



What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), often referred to simply as autism, is a neurological and developmental condition that affects how a person communicates, interacts with others, experiences the world, and responds to their environment. Autism is called a spectrum because every autistic individual is unique, with their own strengths, interests, and support needs.

Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, signs typically appear during early childhood. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that approximately 1 in 36 children in the United States is identified with autism.

Autism is not an illness to be cured—it is a different way of experiencing and processing the world. With understanding, acceptance, and appropriate support, autistic individuals can thrive at school, at work, and in their communities.

Core Characteristics of Autism

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), autism is characterized by:

- Differences in social communication and social interaction
- Restricted or repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities
- Characteristics that affect everyday functioning

Every person with autism experiences these characteristics differently, and no two individuals are exactly alike.

Communication Differences

Autistic individuals may communicate in a variety of ways. Some are highly verbal, while others use limited speech or alternative forms of communication such as gestures, pictures, or communication devices.

Common communication differences may include:

- Taking language literally and struggling with sarcasm or abstract concepts
- Needing additional time to process information and respond
- Repeating words or phrases (known as echolalia)
- Having difficulty interpreting facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice
- Preferring direct, clear communication

These differences do not reflect intelligence or a lack of interest in others—they are simply different ways of communicating.

Social Interaction

Social situations can be challenging for many autistic individuals. They may experience difficulty understanding social expectations or expressing emotions in ways others expect.

For example, an autistic person may:

- Express emotions or interest differently than others expect
- Prefer spending time alone to recharge after social interactions
- Find it difficult to initiate or maintain friendships
- Miss subtle social cues or misunderstand another person's intentions

Many autistic individuals want meaningful relationships but may need different approaches or additional support in social situations.

Repetitive Behaviors and Preference for Routine

Many autistic people find comfort in routines and predictability. Familiar patterns can reduce anxiety and help them navigate daily life.

Examples may include:

- Following consistent daily routines
- Preferring the same foods, routes, or schedules
- Engaging in repetitive movements such as hand-flapping, rocking, or spinning objects
- Developing intense interests in specific topics or activities

Unexpected changes—such as schedule changes, staff changes, or disruptions to routines—can create significant stress or anxiety.

Sensory Differences

Many autistic individuals experience the world differently through their senses. Some may be highly sensitive to certain sensations, while others may seek additional sensory input.

Examples include:

- Being overwhelmed by loud noises or background conversations
- Sensitivity to bright lights or certain visual environments
- Discomfort with certain clothing textures or physical touch
- Strong preferences or aversions to specific food textures
- Seeking movement, deep pressure, or repetitive sensory experiences

Busy environments such as schools, workplaces, shopping centers, or community events can sometimes become overwhelming. Simple accommodations can make these environments more accessible and comfortable.

Meltdowns and Shutdowns

When an autistic person becomes overwhelmed by stress, sensory input, or emotional demands, they may experience a meltdown or a shutdown.

A meltdown is an involuntary response to overwhelming circumstances and may involve crying, yelling, or other intense emotional or physical reactions. It is not the same as a temper tantrum.

A shutdown is a response in which the individual may become quiet, withdrawn, or temporarily unable to communicate or participate. They may need time and a calm environment to recover.

Both meltdowns and shutdowns are signs that the person is overwhelmed and needs understanding and support rather than punishment or criticism.

Common Strengths

While autism presents challenges, many autistic individuals also possess valuable strengths. Depending on the individual, these may include:

- Honesty and reliability
- Strong attention to detail
- Excellent memory
- Creative and innovative thinking
- Deep knowledge of topics of interest
- Persistence and dedication
- Strong pattern recognition and problem-solving skills
- Loyalty and consistency

Every autistic person has their own unique combination of abilities and challenges.

How You Can Help

Small adjustments can make a significant difference in creating inclusive environments:

- Use clear, direct communication.
- Allow extra processing time before expecting a response.
- Maintain routines whenever possible and prepare for changes in advance.
- Reduce unnecessary sensory distractions when appropriate.

- Focus on strengths rather than limitations.
- Ask what supports are helpful instead of making assumptions.
- Be patient, respectful, and open-minded.

A Final Thought

Autism is not defined by a single characteristic or experience. Every autistic individual is unique, with their own personality, abilities, interests, and goals. By increasing understanding and embracing inclusion, we create communities where everyone has the opportunity to contribute, belong, and succeed.