What are the Symptoms of Autism?

Autism affects the way an individual perceives the world and makes communication and social interaction different from those without autism, often leading to significant difficulties. ASD is characterized by social-interaction challenges, communication difficulties and a tendency to engage in repetitive behaviors. However, symptoms and their severity vary widely across these three core areas.

“It is sometimes said that if you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism.”
- Stephen Shore

Social Symptoms

Individuals with autism tend to have difficulty interpreting what others are thinking and feeling. Subtle social cues such as eye rolling, shoulder shrugging or a grimace may convey little meaning to some people on the spectrum. Without this ability to accurately interpret gestures and facial expressions, or nonverbal communication, the social world can seem bewildering.

Many people with autism have similar difficulty seeing things from another person’s perspective. This, in turn, can interfere with the ability to predict or understand another person’s actions. It is also common – but not universal – for those with autism to have difficulty regulating emotions.

Communication Difficulties

At an early age, many children with autism experience significant language delays. However, some exhibit only slight delays or even develop precocious language and unusually large vocabularies – yet have difficulty sustaining conversations. Some children and adults with autism tend to carry on monologues on a favorite subject, giving others little chance to comment. In other words, the ordinary “give-and-take” of conversation proves difficult.

Repetitive Behaviors

Unusual repetitive behaviors and/or a tendency to engage in a restricted range of activities are another core symptom of autism. Some repetitive behaviors include arranging and rearranging objects or hand-flapping. Some people with autism are preoccupied with having household or other objects in a fixed order or place. It can prove extremely upsetting if something or someone disrupts the order. Many need and demand strict consistency in their environment and daily routine. Slight changes can be exceedingly stressful and lead to outbursts.

Repetitive behaviors can also take the form of intense preoccupations or obsessions. These extreme interests can prove all the more unusual for their content (e.g. machines, certain collectibles) or depth of knowledge (e.g. knowing and repeating astonishingly detailed information about astronomy). Adults with autism may develop tremendous interest in numbers, symbols, dates or science topics. Some of these interests can be a great asset in some circumstances, like employment, when harnessed in a productive way.
Executive Functioning and Theory of Mind

Individuals with autism often face challenges related to their ability to interpret certain social cues and skills. They may have difficulty processing large amounts of information and relating to others. Two core terms relating to these challenges are executive functioning and theory of mind.

Executive functioning includes skills such as organizing, planning, sustaining attention and inhibiting inappropriate responses. Difficulties in this area can manifest themselves in many different ways. Some may pay attention to minor details, but in turn struggle with seeing how these details fit into a bigger picture. Others have difficulty with complex thinking that requires holding more than one train of thought simultaneously. Others have difficulty maintaining their attention or organizing their thoughts and actions. Individuals with autism often face challenges using skills related to executive functioning like planning, sequencing and self-regulation.

Theory of mind can be summed up as a person’s ability to understand and identify the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others. Individuals with autism can encounter degrees of difficulty recognizing and processing the feelings of others, which is sometimes referred to as “mind-blindness.” As a result, people with autism may not realize if another person’s behaviors are intentional or unintentional. This challenge often leads others to falsely believe that the individual does not show empathy or understand them, which can create great difficulty in social situations.

“I’m proud to say I have autism, as it has helped shape the man I am today. I have genuine confidence in myself and I know that others out there like me can achieve anything they set their minds to. I truly believe that people on the spectrum are some of the brightest individuals in our society and can offer so much in the workforce and in life.”

- Eric Kirschner