



# Autism Spectrum Disorder

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**What is Autism?** Autism spectrum disorder (also known as autism or ASD) is a disorder classified by a set of specific behaviors related to social communication and restricted or repetitive types of behaviors. The word spectrum helps us to recognize that individuals with autism are all different and their symptoms of autism could be anywhere on a spectrum from very mild to very severe in any of the deficits that are characteristic of this disorder



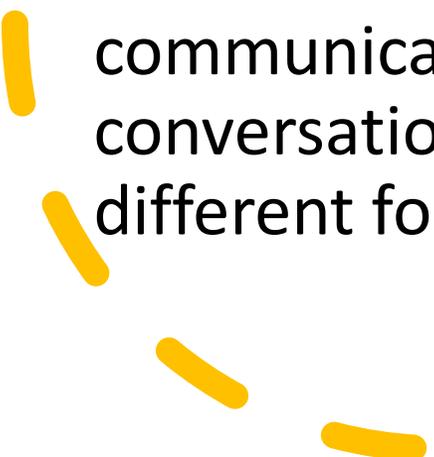


Autism is a wide-Spectrum disorder. This means that no two people with Autism will have exactly the same symptoms as well as experiencing varying combination of symptoms. Some people will have mild symptoms while others will have severe ones.





For example, all individuals with a formal diagnosis of autism have difficulties with communication. However, the severity of communication deficits could be anywhere on a spectrum from very severe and unable to speak to slight deficits in communication and, although the individual may be able to speak with full sentences and understandably, they may have some difficulties with certain communication skills like taking turns in a conversation or initiating conversations. Because of the nature of ASD as a spectrum, autism is different for everyone.



# DSM-V diagnostic criteria

The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is a classification of mental disorders with associated criteria designed to facilitate more reliable diagnoses of these disorders....DSM is intended to serve as a practical, functional, and flexible guide for organizing information that can aid in the accurate diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders.”  
(American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5 Task Force, 2013).

According to the DSM-5 (2013), autism spectrum disorder includes the following characteristics [slight modifications made from DSM-5 text for the purposes of simplifying language]:



## A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity (examples include: difficulties approaching others, difficulty initiating and maintaining a conversation, reduced level of sharing of interests and emotions with others, failure to appropriately respond to others in a social situation)

2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction (examples include: difficulties integrating verbal and nonverbal communication, lack of appropriate eye contact, abnormalities in body language or using gestures, lack of appropriate facial expressions)

3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (Examples include: difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts, difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends, absence of interest in peers)

## B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (Examples include: simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia)

2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (Examples include: extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, need to take same route or eat the same food every day)

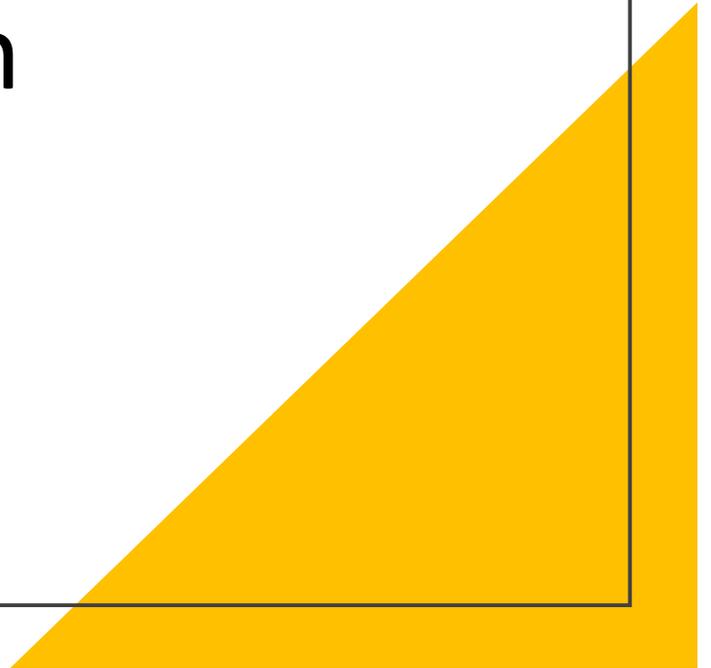
3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (Examples include: strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects)

4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (Examples include: apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual, lights or movement)

- \*In addition to the characteristics above, ASD is also further defined by severity levels. Individuals with ASD may be at a Level 1 (requires support), Level 2 (requiring substantial support), or Level 3 (requiring very substantial support). Level may vary based upon context and may also fluctuate over time.



Level 1 “requires support” For these individuals, their social deficits and restrictive behavior don’t significantly interfere with daily functioning.



Level 2 “requiring substantial support” is the median level of impairment. These individuals experience significant challenges daily. The DSM 5 incorporates deficits in social communication skills. Even though individuals may be able to communicate verbally, they may struggle with engaging in appropriate conversations with others, without support. These individuals struggle significantly with inflexibility and change.

Level 3 “requiring very substantial support” is the highest level of need for individuals with autism. They don’t initiate social interactions and experience extreme difficulty in coping with change.

# Three Functional Levels of Autism

written from an autistic perspective



Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Requiring Support</b> <i>I need help navigating a non-autistic world.</i>	<b>Requiring Substantial Support</b> <i>I need help handling everyday challenges.</i>	<b>Requiring Very Substantial Support</b> <i>I often need one-on-one support.</i>
<b>Average traits</b>	<b>Average traits</b>	<b>Average traits</b>
People may see me as awkward, not disabled. I can befriend or date non-disabled people, but it's hard and I'm often lonely. I can handle change, but I prefer routine. My fidgeting is seen as quirky or "annoying." People may think my developmental delays are signs of laziness or insecurity.	People can usually tell that I have a disability. My social life is very limited or nonexistent. Coping with change is very challenging. My repetitive behaviors are noticeably unusual. I have significant developmental delays and will meet milestones late.	My disability is very obvious. I usually only communicate to express needs or answer questions. Change and transitions can be unbearably difficult. My intense repetitive behavior is calming and important to me. I have large developmental delays and may not meet every milestone.
<b>Please know that</b>	<b>Please know that</b>	<b>Please know that</b>
Social interactions are challenging. Please be understanding and offer help. I struggle more than I let on. Meeting others' expectations is exhausting. Please be patient. I deserve respect and support.	I may seem inattentive, but I hear and understand you. Routines and repetitive behavior help me feel safe. I need a lot of help coping with stress. I deserve respect and support.	I may seem unresponsive, but I hear and understand you. Routines and repetitive behaviors help me feel safe. I need help with communication skills. I deserve respect and support.

These levels aren't clear-cut or permanent. Someone's skills may change. Stress, environment, and support will impact someone's ability to function.

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- **More info about ASD**

- Although many people display difficulties with communication and social relationships from time to time, to have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, these behaviors and symptoms must cause a significant problem for the individual in their daily functioning such as in relationships, at work, at school, or in the community (more severely than is typical of the general population).
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