

Working with People on the Autism Spectrum

Awareness Communication Environment Structure

Awareness

- Get to know the individual. Be aware that every individual on the autism spectrum is unique. What applies to one person on the spectrum does not always apply to others. Many on the spectrum have been conditioned to “pass for normal” and hide their difficulties, so it is important to get to know what the individual needs. Ask the individual; do not assume you already know.
- Be conscious of mental health. Not everything associated with the individual will be because they are autistic. Many on the spectrum experience additional mental health issues, such as anxiety disorders, depression, or compulsive behavior. Being aware of other conditions and how to support individuals experiencing them is helpful not only to those on the spectrum, but to all people.
- Be aware of possible causes for difficult behavior. Be considerate with an individual on the spectrum when they are stressed. Anxiety, confusion, difficulties with communication, and sensory overload are more common in difficult situations.
- Provide support for individuals on the spectrum to interpret and understand others. They may have difficulty understanding the impact of their words and actions on others. They may have difficulty seeing a different perspective. This does not mean they lack empathy; it just means they need to understand the how and why to make sense of things.

Communication

- Establish a preferred method of communication. Verbal interaction may be difficult for individuals on the autism spectrum. Allow for written communication (i.e. email, text messages, etc.) when possible. Always be honest.
- Use clear and precise language. Whenever possible, avoid being vague. Limit (or avoid) the use of metaphors, sarcasm, exaggeration, and unnecessary opinion.
- Allow extra time to process questions and form replies. Allow for extra time to respond and be patient if asked for clarification. If the question is misunderstood, try to rephrase in more precise language. Slow down your speech when dealing with complicated topics.
- Avoid open ended questions. This may require asking multiple, more precise questions and take more time. Asking closed ended questions will reduce the chances of misunderstanding.
- Provide written summaries of conversations. If a conversation covers more than one topic or has multiple “bullet points,” a written summary helps clarify and remind the person of what is important.
- Provide visual aids. Many people on the spectrum process visual information much better than verbal information. When possible use diagrams, charts, or pictures to help relay large amounts of information.

Environment

- Recognize the existence of sensory difficulties. Many on the spectrum are very sensitive to touch, sound, light, strong smells and other external stimuli. Get to know the individual and what they are sensitive to. For example, if they are sensitive to touch, avoid hugs, handshakes, pats on the back, and similar physical interactions. If they have difficulty with noise, allow headphones or move their location to an area with less noise.
- Manage external stimuli. When possible, limit loud noises, harsh lighting, strong odors, and any other things of a sensory nature to which the individual may be highly sensitive.
- Safe space. If possible provide a quiet, low arousal place for the individual to use when needed.
- Limit diversion and distraction. When possible, develop an environment free from distraction. While it may be helpful to have a form of diversion and distraction when an individual on the spectrum is stressed, this should not be the normal environment for doing work.
- Develop a clear communication system. Establish in advance what forms of communication are required, when they are required, and why they are required.
- Patience and understanding. Establish an environment where patience and understanding are expected. Most people on the autism spectrum are experiencing some degree of anxiety most of the time.
- Establish an environment of concrete feedback. Create an environment where reflection is discouraged and concrete feedback is encouraged. For example, “you did well organizing your report, these are things you could do next time to make it better” is better than, “what do you think you could do better next time?”
- Consider unspoken meaning. Consider what the individual may want to say but is not able to say. Be aware that some people on the spectrum, may be very distressed by problems that seem small or unimportant to most others.

Structure

- Establish routine. Whenever possible, establish a consistent routine for the person.
- Consistency. Establish consistent responses to unexpected change wherever possible. Ensure processes and procedures are followed.
- Avoid vague timescales. Provide precise dates and times. If there is a change in a scheduled time or deadline, provide that information as soon as possible.
- Be clear with expectations. Provide specific definitions and detailed descriptions of what is expected. Avoid being vague. Provide reasons for things whenever possible.
- Establish a standard for acceptable interruption. If someone is talking a lot or going off topic, ensure there is an acceptable method for someone on the spectrum to interrupt. Also ensure the same method for interruption is consistent and understood in the event the individual on the spectrum needs to be interrupted.
- Develop plans and stick to them. When possible, make and agree to a plan of action with specific actions that are clearly understood.
- Provide support for changes. Change can be very difficult. Ensure that when change is needed, the individual is aware in advance, the reasons for the change are clear, and they are provided support and time to adjust.