

Autism and Trauma

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Be Comfortable

Get up, move around,
fiddle with an object

People learn best
when they are
comfortable





What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong, developmental condition that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them

Each autistic person has a distinct set of strengths and challenges

The ways in which autistic people learn, think and problem-solve can range from highly skilled to severely challenged

Some autistic people may require significant support in their daily lives, while others may need no support at all



DSM V - Diagnosis

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities

Aspergers is no longer part of the DSM



Autistic
people can
be a Little...
Different



And.....

Different from each other!

If you have met one autistic person you have met one autistic person



Therefore

It is important to remember that every person is different – although they may share some common characteristics

We have to be open to understanding a person's experience from his or her own perspective

We cannot only know someone from our own training, or theoretical orientation, or even from the **perspective of our own thinking and our own lives**

This is especially true when we do not share many of the same references and thought processes



Adapting:

Most health and social care approaches have been predominantly developed for and by non- autistic people

Practitioners often depend on neurotypical world views and on neurotypical ideas about the needs of people

Which means they often work in ways that are not adapted to needs of autistic people

This can lead to autistic people feeling frustrated, misunderstood and confused





What is Trauma

An inescapably stressful event that overwhelms existing coping mechanisms

Van der Kolk and Fislser 1995



Trauma

Can be single events or repeated events

What is traumatic for one person, may not be for another

Many people experience trauma without further negative consequences – however for many people the impact of trauma can be experienced for many years

Interpersonal trauma tends to have the greatest negative consequences



Question:

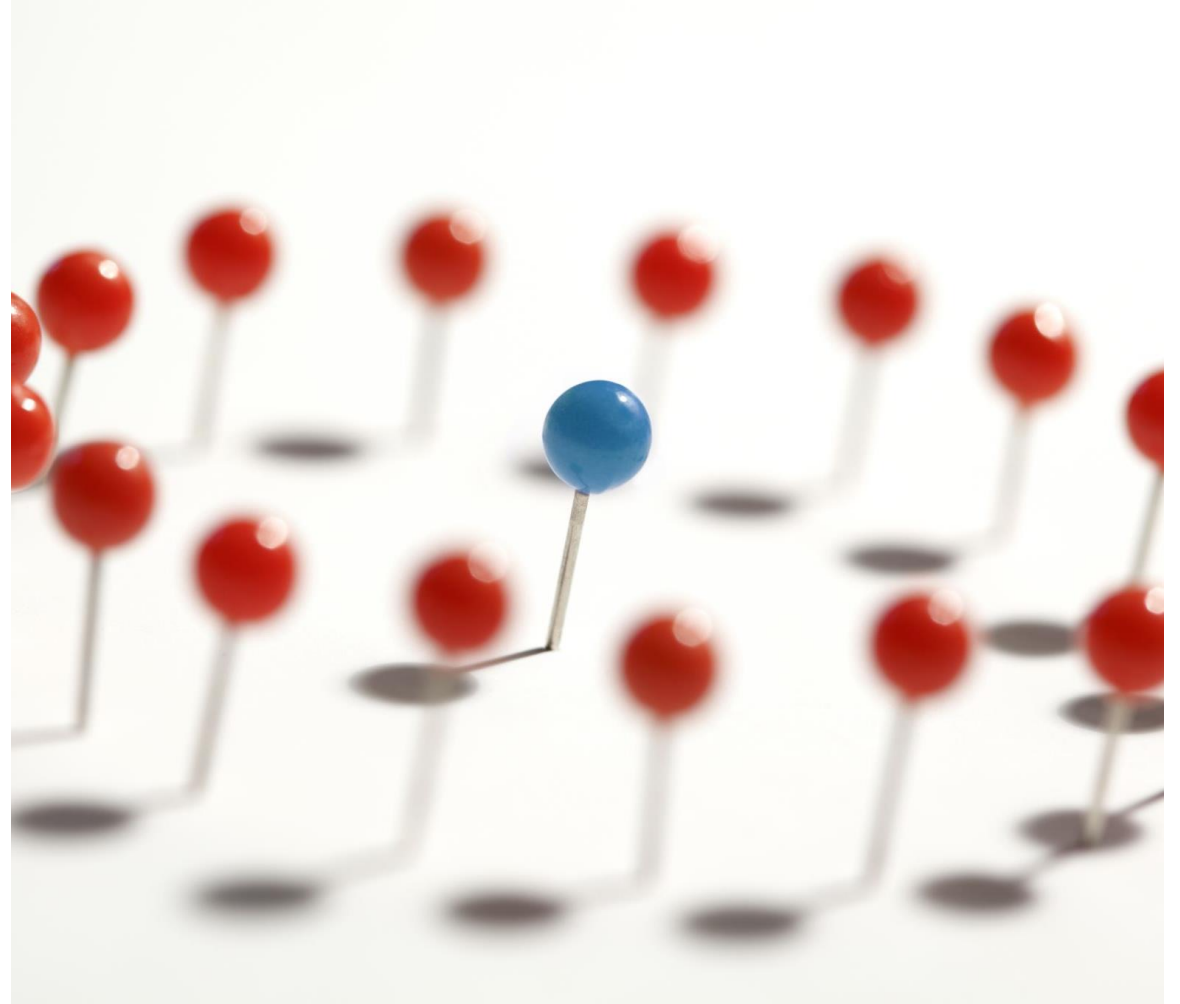
What are some of the traumatic events that autistic people may experience?



Trauma and Autistic People

Research indicates that autistic people are more likely to experience traumatic life events, particularly interpersonal traumas such as bullying and physical and sexual abuse

Brewin et al. 2000



Interpersonal Trauma

Many autistic people are very straightforward with their communication - they may expect other people to be too

It can be difficult to know how much to share about yourself – this may lead to vulnerability

Some autistic people are naturally very cooperative, or may lack the social skills to establish safe boundaries

It can be lonely being autistic – a desire for inclusion may mean they stay close to people who treat them badly





Interpersonal Trauma

Autistic people may have missed out on relationship and sex education – or have been taught it in a way that didn't make sense

Understanding consent and your rights can be difficult– this can be additionally difficult for some autistic people

The autistic person may rely on the other person for care or support – for example to attend appointments or make phone calls for them

Change in living situations can be very difficult this could be due to the changes in routine / or sensory and social difficulties moving to a new environment

Being targeted due to perceived difference / having care needs





Trauma and Autistic People

Living as an autistic person in a world designed by non-autistic people may be traumatising in itself:

Social difficulties and confusion – for example difficulties interpreting social cues, misunderstandings and conflicts

Events related to mental health difficulties – for example extreme anxiety or depression

Transitions and change – for example school, work or living changes

Distress if prevented from engaging in special interests



Trauma and Autistic People

Some theories suggest that factors associated with being autistic may mean and increased risk of developing or maintaining PTSD symptoms such as:

Detailed focused processing – a tendency to keep focusing on the details of a situation

Increased rumination - unable to stop thinking about negative feelings and thoughts

Difficulties regulating emotions

Finding things hard to communicate / talk about

Kerns et al 2015; Hoover 2015; Haruvi-Lamdan et al 2018





Is it Trauma or Autism?

Outwardly there appear to be similarities between autism and conditions such as PTSD

The behaviours may be similar but the reasons behind them different

Findings suggest overlaps in areas related to a lack of emotional sharing, lack of interest towards peers, emotional outbursts, sleep problems and repetitive behaviours

Stavropoulos et al 2018



Trauma	Symptom	Autism
Avoiding reminders of the trauma / triggers	Avoidance	Overstimulation / need to have time alone/ anxiety
Might be due to flashbacks, hypervigilance, painful memories	Working memory issues	May be due to hyperstimulation, speed of processing or high levels of anxiety
Hyper arousal – fight or flight responses	Emotional outbursts	Overload, confusion, lack of routine or inability to articulate how you are feeling
Nightmares , vivid dreams, hyper-vigilance means can be difficult to relax. Trauma may have happened in the bed / bedroom	Poor sleeping	Common to have trouble falling and staying asleep, spinning thoughts, inability to let go of a special interest
Hyper-vigilance / flashbacks/ anxiety	Exhaustion	Through masking / effort of social interaction / sensory overload



Talking about it

It is common to avoid thinking / talking about traumatic events

Also, memories of traumatic events can be fragmented or unavailable

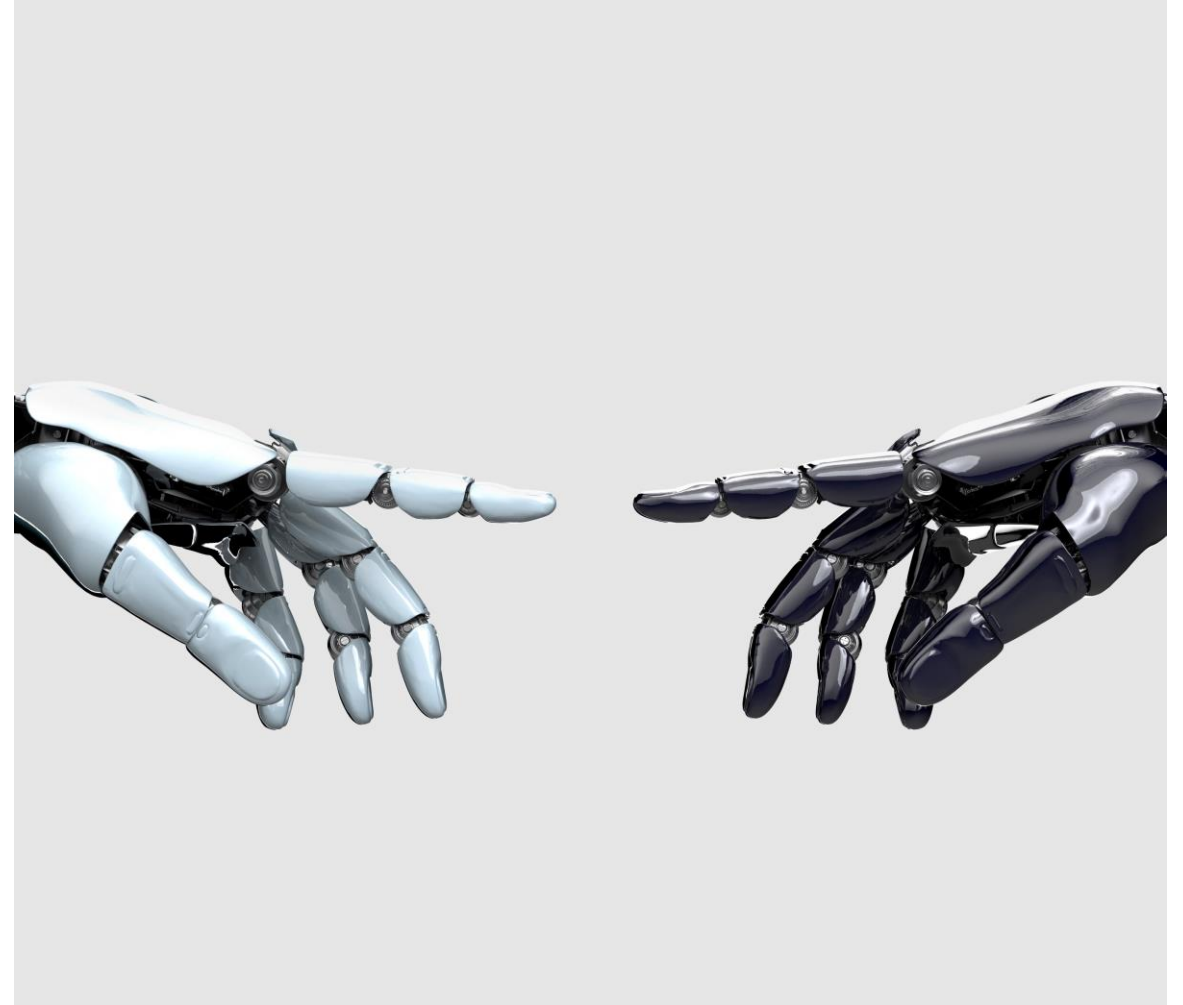
Difficulty in giving a coherent narrative is therefore common when somebody has experienced trauma, however it is also common with autism

Autistic people may struggle to understand what is being asked of them, pick out which details may be important and struggle with the anxiety of speaking to somebody they don't know



How to Help

It is important to remember that we may need to adapt our approaches when working with autistic people – rather than expecting them to adapt to us



Double Empathy

Simply put, the theory of the double empathy problem suggests that when people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathise with each other.

Therefore, it may well be us that struggles with empathy not the autistic person!



Adapting our Approaches



Alexithymia

Alexithymia is reported to affect 85 per cent of autistic people (Hill E, Berthoz S, Frith 2004)

Alexithymia is a Greek word which simply means 'no words for feelings' and people affected by this condition may find describing their feelings and identifying emotions very difficult if not impossible



Alexithymia

“Just because I struggle to put how I feel into words it doesn't mean I don't feel things. In fact, the worse I feel, the more I struggle and often default to, *I'm fine*”



Alexithymia

Being asked to connect with feelings or describe them could be like asking a severely dyslexic client to perform multiple spelling tests in the room

The person is not being difficult – they just might not know what they are feeling and may find it very stressful to be asked





Alexithymia

Be clear and direct

Ask thinking or behaviour questions

Use body sensations

Keep questions specific

Be patient





Special Interests

Don't assume that a person is trying to avoid or distract

They just might have – fewer interests / highly aroused

This is the person sharing something very important with you – listen carefully

Follow that door into their world



Appointments

- Autistic people may need time to prepare in advance
- Ensure that you give information in writing or visually – as people may not take in information only in verbal form
- They may need a greater number of sessions
- They may need regular breaks or shorter sessions
- Give people permission to stim, move around or bring objects with them that make them feel comfortable



Use of Questions



Very broad open questions may be difficult as the person may not understand what exactly you are asking

Be clear and concrete about what you are asking

Don't ask too many questions together – ask one question and then give time for the person to answer

Don't expect the person to understand a pause as meaning that you expect an answer



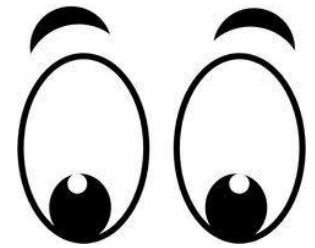
Eye Contact

Some autistic people would prefer to have minimal or no eye contact – it can be painful, distracting, confusing or just unpleasant for some people

For others there is just no point – as is it not going to provide them with any useful information

Let them know that it is OK not to look at you – or ask how they would like the chairs

Would they prefer to do something else whilst talking – a puzzle, colouring, fiddling with an object?



Environment

Ask people if there is anything they don't want in the environment before they come

Check in whether there is anything they would like to change once they get there

Ask whether there is anything they would like to bring with them that would make them feel more comfortable

Be aware of background noises, smells etc



Pointers for Practice

Try and keep a routine

Be clear about where appointments are / times / what will happen when they get there – pictures and videos can help some people

Ask about any anxieties / concerns – or whether there is somebody else that they would like you to ask about these

As far as possible keep consistency of workers

Explain clearly and concretely – send follow up information in writing

Speak more slowly – avoid vagueness and metaphor – check for understanding

Be conscious of pauses – the autistic person may not realise that you are expecting an answer



Pointers for Practice

Allow time for transitions between activities and topics

You may need to work harder to help some people understand what might be applicable in one situation, might also be applicable in another

Offer opportunities to email you in advance about anything they would like to speak to you about – or help people to plan what they would like to speak about next time

Find out what sensory / grounding activities or topics of conversation the person would like to come back to if they are at risk of overwhelm

Use special interests is appropriate as part of your work with someone





Feedback or Questions?