



# Autism is a lifelong neurological disorder characterized by...

## Differences in Socialization and Communication

- Most communication between neurotypical individuals is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication can be challenging for people with autism to understand, and some may exhibit unique nonverbal behavior themselves. A common example is difficulty with eye contact, although not everyone with autism has this difficulty.
- Expressive language is our ability to communicate our wants, needs, and feelings. Receptive language is our ability to take in information. Someone with autism could have challenges with either or both of these.
- Processing time is the length of time it takes to process information. Some people need more time than others. It could take 5, 10, or even 20 seconds for someone's brain to comprehend the words they just heard.



## Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviors

- Topics of interest may be narrow and strong. In other words: *I like what I like and that's what I like*. Someone on the spectrum may have a special interest he or she can talk about for hours.
- People with autism often rely on routines and schedules and can struggle with change or being flexible.
- Many people on the spectrum find repeated behaviors (physical, vocal, or otherwise) comforting and useful for emotional regulation. Some people call these behaviors "stims."



## Splinter Skills

Atypical brain development leads to challenges in certain areas as well as strengths in others. Sometimes we call these differences splinter skills. For example, a person may be able to complete high level calculus in his or her head, but he or she can't balance a budget.



## Theory of Mind

The ability to recognize and understand the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others is called theory of mind. Many people with autism struggle to understand that other people have different thoughts, beliefs, values, and experiences than their own, due to difficulty with theory of mind.



## Executive Functioning

This is the part of the brain in control of strategizing, organizing, working memory, attention, and inhibitory control. People with autism often have difficulties in one or more areas of executive functioning. If an individual on the spectrum procrastinates, has difficulty with memory, struggles to make plans, or has bad time management skills, he or she may be experiencing executive functioning impairment.



## Sensory Processing

All of us receive sensory input from the environment and our bodies that our brains turn into understandable information. Many people on the spectrum have difficulty with the processing step. They can be over- or under-sensitive to any sense: Over – *It's too much*. Under – *I need more*.

This also may apply to our 6th, 7th, and 8th senses:

- Vestibular: sense of balance (movement)
- Proprioceptive: sense of body position (pressure)
- Interoception: sense of the physiological condition of the body (hunger, cramps, exhaustion, and more)



Remember that autism is a spectrum. Individuals will have their own unique constellation of traits, as well as their own strengths, preferences, and identities. Different people will have different levels of challenges, and these challenges are based on supports and environment. No single behavior can be used to identify autism. If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. Autism knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries. Family income, life-style, and educational levels do not affect the chance of a person having autism.

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