

The Autism Spectrum

Autism is a lifelong developmental and neurological disability. People with autism experience difficulty with social communication, social interaction, social imagination and other difficulties. In addition, many people with autism find processing information difficult and can be over sensitive or under-sensitive to particular things such as smells, tastes, colours, sound or touch. In Newham there are an estimated 3,080 people on the Autism Spectrum, based on a ratio of 1:100 (Ratio source: National Autistic Society). However, many people still remain undiagnosed. Autism is a 'hidden disability' and is the root cause of behaviour which is easy to misinterpret. When anxious, stressed or under pressure, this may present as a panic attack (looks like challenging behavior) or as a freeze response (looks like refusal to move or speak).

The purpose of the Autism Alert Card

The card is for people with autism to show to residents or professionals if they get into difficulty in the community. It is designed to speed up access to appropriate support and reduce the number of people going into custody.

Benefits of the card:

- Allows the police, emergency services and other organisations to recognise that they are dealing with someone who has autism.
- Helps the card holder to feel safer and more confident when out and about.
- Promotes better all round management of issues and situations involving people with autism.
- Helps to raise awareness of autism amongst professionals and the Criminal Justice System.

Contact us

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Newham Autism Alert Card



How to use the card and support people with an autism spectrum condition

What to do...

DO ask if the person has an Autism Alert Card.

DO telephone named contact(s) as soon as possible.

DO use the person's name to get their attention. Be clear and direct in what you say, for example. "Sam, sit down" or "Lesley, get in the car".

DO say who you are and what you are going to do. Remember they may take your words literally.

DO ask simple, closed and direct questions. Use visual cues to increase understanding, like photos, writing, drawings, objects etc.

DO allow the person extra time to process and respond to questions. If you interrupt their thinking process, they may have to start again or become overwhelmed.

DO check for understanding. Their understanding may be different from yours. Clear, factual explanation is needed.

DO consider medical issues. For example people with autism are at higher risk of having seizures and they may not tell you if they are injured, sick or in pain.

DO watch for signs of stress. They may overload and go into meltdown quite suddenly.

DO stop what you are doing or saying if the person goes into meltdown, as harm may result if you persist. They need peace and quiet to calm themselves down.

DO turn off fluorescent lighting or flashing lights where possible and limit the amount of noise. Get other people in the room to be still and silent.

DO stay calm.

What NOT to do...

DON'T make the person wait in a crowded, noisy room. This may cause overload and meltdown.

DON'T expect them to understand body language, gestures, tone of voice or facial expressions.

DON'T use abstract ideas and phrases, or phrases open to literal interpretation like "Jump in the car". They may try to jump whilst in the car.

DON'T give a lot of choices, this may confuse due to difficulty in predicting consequences. How will they know which choice will be best?

DON'T take lack of eye contact as a sign of rudeness or guilt. The person may need to avoid your gaze to be able to concentrate on your words.

DON'T attempt to stop flapping, tapping, rocking, pacing or other repetitive behaviours unless essential: these are strategies used to keep control when anxious or stressed.

DON'T invade the person's personal space unless essential. Restraint should only be used if they are a definite risk to themselves or others.

DON'T ask more than one question at a time and do allow extra time for a response.

DON'T assume the person is being deliberately rude or disrespectful if they talk inappropriately or about seemingly irrelevant topics. They may need to exhaust these topics first to be ready to understand what you are saying. This may be their strategy to process information.

DON'T shout.

What to BE AWARE of...

COMMUNICATION: Around 90% of communication is non-verbal, such as voice intonation, facial expression, body language or gestures. People on the autism spectrum miss most non-verbal information and rely on the 10% of meaning in words. This causes constant misunderstandings.

SOCIAL INTERACTION: They may lack social instinct, making it very difficult for them to understand other people's motives, intentions and state of mind. For example they may not recognise that someone is bullying or conning them, or is angry and likely to hit them. They may not realise they have upset someone, or that they have talked for too long, or even that they have made someone happy unless it is said in words.

PAIN: They may have an unusual response to pain, including laughter, humming or taking clothes off. Look out for signs of bleeding or injury as they may not have registered the pain and therefore will be unable to tell you if they have been hurt. Avoid touching unless essential – this may be experienced as an assault if the person is very sensitive to touch.

SENSORY OVERLOAD: People on the autism spectrum can be easily overloaded by sights, sounds and smells in busy places. In a crowded area, they may hear every conversation as loudly as the next – this makes it impossible to focus on what you are saying to them and increases stress and anxiety. When overloaded, some may rock, tap, talk incessantly, pace or ask repetitive questions to try to cope.

These behaviours help to calm the person. It is very important not to stop them unless essential, as this may lead to meltdown and more challenging behaviour.

MELTDOWN: If unable to cope with overload, meltdown may occur, resulting in a Fight, Flight or Freeze response. Some may lash out at people and/or objects, others may try to run away and some may withdraw into themselves and shut down. All these responses are attempts to escape the overload they are experiencing.