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## HOW CAN *YOU* HELP TO MAKE SOMEONE'S EXPERIENCE POSITIVE AND ENJOYABLE?

Helpful tips and things to consider so that you can help to make a visit to your shop, facility, venue or business a more positive experience for people who have an Autism Spectrum Condition, or Asperger's Syndrome.



## WHAT IS AUTISM?

Everyone who has an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is different. Their individual challenges and needs, and the level of support they require, will vary greatly.

*If you've met one person with Autism, you've only met one person with Autism.*

Each individual will have different and specific challenges, but there are a number of areas in which many people with an ASC are likely to have some degree of difficulty. These include:

- Social communication
- Social interaction
- Social imagination (i.e. 'putting yourself in someone else's shoes')
- Sensory difficulties

Autism is a neurological-developmental condition, not a mental illness. However, it is not uncommon for people with Autism to experience emotional health difficulties, especially anxiety.

Often the person who knows best what helps and what makes situations more difficult is the individual themselves, or those who support and care for them.

## SOME OTHER THINGS YOU MAY BE ABLE TO DO TO HELP

Offer to arrange **appointments/visits** at times when it is **less busy and crowded**.

Consider **autism-friendly opening times**, with reasonable adjustments to the environment.

Explore staff **training** and **awareness**.

**Speak to people** who work with those on the Spectrum, or individuals who have Autism to **learn about everyday experiences and challenges**, and find out about ideas that could help people with Autism to enjoy activities and visits to venues.

Consider making a **donation** or **sponsoring** a fund raising event so that the **charities** who are working with and supporting individuals can continue, build on and expand their valuable work.

*We are all unique and special. Understanding and accepting each other's differences will make the world a better place for everyone.*

**Thank you** for taking the time to read this leaflet, and for helping to improve the lives of people with Autism.

## SENSORY DIFFICULTIES

Individuals can be affected by a variety of sensory and environmental issues.

These include: -

- being highly sensitive to **sound**, even things which most people consider to be 'background noise'
- **lighting** – bright, flickering, artificial lights
- **movement** and **busy environments** can be confusing and cause anxiety
- **touch**, especially light touch, can be uncomfortable or even painful
- **smells** and **tastes** that many people find pleasant, can cause individuals to feel nauseous
- **coordination** and **balance** problems

You can help by considering: -

- whether background **music** can be **lowered in volume** or turned off?
- can the **lighting** be **softened** or turned off?
- is there a **quieter area** you could take the person to?
- are there things you can do to make it **easier and safer** for them to move about?

## SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

*For people with autism, understanding conversation can be like trying to understand a foreign language.*

They may: -

- have difficulty understanding **gestures**, **facial expressions**, or **tone of voice**
- have difficulty **knowing when to start or end a conversation**, and **choosing topics** to talk about
- be **very literal in what they say**
- have difficulty understanding **jokes**, **metaphor** or **sarcasm**

In order to help a person with autism to understand you and communicate:

- keep your sentences short – **be clear and concise**.
- **allow time** for the person to process the information and to respond
- understand that the person **may take what you say very literally**, so if you tell them something will happen at a certain time they will expect it to
- you may need to **gently guide conversation** back to topic

## SOCIAL INTERACTION

*For people with Autism, socialising doesn't come naturally – they have to try and learn it.*

For many people with Autism social interactions can make them feel very anxious. They may not understand the unwritten 'social rules' that most people pick up without thinking.

For example, they may: -

- find other people unpredictable and confusing
- become withdrawn and seem uninterested in other people
- behave in what may seem an inappropriate manner
- start an inappropriate topic of conversation
- stand too close to another person
- eye contact can be uncomfortable, so may be limited or avoided altogether

Things you can do to help facilitate interactions:

- one-to-one interactions are often easier than groups
- try not to force eye contact
- understand that the person may need to use certain behaviours (e.g. hand flapping, pacing) to ease their anxiety and as coping strategies

## SOCIAL IMAGINATION

*For people with Autism, 'body language' can appear just as foreign as if people were speaking Greek.*

Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination. Many people on the Autistic Spectrum are imaginative and highly creative.

Difficulties with social imagination can include: -

- understanding or interpreting other people's thoughts, feelings or actions
- reading and interpreting the subtle messages that are put across by facial expression and body language
- imagining alternative outcomes to situations and finding it hard to predict what will happen next

You can help by: -

- explaining what is going on in a situation
- being specific about what, when, where, how
- understanding that the person may be missing out on the non-verbal aspects of an interaction, so may not be able to interpret it accurately