

What you need to know to deal with the vulnerable person who has an Autism Spectrum Condition

Remember – no matter how intelligent they may appear they must be treated as a 'Vulnerable Person' as defined by PACE (1984) and a variety of other pieces of legislation. The following and the accompanying other information in this section of the site will explain why.

- It may not be immediately obvious to you as a criminal justice professional that the person you have encountered has particular needs.
- His or her unusual behaviour may invite the attention of others, but in general autism is a hidden disability.
- All people with autism can experience difficulties with communication and social interaction and may develop strong, narrow, obsessional interests.
- They may also have sensory difficulties and some co-ordination problems. (See other sections for more details which may help in recognising the condition and communicating with a person on the autism spectrum.)
- People with autism frequently suffer from high levels of anxiety due to their inability to make sense of what is going on around them.

Individuals with autism who come into contact with the Criminal Justice System are likely to be from the more able end of the spectrum, with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome, as they generally have a greater degree of independence than those whose autism is accompanied by severe learning difficulties.

Although autism was first identified in 1943, it has remained a relatively unknown disability until recently. For this reason, many professionals, including those in the Criminal Justice System, may be unsure how to work with someone they believe to be on the autism spectrum.

Autism, including Asperger syndrome, is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways.

Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may need a lifetime of specialist support. People with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism. People with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language.

It is estimated that there are 500,000 (around 1 in 100) people with an autism spectrum disorder in the UK, but many, especially adults with Asperger syndrome, may not have had the condition diagnosed or may have previously been misdiagnosed with another condition, such as schizophrenia.

The characteristics of autism

People with autism, including those with Asperger syndrome, share a difficulty in making sense of the world around them. A person with autism will show some of the following characteristics:

Social interaction

He or she may:

- " appear to be indifferent to others or socially isolated
- " be unable to read social cues
- " behave in what may seem an inappropriate or odd manner
- " appear to lack empathy
- " avoid eye contact when under pressure.

Social communication

He or she may:

- " have difficulty in understanding tone of voice, intonation, facial expression
- " make a literal interpretation of figurative or metaphorical speech; the phrases %as the cat got your tongue+or %he'd make mincemeat of you+would be alarming to a person with autism
- " find it difficult to hold a two-way conversation
- " become agitated in responses or come across as argumentative, stubborn...
- " ...or come across as over-compliant, agreeing to things that are not true
- " use formal, stilted or pedantic language
- " have poor concentration and thus poor listening skills
- " be honest to the extent of bluntness or rudeness.

Social imagination

He or she may:

- " have difficulty in foreseeing the consequences of their actions
- " become extremely anxious because of unexpected events or changes in routine
- " like set rules, and overreact to other people's infringement of them
- " often have particular special interests, which may become obsessions
- " find it difficult to imagine or empathise with another person's point of view.

Lack of understanding

People with autism do not always understand the implications of their actions, or the motivations of others. Due to their difficulties with social imagination, problems with flexibility of thought and a tendency towards obsessive and repetitive behaviour, an individual may not learn from past experience. They will often find it difficult to understand how others perceive their actions and to intuitively transfer their experiences from one situation to another. As a result, some may become victims or repeat their behaviour if not offered appropriate support and intervention.