

Useful Strategies For Life



Surrey Autism
Partnership Board



Introduction

This factsheet is about strategies and tips that can help people with an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) manage their day to day lives.

Use your strengths

Managing anxiety

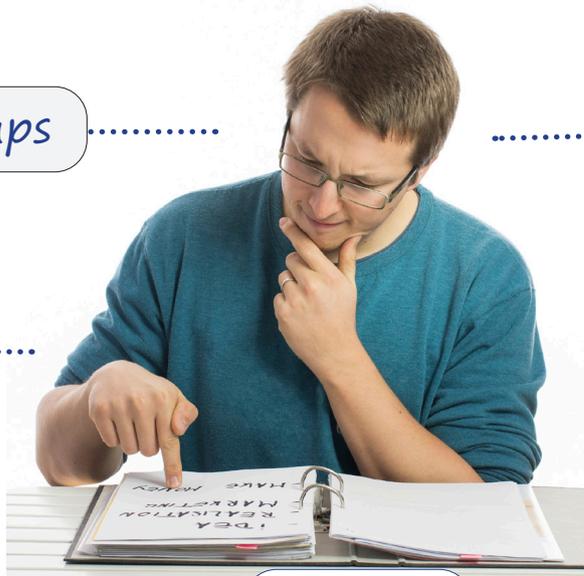
Sensory issues

Support groups

Visual supports

Diagnosis

Be yourself



A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)

A diagnosis can give a person insight into themselves and their needs

Having a diagnosis of ASC can help people to begin to understand why the world can often seem a confusing, chaotic and stressful place.

It can also help others who are close to the person to better understand them.



Judy was diagnosed with an ASC in 2013.

'The diagnosis took a lot of guilt off of my shoulders as I understood why I can't do certain things.

It made my self expectation a lot clearer, which made me feel less of a failure.'

How to ask for a diagnosis if you are an adult in Surrey.

Diagnosis for people who do not have a learning disability.

The Surrey Neurodevelopmental Service offers a diagnosis service for people in Surrey who do not have a learning disability. It is a free service your GP can refer you to.

Diagnosis for people who do have a learning disability.

A diagnostic assessment can be carried out by the Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust's Community Learning Disability Teams.



See our factsheet called 'Diagnosis for adults in Surrey'.

The factsheet explains in detail about how to get a diagnosis in Surrey and what is involved.

Using your strengths

People with ASD often have strengths in certain areas of life and can use these strengths to their advantage.

Peoples' strengths can be a benefit in both a work environment and in leisure activities.

Tony's strengths



Tony is a van courier and has a strong ability to focus on a task and memorise routes.

He keeps an accurate spreadsheet record of each journey he makes.

His records are better than his colleagues, who often ask him for advice about a route.

Juliette's strengths



Juliette plays guitar professionally.

She can learn a new piece of music more quickly than most other musicians.

She has a fine ear for pitch and can detect an off-key straight away.

Edward's strengths



Edward has a strong interest in vintage buses and goes to rallies with his support workers.

People at the events are impressed that Edward can name the model and manufacturing year of every bus there.

Being yourself

It's important that people are encouraged to 'be themselves'

It's ok not to value the things most other people do. People need support to feel good about who they are.

Nathan is not keen on social gatherings.



Nathan's family go for Sunday lunch at the pub every week.

It's a family social gathering and Nathan prefers not to go, but does sometimes.

He would rather have dinner at home on his own because it's cheaper and quieter.

Alicia likes her home to look bare.



Alicia finds clutter makes her feels anxious.

She has decorated the walls of her flat white and doesn't have any pictures or ornaments.

People sometimes comment that it looks a bit institutional, but this is how she wants it to look – she calls it minimalist.

Adam is happy to be 'different'.



Adam describes other members of his family as having 'Neurotypical Syndrome'.

He says their desire to hug each other, make small talk and worry about what other people think helped him make the diagnosis!

Coping with the sensory world

Some people can find the world a confusing mixture of sights, sounds, noises and smell.

Some people often feel over stimulated and need periods of peace and quiet.

Alison needs to escape sometimes.



Alison has a safe place she goes to when she's feeling overstimulated.

She has a small box room upstairs at home that has a blind on the window and a comfortable chair.

She has a 'do not disturb' sign for the door. She relaxes in the chair in the dark, sometimes for an hour or two until she starts to feel less stimulated and calmer.

Andy gets easily distracted on the golf course.



When he's taking his shot he's acutely aware of any movement his playing partners make.

He can even get distracted by people talking on the other fairway even though they are quite far away.

He finds it uncomfortable if people are stood too near him, even if they are behind him and keeping still.

He tends to only play on his own, or with his brother who understands him. He ends up getting irritable and playing badly if he plays with other people.

He describes himself as hyper-vigilant.

Some people find they want or need extra stimulation

Movement and stimulation can be relaxing for some people.

Zara likes to be very active.



Zara needs a lot of movement to help her stay calm.

She does well at college, but finds the lessons very intense and struggles to sit in a classroom for more than an hour.

Before each lesson her tutors encourage her to have a run around the grounds for 5 minutes, as this helps her to start the lesson in a relaxed frame of mind.

Pete craves very spicy flavours.



Pete likes his food to have a strong smell and likes plenty of garlic and spices.

When he was younger he liked to have marmite on everything and would sometimes be found eating it straight out of the jar with a spoon.

He will generally only eat meals if there is a spicy sauce to go with it. He tends to put chilli sauce on his chips, and peri peri chicken is his favourite meal.

He also likes strong smells and has many different aftershaves in his bedroom that he enjoys smelling.

Anxiety

For many people with ASC an important goal is to reduce the anxiety they feel in a world they often find intense and confusing.

For many people with ASC 'thinking, thinking, thinking' is their default position.

Jane describes her brain as like a fruit machine, where the reels are whirring round and round, and sometimes it just doesn't stop.

Mike explains that his thinking is sometimes like water trying to flow through too small a gap. The pressure is enormous.



John needs plenty of rest.

Many people with ASC find it hard to relax. They are constantly on alert trying to make sense of the world around them and its social rules – it can be exhausting.



John has learnt that he needs to go to bed early after a day where he's had a busy social event, such as a family gathering.

John finds social situations like these confusing, hard work and quite stressful at times.

He can manage these social situations, but finds them very tiring, as he's always on alert trying his best to 'fit in' with everyone else.

John now understands that because of his ASC he will find social situations more tiring than other people, because he has to work so much harder at them.

Andrew has been getting more anxious lately.

Andrew's parents were worried that, in their words 'his autism was getting worse'.
What was really happening was that the more anxious Andrew became, the more he would rely on his routines and behaviours, like rocking, that help him cope with the stress he was feeling.



Many people with an ASC can find it difficult to understand emotions.



Learning about emotions can help people identify their feelings and what makes them anxious.
For example understanding that you feel frightened and vulnerable going into a new situation helps to explain what causes your anxiety.
You can then use that knowledge to plan strategies to enable you to better cope with these situations.

Lydia keeps a diary of how she feels.



Lydia's diary helps her to identify how she feels before, during and after different situations.
Her diary has helped her to understand that she was scared about getting lost when travelling on a new bus route and would start worrying about it days before she had to make the journey.

Supporting people to manage anxiety

People may need support to switch off their mind and try to relax

People may need support to develop their own range of calming activities and prompts to remember to use them.

Keeping occupied is often an effective way to keep your mind off your worries. It gives your mind some breathing space and stops your brain whirring around, and around the same concerns.

Vicky keeps a list of calming activities in her handbag.



Sometimes when she's feeling anxious she can't focus her thoughts and think of what to do to help her feel better.

Her list includes: play minecraft on my iPad, have a bath and go for a run.

Serena often takes her rainstick out with her.



When Serena gets anxious she talks very loudly and sometimes starts to shout.

When they go out, her supporters take Serena's rainstick with them. This calms her down as she focuses on the noise and vibration that the stick makes as she moves it.

For many people with ASC, common strategies people use for anxiety, like talking to friends and family, are not so effective.

Some people with an ASC would find the question 'How do you feel about that?' perplexing as they may struggle to understand and interpret their emotions in real time. A more practical, 'problem solving' approach can be more effective.

Predictability and routine

Most people, whether they have an ASC or not, rely on routines to give them the security to predict what will happen in life.

If you are feeling unsettled inside, having things organised and clear around you can feel comforting. Routine and organisation can give you a sense of control. People with an ASC often rely on routine and predictability more than other people.

Frank works in his local council office three afternoons a week.



Frank's job is to do the filing. He's very accurate and never makes mistakes.

The staff in the office make sure that Frank always has the same desk and that his work is laid out exactly the same each week.

Frank gets on with his work and is faster and gets less distracted than other employees. His workplace is a safe, predictable environment that causes little anxiety.

People with an ASC can become quite rigid about their routines and struggle to be flexible if something happens that creates a change in the routine.

After leaving school Graham found it hard to find a job.



He developed a routine of listening to a particular radio show at home every afternoon.

He wouldn't answer the door or the phone when the show was on and became very stuck in this routine. Missing the structure that school gave him, Graham developed his own structure that became rigid and he found it hard to explore other options for using his time.

Graham managed to introduce some flexibility into his routine by accepting that if he missed the show at 1pm he could listen to it on BBC iplayer later.

Structured activities

Many people with an ASC find structured activities easier to manage than social activities that have no distinct beginning or end.

A party invite that says 'come when you're ready and stay til late' is not usually very helpful!

People may feel they can't 'escape' from activities that are unstructured.

Susan finds it stressful when someone wants to visit her at home.



She worries about seeming unfriendly and people staying longer than she can manage.

She enjoys company for short periods of time – up to 45 minutes.

These days she usually suggests that they meet at the other person's house, or in a local café so she can leave when she needs to.

Gareth sometimes meets his friends to watch a football match.



The match gives him a structure. He arrives just before kick off and leaves 10 minutes after the final whistle.

He copes with this better than a situation that has no clear beginning or end.

He finds unstructured social situations make him anxious, because he struggles to work out the right time to leave.

Many social activities, like clubs and societies, have clear structures and routines that some people with an ASC find helpful, as they are able to predict what will happen.

A set of rules

Some people with ASC find that having a set of rules they follow helps them to manage in situations that make them feel anxious.

The rules can be useful to 'fall back on' when they feel trapped and unsure what to do. People may need support to develop rules and strategies to manage when unexpected situations occur.

Amanda travels by bus to and from work.



Amanda finds it uncomfortable if someone she doesn't know talks to her at the bus stop.

She has a rule that she will comment on the weather and if the person keeps talking she will say "Oh dear I've forgotten something I needed to buy" and walk around the block and come back for the next bus.'

Having a 'crisis plan' can be useful for those times where a person becomes so stressed they can no longer think straight and need help.

Sanjay has a crisis plan which is written down.



He keeps it in his wallet, along with his autism alert card.

He explains how he uses it:

'If I am out and about and have a panic attack I read my crisis plan. I have four people I can phone and there is always someone who will answer.

I read out the words that say "Hello it's Sanjay and I'm having a panic" – they know what to do to help me and I do what they say.'

Planning in advance for situations

This can reduce anxiety and help the person to plan for what is likely to happen.

David used to struggle at job interviews as he didn't think to tell employers about the things he had achieved.

David went to several interviews without getting a job.

He didn't know how to 'sell himself'. If the interviewers didn't ask him about specific things, he wouldn't think to mention them.



His supporters helped him write a list of things to remember to say at interviews and did some practice.

He now takes his list to interviews.

He won an 'apprentice of the year' award one year, which he never used to think to mention at interviews.

Darren enjoys walking in open spaces, but gets very scared if he sees a dog that's not on a lead.

There is a local park where people have to keep dogs on leads.



Darren's supporters often take him there.

They always show him the sign as they enter the park.

Explaining social situations in writing

Written stories can be used to explain the social rules of a social situation or event.

The story says what will happen in the situation to help people to predict events, learn about other people's point of view and understand what they can do if things don't go to plan.

Stories are sometimes illustrated to make them easier to follow.

Craig has a story written about his journey to work.



Below is part of Craig's written story.

Sometimes my train will arrive later than 8.40am.

There could be many reasons for this, including leaves on the line or a signal failure.

It is not the driver's fault if his train is late.

I can look at the boards to see if there is a message saying what time they think my train will arrive.

If there is no message, I can ask a member of staff who is wearing a railway uniform if they know what time the 8.40am train from Caterham is due to arrive.

If I am worried about being late for work, I can use my mobile to phone my boss John and tell him my train is late.

John knows that trains are sometimes late and will not be angry.

This idea has been developed by Carol Gray into a technique called 'Social Stories'

Visit her website for more information: www.carolgraysocialstories.com



Visual supports

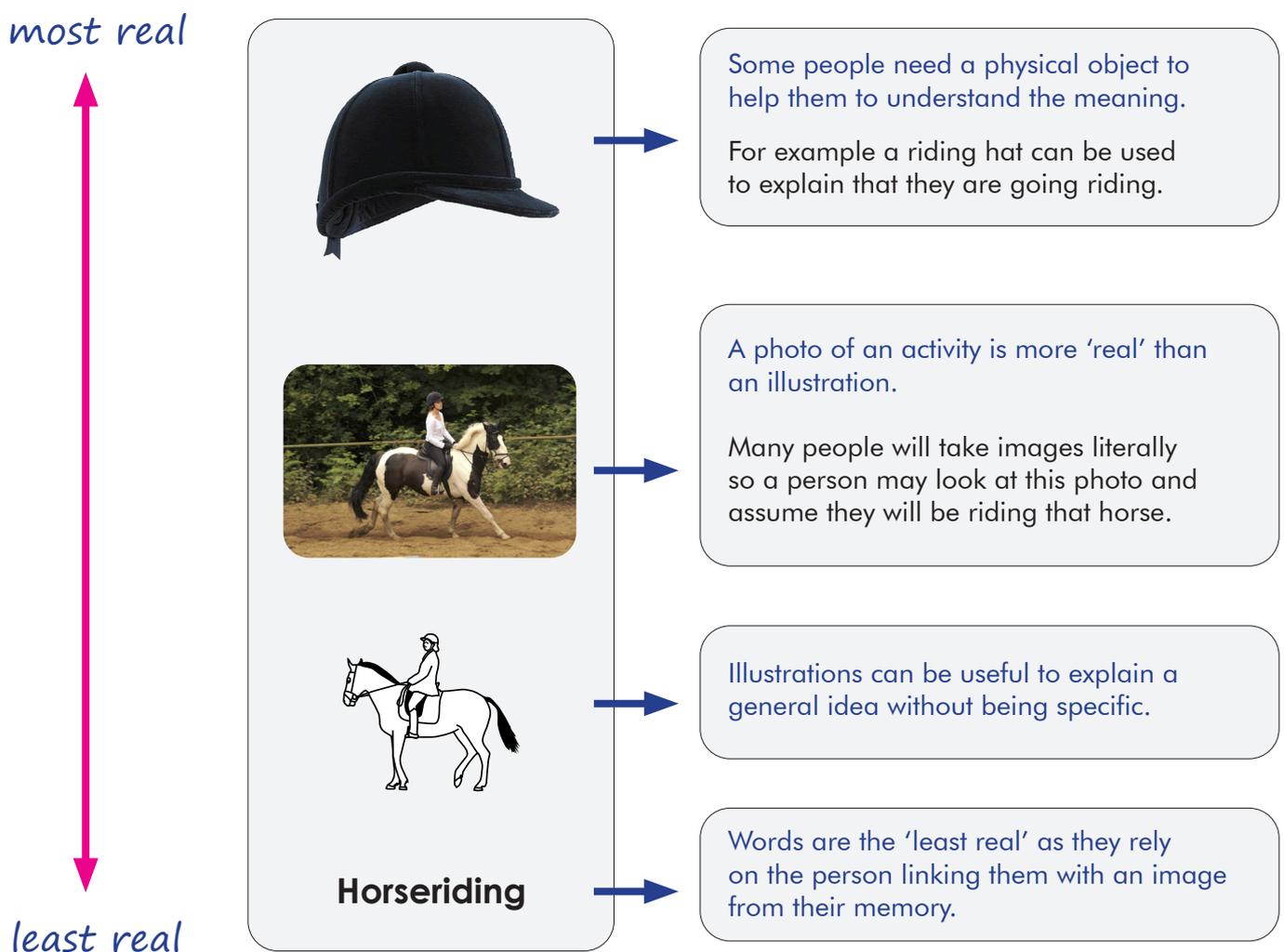
We all use visual prompts in our lives such as road signs, calendars and shopping lists.

Things that are visual are more permanent than things that are spoken. Many people with an ASC find that 'learning through seeing' is a good way to learn.

Visual supports can be simply written words, physical objects or words illustrated with pictures.

It is important that visual supports are designed for an individual.

Some people will find the use of pictures patronising. Other people struggle to take meaning from written words and need pictures or objects for meanings to be real for them.



Ella has an objects timetable at the dayservice she attends.



Her timetable enables her to predict activities.

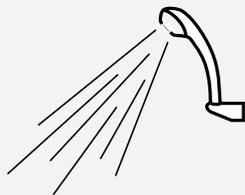
Staff use physical objects to help Ella to understand what activity is happening next. A wooden spoon is used for cookery, a paintbrush for art and a trowel for gardening.

Ella is given the object to hold for a few minutes before the activity is due to start. This helps her to predict what will happen next. In time the physical object will be replaced by a photo of the object.

Josh uses a visual support to help him to get ready in the right order in the morning after he's had breakfast.



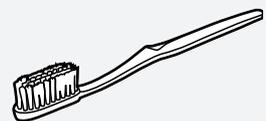
Toilet



Shower



Comb hair



Brush teeth

His visual support is laminated and stuck to the wall in the bathroom.

He used to take 30 minutes to get ready, but can now get ready in half that time.



Jayden found it difficult to understand when it was her turn to choose the CD to play and when it was other people's turn.

This chart, with a removable CD image, enabled her to see whose turn it was at a glance.

She could also predict when her turn was coming, which reduced her anxiety.

WHOSE TURN IS IT TO CHOOSE THE CD ?	
ADRIAN	
ELAINE	
JAYDEN	
THOMAS	



Sam found it difficult to move from one activity to another.



His tutors at college use a 'countdown clock' that clearly shows in red how long there is left for an activity.

Sam now finds it easier to predict when activities will end and to prepare himself to move on.

Scott has a detailed weekly timetable on his bedroom wall that lists activities and main meals.

Mon Monday	Tue Tuesday	Wed Wednesday	Thu Thursday	Fri Friday	Sat Saturday	Sun Sunday
College	College	Opticians for eye test	College	Swimming	Trip to Brighton	Church
		DVD afternoon		Gardening		DVD afternoon
Meatballs and spaghetti	Fishfingers and chips	Tuna and cheese wraps	Pasta bake with cheese	Sausages and mash	Takeaway	Roast dinner



Scott likes to be able to predict everything that will happen and gets anxious if he's not sure what meals he will be eating.

He designs the timetable himself and the layout helps him to discuss options and make choices. If a change happens, Scott edits the timetable himself and prints a new copy.

Barry uses the notes app on his phone to list the order in which he will do things that day.

He used to find it difficult to organise himself and often missed deadlines for college work.



He splits the day into morning, afternoon and evening.

He starts a new page for each section of the day and deletes tasks as he does them. He feels this gives him a sense of order and control.

Support groups

People can learn from each other and from autism specialists who help to run support groups.

For many people the social contact in a safe environment where people will understand your needs is very helpful.

Rebecca goes to her local Aspergers Group.



'I attend an Aspergers group once or twice a month where I can meet and talk to other people who have Aspergers.'

The good thing about this is that we can share stories, ideas and helpful information about living with Aspergers.'

Support groups are often supported by autism specialists, who can offer support and advice.

Adjustments services make to be 'autism friendly'

Services can make 'reasonable adjustments' so that they are accessible for people with an ASC.



Alex enjoys films, but finds cinemas too noisy and busy.

He goes to 'autism friendly' screenings where the volume is set lower. He also takes headphones with him to cover his ears if the film is too loud in places.

Many local cinemas have 'autism friendly' screenings.

Useful websites

www.autism.org.uk

- The website of the National Autistic Society.

www.nassurreybranch.org

- The website of the National Autistic Society Surrey branch.

www.surreypb.org.uk

- The website of the Surrey Autism Partnership Board.



There are seven factsheets in our series about Autism Spectrum Conditions.

You can download our factsheets from www.surreypb.org.uk

This is the website of the Surrey Autism Partnership Board



1. Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) - An Introduction
2. Diagnosis
3. Communication
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5. Social care and community life
6. Health services and support
7. Our stories - three stories from people with ASC

Credits

This factsheet was developed by Howard Childs, Tom Moore and Mike Leat.

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