

AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Q. What are autistic spectrum disorders?

A. Autistic spectrum disorders are a range of developmental disorders, including autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified, that persist throughout life. The term 'autism' is often used in common parlance to denote all autistic spectrum disorders. Autistic spectrum disorders centre on the way in which the brain processes and integrates information, resulting in problems of social interaction, communication and behaviour.

People with autism are unable to relate to others in a meaningful way. Their ability to develop friendships is impaired, as is their capacity to understand other people's feelings. Autism is, however, a spectrum disorder and as such varies in severity. The degree of intelligence and range of abilities of people with autism can be highly varied, though the vast majority have an associated mental deficiency. In some cases, however, people with autism can be normal in certain aspects, or even above average. These people are often referred to as having Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism used to describe people at the higher functioning end of the autistic spectrum.

Q. What are some characteristics of autistic spectrum disorders?

A. People with autistic spectrum disorders are often described in terms of the "Triad of Impairment of Social Interaction". The three aspects of the Triad are (1) an impairment of social relationships; (2) an impairment of social communication; and (3) an impairment of social understanding and imagination. The range and extent of impairment in each or any of these aspects varies greatly across the spectrum of disorders and professional diagnosis is required.

This said, however, twelve easily identifiable characteristics of autism have been described by the Irish Society for Autism in its *Characteristics of Autism* publication. These are:

1. Avoids eye contact.
2. Disinterest in people or play.
3. Unusual fears, e.g., certain colours.
4. Inappropriate use of toys.
5. Resists learning.
6. Obsessive spinning of objects.
7. Laughs or giggles for no apparent reason.
8. Unaware of danger.
9. Ability to ignore loud sounds or noise.
10. Obsessive attachment to objects, e.g., pieces of string.
11. Rejects physical contact.
12. Resists change.

Q. What can be done to help someone with an autistic spectrum disorder?

A. There is no cure for any of the autistic spectrum disorders. However, early and appropriate intervention, a structured environment and individual education plans for each student will help people with autism to achieve their full potential in time. Programmes such as [TEACCH](#), [PECS](#) and [ABA](#) help teachers to structure their classroom environments and assist people with autism to understand what is required of them. While early intervention is advantageous, it is never too late to improve quality of life through greater understanding of individuals with autism. There is a need to respect the way in which people with autism think and learn, but at the same time, help to make that thinking and learning more effective. Importantly, there must be a partnership between the home and school environments, a sharing of successes and failures, and open communication, for any of the many and varied strategies that can be implemented to be successful.

Related Links

[Irish Society for Autism](#)

[Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland \(Aspire\)](#)

[Center for the Study of Autism \(US\)](#)

[National Autistic Society \(UK\)](#)

[Report of the Task Force on Autism \(PDF – 1 MB\)](#)