

# Autism Awareness

By Victoria Morris

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# What is Autism?

- Autism is a lifelong developmental disability, it is a spectrum condition, which means it will affect different individuals in different ways.
- Autism affects how people see the world around them and how they interact with others.
- There are about 700,000 people on the autistic spectrum in the UK



# What is Autism?

## The Three Functional Levels of Autism

### ASD Level 1 Requiring Support



difficulty initiating social interactions

organization and planning problems can hamper independence

### ASD Level 2 Requiring Substantial Support



social interactions limited to narrow special interests

frequent restricted/repetitive behaviors

### ASD Level 3 Requiring Very Substantial Support



severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills

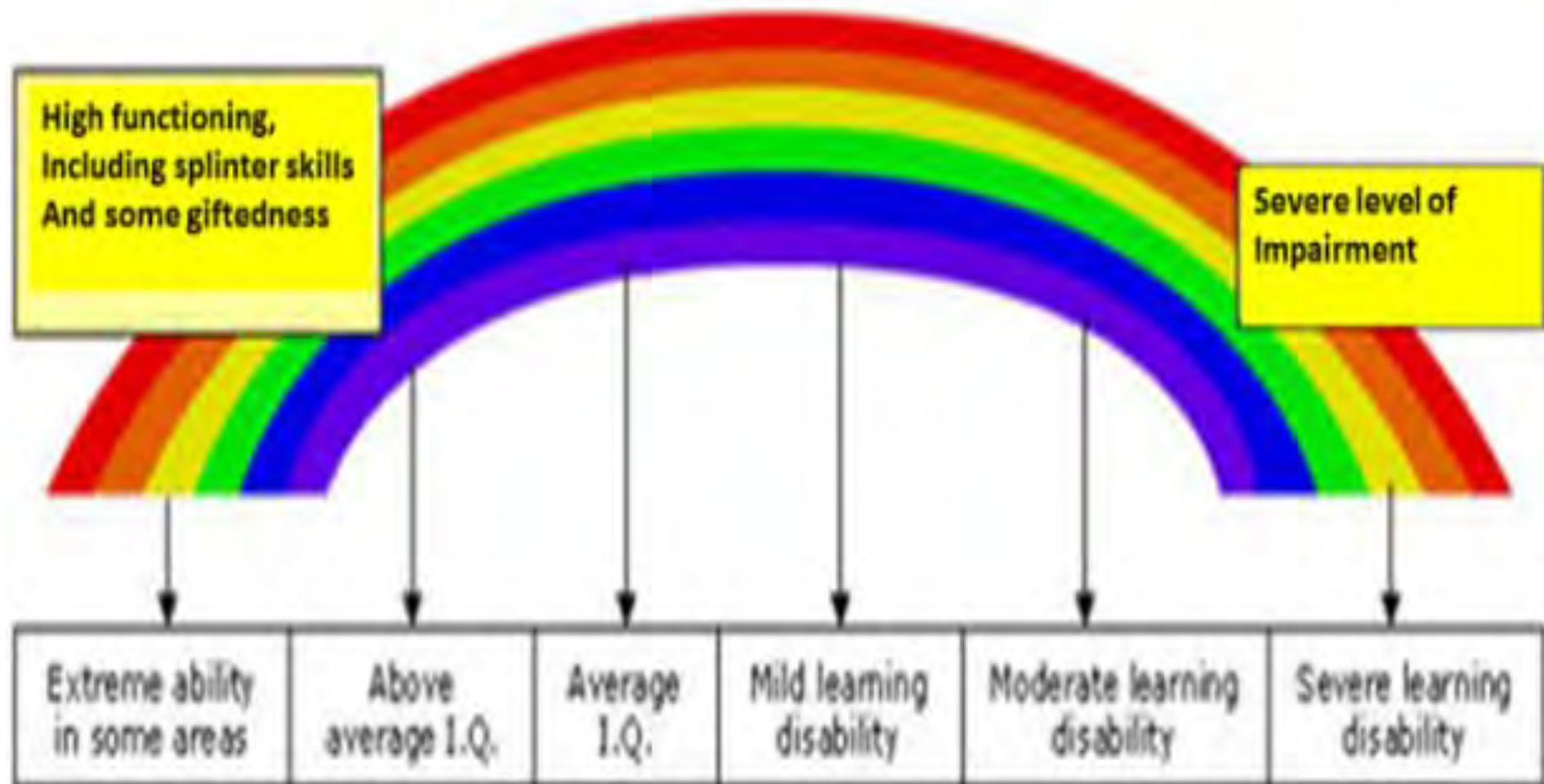
great distress/difficulty changing actions or focus

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# Autism Spectrum Conditions



# Signs of Autism

Autistic people act differently in order to cope with the world around them. As their brains process information differently their behaviours can appear anti-social or inappropriate. The picture opposite shows different behaviours an individual may display.





# How does Autism affect individuals?

- Autism causes social interaction and communication problems which can include, not speaking at all, not understanding facial expressions and needing longer to process information.
- Repetitive behaviours – doing or thinking something over and over again either just for fun or because they are feeling anxious.
- Sensory overloads – noise, smells, touches and bright lights can become overwhelming and painful.
- Unexpected changes are very distressing.
- Autistic individuals can experience emotional shut downs or melt downs.



# Communication

- Autistic people have difficulties interpreting both verbal and non-verbal communication. They may also take everything you say very literally, so find the following difficult to understand:
  - Facial expressions
  - Tone of voice
  - Jokes and sarcasm
- Some do not speak at all, but may understand more of what is being said to them than they can express. These autistic individuals will prefer to use alternative means of communication such as sign language or visual symbols.
- Some have good language skills but may find it hard to understand the expectations of a conversation and repeat what another person has said.
- It helps to speak in a clear consistent way in order for autistic people to be able to process the information given to them.





# Communication

An example of visual cue cards used by an autistic individual.

 turn off lights	 toilet	 wash hands	 soap
 brush teeth	 bath	 use soap	 comb hair
 eat	 juice	 school bus	 go in the car
 party	 color	 paint	 blow bubbles





# Social interaction

- Navigating the social world can be difficult for autistic people, as they often have difficulty recognising or understanding others' feelings, and have difficulties expressing their own emotions this means that they:
  - May appear insensitive
  - Want to be alone when they are surrounded by people
  - May not seek comfort from others
  - May behave differently, or in a socially inappropriate way
  - They may find it hard to make friends as they are unsure how to.



# Repetitive behaviours, activities or interests

- Autistic people prefer a daily routine as they do not feel comfortable with unpredictable situations. For example they may want to travel the same route to school every day.
- Rules are important, as the idea of change makes them feel uncomfortable. They would prefer to be warned of any changes so that they can prepare beforehand.
- Many autistic people have a highly focused interest which they like to focus much of their time on.





# Sensory sensitivity

- Many autistic people can be either over or under sensitive to sounds, touch, taste, smells, lights, colours, temperature or pain.
- For example background noises we may block out can be unbearably loud or distracting to an autistic person.
- Sensory issues can cause anxiety or even physical pain to an autistic person.
- They may also be fascinated by lights or moving objects.



# How can you help spread Autism awareness?

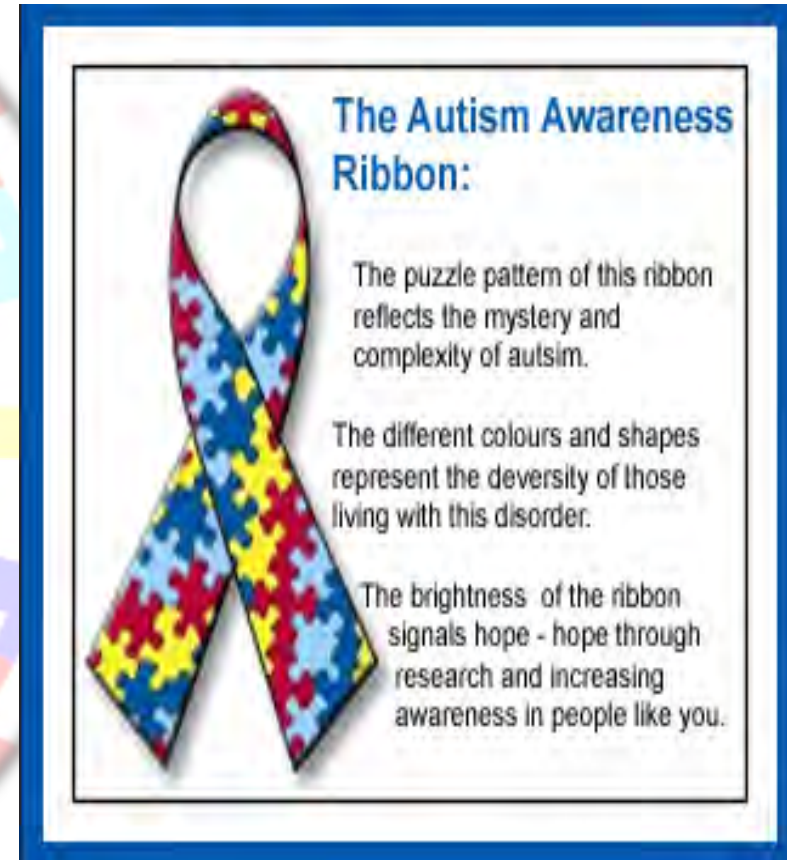
- Learn about autism – so that you have an understanding.
- Get involved – talk about the problem, spread the word, do something about it.
- Attend fundraisers and autism awareness events.
- Spend time with people on the spectrum – this way you can get a much better understanding.
- Donate to an organisation that spreads awareness.





# How can you help spread Autism awareness?

- Volunteer to help with autism fundraisers.
- Social media – use these platforms to spread the word.
- Wear the autism awareness puzzle ribbon.
- Share your story – use your personal experience with an autistic person to give a positive message, this can be verbally or online.
- Don't spread stereotypes just awareness.



# How to support an autistic individual:

- There are five main areas how we can help support an autistic individual this is by:
  1. Creating a friendly environment
  2. Handling meltdowns
  3. Communicating effectively
  4. Teaching important skills
  5. Understanding Autism





# How to support an autistic individual: create a friendly environment.

- Allow them to sit in a place of minimum distraction.
- Designate a calming area where they can retreat to when feeling stressed.
- Understand their needs and actively try to support them.



# Create a friendly environment: make a schedule

- Help them to make a schedule using time slots to map out their day.
- Use a visual calendar they can check.
- Illustrations and drawings will make the calendar look more friendly.





# Create a friendly environment : give warning of changes

- Sometimes things have to be changed, if a friend is ill and a play date is rescheduled, put it on the calendar ASAP so that they can be prepared.
- Plan activities around specific time slots, e.g. football, swimming, orchestra at 4pm on separate days so activities are at the same time.



# Create a friendly environment : schedule down time

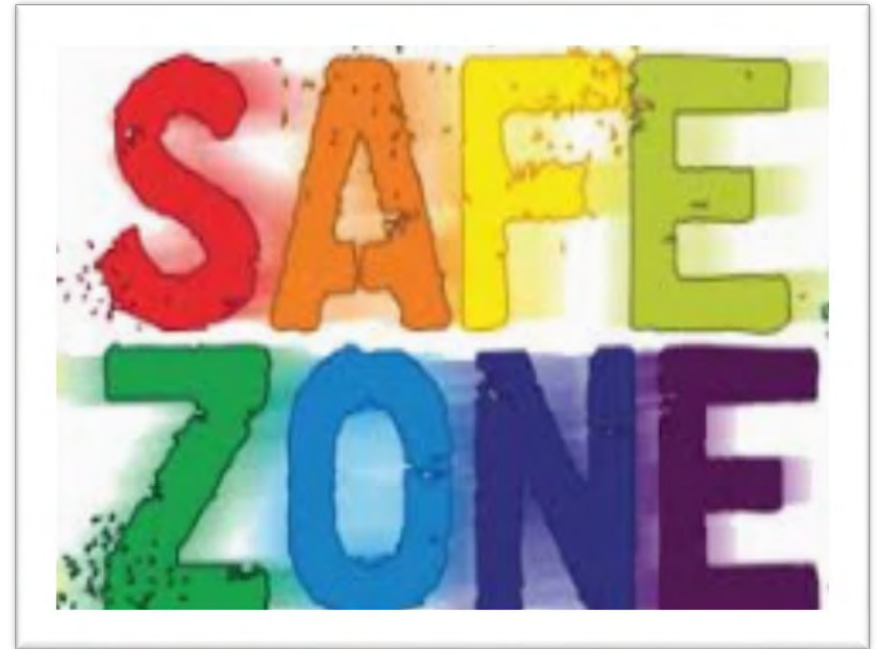
- This way they have time to relax after an activity which would have made them tired.
- Also allow downtime after a change of schedule such as a dentist appointment to allow time to calm.





# Create a friendly environment : determine what stimuli causes discomfort.

- Communicate, ask and notice what causes discomfort so that you can find ways around them.
- For example if they don't like large crowds and noise have a 'safe place' where they can go.



# How to support an autistic individual: incorporate exercise.

- This is a great outlet for excessive energy and can improve their mood.
- Find something that they enjoy, this would normally be a non-competitive individual sport or even walking.





# Create a friendly environment : encourage special interests.

- Allow them to go to the library and read up on interests.
- Encourage to join clubs related to their interest, this gives them a talking point with others making it less threatening to them.



# How to support an autistic individual: handling meltdowns.

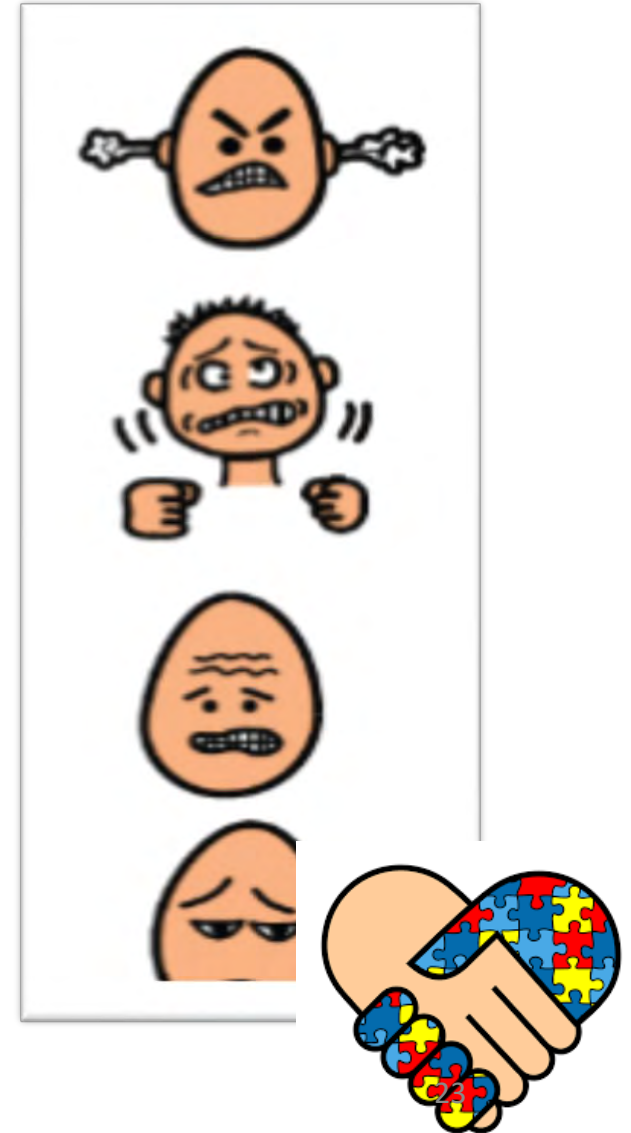
- Learn to see patterns in meltdowns.
- Consider keeping a record of meltdown triggers to prevent in the future.
- Identify when the situation is going to become too much so that an individual can be removed from it before it reaches meltdown.





# Handling meltdowns: know the warning signs

- In autistic people meltdowns are often the result of stress build up, and prevention is the best treatment so you need to notice the signs:
  - Frustration
  - Being given too many verbal instructions at once
  - Witnessing injustice
  - Sensory overload
  - Changes to routine
  - Not being able to understand/communicate effectively.



# Handling meltdowns: intervene quickly on behalf of the autistic person

- The autistic person may not realise how their stresses are building up so you should
  - Take them out of the situation for a break
  - Get them away from crowds or other triggers
  - Avoid placing demands on them.





# Handling meltdowns: make requested accommodations.

- If they are asking for something to change it is probably causing them serious discomfort, so you should take their requests seriously.
- Don't punish them for not using proper manners at this point, you can coach them about this at another time when they are calm.

A meltdown is not deliberate poor behaviour  
It is a response to an overload of  
information, sensory input or emotions.  
Don't punish people for a meltdown



Jeanette Purkis' Autism Books and Other Things.



# Handling meltdowns: take them somewhere calmer.

- If they have had a meltdown or on the verge of one you should take them somewhere calmer
- You could take them outdoors, or to a calming area where they are not surrounded with people or the stimuli of a meltdown.





# Handling meltdowns: be calm patient and understanding.

- After a meltdown an autistic individual may feel ashamed or embarrassed about losing control, so don't shout at them this will only make it worse and more difficult to calm down.
- Avoid big crowds.
- Ask people to not intimidate the autistic person.
- Take them somewhere less public.

**STAY  
CALM**



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# Handling meltdowns: encourage self calming (stimming)

- Allow the individual to stimulate their own senses, as this can be extremely calming for an autistic person. This can include; hand flapping, jumping, rocking or fidgeting.
- We can also encourage them to stim by:
  - Offering a rocking chair where available
  - Bringing fidget toys, or doodle books
  - Ask them if they want to self stim
  - Offer a bear hug
  - Don't judge them, and if anyone else objects use words or a sharp stare to tell them its unacceptable.



# Handling meltdowns: only once they have calmed down ask them what triggered the meltdown.

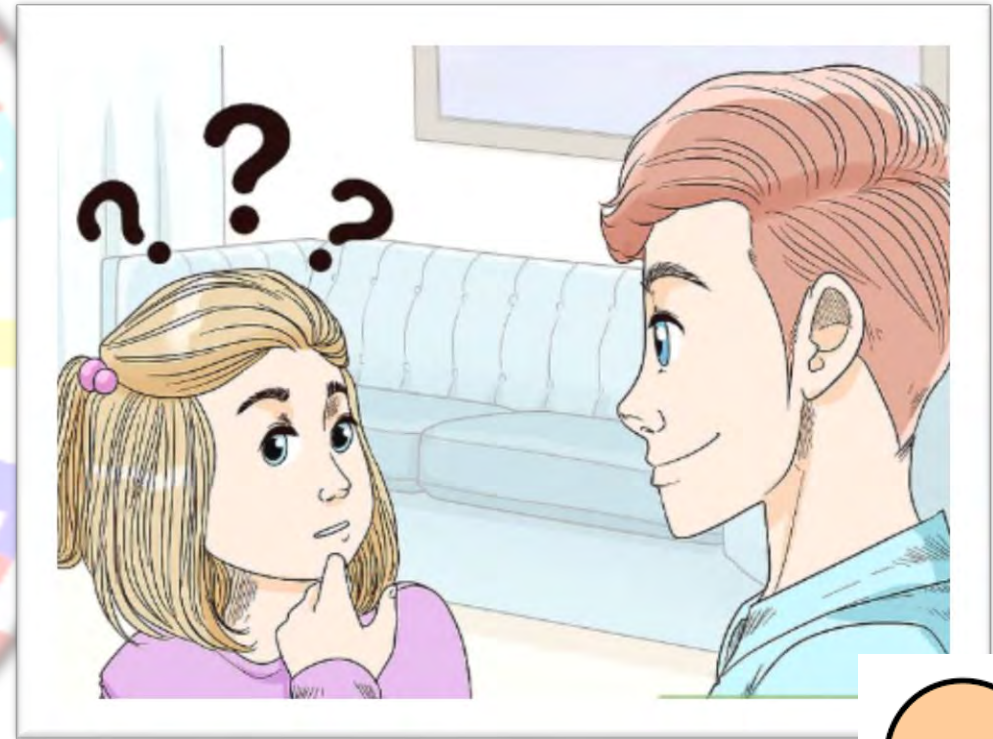
- Focus on the triggers and on what you and they can do to try and avoid it happening again.
- Try and plan trips around less busy times of day or bring ear plugs to block out some of the noise
- If it is news they've seen on the TV that has upset them or put them off a place, avoid watching the news at night and do relaxing exercises instead.





# How to support an autistic individual: communicating effectively.

- Recognise that communication may be challenging, expressions or gestures may confuse an autistic person.
- Don't expect eye contact – they often pay better attention if they are not looking at the person they are talking to.
- Expect fidgeting or unusual movement.
- Learn the unique body language of an individual.



# Communicating effectively: don't stress over tone or body language.

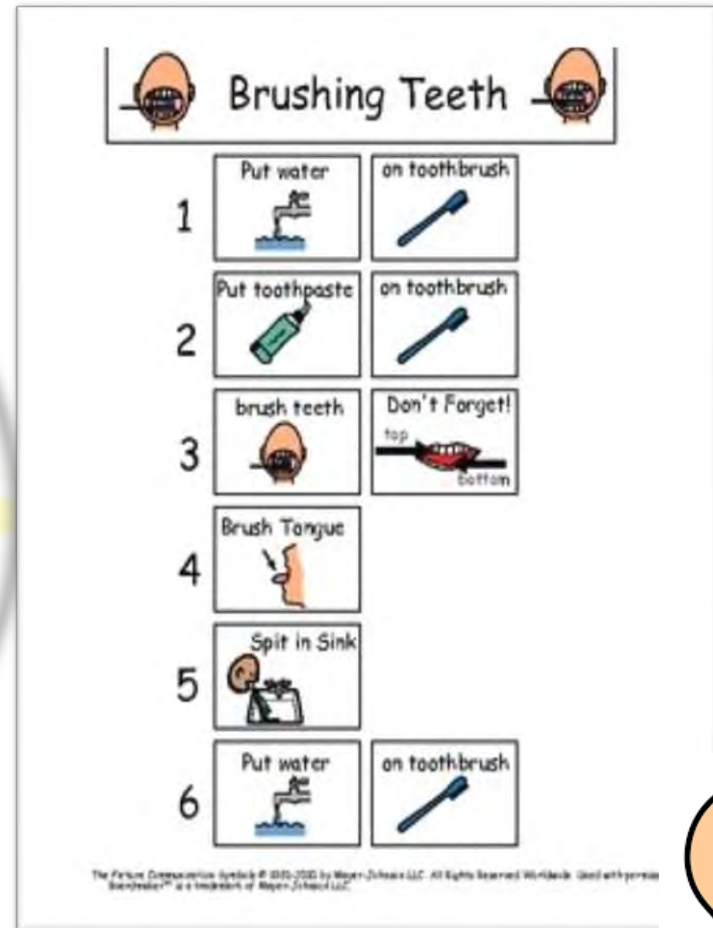
- An autistic person is not likely to display body language or tone that actually matches how they are feeling, so don't be offended.
- Watch their stims, e.g. if they are flapping their hands when they are happy probably nothing is wrong.
- Something as little as a dog barking may have put them on edge all day, so its not aimed at you.





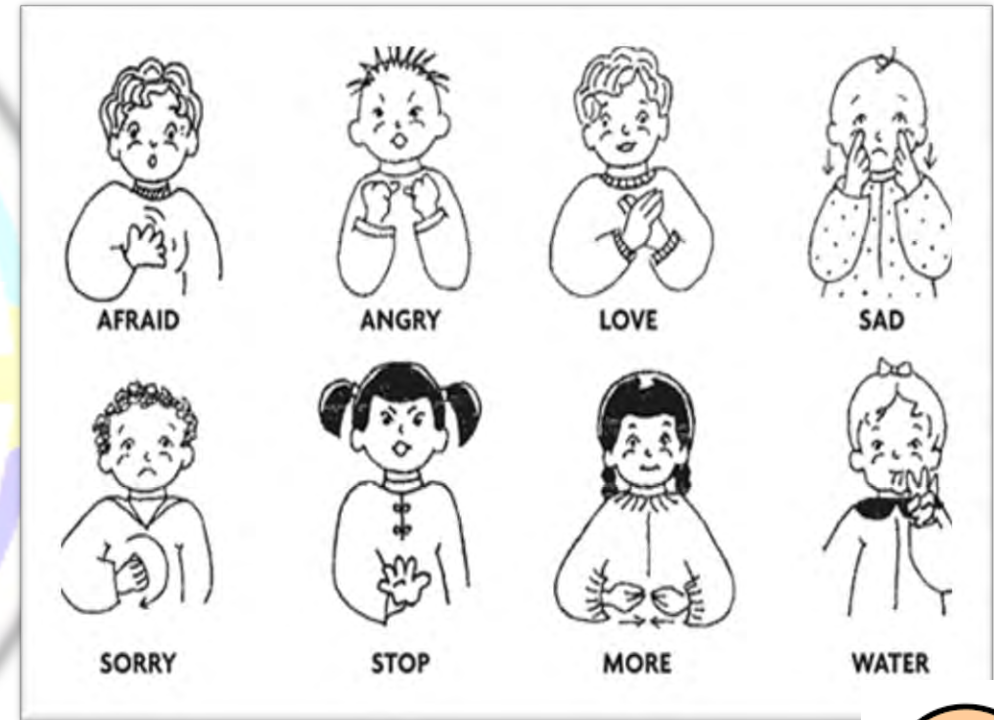
# Communicating effectively: realise that auditory processing may be difficult for them.

- Their brain may take longer to translate auditory instruction, so gauge their reaction.
- Written instructions may help with this, or give the autistic person a simple list.
- Consider using illustrated lists
- Give them time to think and process the information.
- They may prefer reading and writing to spoken conversation.



# Communicating effectively: try to communicate in a calm space.

- Often busy or noisy places make communication more difficult for an autistic person.
- If a room is crowded try and move elsewhere to communicate.
- If its not possible to move try other methods such as sign language, picture charts or typing.





# Communicating effectively: consider focus training to improve social skills.

- Focus training is a course to help autistic people develop strategies for communication with others and teaches them to understand thoughts and feelings.
- Here they can develop strategies for problem solving, conversational skills, emotional regulation and friendship skills.



# How to support an autistic individual: teaching important skills.

- Skills which can be taught and help autistic people include:
  - Practicing deep breathing
  - Counting to feel calm
  - Allowing them to hold a favourite item or toy until calmed down
  - Encouraging certain stims, or providing them with alternatives
  - Stretching, yoga or meditation
  - Playing music or singing.

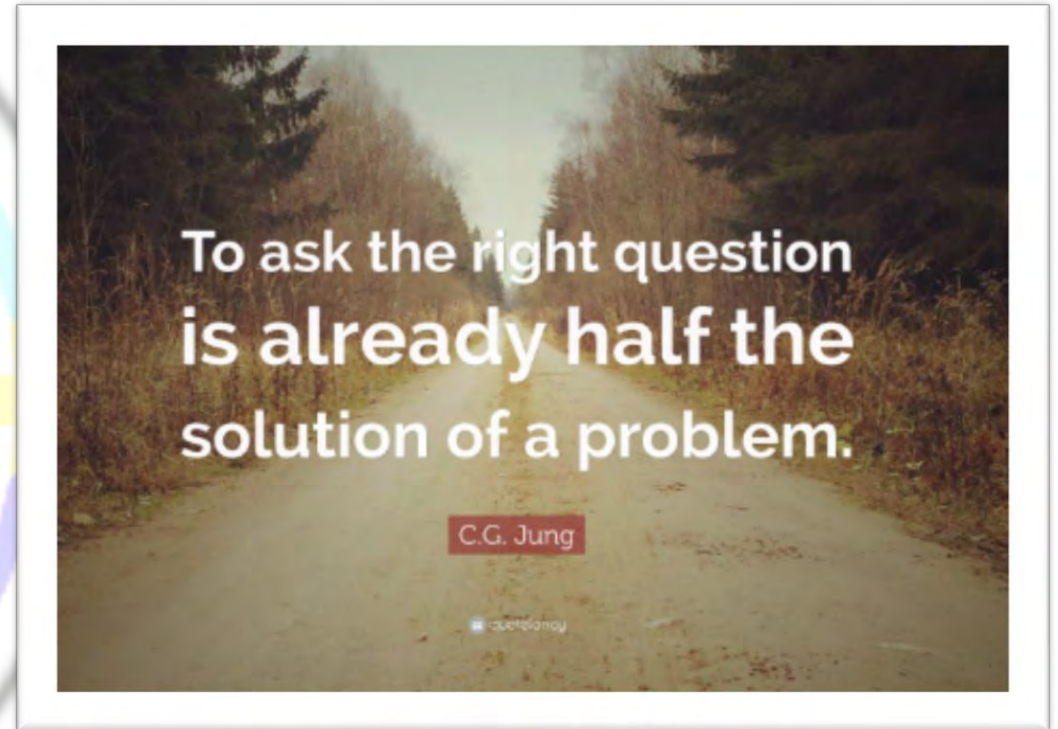
Behavior	What it looks like	Alternative Behaviors
Visual Stereotypy	Staring into lights	Watching videos
	Looking out of corner of eyes	Kaleidoscopes
	Flapping hands in front of eyes	Water Toys/Bubbles





# Teaching important skills: asking for help to prevent meltdowns.

- Once the autistic individual is able to identify their own meltdown triggers, teach them key phrases such as, “may I go for timeout?” or “I need a break, please” so that they can get help to take action.
- Reinforce this by honouring their request.
- Thank them for speaking up and tell them what you can do to help, e.g. “I can now get your earplugs” or “you wait there and I’ll sort it out”.



# Teaching important skills: teach them about emotions using images, books or videos.

- If they don't understand basic emotions you can try teaching them by using flash cards.
- You can ask questions about the emotion such as "how do you think he is feeling?" if they don't know the answer you can explain to teach them.
- You can try social skills by asking question such as "was that a good idea to do that?", then you can ask why.
- You can show them shows that are both fun and educational and ask about the feelings of the characters.





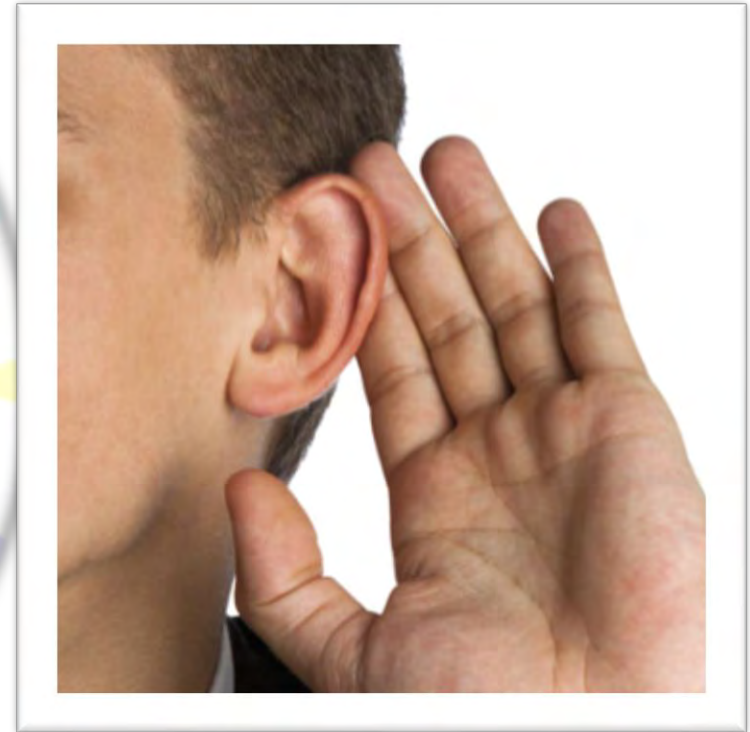
# Teaching important skills: set realistic social goals.

- Focus on what they want to do.
- Maybe focus on making two close friends or to spend time with someone at school lunch break.
- Tailor the social skills to their desires and not just what you want them to be.



# Teaching important skills: teach them how to talk about their own special interest.

- Teach them how to not just focus on their interest but engage in conversations about other peoples interests too.
- Teach them how to:
  - Ask questions to engage others, e.g. “did you enjoy playing football today”
  - Listen to others
  - Know when it’s a good time to talk about their own interest
  - Gauge when someone is interested in what they are talking about.





# Teaching important skills: model good social skills.

- You should behave how you would like them to behave so that they can learn from you.
- Listen to them and ask questions.
- If you are frustrated or exhausted, act how you would like the autistic person to act, this encourages them to keep calm themselves.
- Treat an autistic person the same as you would anyone else and remember to demonstrate compassion.
- Make sure you treat their feelings like they are meaningful and valid.



# Teaching important skills: always offer praise

- As an autistic person is more likely to suffer with low self-esteem praise is very important.
- You should make it clear that you are proud of them and recognise their good qualities.
- Praise can come in the form of hugs, time spent together or extra free time.
- Its important not to use praise as an ultimate goal as this can lead to the autistic individual becoming a people pleaser, making it difficult to set boundaries.





# Teaching important skills: teach them to stick up for themselves.

- This is especially important for an autistic person because they are at higher risk of being abused.
- You should teach them to stand up for their needs and say “no” when they don’t want something.
- You should:
  - Allow them to refuse things
  - Praise them when expressing their needs
  - Encourage thinking by giving choices
  - If they say “no” listen to them and ask why, only ignore their request if its detrimental to their health and safety.

**Value Yourself  
Look out for Yourself  
and  
Stick up for Yourself**

Lessons Learned In Life



# What can we do to support autistic individuals: Understand autism.

- In order to support autistic individuals the key is to understand autism, and recognise that it is a very complex spectrum. An autistic person can be strong in one area yet weak in another, it is so varied. You can help by following these key ideas:
  - Having an awareness that every autistic person has specific strengths and weaknesses.
  - By being knowledgeable and understanding autism.
  - Understanding that every autistic person's goals are different.
  - And Accepting every autistic person for who they are.

