

Module 1: Introduction to Autism

- A brief definition of autism
- A general introduction to autism
- A look at different conditions which have been related to autism
- An overview of the learning disabilities associated with autism

This module offers course participants an introduction to autism, including:

- A brief definition of autism
- A general introduction to autism
- A look at different conditions which have been related to autism
- An overview of the learning disabilities associated with autism

Welcome to your Autism Awareness Diploma course

Before you begin the course please read these important notes.

Modules

The course name is broken down into 11 modules. Each information-packed module lasts between 15 and 60 minutes, but you are free to spend as long as you like on each module. Once you have finished the module, click the “continue to next module” button at the bottom of the page to move to the next one.

Assignments

Some of the modules contain self-assessed assignments/tasks. The tasks are set at the end of the module. Most of the assignments should take around 30 minutes to complete, again, you are free to spend as much time as you need on them. The assignments are self-assessed; you do not need to send them in to us. You will find the answers/our suggestions attached.

Highlighted Text

In the modules, you may notice some text has been highlighted or marked differently to the majority of the rest of the text. For an explanation of each, see the key below:

Information worth remembering

Third-party websites or links that contain information that can further your learning

Vitally important to remember. Ignoring this could cause problems.

Useful trivia

Facts/data related to the topic

Quotes and examples

Sums / Calculations or other formula

Questions you should ask yourself

Revisiting Modules/Access to the Course

You can revisit modules that you have completed at any time, even after you have finished the course. To do this, simply log back in to your account and click on the “revisit modules” option from your member's sidebar. You will then be able to select any module that you have already completed.

End of Course Test

At the end of the course, there is a 30-question test. Each question has multiple choice answers and you will have 3 options to choose from, one of them is correct. In order to pass the test, you need to answer 70% (21/30) of the questions correctly. Don't panic if you don't pass the first time. You can take the test as many times as you need. If you do not pass on the first occasion we recommend that you go back over the modules that you did not fare so well at and study them again.

Completion of the Course

Once you have successfully completed the end-of-course test, you will be awarded your certificate. You can download and print your certificate at any time, or order a hard copy from your account.

What you can do once you have completed the course

Once you have completed the course you will have a great understanding of autism. You can now use this knowledge to assist with your search for jobs. Any potential employers can validate your qualification 24/7 via our website. Simply provide them with your full name and certificate number. If you wish, you can undertake further study to bolster your employment chances further - you can never have too much knowledge!

Support

If you need any assistance we are here to help you. Simply click one of the support tabs (located at the top and bottom of all pages on this site) and one of our support staff will get back to you as soon as possible. Please note, support hours are 9:00 - 17:30 Monday - Friday (we have limited support outside of these hours and your enquiry may take longer to respond to).

Let's Get Going

We hope you enjoy your course and wish you the best of luck with your future career. You can now begin your course.

1.0 Introduction

Every person is unique, and each individual on the autism spectrum will have their own strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, not all of the information discussed in this course will apply to everyone on the spectrum and the issues will affect people to varying degrees.

The terminology used throughout this course is that which is recommended by the [National Autistic Society](#). However, if someone wishes to be described or addressed in a different way to this, you should respect their wishes.

1.1 Defining Autism

Autism is a developmental disability that is present from early childhood, although diagnosis might occasionally occur later in life.

The origin of the word "autism" lies in the Greek "autos" or "self" and the suffix "ism" ("ismos"), indicating an action or state. Early in the 20th century, it was originally used to refer to a condition where a person was dominated by fantasy over reality. The term "autism" was initially used by Eugen Bleuler in 1911, who described autism as a symptom of schizophrenia, related to mental health disorders. It's fair to say that in the past not much was known or understood about autism

and the best way in which to approach it.

Today, however, we have further knowledge and understanding of autism and think of it differently, although there is still a great deal more that experts are working on to discover and learn about this complex condition. For example, there is still no definitive proof of exactly what causes the disorder.

The modern name "autism spectrum disorder" (ASD) was cited by the US Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM-IV -in 2013 and referred to ongoing and persistent 1) social communication/interaction and 2) restricted and repetitive behaviours, behaviour patterns, interests and activities. The diagnosis was based on current difficulties or a history of symptoms in these two key areas.

In short, it is now an umbrella term for developmental disorders that are marked by the above two main criteria. However, the term is now sometimes referred to as autism spectrum "condition" rather than "disorder", as it is less stigmatising and it reflects that these individuals do not merely have disabilities which require a medical diagnosis, but also that autistic people may have areas of cognitive strength. In addition to the characteristics described above, people on the autism spectrum have profound difficulty relating to people and experiencing the world around them. Some have described it as a game where everyone but them is aware of the rules.

DSM-5 is the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In the UK, the DSM-5 and the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases manual are used to assess and help diagnose autism. ICD-11 is the latest edition of the International Classification of Diseases manual, and it is now more in line with DSM-5 with regard to autism classifications.

ICD-11 describes autism as follows: "Autism spectrum disorder is characterised by persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests or activities that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual's age and sociocultural context. The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but symptoms may not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities. Deficits are sufficiently severe to cause impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and are usually a pervasive feature of the individual's functioning observable in all settings, although they may vary according to social, educational, or other context. Individuals along the spectrum exhibit a full range of intellectual functioning and language abilities." ICD-11, chapter 6, section A02.

1.2 A Brief Introduction to Autism

People who are autistic are autistic for life. While treatment and support can improve the quality of life for people on the autism spectrum, at this time there is no known "remedy" for the condition. What's more, professionals agree that autism is not an illness to be cured. As mentioned, the specific cause of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is still unknown, although there are cases where it may be passed down genetically. We will discuss this in greater detail in a later module.

FACT

One in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK

(www.autism.org)

Individuals on the autism spectrum often feel that, to quote Autism.org.uk, their condition "is a fundamental aspect of their identity" not a mental illness or a disease. In addition to the main characteristics, such as difficulty communicating, forming relationships, using language, and understanding abstract concepts, people on the autism spectrum may also have sensory difficulties. These may include being either under (hypo) or over (hyper) sensitive to sound, light, colour, and even touch, when reacting to certain fabrics or items of clothing such as zips, seams and buttons. We now use the term "spectrum" to encompass the fact that autism-related challenges can vary somewhat from person to person. While they share common issues, every person on the autism spectrum will have unique challenges and different levels of both ability and disability. Autism will affect each person differently, as we are all unique.

Some prime examples of the vast range of the autism spectrum are as follows:

- Some individuals on the autism spectrum may have no functional speech and communicate using gestures or pictures, while others may have an extensive and well-developed vocabulary.
- Some individuals on the autism spectrum may have significant learning disabilities and cognitive barriers, while others may have exceptionally high IQs.
- Some individuals on the autism spectrum may be extremely socially withdrawn, while others may be socially active, albeit often in an eccentric or even oblivious manner.

1.3 Conditions Sharing Traits with Autism

✖ **There are several conditions that are or have previously been associated with the autism spectrum.** While each of them has its own specific set of symptoms and challenges, they also share traits that are commonly found in autism. Some individuals may be investigated for autism before the correct diagnosis is found.

These conditions include:

- **Asperger Syndrome (AS):** individuals who may have previously fitted the profile of Asperger syndrome are now diagnosed as having Autism Spectrum Disorder. Asperger syndrome was characterised by a fixation on certain subject matters, difficulty reading social cues, and an unusual speech pattern. Individuals who were diagnosed with Asperger syndrome have average to above average intelligence and lack the learning difficulties associated with autism. They often go on to achieve academic success and may find careers that let them focus intensely on their special interest.
- **Fragile X Syndrome (FXS):** the most common cause of inherited learning disabilities, the challenges associated with the genetic condition Fragile X range from mild to severe. There are many similarities between the symptoms of Fragile X and autism, such as delayed speech and language development, anxiety, short attention span, hyperactivity, impulsiveness, difficulty relating to others, dislike of eye contact, the need for routine, hand flapping, biting, and repetitive speech, or echolalia. It's also possible for people to have both autism and Fragile X.
- **Landau-Kleffner Syndrome (LKS):** a loss of language that typically develops in children between the ages of three and seven is what differentiates this syndrome. While children with Landau-Kleffner Syndrome may initially meet developmental milestones for speech and vocabulary, they will then lose their ability to comprehend and speak. These changes may occur slowly or all of a sudden. This is in contrast to autism, where language skills may be delayed or limited. Individuals with Landau-Kleffner Syndrome also fail to respond to sounds, have abnormal brain waves during sleep, and have a high propensity to develop epilepsy. In fact, LKS is now considered a rare form of epilepsy rather than an early indicator of it.

- **Rett Syndrome (RS):** a neurological disorder, unlike autism, Rett Syndrome affects more females than males. While their pathologies are different, the symptoms and behaviours of Rett Syndrome and autism are similar. Children with Rett Syndrome typically make repetitive hand movements, walk on their toes, engage in prolonged body rocking, and have a stiff and unstable gait. They may also have a smaller than average head, breathing difficulties, sleep problems, and epilepsy. Some will regress in their cognition and development throughout their lifetime.
- **Williams Syndrome (WS):** a genetic disorder marked primarily by intellectual disability, this syndrome occurs when a portion of DNA on chromosome number 7 is missing. Many people exhibit autistic behaviour as well as cardiovascular issues. Those with WS may have very sociable traits, an affinity for music, unique, pixie-like facial features such as wide-set eyes and mouth, and a narrow chin, as well as elevated calcium levels.
- **Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA):** Pathological Demand Avoidance is considered to be an atypical subtype of autism. Individuals with PDA will avoid demands made by other people due to their anxiety-based need to be in control. Individuals with PDA often have better social communication skills than others on the spectrum and will often use this to their advantage.
- **Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS):** PDD-NOS conditions typically affect the ability to socialise, communicate and use imagination. People can experience confused thinking and significant difficulty understanding the world around them. People with Pervasive Developmental Disorders may not walk, talk or otherwise develop similarly to their peers. As children, they have unusual ways of playing and difficulty with any changes to routine. In addition, they can have high anxiety, tempers, problems sleeping, and the tendency to become aggressive. While many of these symptoms may sound like autism, we must remember that PDD-NOS conditions are different because they are also accompanied by other health issues, such as cardiovascular problems, trouble walking or standing, and unique facial features.

1.4 Other Related Conditions

There are many other conditions that can also be related to autism, although it is not the case that everyone who has one of these conditions will also be autistic, or that a person on the autism spectrum will definitely have one of these related

conditions. However, these conditions are seen together often enough with autism or are similar in certain respects, and their relationship has been noticed by health professionals.

Other conditions that are related to autism include, but are not limited to:

- **Anxiety:** a real difficulty for people on the autism spectrum, anxiety can have both psychological and physical repercussions. Just like those of us without an autism spectrum disorder, autistic people vary in their ability to cope with anxiety. Some experts have pointed out that people who are on the autism spectrum are more likely to experience anxiety because they are aware of the fact that they don't quite "fit in", and feel overwhelmed by the world.
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):** with its traits of inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, this disorder can impact day-to-day life for the affected person and tends to run in families. Some people on the autism spectrum will also have ADHD.
- **Depression:** Similar to those who experience anxiety, people on the autism spectrum are more likely to experience depression. They tend to feel depressed as they're more aware of their challenges and have difficulty expressing them.
- **Down's Syndrome:** this lifelong condition causes developmental and learning delays due to an extra chromosome number 21. All people with Down's Syndrome have some level of learning disability. People with the condition are more likely to meet key developmental milestones later in life than others. Some people also may have a dual diagnosis of both Down's Syndrome and autism.
- **Dyslexia:** a lifelong learning difficulty that hinders the development of literacy and language skills. Dyslexia affects how people process, store, and retrieve information and can cause difficulties with reading, writing, memory, processing speed, sequencing, and organisational skills.
- **Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD)/Dyspraxia:** similar to dyslexia in the sense that it relates to how the brain processes information. This condition affects planning abilities, spatial perception, coordination, language and thought. Some people may also be over or under sensitive to sensory stimuli, and those on the autism spectrum can also have dyspraxia, amongst other challenges.
- **Epilepsy:** this disorder causes recurrent seizures due to an imbalance in the brain's chemistry. People on the autism spectrum are more likely to also have epilepsy, and people with epilepsy are also more likely to be on the autism spectrum. Furthermore, some of the behaviours commonly associated with autism can even look like the symptoms of epilepsy, including prolonged staring and repetitive movements.
- **Fetal Anticonvulsant Syndrome:** this syndrome can occur when women take medication to manage epilepsy during their pregnancies. As a result, a child with Fetal Anticonvulsant Syndrome can have speech delays, difficulty socialising, and trouble paying attention and remembering information. While these symptoms are similar to autism, some children with FACS will also be on the autism spectrum.
- **Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs)** are a group of conditions that can occur in a person whose mother drank excessive amounts of alcohol during pregnancy. These conditions can include physical problems, such as abnormal features, shorter than average height, vision

or hearing problems, and it can also cause behavioural and learning problems, such as hyperactivity, short attention span and all the consequent difficulties in school.

- **Hearing impairment:** some people on the autism spectrum have difficulty with sensory processing and are particularly sensitive to noise. While they may or may not be hearing impaired, as a result of their sensory and verbal challenges they may learn sign language and rely on visual supports and reference objects in order to communicate. Visuals and sign language are also extremely helpful for autistic people who have difficulty communicating verbally.
- **Hyperlexia:** the opposite of dyslexia, hyperlexia describes an extreme fascination with letters and/or numbers. Children with hyperlexia have the ability to read far beyond their age level and read far earlier than what's typically expected of children. Even with their ability to read, people with hyperlexia may have difficulty comprehending the meaning of what they read. People with hyperlexia, despite their literacy abilities, may also have challenges with understanding speech. Furthermore, they commonly have the social difficulties associated with autism.
- **Social Communication Disorder:** this disorder involves the communication and interaction challenges of autism without the restricted or repetitive movements or intense interests or activities. People with Social Communication Disorder may have difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication despite having at least an average cognitive ability. As a result, they could potentially make inappropriate responses in conversations. Social Communication Disorder has the ability to affect the relationships, academic ability, and even job performance of those who have it.
- **Visual impairment:** children who are visually impaired may lose their vision from birth or in the first few months of life, long before an autism spectrum disorder can be diagnosed. However, they could also lose their sight later in life or through injuring themselves. It's quite challenging to determine just how many people may be affected by both autism and a visual impairment; while the impact on their lives is very high, the incidence of such co-occurrence is thought to be quite low. It is generally agreed that the impact of both a visual impairment and being on the autism spectrum is greater than one or the other, because of the unique difficulties that will arise with every activity and interaction the affected person undertakes. What's more, traditional treatments for either disorder are not always suitable for people on the autism spectrum who are also visually impaired - and this makes support more challenging.

1.5 Autism and Learning Disabilities

It is typical for people on the autism spectrum to also have learning disabilities.

FACT

One in three autistic people has a learning disability (*autistica.org.uk*)

Learning disabilities experienced by autistic people can range from mild to severe but generally will affect all aspects of a person's life. However, those on the autism spectrum who also have learning disabilities can often live independently, with at least some degree of support. The learning disabilities associated with autism spectrum disorders are primarily related to challenges with processing information, as well as other outlying factors that can affect learning, such as communication and social skills. People on the autism spectrum who also have learning disabilities typically struggle with both verbal and non-verbal communication, such as reading facial expressions. They tend to take speech literally so will struggle with metaphors and expressions like, "it's raining cats and dogs!"

In addition to having trouble understanding communication, they may also have difficulty expressing themselves. While some people on the autism spectrum do not develop functional speech, they are still able to communicate in other ways, such as through visual cues or sign language.

Misunderstanding social behaviour is also an aspect of autism and learning difficulties. People on the autism spectrum can find reading social cues difficult, and may - as a result of this - behave in ways that are socially inappropriate. Furthermore, they may be unable to understand social context or find it difficult to express empathy to others.

People on the autism spectrum, particularly children, also have a hard time playing and using their imagination. As a result, they may end up spending more time in solitary play or playing alongside other children while not actually interacting with them. Some people on the autism spectrum become particularly passionate about or "fixated" on certain subjects, and children have excellent memory regarding the toys or topics they most enjoy.

Finally, those on the autism spectrum who also have learning difficulties have a hard time adjusting to new schedules and can struggle with transferring their skills to other tasks or activities. They prefer routine and consistency and do not always have the required coping skills or resilience to

change.

In the next module, we will cover in more depth how autism relates to learning disabilities and can therefore impact one's ability to achieve.

Take a Quick Recap Test

[viralQuiz id=89]

1.6 What We've Learned

In this first module, we've taken an initial look at autism; what it is and isn't, some of the common characteristics of ASD and the related conditions.

We've learned that autism is a condition present from early childhood, although diagnosis might occasionally not occur until later in life. Autism should not be thought of as an illness but rather a lifelong condition.

We also discussed some of the most common characteristics of autism, including repetitive behaviour and extreme difficulty with changes to routine, communication, relationships, language and abstract concepts.

We reviewed other conditions that co-occur with autism, such as anxiety and depression, epilepsy, dyslexia, hyperlexia, hearing and visual impairment, and Down's Syndrome.

Finally, we began taking a look at the role that learning disabilities play alongside autism. Whilst not everyone on the autism spectrum has learning difficulties, it is common for many people to deal with a variety of related challenges. These can stem from their difficulties with verbal and non-verbal communication, attention, processing information, and understanding social cues.

Summary

After completing this module, you should have a good basic understanding of autism, how it is defined and the most typical symptoms and behaviours. You should also now be familiar with the various conditions that fall under the autism spectrum umbrella, and other conditions that either have similarities to autism or, for some, commonly occur alongside autism.

In conclusion, you should also now have an introduction to the most common aspects of learning disabilities experienced by people on the autism spectrum.

In the next module, we will look further into the learning disabilities associated with young people who are on the autism spectrum and consider the impact they have on academic achievement.

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