WARM-UP!





TEMPERATURE CHECK:

How confident do you feel about supporting your autistic colleagues?

Go to <u>slido.com</u> Enter code **#327 648**



SUPPORTING AUTISTIC COLLEAGUES





DISCLAIMER: We are not HR professionals or official certified trainers on Autism. We are just autistic civil servants wanting to share our personal experiences to improve understanding of Autism in the workplace.



AGENDA



- 1. Housekeeping
- 2. Warm-up
- 3. What is autism?

 A very... very brief overview
- 4. Autism at work

 Our experiences in the workplace
- 5. Q&A time



HOUSEKEEPING



- ★ Slides will be shared afterwards
- ★ This session is **not** being recorded
- ★ Please stay on mute
- ★ Post questions in the Q&A tab on Slido
 - We will only be answering questions via Slido
 - o Teams chat will mostly be disabled, to avoid distraction
 - (We will use the Teams chat for some activities!)
- ★ View the **live transcript** by clicking "More actions" () in the Teams toolbar





Code: #327 648



WARM-UP!





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A very... very brief overview

WHAT IS AUTISM?



- ★ Neurodevelopmental condition
 - How the brain developed
 - Not an illness (can't be cured or treated, but can be managed)
- ★ Areas primarily impacted:
 - Communication
 - Routine
 - Sensory
 - Social
- ★ A spectrum (more on that later...)



PROTECTED CHARACTERISTIC



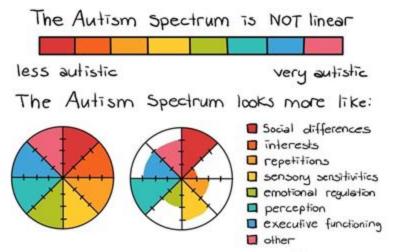
Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) are protected as a Disability under Section 6 of the **Equality Act**, **2010**.

This is because Autism is:

- (a) a physical or mental impairment, which
- **(b)** has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

WHAT IS THE AUTISM SPECTRUM?





Terms like "high functioning", "low functioning" and "Asperger" are harmful and outdated.

Autism_sketches



It's a **spectrum**, not a **scale**.





If you've met one autistic person...

...you've met one autistic person!

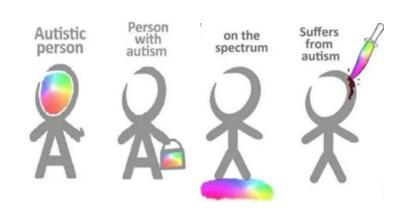


HOW SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT BEING AUTISTIC?



- ★ *Identity* first ("autistic person")
- ★ Person first ("person with autism")

- ★ Autism is often part of our *identity*
- ★ Ultimately, it is up to the individual
- ★ If in doubt, just ask us!



Neurology is not an accessory

THE OPERATING SYSTEM ANALOGY





Consider two laptops: one runs on Windows, the other runs on a Mac operating system



- ★ Both will do pretty much the same tasks but may do them differently
- ★ The Mac may be faster with some tasks, and the Windows with others
- ★ Autistic people can do pretty much everything neurotypical people can...
- ★ ... but we may complete tasks in a different way
- ★ We may do some tasks quicker and better, but struggle more with others

COMMON STRENGTHS



- ★ Visual thinking, learning, and recall
- ★ Clear and direct communication
- ★ Attention to detail, pattern recognition
- ★ Intense focus and tenacity
- ★ Excellent long-term recall
- ★ Honesty, loyalty, and integrity
- ★ Methodical, analytical approach
- ★ Strong respect for truth, facts, and rules
- ★ Creative thinking, innovative solutions
- ★ Accepting of difference, questioning norms



COMMON CHALLENGES





Autistic people may struggle with:

- ★ Ambiguity (e.g. vague instructions)
- ★ Verbally conveying complicated information
- ★ Navigating and prioritising complex tasks
- Working in busy, loud or sensory overwhelming environments
- ★ Finding the average workday more tiring than colleagues



Our experiences in the workplace

QUICK QUESTION...



What percentage of workingage autistic people in the UK are in full-time or part-time employment?

Post your answer in the Teams chat

ANSWER: 29%



- ★ Around half (53.5%) of working age disabled people are in employment
 - o For non-disabled people it is 81.6%
- ★ Autistic people had some of the the lowest employment rates in 2021 (29.0%)
 - o This is up from 21.7% in 2020
- ★ Disabled people in general are less likely to be employed as managers, directors or senior officials, in professional occupations, or full-time





WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AUTISTIC AT WORK?

DISCLAIMER: This will not represent the experiences of all autistic people!

SENSORY DIFFERENCES



used to enjoy working from home as it was a quieter environment than the office. But with everyone in the house working from home there has been more noise. I often hear my partner on a call while 'm working and it's very hard to focus

WHAT COULD YOU DO TO HELP?

- Provide noise cancelling headphones.
- Speak louder when you talk to us.
- Offer flexible working.
- Make sure we're busy, so less likely to be distracted.



SENSORY DIFFERENCES





Autistic brains process sensory information differently from non-autistic brains.

- ★ Offer us the option for flexible working, including the option to work from home.
 - NOTE: Home working may be less effective if the rest of the household is also working from home!
- Provide noise cancelling headphones for working at home and in the office.
- ★ Allow us to take rest breaks when we need to.

A NOTE ON STIMMING



★ What is it?

- "Self-stimulation" a.k.a. stimming
- Stims can use any of the senses (inc. sight, sound, touch, vestibular, proprioceptive...)
- At work: fidget objects, walking breaks, chewing a pen, spinning in chair, organising items, etc.

★ Why do we do it?

- Self-management / self-regulation
- A way to deal with various stressors
- We need it



COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES



I struggle to
understand verbal
instructions
sometimes.
I feel like I'm listening
to my manager's
instructions, but once
the conversation is
over I find it difficult
to recall what
we said.

WHAT COULD YOU DO TO HELP?

- Hold informal face-to-face meetings in the break room.
- Provide clear, written instructions.
- ? Ask us to repeat back to you what we've heard.
- Remind us to pay attention.



COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES



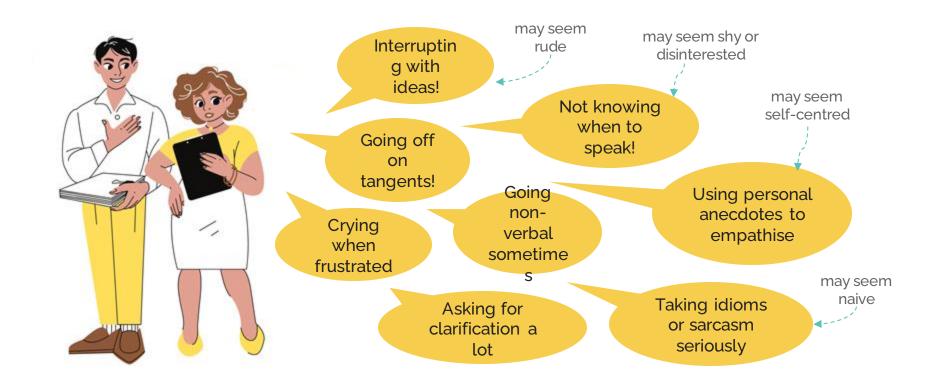


Autistic people have communications styled all of our and we are often visual thinkers and may not always be able to process information we hear.

- ★ Ask for (and use!) someone's preferred method of communication (e.g. verbal, email, IM)
- ★ Where possible, give clear, written or verbal instructions or show us what you mean (avoid using e.g. sarcasm, hyperbole)
- After meetings or important conversations, provide us with written notes to refer back to.
- ★ Hold structured face-to-face or camera-on meetings in quiet areas e.g. send agenda with timings sent beforehand.
- ★ Check our understanding by incorporating time for questions or encouraging us to relay our actions back in our preferred style
- ★ Be patient with our differences!

AUTISTIC COMMUNICATION STYLE





BE CAREFUL WITH VAGUE OR AMBIGUOUS INSTRUCTIONS





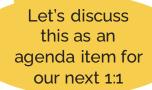
This is urgent!



I'll catch up with your later!

> Please prioritise this over your other actions and send it over to me completed by end of today.

Please schedule a 30 minute call with me tomorrow at 3pm



COGNITIVE DIFFERENCES



Even when my
manager and I think I
understand what I need
to do, I still really
struggle to plan my
time and tasks to meet
my objectives. Most of
the time I don't even
know where to start!

WHAT COULD YOU DO TO HELP?

- Give us clear, step-by-step instructions.
- Let us know there's no rush, that we can do the work at our own pace.
- Help us break big tasks down into smaller tasks.
- ? Instruct us to report back to you regularly with our progress.



COGNITIVE DIFFERENCES





Autistic people's brains are likely to struggle with executive functioning, including planning and prioritising.

- ★ Make sure we understand why the work is being done and where our focus should be.
- ★ Highlight important information (e.g., dates).
- ★ Give fixed deadlines (including for parts of tasks).
- ★ Break epic tasks down into smaller tasks.
- ★ Give us quiet time to process.
- ★ Be patient if we ask lots of clarification questions

EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND IDENTIFICATION





Autistic people are can struggle with emotional regulation or identifying how they feel. This can be characterised as:

- ★ Talking about feelings in a different way to others, like focusing more on physical symptoms like shortness of breath or a stomach ache.
- ★ Seeing feelings in a more 'black & white' way, focusing on core feelings like 'happy', 'sad', 'angry' etc instead of more specific nuanced feelings such as jealousy, disappointment etc.
- Feeling emotions intensely or struggling to interpret how others may be feeling if they are not explicit so we may misinterpret how someone feels
- ★ The feelings wheel (see left) is a helpful tool in aiding autistic people in distinguishing and identifying emotions.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION: FIGHT OR FLIGHT





Emotions are scary for a lot of people, but Autistuc people can find emotions particularly overwhelming, both in terms of dealing with our own emotions, and responding to others.

Experiencing or seeing someone in emotional distress can often trigger a 'fight or flight' response in people with autism. They will either:

- → Try to 'fight' the emotion. For instance, this could be through food (emotional eating), buying themselves or someone a present. Essentially they are trying to force the emotion to go away without addressing it.
- → The 'flight' response. They will try to escape the emotion. This could be by ignoring it, leaving someone in emotional distress alone to deal with it without their help (often fearing they'll only make things worse).

This can come across as being **emotionally naive**, **unempathetic**, **or emotionally distant**. It can also lead to eating disorders, heightened anxiety/depression and other mental health conditions. **Autistic people do care!**

A NOTE ON ROUTINE





Autistic people tend to abide by a set daily routine, and can become distressed when sudden changes threaten the expected order of their day.

Some last-minute changes are inevitable in the workplace, but making efforts to minimise these, ensuring your colleagues are informed of any changes as soon as possible, and being understanding if your colleague is stressed and/or needs time to process as a result of an unforeseen sudden change.

This also means that last-minute social plans are difficult for autistic people, if you are planning on going out for lunch or drinks after work, setting these plans up at least a day before makes these socials more accessible.

SOCIAL DIFFERENCES



My colleagues often go for drinks after

work. I usually don't have the energy for it at the end of the day, especially as the pub they go to is often crowded and noisy. But I'm worried I'm

to know them and feel excluded from the group.

missing out on getting

WHAT COULD YOU DO TO HELP?

- Tell the others to stop going to the pub.
- Arrange some structured social events during the day, like going out for coffee at lunch.
- Try to find quieter venues.
- Don't let us know the others are going out so we don't feel bad.



SOCIAL DIFFERENCES





Autistic people can have very different tolerances for social interaction than non-autistic people.

- ★ Arrange some social events during the day, like going out for coffee or playing games at lunch.
- ★ Try to find venues and activities that are autismfriendly (e.g. not too busy or noisy or brightly lit).
- ★ Plan some social events in advance so we can plan around them and save up our energy.

AUTISTIC MIRRORING & MASKING





MIRRORING

Copying or mimicking nonautistic behaviours (e.g. body language, speech patterns, jargon)

MASKING

Disguising or hiding autistic behaviours (e.g. forcing eye contact, not fidgeting, carefully not going off on tangents)

AUTISTIC MELTDOWNS, SHUTDOWNS & BURNOUT



- ★ Demand is greater than capacity
- ★ Can look different for everyone
- ★ Meltdowns and shutdowns
 - Shorter-term, completely overwhelmed or overloaded
 - Meltdowns: often reactive/external
 - Shutdowns: often recovery/internal

★ Autistic burnout

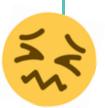
- Longer-term, generally overwhelmed
- Can lead to melt/shutdowns
- Exhaustion, irritability, disinterest

Autistic meltdowns, shutdowns, and burnout are <u>not</u> us being:

- Stubborn
- Lazy
- Disrespectful
- Disobedient
- Attention-seeking

It is not voluntary.
It is painful and exhausting.

Try to be patient and supportive.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?



MELTDOWN & SHUTDOWN

- ★ Give us time and space to recover
- ★ Remove immediate demands and pressures
- ★ Discuss strategies in advance
- ★ Find a good retreat or recovery place in advance, if possible (e.g. a wellbeing room)

BURNOUT

- ★ Respect our reasonable adjustments
- ★ Reduce demands and expectations
- **★** Offer extensions on deadlines
- **★** Communicate very clearly, directly
- ★ Minimise interactions and distractions
- ★ Let us take breaks and sick days



TYPES OF WORKPLACE ADJUSTMENTS





- **★ Communication** (written instructions and notes, set expectations, provide agendas...)
- ★ Sensory (flexible working, breaks/movement breaks, quiet spaces, noise-cancelling headphones, access to natural light...)
- ★ Routine (fixed desks, set hours, clear plans, minimised last-minute changes...)
- ★ Social (planned social events, daytime events...)
- ★ Performance management (clear (written) expectations, bullet point tasks...)

TELLING PEOPLE YOU'RE AUTISTIC (DISCLOSURE)



★ Depends on the individual!

★ Pros

- Feeling more able to be yourself
- May be easier to access certain adjustments and resources

★ Cons

- Dealing with negative stereotypes, feeling judged
- Having to explain and discuss your challenges

"I THINK SOMEONE I WORK WITH MIGHT BE AUTISTIC..."

- ★ It is not your place to diagnose
- ★ What is appropriate to say will depend on your relationship
- ★ They may already know and want to keep their diagnosis private
- ★ You don't need a diagnosis to provide (or access) support

SUPPORTING COLLEAGUES



- * Ask us how you can be supportive every autistic person is different
- ★ Be respectful of our reasonable adjustments
- ★ Include us (e.g. plan inclusive socials)
- ★ Provide clear instructions
- ★ Check in regularly
- ★ Don't cut corners
- ★ Don't stereotype
- ★ Be patient



SOURCES OF INFORMATION



I'm Autistic





- ★ Be careful what you read online!
- ★ Not all sources are actually trustworthy
- ★ Go to autistic people for information about autism:
 - Fast Stream Autism Spectrum Network
 - Civil Service Neurodiversity Network
 - Departmental neurodiversity networks
 - Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)
 - National Autistic Society
 - Ambitious About Autism
 - PDA Society



A&9

Post your question in Slido (code #327648)



COOL DOWN!





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THANK YOU FOR COMING!

Contact us at

autism.network@faststream.civilservice.gov.u k

or find us on the Fast Stream intranet

We'd really appreciate your feedback!

We'll be running more of these sessions and it would be great to hear where we did well and where we can improve.

Please fill out the quick form posted in the chat.

We will also email it out :)

