

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Definition

Autism refers to a group of developmental disabilities affecting one's ability to communicate, understand language, and relate to others. A developmental disability is typically present from birth or a young age. Cognitive function may not develop at the same rate as the average population, due to a variety of reasons. The exact cause of autism is not fully understood yet.

Background Information

Generally, people with autism do best with set routines and familiar surroundings. Change can be very upsetting. They might respond to seemingly normal sensory information in unusual ways. For example, a patient with autism may have an episode of screaming or physical striking out triggered by bright lights, loud noises, or deviation from their regular routine. (This is often called a "meltdown.") In order to calm or soothe themselves, patients may engage in repetitive behaviors (called "stimming"), such as hand flapping or rocking.

Individuals with autism vary widely in their abilities and behaviors, and are often categorized by their level of functioning. Asperger's syndrome is on the mild end of the autism spectrum. These individuals are considered high-functioning as they have intact language skills and often above-average intelligence. Their primary difficulty is interacting with others socially. They have a tendency to focus on a small range of topics and experience difficulty with abstract concepts. They may appear aloof, uninterested, or distracted, and may avoid eye contact.

On the other hand, classical autism is a much more severe form. These patients are typically described as low-functioning because of poor language development and an inability to interact with their environment in a meaningful way. Some do not speak at all, while others have limited language that often includes repeated phrases. They may have a limited range of interests and/or limited social skills.

Accommodating Patients with Autism

- ▶ Take time to explain each upcoming action to avoid startling or surprising them. For example, do not touch the patient without telling them first that you are going to do so.
- ▶ Be aware that a sudden shift in behavior is often a clue the patient is in physical distress. For example, a patient with autism may feel pain from a sound or touch, but may not be able to express it verbally. Therefore, nonverbal signs such as behavior changes may be the only indicator that they are experiencing discomfort.
- ▶ Use concrete terms and avoid metaphors. For example, instead of saying, "Let's take a step back and start over," say, "Let's restart our conversation so that we both can understand each other better."

Clinical Scenario

Matthew is a young man with moderate severity autism. He is at your clinic for a routine visit. He doesn't make eye contact with the secretary when he checks in, instead looking down at the floor of the waiting room. When he goes to sit down in his usual chair, he finds another patient already seated.

Matthew returns to the secretary and asks if she will ask the other patient to move. The secretary suggests he sit in a different chair. Matthew sits down and gently rocks back and forth in his seat, repeating, "I always sit in the corner chair." The secretary can see that he is becoming distressed by the situation. She asks a nurse to take Matthew in ahead of schedule and let him sit in an empty exam room until his appointment starts.

Resources

Mayo Clinic Information on Asperger's Syndrome

<http://mayoclinic.in/UKRus>

Autism Speaks

<http://www.autismspeaks.org/>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

<http://1.usa.gov/18BrNW>

Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services

<http://1.usa.gov/131IQFj>

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Inclusive Health Care was developed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Boston Children's Hospital. We have decades of experience in workforce training and specialized consultation related to disability inclusion.

