

Autism spectrum

[April Is Autism Awareness Month]

Autism, also known as “autistic spectrum disorder (ASD),” is a developmental disability that affects a person’s behavior, ability to communicate and social skills. According to the National Institutes of Health, ASD is called a spectrum disorder because there is a wide range of symptoms, skills and levels of impairment among those who have the condition.

Until recently, there were several different conditions, including Asperger syndrome, that were considered to be part of the autism spectrum. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association consolidated these diagnoses into Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Autism can be diagnosed in children as young as 18 months, although many children aren’t diagnosed until they are older. Some people with autism who are very high functioning may never be diagnosed or may be diagnosed as adults.

Autism symptoms

Autism symptoms vary in severity and presentation. Here are some common symptoms of autism spectrum disorders:

- Has difficulties relating to others.
- Avoids appropriate eye contact.
- Engages in repetitive behaviors or motions, such as rocking or hand-flapping.
- Has difficulties adapting to changes in routines.
- Reacts in an extreme or unusual way to sensory stimulation, such as tastes, textures and sounds.

Autism treatment

There is no cure for autistic spectrum disorder, but there are ways to improve the quality of life of those who have it. Therapy is available that will help them communicate more effectively, develop relationships with others and manage stress.

Early interventions are important for people with autism. Parents who believe their child may be on the spectrum should speak to their doctors about having their child evaluated. Adults who believe they are on the spectrum should speak to their physician or a mental health professional about their concerns.

Dear God, we remember those who struggle with their differences. Give us the grace and love necessary to support them and their families. Amen.

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Caring for people on the autism spectrum and their families

Faith communities can do a lot to support people with autism. Learning about autism, understanding autistic behaviors and providing practical support can make an enormous difference in the lives of people in your congregation who are on the spectrum, as well as their families and caregivers.

Be understanding: Some people call autism an “invisible disability,” because you can’t tell if a person has the condition just by looking at him or her. In children, frustration and sensory stimulation can sometimes cause a child to have what appears to be a tantrum. High-functioning adults with autism may appear to be distracted or even rude in social interactions. When confronted with these situations, show grace and understanding, instead of becoming irritated or offended.

Educate yourself: There are many online resources for those who wish to educate themselves about autism spectrum disorders. Learning about autism is important for everyone, especially clergy and laypeople. Encourage those who work with young people and children in your congregation to develop an understanding of autistic spectrum disorders. These workers can, in turn, educate the children and teens that they work with about the challenges faced by peers on the spectrum.

Make accommodations: When possible, faith communities can accommodate the special needs of people with autism, as well as their families. Accommodations may include dimming the lights in classrooms, asking about communication preferences (some people with autism are more comfortable communicating in writing than on the phone), or providing a quiet room where an autistic person can decompress if feeling stressed.

Offer practical support: Parents of children on the autism spectrum are often very busy juggling their children’s special needs with other responsibilities. Faith community members can help these parents by offering assistance with chores and childcare.

If there are adult members of your congregation who are on the spectrum, they may also appreciate support and assistance with household tasks and, if they don’t drive, transportation. Some people with autism may appreciate your willingness to engage them socially, especially if they are self-conscious about their social skills. High-functioning adults with autism often have special interests and skills that your faith community may be able to put to use. Encourage these individuals to become volunteers.

Resources: [Advocate Health Care: advocatehealth.com](http://advocatehealth.com), [Autism Speaks: autismspeaks.org](http://autismspeaks.org), [The Autism Society: autism-society.org](http://autism-society.org)

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