



Being Autism Aware

From 29th March - 4th April it's World Autism Awareness Week

This is great time to discuss how we can all play our part in making the world a better place for people with autism.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how someone perceives and interacts with the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that while all people with autism share certain difficulties, their autism will affect them in different ways. Around 700,000 individuals in the UK are diagnosed with autism, an average of 1 in every 100 people, so it's important that we all understand the basics of autism and how we can make life easier for our friends, relatives, colleagues, peers and everyone with autism.

What are common challenges for people with autism?

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

- how we behave when interacting with others
It includes understanding and using appropriate facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. For people with autism, it may be difficult to use or understand facial expressions or tone of voice, jokes and sarcasm, or common phrases and sayings.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

People with autism often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings, and expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in. Many autistic individuals describe socialising as being like trying to play a game where everyone else knows the rules but they don't.

SOCIAL IMAGINATION

allows us to understand and predict other people's behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. People with autism can find it hard to: understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions; predict what will happen next; cope in new or unfamiliar situations.

What can we do to be more autism aware and remove barriers for people with autism?

Avoid harmful misconceptions or stereotypes

Increased knowledge and education are key to supporting a more inclusive society for everyone with a disability. It is important to understand that Autism is one of the 'hidden' disabilities and you cannot tell if someone has autism just by looking at them.

With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place and we can demonstrate greater understanding and support by considering whether we can re-frame our own reactions in certain situations. For example:



- *When someone is seeking out time alone, are they being anti-social or employing an effective coping mechanism in an otherwise overwhelming social situation?*
- *Is what we might see as unemotional behaviour in fact a difficulty expressing and communicating feelings?*
- *Perhaps a need for higher levels of consistency and stability is necessary to support their own personal wellbeing?*



Call out discrimination and advocate for others

It's upsetting to think about, but sadly people with disabilities still face abuse and discrimination

SO WE NEED TO BE AWARE OF IT AND KNOW HOW TO RESPOND.

While some people with autism are able to live independently and advocate for themselves, often individuals with autism (particularly those with higher needs) are at greater risk of being discriminated against due to factors such as:

- Relying more on others to support them in their day to day activities
- Having difficulty effectively communicating their feelings or concerns
- Finding it challenging to 'read' people or situations or recognise consequences

Please remember, it is against the law to discriminate against somebody on the grounds of a disability – disability is one of the protected characteristics. Protection from discrimination is set out in the Equality Act 2010.



Be patient and understanding

Remember some people with autism will have behaviours and sensory needs that might seem unusual to neurotypical people. For example, some individuals with autism engage in repetitive behaviours like hand flapping or twirling their hair; and people with sensory processing disorders may feel more comfortable meeting with friends at home rather than in a noisy or busy environment. Some people may need more time to adapt to change or new routines and others might need reasonable adjustments made at work, such as extra time to complete assignments.

We hope this guide has been useful and offered some new perspectives. By reading this and remembering the key takeaways to avoid harmful misconceptions, advocate for others and be patient you'll help to make the world a better place for people with autism. Thank you.

Jigsaw supports children and adults with higher dependency needs on the autism spectrum. We focus on providing the highest quality of education and lifelong learning to help individuals develop skills that will enable them to be as independent and successful as possible.

Based in Surrey Jigsaw Trust comprises: Jigsaw School, for pupils aged 4-19; JigsawPlus, a specialist day service for adults with autism; Café on the Park and GARDENworks, social enterprises that provide vocational opportunities and development of transferable skills to enhance independence.

Our vision for everyone with autism is they live a life that gives them the opportunity to reach their full potential