What is Autism?


What is Autism?

Autism is a neurological, pervasive developmental condition. It is a disability. It is usually considered a disorder. It is not a disease. It is a lifelong condition that spans from infancy to adulthood. Autistic people usually share a variety of characteristics, including significant differences in information processing, sensory processing, communication abilities or styles, social skills, and learning styles.

Some Autistic people are non-speaking (and may be called nonverbal). These people cannot use typical speech to communicate. They often use Adaptive and Augmentative Communication (AAC) devices, keyboards/typing, picture cards, whiteboards, or American Sign Language to communicate instead. Some Autistic people begin to develop normal speech in childhood and later regress and lose some or all speech. Other Autistic people develop limited speech. Still other Autistic people never develop speech at all. Other Autistic people are highly verbal and able to communicate using speech. Some Autistic people develop precocious vocabularies in early childhood.

Many Autistic people engage in self-stimulating behaviors called "stims" or "stimming." Stimming can take many forms. Stereotyped stims are hand or arm flapping and rocking, although stimming can also include pacing, other body movements, verbal stims (repeating certain phrases, humming, singing certain songs), or tactile stimming (rubbing a piece of cloth.) Stimming is a natural response to cope with overwhelming emotions, such as joy, anxiety, anger, or sadness. It is also a coping mechanism for sensory overload.

Autistic people tend to understand language literally and explicitly. Idioms are difficult for us to understand. We tend to be very truthful or honest, sometimes even to the point of extreme bluntness. For those of us who have high levels of verbal abilities, the social or pragmatic aspect of language is extremely difficult for us to learn -- and it has to be taught. It is not intuitive, automatic, or natural for us. We find it an entire foreign culture. We can easily come across as arrogant, rude, self-centered, or mean, and will rarely be aware of this unless informed directly. Autistic people have great difficulties with nonverbal communication such as facial expressions and body language, and have trouble understanding social subtleties and subtext.

Autistic people also rely heavily on routine, sameness, or being able to expect something to be or occur a certain way. When a routine is altered or disrupted, an Autistic person may have a meltdown, experience severe anxiety, and will have extreme difficulty adapting to the change.

Some Autistic people are able to live independently, complete post-secondary education (such as
university or technical training), and obtain and keep meaningful, competitive employment. Other Autistic people can only do these things with supported employment or living services, or extensive supports in the educational setting. Still other Autistic people may need to live in a group home setting or with a family member or full-time caregiver for the rest of their lives. Many Autistic adults are underemployed or unemployed because they do not have access to appropriate and necessary supported employment services.

Some Autistic people also have co-occurring conditions of mental illness (such as bipolar disorder), behavioral or mood disorder (such as clinical depression or Tourette's Syndrome), learning disability (such as dyscalculia), or intellectual disability (formerly called mental retardation.) Many Autistic people also have conditions like Executive Function Disorder, Sensory Processing Disorder (formerly called Sensory Integration Disorder), prosopagnosia (face blindness), dyspraxia, synesthesia, anxiety disorders, and learning disabilities.

Some Autistic people are misdiagnosed or given simultaneous diagnoses with various conditions like Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or intellectual disability.

The most important thing to remember about Autism is that each individual is truly an individual. No two Autistic people are alike. At best, we share many similar characters, but we have our own personalities, interests, wishes, hopes, dreams, and fears. We also have different neurological and psychological profiles.