

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects an individual's social and communicative behaviors. Individuals with ASD have differences in their brains, causing them to think and behave differently than individuals without ASD. ASD is present at a young age, and it is a lifelong disorder. The Centers for Disease Control currently reports that:

- About 1 in 59 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) according to estimates from CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network. [Read article]
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html

There are three main categories that characterize a person with autism spectrum disorder:

1. Communication differences
2. Social differences
3. Stereotyped behavior, rigidity, or inflexibility in thinking.

Because it is a *spectrum* disorder, the characteristics of ASD can look very different from person to person. On one end of the spectrum, someone with ASD may not be able to speak to communicate, may lack social interest in others, and/or may have unusual repetitive behaviors, such as hand-flapping or rocking. On the other end of the spectrum, someone with high functioning autism may have much more subtle characteristics. Rather than lacking spoken language, someone with high functioning autism may have trouble starting and maintaining a conversation, use few gestures or facial expressions when talking to others, or use formal language. Socially, someone with high functioning autism may have the desire to interact with others, but these interactions may not come naturally for them. They may have difficulty taking the perspective of others, unusual eye contact, difficulty reading the facial expressions and/or emotions of others, and limited insight into relationships or friendships. While most people intuitively understand social norms and customs, someone with ASD must learn these social rules since they do not necessarily come naturally. In addition to social and communication differences, individuals with ASD may have one or more of the following characteristics: Rigidity, difficulty with changes in routines, insistence on sameness, inflexibility in their thinking style, or repetitive/strong interests or behaviors.

Like everyone else, no two people with ASD are alike. An individual with ASD will not necessarily have all of the characteristics associated with ASD, but will have some of them in each of the areas of communication, socialization, and flexibility. These characteristics also exist in typical people, but in the case of ASD, there are more of them in each person, and they are more intense as well.

Individuals with high functioning autism have many strengths and are typically average to above average in intelligence. The following characteristics are often associated with high functioning autism: Excellent memory, very strong visual skills, acute attention to detail, and a genuine, honest personality. Individuals with high functioning autism can lead full, independent lives and can contribute greatly to the workforce.