



## What is autism?

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

'Autism is a **neurotype** that leads to:

➤ a **cognition** that is **qualitatively different** from that of the predominant neurotype in the way that information specific to **communication, social interpretation** and **interaction** is **processed** and **understood**; and

➤ a **perceptual reality** of the **sensory environment** that **differs considerably** from one individual to the next.'

**Dr Luke Beardon, 2017**



© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

1



## A different way of being

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

- **Neurodiversity** refers to the variety of all brains
- **Neurodivergency** differs from the *neuromajority*
- Autistic people are not 'wrong', just different
- Society is set up to suit the majority
- Those in a minority are at a disadvantage

© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

2



Picture from *An Introduction To The Double Empathy Problem*, written and narrated by Kieran Rose and animated by Josh Knowles Animation  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpXwYD9bGyU>

## The Double Empathy Problem

*'A breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding that can happen between people with very differing ways of experiencing the world.'*



*Dr Damian Milton, 2012*

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

3



## Thinking, processing, understanding

### Autistic people experience differences in . . .

- **Attention** – distributing and shifting focus
- **Communication** – sharing/receiving information
- **Interaction** – having an effect on someone
- **Social imagination** – reading a situation

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

4



## Differences in attention

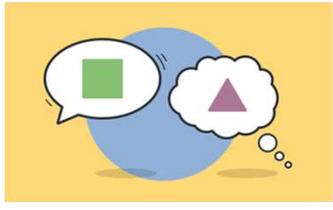
- Attention is drawn to a smaller number of interests
- Intense interest pulls focus into an 'attention tunnel'
- Everything outside the tunnel ceases to exist
- Shifting attention elsewhere is hard and takes time
- Abrupt exit from tunnel scrambles sensory balance



## What do we mean by 'communication'?

**“The sharing of information, ideas or feelings between two or more people.”**

- Requires Sender, Message and Recipient
- Can take many forms
- Can be intentional or accidental
- Sender / Recipient roles equally important



## Differences in communication

- Problems occur when messages cannot be received, interpreted or understood
- Leads to misunderstandings on *both* sides
- Non-autistic people make no sense! Can lead to confusion, frustration, anxiety, feeling unsafe
- Autistic messages are often missed/misinterpreted

## Communication differences you might see VS autistic point of view

### Take things literally (misses sarcasm, idioms)

Message is hidden, ambiguous or makes no sense

### No response to instructions, eg 'can you put your shoes on?'

Questions ability rather than gives information about what to do

### Speaks little or not at all

Spoken communication is not prioritised or necessary

### Delay in response

It takes time to sort, process and interpret others' messages

### Lacks facial expression / gestures, invariable tone of voice

Nonverbal embellishment doesn't make message clearer

### Uses behaviour instead of words or gestures

Attempts to be heard and understood are missed, has to up the ante

## Interaction differences you might see VS autistic point of view

**Lack of to and fro in conversation**

Others don't signal whose turn it is to speak or when response required

**Talks 'at' you; brings conversation back to favourite topics**

Areas of interest are all-compassing and there is so much information to convey

**Appears rude or insensitive**

Logical approach; what you see is what you say, no offence intended

**Annoyed by others wanting to chat**

Small talk is irrelevant and meaningless

**Ignores or doesn't seem to hear**

Engaged within own attention tunnel

**Over-reacts or disengages for no apparent reason**

Hostile sensory environments derail engagement

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

9

## Imagination differences you might see VS autistic point of view

**Constant questions about what's going to happen**

Lack of explicit info provokes uncertainty and anxiety

**Lacks empathy; unaware or uncaring of others' feelings**

Codes used by others to convey their state of being are unintelligible

**Rigidly sticks to routines; dislikes change**

Familiarity is safe; change is destabilising and feels unsafe

**Over-reacts if planned events don't happen on time**

Reneging on agreement provokes loss of trust and insecurity

**Over-familiar with authority figures**

Social hierarchy is irrelevant

**Imposes own rules in play; appears controlling**

Reassuring sense of safety from knowing exactly what is happening

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

10



## Supporting communication

- ✓ Remember the Double Empathy Problem!
- ✓ Avoid trying to 'normalise' communication
- ✓ Use simple, clear, explicit language
- ✓ Frame language positively ('do' instead of 'don't')
- ✓ Give one instruction at a time (step-by-step)
- ✓ Allow processing time – 6 second rule
- ✓ Support with visual aids – timetables, checklists
- ✓ Consider alternative methods to speech

**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

11



## Supporting interaction

- ✓ Help everyone to become 'socially bilingual'
- ✓ Incorporate special interests as much as possible
- ✓ Allow recovery time after the smallest of interactions
- ✓ Avoid assuming knowledge or understanding
- ✓ Be clear about what will happen/what to expect
- ✓ Structure, routines & consistency reduce uncertainty



**ADD-vance**  
The ADHD and Autism Trust

© The ADD-vance ADHD and Autism Trust

12