

Autistic experiences, thinking, perceptions, and interests

Autistic individuals are likely to have a different way of processing information. There is a significant body of research that has advanced our understanding of the cognition or thinking styles and processes of people who are on the autism spectrum (Bowler, 2007). Applying this understanding is essential if we are to see beyond the behaviour of autistic people.

Some issues associated with thinking, information processing and perception are that individuals on the autism spectrum may:

- Have difficulty understanding and responding to the perspective of others: It is often commented that people on the spectrum appear to lack empathy however this is to some extent an over simplification and gross generalisation of the understanding of and forming and sustaining relationships with others that people on the spectrum experience.

Example

Katie is 7 years old, she has a diagnosis of autism and learning disability. While her typically developing peer group were keen to interact and showed strong social awareness, Katie had a number of difficulties in this area. An example being that when using the slide Katie would push through the queuing children, as if not realising they were there and that they were put out or even physically hurt by her actions

Johnny is a twelve year old boy with Asperger's syndrome. He was excited at his mother's forthcoming birthday and was planning a nice surprise present for her. When the day arrived he proudly presented her with a carefully wrapped box in red paper which she opened to reveal a book about aeroplanes. His mum has no interest in aeroplanes but they are a current interest for Johnny.

- Anticipating the social expectations in a range of situations: The social world places significant demands on us. From an early age we are required to adapt to a multitude of social situations that involve both familiar and unfamiliar people. There are many and varied rules of engagement that apply to these situations. Some social rules have been clearly and purposefully taught throughout our life time however others are learned on a less conscious level, by repeated experiences or by imitating others. Individuals on the autism spectrum can have great difficulty in assimilating, retaining and retrieving the social behaviour that is appropriate to a given context.

Example

Michael is 16 and has Asperger's syndrome. He travels to college everyday by bus and has become familiar with some of the other people who catch the bus at the same time as he does. Michael is very socially active and desperately wants to have friends. He often interprets the friendly behaviour of strangers as an indication that they are actual friends. This is confusing for Michael and makes him vulnerable as he will often share private information with relative strangers.

Adam, who is 19 is autistic and when he meets a new person (irrespective of who they are or where he meets them) he will ask them a number of "questions". They are always the same and in the same order: what's your name, "what kind of car do you drive", "what's your children's name", "when is your birthday". Once these questions have been asked and answered Adam walks away.

Jane is 16 and has Asperger's Syndrome. She attends a mainstream secondary school. She is friendly with a small number of girls in her class. She is very motivated to be part of this group, but is generally passive within it. She joins in whenever possible. When in the group Jane attempts to copy the content of the group's conversations, phrases and the other girl's behaviour. Often when at home with her parents Jane will speak and behave exactly as if she were with her friends. She becomes distressed and frustrated when her parents do not react or engage with her as her friends did.

Matt is 17 and has Asperger's Syndrome. He has a several friends that he meets out with school. Sometimes, when with his friends he hears jokes that are rude or sexually explicit. He usually does not understand these jokes. At home, Matt will often tell his parents and younger siblings these jokes. He is confused by the response of his parents because he has seen people laugh when told the same joke.

Predictive and sequential thinking can be problematic for those with a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. We are required to use predictive thinking in a whole range of situations. This can range from thinking about how someone is going to react to something we have done or something we are going to say to planning and organising what you need to take in your schoolbag or when you pack a case for your holidays. Difficulties in predictive thinking impact on a person's ability to organise, acquire self help skills, to be independent or to fully anticipate the likely consequences of their actions. Predictive thinking is also important in coping with and accommodating change.

Example

Dale is 9 and is autistic. He can function quite independently with his dressing if the items are laid out in a pile with the first item (pants) at the top. Although he follows the sequence Dale does not understand why the clothes are set as they are. This system generally works well. However, sometimes Dale will arrive downstairs without trousers on or no school top. When checking his parents may find that an item has fallen from the bed: therefore making the sequence wrong.

Dale is not able to reorganise the clothing and is not aware that he does not have on all the items of clothing.

- It is often said that people on the autism spectrum have an eye for detail. This can be true and can be a tremendous asset in certain situations. However this can also result in a fragmented perception. Where the full context or meaning is not appreciated or understood.

Example

David is 27 he has Asperger's syndrome. He has a part time job in a book store. His eye for and attention to detail are very useful to him and his employer in that he is able to ensure that the book shelves are always well stocked and are in good order.

The above issues may present in the form of certain types of behaviour e.g. an individual may seem remote and withdrawn. A child may appear non compliant or belligerent in school. A young adult may seem socially gauche. It is however important to go beyond a surface interpretation of such behaviour.

National and international research continues to advance our understanding of psychological theories. These, in turn, can inform our understanding of people across the autism spectrum and have the potential to inform approaches to intervention and practice.

Over- or under-sensitivity to light, sound, taste or touch

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. Many autistic people prefer not to hug due to discomfort, which can be misinterpreted as being cold and aloof.

Many autistic people avoid everyday situations because of their sensitivity issues. Schools, workplaces and shopping centres can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload. There are many simple adjustments that can be made to make environments more autism-friendly.

Highly focused interests or hobbies

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. A stereotypical example is trains but that is one of many. Greta Thunberg's intense interest, for example, is protecting the environment.

Like all people, autistic people gain huge amounts of pleasure from pursuing their interests and see them as fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

Being highly focused helps many autistic people do well academically and in the workplace but they can also become so engrossed in particular topics or activities that they neglect other aspects of their lives.

Sources:

scottishautism.org/about-autism/about-autism/thinking-styles

autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism