

General Information About Autism

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is the name given to a special type of problem in behaviour. Due to the autism, the person will behave and talk strangely.

It is actually due to a problem in the brain, with the result that the person does not easily understand what is going on around them. This affects their behaviour and communication in their physical surroundings and with people.

They act in a confused way, and respond in unusual ways.

For example: if the mother hugs an autistic child, the child might scream and bite.

For example: if someone speaks to them, they may hit themselves.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF AUTISM?

Most autistic people look normal physically, but behave in different ways to ordinary people, which you can observe.

Some of this behaviour will be similar to people with learning disability. But there are some special things that define autism.

Most autistic people have problems in four areas:

Social/relational problems:

- They can have problems talking to and being with other people. This can be even with close family members.
- They may change their mood very quickly, including getting angry, for no reason that others can see.
- They act as if they are not aware of the feelings of others.
- The child may not play, or share toys, or learn rules
- It is difficult for them to make close relationships with others, especially with people from outside the family.

Communication Problems:

- they have trouble speaking, or with using signs to show what they mean.
- sometimes it takes them a long time to start to speak, and then they keep saying the same thing over and over again
- they have difficulty following instructions
- they may not notice when someone is speaking to them - it seems like they do not listen or understand



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Unusual Behaviour:

- they may do the same activity over and over again-like reaching into the air, rocking, biting their arm, hitting their head
- some are very active and will not sit still, while others will not move or talk for hours
- they may not know how to play like others for example, they roll a ball on their hand, but not throw it; move the wheels of a car , but not roll it on the ground
- they may only eat a few kinds of food, or wear one item of clothing again and again

Responses to their environment:

- many are very sensitive to touch, noise and taste. They may cry loudly when they are touched or hear a noise they do not like. Sometimes they will react to the feel or taste of food in their mouth.
- They may have trouble doing new things or adjusting to change, and usually want to always do things in the same way.

All people with autism are different. They will not all do all the things from the list above, but they will do some of them.

Some will have many of the things from the list, some will have a few only.

They will have them in different combinations.

Some will be able to go to school, while others need supervision and help all the time.

Some people who have autism are intelligent, but many have a learning disability as well. Some also have epilepsy. Some also have problems with hearing or sight.

WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

The cause of autism is not known, except that it is a problem of the brain, which works differently from usual.

It may be caused by something in pregnancy, such as an illness of the mother, or a problem in the birth.

Most people with autism have had it since birth, but some may develop it after an illness such as meningitis.

Sometimes as the child grows, the behaviour may get worse if it is not helped properly.

CAN AUTISM BE PREVENTED?

Because the cause is not known, it is hard to prevent it.

Good care and nutrition while pregnant, and having a trained birth attendant or medical person at the birth may help.



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As soon as the family thinks there is a problem with the child's behaviour, getting the right help early is important, and gives them more support.

CAN AUTISM BE CURED? DOES IT GET BETTER OR WORSE? CAN EXTRA PROBLEMS COME?

Autism can not be cured.

A person with autism will always have some problems, but if the family gets help and learns how to manage them, the problems will be less.

If nothing is done, it is very difficult for the person, but more so for the family who have to look after him/her. The family will need a lot of support and encouragement.

Usually if no help is given, the behaviour problems will get worse, and this is very difficult practically and socially for the family.

CAN OTHER PEOPLE CATCH IT? CAN IT BE PASSED ON FROM PARENTS TO CHILDREN?

Autism cannot spread from one person to another.

Brothers and sisters of children with autism have a higher chance of also having it.

CAN A PERSON WITH AUTISM GO TO SCHOOL, GET A JOB, OR GET MARRIED AND HAVE CHILDREN?

If the child has autism but is intelligent, they can go to an ordinary school. But it depends on the type of behaviour they have, and other factors like the class sizes. They will probably do best in a special class in an ordinary school and the teacher will need training and support/assistance. It will probably be hard to go into an ordinary class, not because the child cannot learn (many children with autism are intelligent), but as the behaviour can be very difficult to manage, and the child may disturb the others too much.

If the child has a learning disability as well, she/he will certainly need a special setting such as a special class in an ordinary school.

Again, depending on the problems they have, some adults with autism can do simple work: they often need special training and supervision.

It is not usual for people with autism to get married, because of the problems they have in communication and in making relationships with others. They usually live with their families in the community.

HOW CAN THE DOCTOR HELP? IS IT NECESSARY TO SEE A SPECIALIST? IS THE TREATMENT EXPENSIVE? IS EQUIPMENT NEEDED?

There is no medicine, or surgery that will help.



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If the person also has epilepsy, they should take medicine for their fits, although this does not cure the autism.

Sometimes medicine is given to make the person calm and sleepy but the medicine only controls the behaviour, and does not cure the autism. It should not be given all the time, but it may be helpful for the family to care for the person: for example, to take in the evening to help them to sleep through the night.

It may be helpful to see a psychologist (if possible) to get advice for the behaviour problems.

The main input is by the family and CW, so is not expensive. Usually equipment is not needed.

HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY DISABILITY WORKER (CDW) HELP?

The most important thing for the CW to do is to help and support the family, and teach them things they can practically do to help the child/person with autism.

The CW can help the family understand what autism is, especially as families often feel that the autistic person does not love them or care for their feelings.

The CW should help the family to set up and maintain the things in the section below (for the family to do).

It is not easy for the CW to make a good relationship with the autistic person himself or herself. It will take a lot of time before child will trust new people.

At the beginning, it is best to:

- just sit near the person and not talk directly to him or her.
- Observe what they do and how the family responds/reacts
- follow what the person wants to do
- not try to make the person follow instructions.

(It is helpful if the family also advises visitors to do these things.)

Gradually, when the CW is known, it will be possible to help the autistic person to learn things.

When trying to teach a new activity, it is easiest to do it together with the person, for example, by placing your hands on the autistic person's hands and guiding them.

It may also be helpful to use things or pictures to help communication, rather than words: for example, if you want the person to dress in his shirt, hold the shirt up in front of him.

HOW CAN THE FAMILY HELP?

Generally it is not easy to live with and help the child with autism. But the following things can make a big difference:



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- a regular schedule and routine, that is doing things in the same order and same times each day (for example, when the child wakes up, then going to the toilet, washing, getting dressed, having food and drink, brushing teeth always in a regular order each day)
- keeping things in the house in the same place, such as furniture, dishes, clothes etc. (and also keeping dangerous things out of the way of the child, who may not be able to learn what is safe and what is not)
- being aware which activities or sounds cause the child to have problems, and try to remove/avoid them: for example, some foods or sounds may cause the child to shout or bang his or her head.
- Finding things the child likes to do and make sure that the child does them often: for example, playing with household items or toys, or songs/music.
- knowing ways in which to change the behaviour as much as possible (see module on learning disability), by rewarding good behaviour.
- some children with autism respond well to a pet such as a rabbit, cat or dog: they like to stroke them and hold them. Others like to hear singing/music and this can sometimes be a way of calming them down.
- Some children, if they get very upset, respond and calm down if a family member gets hold of them and hugs them very tightly, saying loving words and simply keeping them still until they calm down.

HOW CAN THE PERSON HELP HIM OR HERSELF?

It is difficult for the person with autism to help himself or herself, as they do not understand that they have a problem. The main work of caring for them and helping them is by their family, therefore they are the ones who need the most support and input from the CW.

HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY HELP?

Because the family of an autistic person often has to watch them all day - community members could volunteer to do this so that the family members could have a break and /or do other work. To do this, the person who is helping should be known to the child, or gradually introduced and included in the family. Also the person should know about the routines etc and how to handle the child.

Most people do not understand autism - some people may think that the person has been cursed or that a spirit lives in them. Awareness from the community worker will help to change this and give more understanding. Also, it is important that the community members do not tease the person or reinforce behaviour bad behaviour, but reinforce good behaviour.

SEE OTHER RELATED MODULES:

- learning disability
- epilepsy



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