for you to find out what is needed by this person. It can be downloaded from AsIAm.ie at the link below and offered to any relevant customers.

You can view them here at: <http://asiam.ie/asyoucan>



SCAN  
ME!



## BE AN EXAMPLE

Simple but true. Being an example of autism-friendly practice extends to how you interact with autistic users and customers in your public service. Be sure to be courteous, helpful and understanding, as this sets a clear example to the public using the service as well.

# EXAMPLES OF AUTISM-FRIENDLY PRACTICE

Now that we have given you a background to autism and an understanding of the accessibility needs and possibilities, we want to demonstrate some examples of public services in Ireland and abroad who have already taken steps to put autism-friendly practices into action. This will help you see how these steps can be taken in a practical, busy work environment.

## DUBLIN AIRPORT



Airports, as we all know, can be hugely stressful environments for anyone; last-minute checks that we've got everything packed, going through security, racing to the flight gate and working our way through often very big crowds.

Airports can be especially tough to navigate for autistic people. To begin with, you're in somewhere which is not part of day-to-day life. This already means that the autistic individual has probably had to make significant adjustments to their routine which can be unsettling and demanding. The airport is also somewhere which can be especially overstimulating for them; it's big, it's loud, it can be hugely intimidating with all the security announcements and checks.

As a result, many individuals and families living with autism struggle to kick their holidays off to a good start, or might not even be able to go abroad at all because the airport process can simply be far too much to cope with.

Dublin Airport has worked to address some of these challenges and make their check-in experience as easy as possible for autistic customers. On their website, customers can access a visual guide/social story to Terminal One and Terminal Two. The airport also provides some important tips, to families who wish to write their own personalised social story, on what to include such as luggage check-in, security and boarding.





Prior to travelling, the airport will facilitate a 'mock' visit if it is helpful for the person to see the airport advance of the day of travel. OCS, the airport's assistance service, are available to individuals with Autism who wish to have some assistance going through the terminal. This can help deal with challenges surrounding crowds or queues.

Some individuals may feel prefer to go through the airport independently, but may still wish to be able to ask for assistance if they need it. Not everyone is comfortable with their diagnosis or discussing it with peers. Many young people on the spectrum are especially conscious of being embarrassed of their condition's negative connotations. The airport, as a result, provides lanyards and wristbands, on receipt of a diagnosis, to individuals who apply prior to travel. The lanyards/wristbands simply say 'Important Flyer,' meaning that a passenger doesn't have to publicly highlight their diagnosis, should they prefer not to.

Dublin Airport's staff will assist anyone who presents these items to them. This would include people of security who would then understand that they may need to be understanding to an autistic individual going through what would be an invasive process.

Finally, Dublin Airport provides some tips on their website to individuals and families for preparing for their trip and day of travel. These include providing visual reminders of the trip in a passenger's calendar (so they can prepare themselves for what's to come) and leaving plenty of time ahead to go through the Terminal to avoid stress.

Many families use the services offered by Dublin Airport and find them to be hugely beneficial. Indeed some families note that without them, they simply couldn't get away. Shannon Airport has recently adapted similar measures to Dublin Airport.



## STORMONT CASTLE

Stormont Castle became the first autism-friendly building on the island in 2012 after working through a series of programmes with the Autism Accreditation Service which is part of the British National Autistic Society. Buildings which seek Autism Accreditation in Britain are now said to be working towards the 'Stormont Standard.'

The Stormont Assembly was welcoming many visitors on the spectrum, mainly as part of school visits. Visiting Stormont can be stressful due to its security measures, the bustling atmosphere of a parliament building and the lack of consistency in such an environment. Like the airport, it is also a busy and noisy place.

The Assembly's website has a special autism section. Here, you will find everything you would need preparing for a trip to the Assembly, as an autistic person. The website has an introductory video which brings visitors through the parliament building, starting at the security gate, taking you through each stage of the process and what to expect.

There is also a section for staff which advises staff on how best to prepare documents (clean and coherent language) and events for autistic visitors. Similarly, there is information for those who will be attending committee proceedings at Stormont on what to expect, and what they may and may not do. Stormont's website also has a special section on sensory issues. It has particularly challenging noises, such as the division bells and fire alarms recorded so that people can play and pause and prepare before experiencing them on the day. It also highlights specific sensory challenges which may exist in the building and tips for dealing with some sensory issues. It also provides sensory updates on any building work which may be taking place in the building.

On visiting the Assembly, there are numerous supports in place for its autistic visitors. It has two Quiet Rooms which people can access should they need a break or feel overstimulated. Additionally, Stormont trains a number of staff known as **Autism Champions**. There is always an Autism Champion on duty and this is someone who can meet an autistic person and assist them through their visit. The person has undertaken training in autism-awareness and so understands some of the challenges which an individual on the spectrum may experience. Additionally, the Autism Champion will assist in the preparation of a visit; for example, notifying other staff and assisting the person through the security process.

The Stormont Assembly encourages autistic visitors to submit their feedback and ideas following a visit.

# STEPS TO BECOME AUTISM-FRIENDLY

ASCEL, the British Association of Libraries, is working towards making all 3,000 libraries in Britain autism-friendly. This follows research which suggested that 90% of autistic people would use their library more frequently if it was autism-friendly.

Libraries in Britain are now being asked to take the following steps:

## HIGHLIGHT THAT THEY ARE AUTISM-FRIENDLY THROUGH SIGNAGE

This is to increase public awareness of the accessibility needs of autistic people. It is also so that people realise why some library users may behave differently. An autism-friendly library would, for instance, be permissive of autistic users whose stimming would otherwise be interpreted as distracting to other visitors.

## FILM & INTRODUCTION HANDBOOK

The library has a short film and handbook for staff to understand the concept and the needs. Following dissemination of these materials, staff are asked if they would like to accept the challenge of becoming autism-friendly.

## PROVIDE TOOLS TO IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY

Every library is provided with a tool to create social story relevant to their library. Each library is also asked to make a map available of building and to provide clear signage around library to places such as the bathroom, quiet space and other areas of the library building. They are encouraged to use images, not just words on their signage.

The library is encouraged to offer ear defenders and hand fidgets for people to borrow from front desk. Libraries are encouraged to make quiet spaces available in their building. Where possible, libraries are asked to consider removing hand dryers and to consider the brightness of their lighting. Finally, some libraries have tried to incorporate autism-friendly practice into clubs which they run for young people.

# THE FIVE KEY STEPS

## CONSULT THE COMMUNITY

Reach out to a local or national autism group or do a call-out among your customers for autistic users and their families members. Ask them what is working presently? What is posing difficulties? What changes could help? Ensure to get a wide variety of ages, perspectives and experiences (this is especially vital in such a diverse community).

Make sure that your consultation process autism-friendly; Is the survey written using clear language? Are there any visual supports in the survey? If have a public meeting is the room suitable? Do you have a social story available? This consultation piece will be invaluable to your efforts, save time on making changes which are not required as well as ensuring that the community is on board.

## ASSESS WHERE YOUR SERVICE IS AT PRESENTLY

Assess current knowledge levels of autism amongst your staff, conduct a sensory audit with the support of the autism community, review your signage and written materials, take a look at your practices against what you have learned - are there areas which could be improved?

## ENGAGE STAFF

Now that you have conducted a consultation and review, engage staff and gauge their interest in the process. Offer a training opportunity and explore what changes they think would be do-able.

## DEVELOP PRACTICAL & SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

With your team develop and roll out your changes. Ensure what is being proposed is sustainable and has been proofed after it is developed (for example, make sure a social story is written well).

## ASSESS HOW THINGS ARE GOING & REVIEW

After a pilot period, review the changes and consult with the community again - what has been their impact? Can further improvements be made? Ensure the practices are reviewed and enhanced, in consultation with the community, periodically.

So, how can you now put this into practice in your own workplace? We will take you through a 5-step process which will allow you to reflect on your own practices presently, consider the needs of the autism community and explore what steps you can take to make a difference on the ground.

It is important to consider carefully the changes which you make. It's often tempting to want to change everything and make big, radical changes, when in fact, what you have done changes something which was working or wasn't a major issue for autistic service users to begin with. Equally, things which you may have seen as unfeasible or irrelevant may be very important and more doable than you thought.

## **When considering autism-friendly practices it's important to remember:**

### **TRAINING & UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONDITION ARE THE VERY BASIS OF ALL OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS**

Any efforts to become more autism-friendly should start at increasing staff awareness. If you can only do one thing, do this.

### **CONSULT THE COMMUNITY – NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US.**

There is little to be gained in guessing what would be beneficial or in imposing changes which are unhelpful. Engage autistic people, preferably those on the spectrum who use your service, in designing the autism-friendly measures you may decide to take.

### **MAINSTREAM SUPPORTS AS FAR AS POSSIBLE & APPROPRIATE**

As far as possible make the adaptations applicable to everyone or something which becomes a fundamental part of how you do business. When the supports are more intensive or specific to an autistic customer, try to provide them in a discrete and respectful manner.

### **ENABLE AN AUTISTIC PERSON TO COPE IN A SITUATION RATHER THAN ADOPT THE SITUATION ENTIRELY**

The aim of autism-friendly adaptations is not to make a person more helpless or to protect a person from the world, rather it is to empower those of us on the spectrum to engage in the world. Therefore, when possible provide adaptations which enable a person to control the situation they are in and make it manageable not which remove or protect a person.

### **DON'T MAKE THIS AN ACT OF CHARITY OR CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

It's easy for measures like these to be misconstrued. It's important that staff understand that they relate to another person's dignity, the human rights, and their basic entitlement to participate as fully in society as anyone else.

### **AID EFFICIENCY**

In the long term, you should find that autism-friendly practices actually save time and aid efficiency for most workplaces.

### **BENEFIT OTHER CUSTOMERS & USERS**

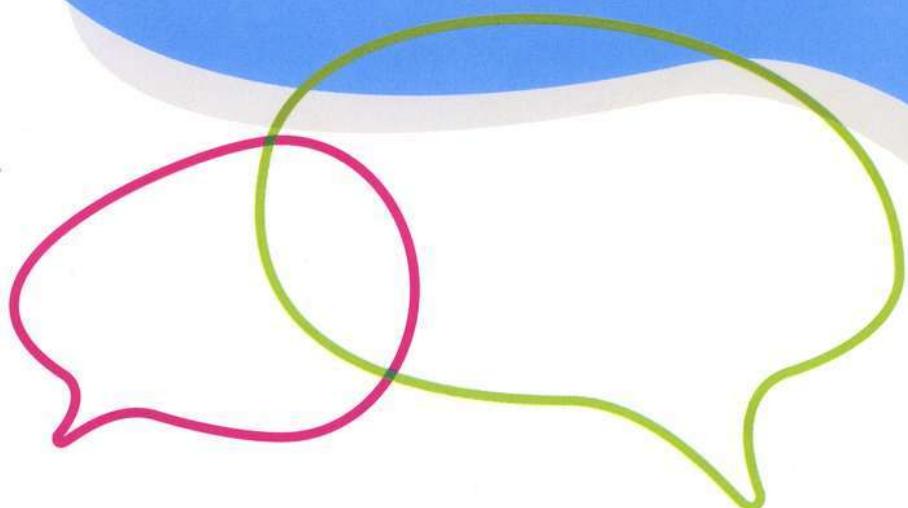
In many instances, autism-friendly practices can be incorporated into the concept of Universal Design as many of the steps benefit a whole range of different people; clear language may benefit someone who doesn't have English as their first language and visual instructions may benefit someone with dementia.

### **ADVERTISE ACCOMMODATIONS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE**

Accommodations should be advertised and, as far as possible, not have to be requested: in a few instances it's important to highlight the service you offer to autistic individuals. Where possible, these accommodations should be accessible without having to request them. Where they do have to be requested, it's worth engaging with your autistic customers on how they should be branded. Should a Quiet Period, for instance, be called 'autism-friendly' or 'Quiet Hour.'

# ALL ABOUT ME

My Passport for Accessible & Autism-Friendly Public Services



supported by



AN ROINN DLÍ AGUS CIRT AGUS COMHIONANNAS  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY



Progress has been made throughout the last twenty years in establishing legal rights and equalities for people with disabilities living in Ireland. The real impact is felt on the ground and frontlines where we all access essential public services. It is important to understand however that no single label defines any one of us, and that every person on the autism spectrum is affected by their condition in different ways to varying degrees.

This booklet will enable you to directly interact with autistic customers and service users. By asking for their feedback, you will be actively involving the best people to consult in your drive to make services more autism-friendly.

**This book is all about:**

---

## **SENSORY**

Coping with certain environments can be a source of serious overstimulation and anxiety for autistic people. Different settings test different individuals on the spectrum and it's important to understand the specific sensory processing challenges relevant to autism.

**I manage the environment by . . .**

**I struggle with environments such as . . .**

**I get distracted by the following odours, sounds or textures . . .**

## COMMUNICATION

Communication is a major obstacle for individuals right across the spectrum. Some autistic people are verbal whilst others are not. Many living with the condition find it hard to express their feelings, to initiate conversations or ask questions. Understanding and comprehending language can also be difficult. Autistic individuals are, by and large, literal thinkers and may struggle to decode sarcasm, slang or narrative instruction.

**I communicate by . . .**

**My preferred mode of communication is . . .**

**I find it difficult to understand . . .**

---

---

---

**It's hard for me to communicate when . . .**

---

---

---

**I manage instructions / directions best when they are explained by . . .**

---

---

---

**My preferred mode of communication is . . .**

---

---

---

## CONCENTRATION

Concentration or sitting still for long periods are a particular challenge for many on the spectrum. It can be especially tough for an autistic person to concentrate when they lack stimulation, are distracted by their surroundings or anxiety.

**I find it difficult to concentrate when ...**

**I find it easier to concentrate when ...**

**Ways to help me concentrate are ...**

## IMAGINATION

Visual thinking comes easy to many autistic individuals, yet for those which it does not, imagining certain scenarios is tough. This makes interacting with strangers and following particular types of instructions difficult.

**I find it hard to understand / imagine . . .**

## PREDICTABILITY/ROUTINE

Predictability is crucial for autistic people to have when accessing public services. Establishing what the process entails, whether it involves using transport, visiting a hospital or interacting with State agencies, will help reduce anxiety. The unexpected will be limited and leaves less room for fretting over what-if scenarios.

**My routine is . . .**

**Predictability helps me because . . .**

**Challenging things like seating plans or routes can be stressful for me. You can help reduce this anxiety for me by ...**

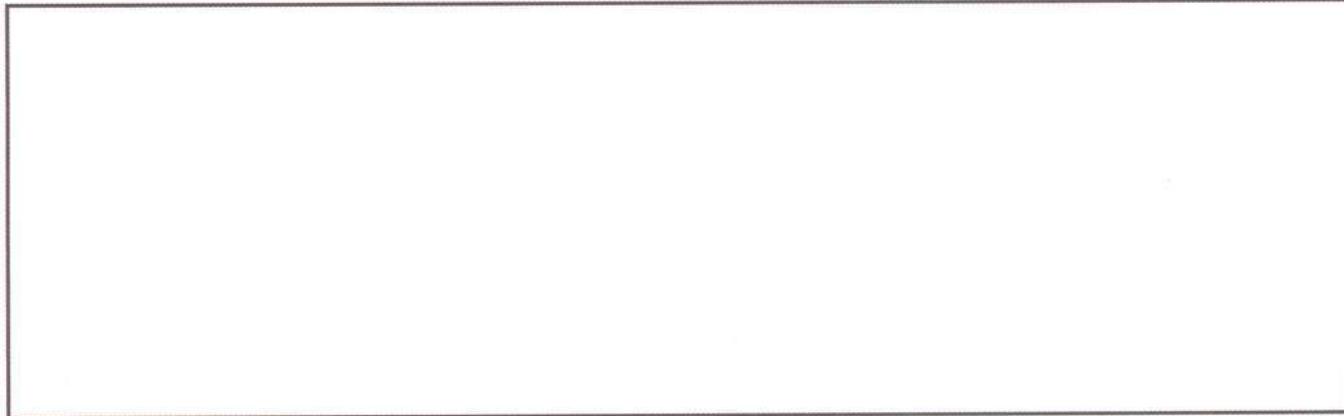
## **ORGANISATION**

Self-organisation is a struggle for many autistic people. How big a difficulty it can be, and the strategies used to deal with it, varies from person to person. When interacting with public services, an autistic individual might find it hard to time manage, keep track of appointments and their personal papers. By asking them about their additional needs here, you can develop strategies to reduce anxiety and make your service more accommodating for autistic users.

**I have the following problems with organisation ...**

**Situations that cause me to become disorganised are ...**

**I stay organised by . . .**



## BEHAVIOUR

Certain situations can trigger autistic people to exhibit challenging behaviours. This is often because they are anxious about something, struggling to communicate or process their surroundings. It's crucial to understand the difference between these frustrations and how they should be addressed..

**I may display challenging behaviour when . . .**



**I behave the following way when I am upset about something related to my condition . . .**



**If I experience a meltdown, please . . .**

## **ANXIETY**

Living with chronic worry is a major problem for many individuals on the spectrum. Anxiety can happen for a range of reasons and autistic people can vary in their ability to cope with it. Whilst experiencing spells of anxiety, their particular difficulties often become more pronounced. This impacts on how they interact with others and how they will conduct themselves personally.

**I am likely to get anxious when . . .**

**You can tell that I'm feeling anxious by . . .**

**Ways which I find useful for preventing / managing my anxiety are ...**

---

---

**When I get anxious, approaches that have worked to calm me down are ...**

---

---

## **INTERACTION**

Interacting with others can be a complicated process for many on the autism spectrum. Communication is one obstacle, but attached to a far wider series of challenges in terms of social anxiety, dealing with one person in a busy environment, and talking to complete strangers. By establishing what an autistic service user's needs are, you can make your workplace and its utilities more accessible.

**I find the following aspects of interaction difficult ...**

---

---

**I find it easier to approach someone for help when . . .**

**Public servants could be more approachable for me if they . . .**

## STRENGTHS / INTERESTS

Autism's challenges are just one small part of the condition as a whole. Those on the spectrum have an entire range of practical interests and abilities which are closely linked to their diagnosis. This can be an ideal way of broaching the subject of accessibility with autistic services and what strategies can be developed for their using public services and utilities.

**My special interests are . . .**

**Ways we could link my interests to your service are . . .**

## OTHER

**Other useful information about me is . . .**

## FURTHER INFORMATION FROM ASIAM.IE

"What can I do to help?"

This is a question we get asked a lot, whether its members of the public who have learned about autism for the first time and want to make a difference or those close to a family or individual with the condition who really want to help.

Ensuring that autistic people can reach their full potential is something that needs to involve the wider community. It's not just for families affected by the condition nor for professionals in education and health. Autistic individuals need accessible support and services as well as an open and understanding mind from the society around them.

AsIAm's As You Can programme offers a range of practical advice on how to make your workplaces more autism-friendly, whether in transport, healthcare or with the emergency services.



You can view them here at <http://asiam.ie/about-autism-2/what-you-can-do>

# SOCIAL STORIES™

Social stories™ can help autistic people develop social understanding and stay safe. They are visual tools which explain different activities, events and processes in every day life and the meanings behind them.

The advantage of social stories is that they explain things in a literal, 'concrete' manner, which may clarify an earlier misunderstanding of a previous situation that may have been ambiguous or difficult. Accessing public services, whether using transport, applying for welfare or interacting with the police, can be confusing and sometimes overwhelming processes for autistic individuals. Instructions explaining how to use these services are often unclear or not specific enough to allay concerns.

By providing information about what might happen in a particular situation, and some guidelines for behaviour, you can increase structure in a person's life and thereby reduce anxiety. Creating or using a social story for your service can help you to understand how the autistic person perceives different situations.

## WRITING A SOCIAL STORY

A Social Story is a walkthrough guide of a particular social situation which might cause an autistic person to be anxious or uncomfortable. Knowing what to expect from a certain social situation can eliminate unpredictability, and help the autistic person to be prepared and know what to expect.

- Social stories should be simple and uncomplicated (no unnecessary language).
- It is preferable for social stories to run in the order of which the person might experience the events, if possible.
- If the social story is for a specific place (e.g., an airport) use specific pictures taken from that location and of actual things they may see and experience.
- If a social story is for a general activity (e.g., a birthday party) it is better to use non-specific pictures or visuals which may apply to the situation. In this case, animated pictures are often used.
- Do not use negative language. Phase emphasis on what can be done or what is acceptable rather than what cannot be done and what isn't acceptable.

- Acknowledge how the autistic person may feel (anxious, nervous, etc.) and label that the situation may be loud or busy, immediately followed by "and this is ok, because..." and include a positive outcome of attending the event or situation.
- If the social story is for a particular person, make it personal by highlighting their strengths or what they will enjoy about the situation ("I am really good at waiting my turn" or "I like when I get to see my friends").
- Finish the social story by stating that when the event is over they get to go home, or go somewhere they are comfortable or familiar with. It is important to show that the situation has an end to it which the autistic person is happy and comfortable with.

## EXAMPLE

At ten o'clock, every first Wednesday of the month, I go to the Post Office to send letters to my parents and collect my Disability Allowance.



Sometimes it might be later than ten o'clock when I get to the Post Office, but that's okay. The post is not sent off until much later in the day. There will be plenty of time to send my letters before the usual closing time at half past five that evening



When I walk in to the Post Office, I wait in line. I don't push. It is sometimes busy in the Post Office and there may be lots of people queuing. Sometimes I might find waiting difficult or feel anxious, and that is ok. If I am worried, I can ask one of the staff for help. If I wait patiently it will soon be my turn





**Note:** the example we have shown here is a very basic one. Autistic individuals of all ages across the spectrum receive the best guidance from social stories that structure themselves as step-by-step guides. The more photos you use that are directly relevant to the scenario the better, because you are explaining the process as clearly as possible for the customer.



## DO'S & DON'TS OF AUTISM-FRIENDLY PRACTICE IN PUBLIC SERVICES

### DO'S

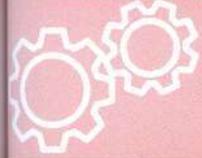
 Use clean, clear and consistent communication

Provide predictability, routine and stability

Be aware of your workplace's sensory environment



Include visuals and signage – for staff and service users

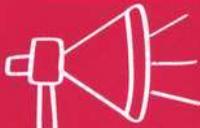
 Improve accessibility through tools and technology

Consult the community and assess what works and what doesn't

Understand that repetitive behaviour is used to calm nerves and reduce anxiety

### DON'TS

Speak fast or use slang when communicating



Raise your voice or become confrontational

Impose changes without talking to autistic service users

 Present limited 'either or' choices for communication

Stare or comment whenever someone is stimming or experiencing a meltdown



Touch the autistic person if you can avoid it

 Make assumptions about the person's needs

# SENSORY CHECKLIST



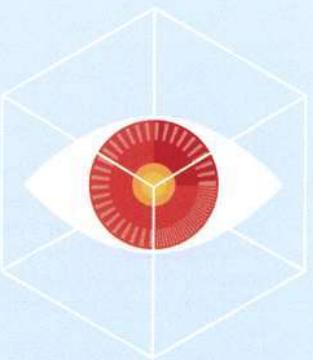
supported by



AN ROINN DLÍ AGUS CIRT AGUS COMHIONANNAS  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

AS I AM .IE

# VISUALS

Good Practice and what to look for	Current Situation	Possible Solutions
<p><b>The environment is orderly and not cluttered so that service users can make sense of the environment.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The impact of wall displays, and visuals is considered.</li><li>• Designated areas for specific activities to give clarity to environment organisation.</li></ul>		
<p><b>Environment lighting is suitable for autism service users.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Florescent lights are regularly checked and changed.</li><li>• The effects of natural light coming into the environment through blinds and creating distracting patterns are limited.</li><li>• Reflective surfaces are made a note of.</li></ul>		
<p><b>Staff are wearing their uniform correctly and there is no extreme variation in their presentation.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uniform is not coloured in especially bold or vibrant shades.</li><li>• Any jewellery you are wearing is limited and not overly bright or distracting.</li><li>• Extensive or colourful tattoos are appropriately covered up.</li></ul>		

# NOISE & HEARING

Good Practice and what to look for	Current Situation	Possible Solutions
<p><b>Audio audit the environment to ensure its physical layout is sensory friendly.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Floor surfaces are made from materials, such as carpet, which limit impact and movement noise.</li><li>• Are there particular sounds which may irritate hypersensitive individuals? (e.g., clocks ticking, bells, lights humming, road noises, etc.)</li><li>• The acoustics of rooms are checked and modified to lessen echoes.</li><li>• Clear visual warnings are in place informing people of an alarm, and why and when it may go off.</li></ul>		
<p><b>Sounds from onsite equipment is kept to a minimum.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Audio systems, computers, lights and visual displays are switched off when not in use to avoid a mass humming noise.</li><li>• Speakers are not especially loud in their noise level and pitch. Use only when necessary.</li><li>• Avoid using blackboards. White boards are a less noisy alternative but take care when using markers.</li></ul>		
<p><b>Raised voices and shouting are a common source of distress in autistic individuals.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be aware of the volume and pitch of speakers in your workplace. Are they all at a standard volume? Is it too loud?</li><li>• Ensure that clear signage warns service users that speakers are in place within your environment and their purpose.</li><li>• Do not immediately chastise or yell at an autistic person if they are stimming or exhibiting challenging behaviour. Establish the cause and deal with it calmly in a level tone.</li></ul>		
<p><b>There is a Sensory or 'Quiet' Room available for service users who feel overwhelmed. These Rooms are sensory friendly environments which provide a calm space for people to relax.</b></p>		

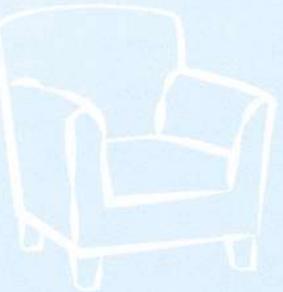
# BALANCE & COORDINATION

Good Practice and what to look for	Current Situation	Possible Solutions
<p><b>The environment is spacious and is free of unnecessary obstructions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited movement can cause distress to many individuals on the spectrum sensitive to touch and enclosed spaces.</li><li>• Visual warnings and instructions are in place where more space is not and or cannot be made readily available.</li></ul>		
<p><b>Physical adjustments and supports are installed for individuals who may struggle with their coordination.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bars and railings are in place within appropriate settings where regular movement or unstable areas. (e.g., stairways, wide corridors, on public transports, etc.)</li></ul>		
<p><b>Arrangements are made to make navigation easier for those people who may have fine motor difficulties.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clear signage in appropriate colours is used to direct people to key areas within busy environments. (e.g., airports, bus and train stations, post and social welfare offices, etc.)</li></ul>		
<p><b>Opportunities and appropriate space are available for autistic individuals to stim.</b></p>		

# COMMUNICATION

Good Practice and what to look for	Current Situation	Possible Solutions
<p><b>To what extent is your service's accessibility aided by communication systems (e.g., symbols, pictures, photos etc.)? Would their inclusion be appropriate or helpful?</b></p>		
<p><b>Alternative arrangements are made for service users who may struggle with writing.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness of the service provider to accept alternative signature forms from customers such as audio recordings.</li> <li>• Allowance of forms to be typed.</li> <li>• Inclusion of electronic signature software to use when signing forms.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Relevant forms and documents are accessible online in a downloadable format.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signpost these documents on services' literature and websites clearly. Include QR codes for the relevant link.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Use plain English (ideally NALA approved) when clarifying and giving directions in announcements and literature.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write for your audience. Many autistic people are literal thinkers and process instructions easier when it is issued clearly and plainly.</li> <li>• Keep communication succinct and spaced out. Many autistic individuals struggle to process large sections of information all in one go.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Appropriate signage and visual aids are in place guiding service users on particular stages and tasks.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Services which require step-by-step involvement from users provide clear guidance on what is needed at each stage. (e.g., post office, social welfare etc.)</li> </ul>		

# EXITING & WITHDRAWAL OPTIONS

Good Practice and what to look for	Current Situation	Possible Solutions
<p>Is there a system in place to know when an autistic person need to escape from an environment?</p>		
<p>Have a strategy in place which informs designated members of staff on how to appropriately manage a service user experiencing distress or a meltdown.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Autism liaison officers, or champions, are trained to identify warning signs and direct distressed individuals to a safe space.</li></ul>		
<p>Raising public awareness through your example is an ideal way of getting other customers thinking about autism. By providing clear signages and explicit mentions of autism within your service, you will help generate conversations and inform people of what to be mindful of.</p>		
<p>There is a Sensory or 'Quiet' Room available for service users who feel overwhelmed. These Rooms are sensory friendly environments which provide a calm space for people to relax.</p>		

# TOUCH & FEEL

Good Practice and what to look for	Current Situation	Possible Solutions
<p><b>Does your service involve physical interaction and or contact? If so, do you make your intentions and rationale clear?</b></p>		
<p><b>Seating is comfortable.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Padding is used to make hard chairs more comfortable.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Staff are made aware of body maps in settings where physical contact may be necessary.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many autistic individuals are sensitive to other people touching them anywhere at all. Body maps inform those they interact with which areas (if any) are acceptable to touch.</li> <li>Gently encourage service users to indicate where they do not wish to be touched if no body map is available.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Clear signage and visuals are in place indicating hazardous surfaces. (e.g., hot, wet, delicate, unstable etc.)</b></p>		 An illustration of a doctor with white hair and a stethoscope around their neck, wearing a white coat and blue trousers, standing next to a young boy who is sitting in a pink chair. The doctor is holding a stethoscope and appears to be examining the boy's back. The boy is smiling and looking towards the doctor.

# GLOSSARY

## ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

There are different types of equipment, usually digital and electronic, which are sometimes used by autistic people to help communicate with other people. Many individuals on the spectrum will use different tools according to their needs. Assistive technology helps those who have difficulty speaking, typing, writing, remembering, pointing, seeing, hearing, learning, walking, and many other things. Different disabilities require different assistive technologies.

## ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

A form of autism where individuals often have difficulty with social interactions and exhibit a restricted range of interests and or repetitive behaviours. Motor development may be delayed, leading to clumsiness or uncoordinated motor movements. Although not classed as a separate diagnosis in itself anymore, many autistic people living with the condition continue to identify as having it rather than autism.

## ATTENTION DEFICIT (HYPERACTIVE) DISORDER

A lifelong condition marked by difficulties in staying concentrated, hyperactivity and impulsivity. Not everyone diagnosed with AD(H)D will exhibit hyperactive or impulsive tendencies, yet they still struggle to focus themselves. This can complicate their doing daily tasks, taking part in conversations, paying attention and memorising crucial information.

## AUTISM

A neurodevelopmental condition where individuals living with it exhibit delays during key stages of growth in their lives. These include speech and language, motor skills, and sensory processing. Not everyone living with autism is affected to the same extent and in the same ways as any other. This is why it is often thought of as a spectrum, where some autistic individuals may be more or less independent than another.

## BODY MAP

A visual diagram denoting which areas of a person's body which other people may touch. Not every autistic person will carry one and is normally used by individuals who may be non-verbal, have limited speech and or are hypersensitive to touch.

## DYSCALCULIA

A developmental condition which affects a person's spatial awareness and their understanding of numbers. It occurs in people right across the whole IQ range. People living with it often struggle with arithmetic, remembering numbers, following directions and time management. It is commonly diagnosed at a young age, though less frequently than dyslexia and dyspraxia.

## DYSLEXIA

A learning disability which causes difficulty reading and writing. Problems typically include struggling with spelling, understanding grammar, and learning how to write clearly. People living with dyslexia are no less intelligent than those who do not and are fully willing to learn and engage. Autistic individuals diagnosed with dyslexia may find it especially hard to communicate and express themselves.

## DYSPRAXIA

A neurodevelopmental disability which complicates motor planning and coordination in everyday living. Individuals affected by it typically struggles with planning movements, balance, their hand-eye coordination, and spatial awareness. Many of dyspraxia's traits overlap with autism's, and people diagnosed with both can complicate their movement, social interactions and taking part in group activities.

## ECHOLALIA

Autistic individuals may repeat or 'echo' particular words or phrases, either aloud or under their breath. It is commonly seen in younger children as they learn to speak but can continue well into adulthood. In older people on the spectrum, it helps regulate themselves and break down sentences they may not initially understand.

## HYPERSENSITIVITY

Autistic people can be overwhelmed by their sensory environments. They cannot focus and may experience extreme discomfort or even outright pain. This may lead them to undergo a meltdown, withdraw from activity or display challenging behaviour. Hypersensitive individuals on the spectrum experience tastes, scents, textures, sounds and tastes significantly stronger than most other people.

## HYPOSENSITIVITY

Hyposensitivity may make it difficult to accurately read one's surroundings, to coordinate their body or identify pain. Where someone is hyposensitive to the environment around them, they mightn't get the same experience of their surroundings as others. In

fact, they may not feel anything at all. Examples of these include walking through crowds and bumping into people.

## MELTDOWNS

When an autistic person experiences a sensory overload, they may undergo a meltdown. It is an intense response to overwhelming situations. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (e.g., shouting, screaming, crying), physically (e.g., kicking, lashing out, biting) or in both ways. Many who are not autistic have trouble telling the difference between a meltdown and a temper tantrum, especially if the autistic individual is a younger child.

## NON-VERBAL

Communication varies from person to person when they are on the spectrum. Nearly a third of people on the autism spectrum use no spoken language or only a few words. This is described as being non-verbal. A lack of speech does not mean the person is not intelligent or can't understand what's being said to them. They will use different tools to express themselves, typically through writing, sign language, visuals, or devices like iPads and PCs.

## SENSORY PROCESSING

An autistic person's brain has trouble receiving and responding to information collected through their senses. This impacts on how people respond to others, their speech and their motor skills. They may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to stimuli.

## **SELF-STIMULATOR BEHAVIOUR (STIMMING)**

Almost everyone engages in stimming to some degree (e.g., cracking our knuckles, tapping our feet, humming or whistling). In autistic individuals, these kinds of behaviours are usually more pronounced and may seem odd. Autistic people often stim as a response to stress, to regulate themselves, release excess energy they have and sometimes to express emotion. Common ways of stimming include rocking back and forth, flapping hands and echolalia.

## **SOCIAL STORY™**

Visual aids to help improve the social skills of people with autism. Social stories are used to educate and as praise. Social stories model appropriate social interaction by describing a situation with relevant social cues, other's perspectives, and a suggested appropriate response. The goal of a Social Story is to reveal accurate social information in a clear and reassuring manner that is easily understood by an autistic individual.

## **SOCIAL IMAGINATION**

Difficulties with social imagination mean that people with autism find it hard to understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and action, predict what will happen next, or what could happen next. This poses challenges with interacting with others, meaning that autistic individuals may not consider their tone of voice or appreciate social contexts.





□ [www.asiam.ie](http://www.asiam.ie) □ [info@asiam.ie](mailto:info@asiam.ie) □ [@AsIAmIreland](https://twitter.com/AsIAmIreland)