



# MONTHLY MENTAL HEALTH NEWSLETTER

Presented by the Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office Mental Health Task Force

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

## What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder. It is typically characterized by a range of problems associated with social interactions. These issues can be experienced as difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication, choices of words, muscle control, regulation of sensory input and adapting to even small changes.

To varying degrees in different people ASD will affect brain functions to include:

*Cognitions (thoughts)*

*Receiving and expressing language*

*Motor Functions*

*Emotional Regulation and Content*

*Impulses*

*Senses and coping mechanisms in various situations.*

## Recognizing ASD

Some may say that those with ASD can often seem a bit "different", due to ignorance of the disorder others may say they are "off" in regard to social norms.

Therefore their behavior is often misunderstood and even misconstrued as "defiance".

Persons with ASD may employ behaviors to self-regulate their emotions. These behaviors are known as "stimming". Some of these behaviors may include, but are not limited to, foot tapping, twirling, rocking, and repeating words and sounds.

Other recognizable behaviors in some more severe ASD persons include "Acclimating". Also misunderstood by many, *Acclimating* consists of wandering around any given area looking at and/or touching things and people. Sometimes they may even smell the area or other persons within the area. *Acclimating* is a method by which ASD persons may adjust to a new environment.

Many ASD persons have problems maintaining eye contact. It may appear that they are ignoring you, but they are actually trying to focus on what you are saying. Depending on the level of ASD presented these persons may appear as very "concrete" thinkers and may not adapt quickly before they understand and feel comfortable with the situation or instructions.

ASD encompasses a wide range of symptoms and levels of functioning. It presents along a spectrum ranging from Asperger's Syndrome (considered higher functioning) to Profound or Severe Autism (considered lower functioning)

Besides the recognizable characteristics described above, ASD may include symptoms that are sometimes unseen from just an outward presentation and other symptoms that one may assume are unrelated to the common assumptions people have about ASD. Both types of symptoms may include dizziness, learning differences, hearing and vision impairments, allergies, gastrointestinal problems and fatigue.

**Other characteristics of ASD.** (The more profound sufferers may present more overt characteristics)

The level of the spectrum at which these patients present, determines the presence and/or severity of the following symptoms:

Seems to have a delay in processing what is said to them, (may repeat questions without answering)

Speaks more loudly than needed or in a very low monotone voice

Could be overly talkative or very limited in word use

May cover their ears when feeling too stimulated

Has verbal outbursts, such as loud squeals or shouts

Could be overwhelmed with too many instructions or questions.

Rearranges things on your desk or work area while you are talking to or assessing them.

May create confusion when being questioned or assessed

Chews on objects or even bites self and/or eats inappropriate (nonfood) items. May also pull their hair out

## ENGAGING AND DE-ESCALATING WITH ASD PERSONS (DECREASING ANXIETY IS THE GOAL)

If their behaviors are not harmful to themselves or others allow them to continue.

Forcing eye contact could increase anxiety.

Engage respectfully (behavior ≠ intelligence) therefore explain what you are going to do before you do it when possible.

When possible ask before touching and try not to get too close; being too close will increase their anxiety.

Validate their viewpoint

Enlist their help (ask for assistance)

Choose an appropriate bargain (only bargain when physical danger is NOT present.) Ex. *If I ...will you...?*

Distract them by asking about something known to interest them. You could also ask them to help you solve a simple math equation.

Ask them about any medication they may be taking. (when was your last dose? etc.)

## REFERENCES

The following sources were used in the creation of this Mental Health Newsletter. The G.C.S.O. Mental Health Tasks Force encourages you to utilize these and other sources such as the *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)* to learn more about this important health topic.

Diagnostic Statistical Manual –V, American Psychiatric Association, June 2013

National Institute of Mental Health (2013). Autism. Retrieved March 23, 2021, from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism/index.shtml>

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