

# Understanding autism

A short guide to this complex condition and how  
the National Autistic Society can help



# A confusing and overwhelming world

Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. It is also a spectrum condition, ranging from individuals in need of 24-hour care to people who face difficulties with some aspects of everyday life, including forming friendships, coping at school or managing at work. All autistic people are different. They will, however, share some of the following characteristics:

- communication issues, from not speaking to needing more time to process information
- repetitive behaviour and routines and difficulty with unexpected change
- anxiety in social situations and difficulty with interacting
- sensory sensitivity to light, touch, sound or smell
- intense and highly focused interests.

## You're not alone

There are over 700,000 autistic children and adults in the UK with around three million family members and carers. Autistic people and their families can often feel isolated and hidden, but help is available.

### For more information on autism and getting help:

 visit us at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)  
You can also join our online community or find out where your local volunteer-led branch is.

 or contact our specialist helplines at [www.autism.org.uk/help-and-support](http://www.autism.org.uk/help-and-support)



***“The National Autistic Society gave me excellent advice on where to find help for my son.”***

*Dan, dad of Thomas, tractor fanatic and autistic boy*



### Distressed behaviour

Sensory overload and difficulty with unexpected change can lead to autistic adults and children having meltdowns or shutdowns, which can be very distressing. Autistic people also face difficulties with 'reading' people and understanding what is expected of them in a conversation.



### Highly focused interests

Many autistic people have intense and highly focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge.



### The benefits of getting a diagnosis

A diagnosis can help autistic people and their families to understand why they are experiencing certain difficulties. It also makes it easier for them to access the vital services, benefits and support at school, work or home they need.



### Asperger syndrome and other terms

Currently, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the overarching diagnosis. But, you will hear terms such as Asperger syndrome and pathological demand avoidance (PDA). Terminology will continue to change and be redefined. For the latest, please check our website.




### Girls and autism

It's not just men and boys who are autistic. Studies put the men to women ratio at anywhere between 16:1 to 2:1. Girls often go undiagnosed and are labelled as 'shy' or 'quirky'. Some professionals still fail to recognise girls on the spectrum.

**For more information:**



visit our website at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

A portrait of Chris Packham, a middle-aged man with short, light brown hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a dark green turtleneck sweater under a brown tweed jacket. The background is a blurred green foliage.

***“The greatest discomfort for autistic people can be the social one. For me, it led to constant self-persecution because I was failing to manage the interactions. I was confused about why people behaved the way they did.”***

*Chris Packham, animal enthusiast, autistic man  
and National Autistic Society ambassador*

# Here to help

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for autistic people and their families. Since 1962, we have been offering services, support and advice to help increase opportunities and reduce social isolation for autistic people. Our goal is to build a society that works for autistic people and help improve their lives.

## Our services include:

- an extensive website with information and advice on autism
- 116 volunteer-led branches offering support and activities for autistic children and adults
- two child and adult diagnosis centres
- seven specialist schools for autistic children
- over 80 care centres and services for autistic adults
- training and conferences for education, health and social care professionals
- two quarterly magazines - *Your Autism* magazine and *the Spectrum*
- working with thousands of shops, businesses and local councils to provide more autism-friendly services and environments
- campaigning to increase public understanding and change government policy to help improve the lives of autistic people.

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 contact our specialist helplines at  
[www.autism.org.uk/help-and-support](http://www.autism.org.uk/help-and-support)

 [www.twitter.com/Autism](https://www.twitter.com/Autism)

 [www.facebook.com/NationalAutisticSociety](https://www.facebook.com/NationalAutisticSociety)



***“With the right support and access to equal opportunities, autistic people can lead happy lives and reach their full potential.”***

*Tasinda, project worker for Anouska, talented artist and autistic teenager*

# National Autistic Society

## Transforming lives and changing attitudes since 1962

- Our website, 116 local volunteer-led branches, online community and specialist helplines provide information, support and practical advice to hundreds of autistic people and their families every day.
- We train over 11,000 teachers, health workers and other professionals every year to help ensure schools, health services and workplaces meet the needs of autistic people.
- Our *Too Much Information* campaign has reached 65 million people, helping to increase understanding of the difficulties autistic people face every day.
- In 2009, we led a campaign to persuade the Government to introduce the first ever Autism Act in England that guarantees the rights of autistic adults.
- More than 300 organisations, including schools and care services, have achieved Autism Accreditation, our quality standard to recognise best autism practice.

With your help, we can do even more. Find out how you can become a member and other ways to support our charity at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)



The National Autistic Society is a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427)  
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