

What is autism?

As taken from <http://www.autistics.org/library/whatis.html>:

Autism?

What is it...? Autism is a developmental disability of the brain, much like dyslexia, mental retardation, or attention deficit disorder. Autism is not a form of mental retardation, and though many autistic people appear to function as retarded, they are frequently quite intelligent. The word autism may actually refer to several similar disabilities, including Autistic Disorder, Aspergers Syndrome, and "Atypical" Autism (a type of Pervasive Developmental Disorder, not otherwise specified). Though there are some differences between these conditions, they are quite similar, and those who have them experience many of the same difficulties in life. What is autism like for those who have it? The symptoms of autism can vary widely from one individual to the next. Autism is referred to as a spectrum disorder because it ranges in severity across a wide range of conditions, like the colors of a rainbow. In additions, some people may be affected more by one symptom, while others may be affected more strongly by a different symptom. Also, some of the symptoms may have variable manifestations. Sensory Processing Autistic people tend to have unusual sensory experiences. These experiences may involve a sense being too sensitive, less sensitive than normal, and/or difficulty interpreting a sense ("agnosia"). These experiences do not involve hallucinations; autistic people have sensory experience based on real experiences, like normal people, but the experience may feel or sound different, or the autistic person may have difficulty interpreting the experience. No two autistic people appear to have the exact same pattern of sensory problems. It is not uncommon, for example, for an autistic person to avoid being touched. This is usually because of a heightened sense of touch - a gentle touch to most people may hurt or shock some autistic people. Others may experience confusion, due to difficulty interpreting the sensation or insufficient sensation reaching the brain to interpret. Another, not uncommon pattern is to have the strength of the sensation inverse from that of the stimulation, so that a gentle touch may feel like an electric shock, but firm contact may not be a problem. Some autistic people may be insensitive to pain, and fail to notice injuries. Hearing may also be heightened, so that noises that don't bother others may hurt an autistic person's ears. Many autistic people have trouble making out what is said to them, as they have trouble processing sound. Vision may also be affected. Some autistic people are prosopagnostic ("face-blind"), that is, have trouble recognizing people. This means that learning to recognize someone is hard, recognition may be slow, faces tend to be analyzed rather than recognized automatically, and many normal effects of seeing a person may be absent. The exact effects and severity may vary between people. Other autistic people may have their eyes hurt by bright light or certain flickering or vibrating frequencies. One common effect of these heightened senses, is that autistic people are vulnerable to sensory overload with continued low-level bombardment. This may also result from too much emotional or social stimulation. Autistic people may become overloaded in situation that would not bother (or might even entertain) a normal person. When overloaded, autistic people have trouble concentrating, may feel tired or confused, and some may experience physical pain. Too much overload may lead to tantrums or emotional outburst. Another result of too much overload may be "shutdown," in which the person loses some or all of the person's normal functioning. Shutdown may feel different to different people, but is extremely unpleasant. Misunderstanding Autistic people have a great deal of trouble understanding things in the social environment. This includes both understanding of social cues and conventions, and understanding language. (The primary difference between Autistic Disorder and Aspergers Syndrome is that those with Aspergers are defined to have less severe communication problems and no speech delays.) One aspect of autism is that it is like being in perpetual culture shock, no matter where the autistic person goes or how long the autistic person stays. They don't understand many of the basic social assumptions that others take for granted (often without even being consciously aware of them). In many situations, it's like being dropped into the middle of an unfamiliar play, and being the only one there who doesn't know the script, you're role, or even what play you're in! What's going on? What should I do? Why is X crying, Y happy, and Z sneaking around grumbling? Life, especially social life, can be very, very confusing! Autistic people generally don't know how to handle innuendoes, either. Autistic people lack normal non-verbal communication and body language, and may thus seem more literal minded or unemotional than they actually are. Autistic people also have trouble with verbal communication. This usually involves what is called a semantic-pragmatic component. This means that an autistic person may take a statement or question in a very literal or unusual way; like the comic character Amelia Bedelia² from Peggy Parish's children's book series. This could include things like interpreting "I'd like coffee with my cereal" to mean cereal with coffee in it². Another example could be innocently answering "what do you do when you get cut" with "bleed," instead of describing what should be done about the cut³. Many autistic people have other communication difficulties, such as trouble remembering vocabulary, or trouble pronouncing words. Some may have Apraxia of Speech, meaning difficulty coordinating speech movements. Others have characteristics of speech disorders called aphasia. Some autistic people may be mute, or may occasionally lose the ability to speak. Some may have odd pronunciation, inflection, or vocal qualities. Many autistic people may pause and need extra time to process verbal comments or questions, and to formulate replies. Repeating things that have been heard (echolalia), is not uncommon, nor is repeating ones own words. Attention Autistic people have trouble handling multiple stimuli. The problem is that they have very narrowly focused attention, and can't keep up with more than one thing at a time. Most people have a mind like a flashlight, with an area of high focus, and a larger area of partial awareness; the autistic mind is more like a laser-pointer, that highlights only a single small dot. Also, shifting attention is a relatively slow process, and involves a sort of pause or moment of delay. While Attention Deficit Disorder is primarily a disorder of inconsistent (often short) attention span, autism involves other dimensions of attention call selectivity and shifting speed, specifically, too narrow of a focus

and difficulty and slowness shifting foci. (Though many autistic people also have symptoms of ADD as well, not all do.) One result of this is that autistic people tend to not see things as connected. What are Autistic People Like? There is great deal of variety among autistic people. Some autistic people may never learn to talk and may not be able work or to live independently. Others may do well in special supportive environments, working in sheltered setting. Still others are be totally independent and function fairly well. The last, or "high-functioning," group is often not recognized. However, these do exist, and people need to recognize and understand the difficulties they face, and their unique ways of thinking, doing things, and experiencing the world. Most autistic people seem unusually "reactive," and reactive to unusual things. An autistic person who seems to take major emergencies in stride may become upset over any surprise happening, even a minor one (like dropping pencil). Autistic people may often seem unemotional, but can be very emotional when something is important to them. Many are much more candid and expressive with their emotions than normal people. Autistic people tend to dislike, or at least be uninterested in, change. Many have strong attachments to objects, places, or routines, and become very upset if forced to abandon these things. Something that seems silly to others may be very important to an autistic person. Most autistic people have a few very intense interests, that may seem almost obsessive. These could be as ordinary as sports, as technical as neurology, or as odd as memorizing train schedules. Autistic people take their special interests very seriously. Autistic people are often aloof, and may be seen as extremely shy. However, while some may be very socially anxious, others are not anxious about people, but either uninterested, or are unaware of how to interact with or approach others. Some may not notice people, because of being absorbed by other things. Some are very interested in getting to know others, some may not care, and other may actively avoid social contact. However, it is a mistake to assume autistic people lack affection; some can be very affectionate toward those they know and care about. The lack of normal body language may make them seem more distant or unemotional than they actually are. Autistic people may do strange things, like rocking back-and-forth, flapping their hands in front of their eyes, humming, talking to themselves, spinning in circles, or repeating things. Some of this is just for fun, or out of excitement or distress. Sometimes, strange behaviors are to compensate with sensory problems. The repetitiveness is related to the natural repetitiveness and narrow focus of the autistic mind. Talking to oneself or giggling for no apparent reason is often the result of intense daydreaming or remembering, but may sometimes result from disregulated emotion, or be a form of echolalia. (Some ý estimated 25% ý also suffer from epileptic seizures of various kinds, some of which may cause strange behavior.) These things are harmless, and do not result from total disorientation or hallucinating. Some may injure themselves with such behavior, but it should not be assumed that such behavior is self-injurious. Some Things Autism is Not1. Autism is not mental retardation. Some autistic people may be very intelligent (there is a lot of evidence that Albert Einstein may have been autistic).2. Autism is not "savant" syndrome. Some autistic people are "savants," (e.g., instant calculator, etc.) but most are not. Other autistic people are "gifted," however, and have high "general" intelligence. Many autistic people have normal intelligence, and some may be retarded.3. Autism is not an emotional problem. Autism is a neurological condition which people are usually born with. Psychological trauma doesn't cause it.4. Autism is not a psychosis or lack of reality contact.5. People do not choose to be autistic.6. Autism is not "a fate worse than death." Autistic people have some disadvantages, but some live very happy and rewarding lives. Many autistic people wouldn't want to be "cured," as this would be like erasing them and replacing them with different people. More Information3 Sigman, Marian, and Lisa Caps. Children With Autism: A Developmental Perspective. The Developing Child. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. ISBN 0-674-05313-3. Autism Network International <http://www.ani.ac> the Autism Picture Pages <http://www.picturepage.net/> 1Autism Society of America <http://www.autism-society.org/> Copyright © Jared Blackburn, 1997 Permission granted to copy and distribute unaltered 2Parish, Margaret. Come Back, Amelia Bedelia. HarperCollins, 1971.