




Meeting the Needs of Teens and Adults on the Autism Spectrum


Teens and Adults with high-functioning Autism are most often:

- Highly intelligent
- Socially awkward
- Prefer visually presented/communicated materials over verbal
- Honest (some say brutally honest)
- Detail oriented

 **Associative Memory** - While many people linearly; those with High-Functioning Autism tend to be visual thinkers. They tend to "think in pictures." Many report that their memory is composed of movies—a sort of video diary unrelated to words, but triggered by association with smells, sights or sounds. Many researchers believe this associative memory is a compensation for delays in the ability to process information quickly. Autistic people do not respond to information at the time it happens, they respond to the situation "from memory" when something remembered in a serial way is triggered.

 **Auditory Processing** - People with Autism, Asperger's, and PDD typically have problems processing things they hear, particularly if it's a large quantity of information. A preference for visually presented material has often led autistic people into creative fields.

 **Perseveration** - Many people with Autism, Asperger's, and PDD get fixated on one subject, such as cars, trains, calendars, or maps. They become experts on their particular subject of interest and will often not tolerate any disagreement that intrudes into their area of expertise.


 **Extremely Literal** - This can often catch you off guard. Autistic adults can sometimes misuse or misunderstand verbal metaphors or colloquialisms. Verbal language meaning is subject to shading by inflection, tone and context. Autistic teens and adults are often unaware of these differences, and have difficulty understanding how they may change the literal meaning of words. This extreme literalness is an integral factor in a number of other characteristics of high-functioning autistic teens and adults.


Generalizing – or more properly lack thereof. Their tendency to extreme literalness is related to an inability to generalize. If taught a rule or ritual in only one location, they may think the rule only applies to one specific place. A simple example of this is thinking that he/she could only eat pizza at home because that was the first place they tried it. Because of their high intelligence however, when the parallels or equivalents of a situation are explained or made explicit, autistic people can readily apply an old concept to a new place.

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Resistance to Change - Maybe a better term would be, "difficulty dealing with change or anything unexpected." This inability to generalize that an action, rule or concept may apply across multiple situations is one of the root causes of an autistic person's strong resistance to changes in routine. Something simple like calling to speak to the Rector on the phone can be a challenge if a secretary answers instead. Imagine for a moment that every situation you entered into in your life was entirely independent of and different from every other! Any change would be not only exhausting but also bewildering. It is always best to warn about any changes ahead of time. And be prepared that autistic people may feel the need to ask a lot of questions to help themselves understand the change and how it will affect them.

Getting Stuck - People with PDD/Autism tend to get "stuck" in doorways. People are often tripping over them because of the sudden stop. They often need to be coaxed into a room, especially when entering for the first time. This is most likely related to delays in processing information, and a resistance to change, even of venue.

 **Sensory Processing** - Sights and sounds that are easily tolerated by "neurotypicals" may cause pain, confusion, and/or fear in people with Autism, Asperger's and PDD. The best way to describe this is to imagine waking up in the middle of the night, thinking you heard a suspicious noise. All of your senses are on heightened alert; and the next sight, sound, or touch could send you through the roof. This is how many people with Autism and PDD feel when they enter a room for the first time, encounter a new situation, or experience stress. Many autistic people live with intense anxiety because of sensory processing issues. One of the most notable ways sensory processing difficulty is manifested in autistic people is the resistance to looking others directly in the eye when speaking or listening to them. Often misunderstood, this simple behavior is a defense mechanism for autistic people. Gazing into eyes is a first source of visual stimulation for human beings. The visual stimulation of eye gazing is powerful and can cause autistic people to completely lose focus of any verbal information being passed, as well as cause sensory overstimulation. Because many human cultures interpret direct eye contact as interest, autistic people can seem aloof or uninterested as they avert their eyes.

 **Theory of Mind** - People with Autism, Asperger's, and PDD have difficulty comprehending that others don't know something. It is quite common for autistic teens or adults to become upset when asking a question of a person if the person does not know the answer. Many autistic people do not understand that other people have their own plans, thoughts, and points of view. They may also have difficulty understanding the beliefs, attitudes, and emotions of others.

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Social Awkwardness – People with high-functioning autism have fewer difficulties with communication than those with classic autistic disorder. However, their ability to engage in social communication is impaired and may manifest itself in a number of ways.

- Has difficulty starting or maintaining a social conversation
- Does not adjust gaze to look at objects that others are looking at
- Does not point to direct others' attention to objects
- Repeats words or memorized passages, such as commercials or lines from movies (and expects that everyone will recognize the quote)
- Does not make friends or seems withdrawn or aloof
- May not respond to eye contact or smiles, or may avoid eye contact
- May treat others as if they are objects
- Prefers to spend time alone, rather than with others
- Shows a lack of understanding/empathy* how words or actions impact others, to the point of seeming rude or offensive
- Easily angered or frustrated
- Gets stuck on a single topic or task (perseveration), gets stuck on or argues about details

The symptoms may vary from moderate to severe.

***Qualifier:** Gavin Bollard in his blog: <http://life-with-aspergers.blogspot.com> writes: "The Aspie doesn't really "think on the fly" during conversations. There's a delay and we often don't pick up on non-verbal or non-obvious cues that we're hurting someone. That said, Aspies are the first to notice when people are obviously upset or hurt. When people are physically rather than verbally hurt, Aspies tend to be quite concerned. It's not that we don't understand emotional hurt but rather that we have more difficulty determining that it has happened. "



Meltdowns - Sometimes, despite best efforts, an autistic teen or adult may have a "meltdown" because he/she just cannot handle something. Without the verbal ability to easily translate feelings into speech, autistic adults and teens have a very difficult time handling conflict, disagreement or overstimulation. The "meltdown" may be completely unrelated to the topic/discussion at hand since it may have been triggered by an associative memory or may be related to sensory distressers in the environment. These meltdowns should not be mistaken for rage/indignation/anger against individuals or concepts. The best thing to do is give him/her a safe place to calm down and regroup. This place should be chosen ahead of time, and it should be as quiet and as soothing/non-stimulating as possible.