

Autistic Adult Support

Autism NI co-ordinates Autistic Peer Networks for: different age groups including:

- Autistic Peer Network for adults aged 18 + years
- Autistic Peer Network for adults aged 30 + years.
- Autistic LGBTQIA+ Peer Network.

Autistic Peer Networks provide online peer support for autistic adults, they are an opportunity to socialise in a relaxed setting, with the option for text based communication via the chat function. Additionally, Autism NI has created a range of activities and resources that are useful for autistic adults. These resources can be downloaded on our website, www.autismni.org

Employment

There are a number of supported employment options available for autistic adults in Northern Ireland. These services may work with you to help you gain skills to be ready for the workplace or help you through the recruitment period or to maintain your job role.

Autism NI provides a range of training options for employers to understand more about how they can support an autistic employee and what their responsibilities are.

Autism NI has worked in partnership with a range of organisations across Europe to create an employers resource toolkit, to help improve employment opportunities for autistic adults. See further information about the ABLE Project. www.autismni.org/the-able-project.html

Useful information

Health & Social Care Trusts (HSCT)
ASD Co-ordinators

SHSCT Tel: 028 3836 6777
Email: autism.services@southerntrust.hscni.net

BHSCT Tel: 028 9504 5949
Email: AdultASDTeam@belfasttrust.hscni.net

WHSCT Tel: 028 7132 0167
Email: Thomas.mccarthy@westerntrust.hscni.net

SEHSCT Tel: 028 9250 1326
Email: adele.johnston@setrust.hscni.net

All Trusts have an adult autism care pathway for diagnosis of autism.

NHSCT Tel: 028 2766 1335
Email: adultautismservice@northerntrust.hscni.net

Autism NI Helpline 028 9040 1729 (opt 1)



Autism NI is Northern Ireland's main autism charity and works to provide life-changing services for over 35,000 autistic people currently living in Northern Ireland.

Our work wouldn't be possible without the generosity of our supporters. Your donation can help us continue to provide invaluable autism services, and build an inclusive society where autistic people can reach their full potential.

To make a donation, please visit www.autismni.org or call us on **028 9040 1729**.

Autism NI
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Saintfield Road, Belfast, BT8 8BH

Tel: **028 9040 1729**
Email: info@autismni.org

Autism NI is a company limited by guarantee (Company Number NI 058548).
Registered Charity Number: XR22944. NI Charity Commission Number: NIC100240.



Factsheet for autistic adults



What is autism?

Autism is lifelong and affects the social and communication centre of the brain. Autism can affect the way a person relates to people, situations and the immediate environment. Many autistic people can have difficulty processing everyday sensory information like sight, smells, touch, tastes and sounds.

There are now over 35,000 autistic people currently living in Northern Ireland, with many adults only receiving an autism diagnosis later in life, as awareness of the whole spectrum increases. Additionally, there are many adults who recognise that they have autism traits or are autistic, but don't have a formal diagnosis.

It is important to understand that every person is different, and there are supports available that can be tailored to each person and what works best for them.

Areas of difference autistic people share

Autism is a spectrum and although each autistic person is different, there are some communication and interaction challenges that are common for autistic adults.

1. Social communication and reciprocal social interactions including:
 - Starting and maintaining social communication. For example, understanding small talk.
 - Understanding nonverbal cues. For example, body language, tone of voice or facial expressions.
 - Understanding the social context of a situation.
 - Social skills such as personal space or contact.
 - Understanding other people's thoughts and reactions.
2. Repetitive behaviour and sensory processing differences including:
 - Preferring routines and plans, and finding changes within the day highly stressful.
 - Experiencing high anxiety levels because of unexpected changes.
 - Repetitive behaviours such as foot tapping or finger flicking.
 - Being highly focused or interested in a specific topic or activity.
 - Hypersensitivity (over sensitive) or hyposensitivity (under sensitive) to noise, lights, smell, taste and body awareness.

Many of these differences are due to how the brain is processing information about the world around you. There are lots of adaptations that can be beneficial, including adapting the sensory environment and getting information in a clear way. Every individual is different.

Obtaining a diagnosis

Receiving confirmation of autism as an adult is positive and can help you understand why you face certain challenges, and can also help you build on your strengths. Additionally, a formal autism assessment can help give you answers, further information and access to support.

Often the first step is to visit your GP and request a referral for autism assessment through your Health and Social Care Trust. There are also private assessment options available. If you think you are autistic and are over the age of 18:

- Call our Helpline on 028 9040 1729 (select option 1)
- Visit your GP or healthcare practitioner
- Ask for a referral to the adult autism team with your Health Trust
- Ask for a referral to an independent psychiatrist or clinical psychologist.

Throughout the process you will meet with a range of professionals who will provide the best care, information and services. These can include a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist, voluntary organisations, support networks and autism intervention teams within the HSC Trust.

HSC referral and screening

1. You must be resident in the HSC Trust's geographical area and registered with a GP.
2. You must be able to give valid and informed consent, obtained prior to referral.
3. You must be over the age of 18 on receipt of referral.
4. Referrals must outline a concern regarding autism and include supporting evidence or examples in-line with the diagnostic criteria, if not, the process may be delayed.
5. Your GP must make your referral on the standardised referral form, which is located under appendix 4 of the Autism Adult Care Pathway document.

Preparing yourself for a meeting

1. Before any meetings or appointments write down any questions you may have or any comments you would like to make.
2. Remember you are a vitally important member of those present at the meeting and have an extremely valuable contribution to make – you are representing yourself and know your specific needs and requirements.
3. If possible bring someone with you for support and to make sure you have someone to talk to later about the meeting.
4. Be firm during any meeting about what is important to you, otherwise you may regret not having your concerns heard.
5. Ask that minutes of the meeting are taken; this provides a record to read later and is a useful resource for review meetings and follow ups.
6. If possible, take notes for the next meeting, ensure you know the date and obtain the name of the contact person should you need to rearrange, postpone or cancel.
7. Prior to the meeting discuss strategies should you require a break, explain that you wish to pause and when you think you will be able to resume the meeting.
8. After, you may wish to make a record of your understanding of what occurred during the meeting. This will help inform future meetings.
9. Keep good records – a file where you can store letters and reports.

Self-care

Self-care is important for everyone, especially if you experience heightened anxiety or varying energy levels throughout the day.

To avoid exhaustion and burnout, it's important to reflect on your own daily challenges and what helps you manage them. Here are some strategies for helping you develop self-care skills:

- Take a nap, turn your phone off
- Drink more water
- Stop comparing yourself to others
- 5 minutes deep breathing
- Listen to music
- Make something (arts& crafts, bake)
- Go for a walk
- Spend time with animals
- Meet a friend/talk to a friend
- Start a journal
- Have a shower or a bath
- Treat yourself
- Take a break from social media
- Learn something new