

Autism, Aspergers, employment and mental health

This leaflet is designed to help Human Resources departments understand Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the impact of mental health on individuals with ASD in the workplace.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It is part of the autism spectrum and so is sometimes referred to as ASD. People with autism have difficulty with social communication, social interaction and social imagination but the same condition can affect each individual in different ways. Around 1 in 100 people in the UK have autism.

What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, mostly a 'hidden disability' because you can't tell if someone has this condition just by their outward appearance. People with Asperger syndrome often have average or above average intelligence and do not have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism. Only around 15% of adults with Asperger syndrome are in employment, despite the majority being keen and capable of work.

What jobs can people with ASD do?

People with ASD can do all types of jobs ranging from sales assistants or computer programmers to graphic designers or statisticians. People with ASD often demonstrate high levels of concentration, accuracy and close attention to detail and employees with ASD can prove to be some of the most reliable, conscientious and valued workers in an organisation.

Mental health & ASD

More than 1 in 4 European adults experience mental health problems, with stress being the leading cause of long-term absence from work in non-manual workers. This places pressure on employers and employees to ensure that full support is given at work, particularly for employees with ASD who are at a greater risk of these pressures.

It has been estimated that by 2020 depression will be the leading cause of disability globally, second only to ischemic heart disease (World Health Organisation 2001) so the need to look after the mental health of workers is crucial. In addition, many adults with ASD feel socially isolated with a large minority previously experiencing sexual or financial exploitation. Many have also experienced bullying, and depression and anxiety are widely reported, with 15% attempting suicide (Balfe & Tantam 2010). However, family and peer support is associated with increased optimism among adults with ASD (Ekas et al. 2010) highlighting the need for support and encouragement from colleagues for employees with ASD to feel secure and productive in the workplace.

'Once you have met one person with autism you have met one person with autism.'



**foundation for
people with
learning disabilities**

How can HR help?

1 Advertising the job

- Please consider whether the job actually requires 'good interpersonal skills'. If it doesn't, leave it out. People with ASD may not apply for a job with this requirement if they are aware of their potential difficulties in this area. Avoid jargon.
- Provide space on the application form to write about potential adjustments needed. (Bear in mind, however, that appropriate adjustments often emerge on-the-job.)

2 Recruitment process

- Interviews rely heavily on social and communication skills and the ability to 'sell yourself'. Individuals with ASD may struggle with this even if they have all the right skills for the job.
- Ask closed questions if possible, e.g. 'Describe your work history for the last 5 years' rather than 'Tell me about yourself', so that the candidate knows exactly what you are asking.
- Avoid hypothetical ('What if?') questions. Instead, ask the candidate to give specific examples of relevant situations they have experienced in the past.
- Let the candidate know if they are talking too much and move onto the next question.
- Be aware that candidates' eye contact or body language may not be the same as other candidates and may not be a reflection of how they feel about the job.
- Invite a supporter to help the candidate at interview in case questions need to be rephrased, or the candidate has misunderstood the context and needs to be prompted.
- Consider offering a work trial so the candidate can demonstrate exactly how they would perform in the workplace.

3 Workplace adjustments

- Each employee with ASD and mental health difficulties will engage differently to others with their colleagues and managers. This needs to be considered in terms of job divisions, management choices and team working.
- A first day at work could start with a full induction, an introduction to each employee, a map of the building/office and where each person sits and a timetable for the week ahead, for example:

	10:00-10:15	10:15-11:45	11:45-12:00	12:00-13:00	13:00-14:30	14:30-14:45	14:45-15:30	15:30-16:00
Mon	Meeting line manager to discuss the day ahead	Work	Feedback from line manager	Lunch	Work	Feedback from senior managers	Work	In-Work Support from Prospects
Wed	Meeting line manager to discuss the day ahead	Work	Stress reduction teaching (e.g. heart rate monitoring)	Lunch	Work	Break	Work	Work
Fri	Meeting buddy/mentor to discuss the day ahead	Work	Training session (delivered electronically by email or smart-phone application)	Lunch	Work	Meeting HR to discuss week at work and provide feedback	Work	Meeting line manager, receive feedback and plan next week's work

Top tips for supporting employees with ASD and mental health difficulties

- Provide Autism Awareness training to line manager and colleagues.
- Give clear, concise and specific instructions to reduce anxiety. These might be given electronically.
- Structure the working environment. Use timetables, explain the unwritten rules of the workplace and break down large tasks into small clear steps. Use written instructions if your employee would prefer this.
- Give direct but sensitive and regular feedback. This might include the use of Talk Blocks for Work, which help to promote self-expression and lead to easier discussions with colleagues (see Thomas' story).

Thomas' Story

Thomas works for a utility company. He experienced a great deal of anxiety relating to a long commute to work, as well as difficulties relating to his team. Regular support sessions have helped Thomas rationalise these feelings and establish strategies to reduce these anxieties, listening to music during the train journey and walking part of the route to work, for example. In addition, the use of Talk Blocks for Work™ - which facilitate and enhance communication about feelings and needs in relation to work – increased Thomas' self-awareness and problem-solving. This led him to produce an action plan for himself and his manager to work towards in order to improve his work productivity. Thomas is now less anxious about both his commute and liaising with his colleagues. He is also able to request support or advice more appropriately which has led to reduced conflict in the work place.

- Provide a full induction to employee to ensure s/he feels supported in their role.
- Be flexible in working arrangements (e.g. if rush hour travel is a cause for anxiety then arrange flexible working hours or an assigned parking space) (see Laura's story).

Laura's Story

Travelling on public transport during the rush hour made Laura highly anxious. This led her to phone in sick several times a week and she became marginalised at work. After discussing her poor attendance in her monthly feedback meeting with her line manager, Laura now works flexible hours to avoid travelling during the rush hour. Since working between 7.30am and 3.30pm, Laura is the most reliable employee in her division and no longer experiences high anxiety levels.

- Assign a mentor or buddy if available, or arrange support from a suitable colleague.
- Provide support programmes and coaching programmes via a performance cueing system (e.g. smartphone training app for fire safety programme; Burke et al. 2010).
- Allow access to stress reduction sessions and relaxation techniques, such as heart rate variability monitoring.
- Ensure that ongoing, proactive support from HR or OH is booked in regularly and not used as a last resort when things go wrong.

Be aware of sensory issues, e.g. open plan offices have lots of noise and lights. Consider using desk partitions, telephones that light up when ringing, noise-cancelling headphones (e.g. Bose®), desk low-lights etc. An employee with ASD will feel more productive, and experience less work-related anxiety, when they can reduce the ambient interference from their working environment.

If specific support is required in the workplace to address issues arising from the individual's disability, it must under the terms of the Equality Act (2010) be provided by the employer as a reasonable adjustment. Employers can apply to the government's Access to Work scheme to assist with any costs of this support (see Douglas' story). Encourage a working culture where employees are not intimidated by senior management, and promote a culture that is willing to engage with and support individual differences.

Douglas' Story

Douglas works within a big team in a large organisation. From the outset no support relating to ASD was given either to Douglas or his colleagues. This, along with the noise of the open plan office space, led to excessive levels of anxiety as well as depression. Long-term absence from work meant that Douglas was called to a disciplinary hearing. With the support of an employment consultant from Prospects, it was established that 90% of Douglas' absence was due to ASD, and that if relevant support had been provided for this, poor mental health would not have occurred, and disciplinary action would not have been triggered. A tribunal overturned the decision to cease Douglas' employment. A Prospects consultant conducted autism awareness training with Douglas' immediate team, as well as with HR/OH staff. Relations at work improved immediately. Douglas' mental health difficulties are now much better and he, and his colleagues, know that they can access support if needed.

About us

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (FPLD):

FPLD is part of the Mental Health Foundation, and is a national charity working to promote the rights, quality of life and opportunities of people with learning disabilities and their families. The Foundation carries out research, improves services, and spreads knowledge and information.

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Prospects Employment Service: Prospects is the employment service of the National Autistic Society, the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism. Prospects supports people with ASD to secure and retain paid employment, voluntary work and educational opportunities, and provides a range of training, consultancy and assessment services for employers.

The following factsheets are available from prospects.london@nas.org.uk:

- What is an autism spectrum disorder?
- How can Prospects help you as an employer?
- Recruiting someone with an ASD
- Managing someone with an ASD

For more information, contact:

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The National Autistic Society
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Email: prospects.london@nas.org.uk

Website: www.autism.org.uk

Registered charity no. 269425

Goldsmiths, University of London: The Autism & Employment Study was set up to evaluate the employment experiences of those with an autism spectrum disorder, their colleagues and employers.

For more information, contact:

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