

Autistic Women and Girls

Resources for Professionals

Employment

These resources have been collated from information collected through an online questionnaire, focus groups, interviews with individual practitioners and autistic women, and other recent research studies. Our aim is to summarise all this information, to present it in a succinct and useful form for busy professionals. Each resource contains a summary of key points, with links to appropriate items within the Right Click programme itself and other resources, from websites, online information and books. If you'd like more information on any of the areas covered, or have a specific enquiry, please contact us at rightclick@scottishautism.org

Key Messages

Autism and Asperger's Syndrome are covered under the Equality Act 2010 which requires what is termed 'reasonable adjustments'.

Autistic people, just like any others, have individual strengths and challenges - they may excel in some areas, and struggle in others. Qualities such as 'loyal', 'hard working', 'specialist' and 'focused' are often cited in relation to autistic workers and they may be great problem solvers and creative 'out of the box' thinkers.

Awareness of the issues, understanding of the individual's 'spiky profile' (abilities and challenges), reasonable workplace adjustments and active support from management can all make a great difference to the individual's health, wellbeing and ability to perform to their best in the workplace.

Autism and Employment

Autistic people may experience some issues around social communication and interaction; many also experience sensory processing issues and often have very high levels of anxiety. Elevated anxiety is likely to increase some of the coping behaviours in autistic individuals that others may find difficult to understand, such as repetitive behaviour or, 'stimming' or rigidity of thinking for example. When that anxiety is reduced, the ability to cope and function is improved for the individual.

Unfortunately, many workplaces are challenging for autistic adults. Recent research indicates an unemployment figure for autistic adults of 84%¹. This figure may reflect only those adults who have come to the attention of service providers, however it's possible there are others who have successfully found an employment niche. It's also possible there are other autistic adults who are in employment and struggling to cope with the challenges of the working environment.

Women have reported through the Scottish Women's Autism Network (SWAN), and in the Right Click survey and focus groups that they have not disclosed their autism at work for fear of being targeted or even of losing their jobs.

The workplace issues described by participants in our survey and focus groups can make it extremely hard for otherwise very capable women to stay in employment. About 50% of our questionnaire respondents said they had difficulties in retaining a job or had to leave.

Workplace Issues

Some of the common challenges autistic people report having to deal with in the workplace stem from cognitive processing differences for example, lack of routine at work, or unexpected or ongoing change.

“People read overwhelmed as rudeness or unwillingness, and don't understand that when I say "can't" I mean "can't", and that I will push myself and push myself until I crash. People get impatient when I don't understand what is being said (or not said) or am slow in processing. I am very intelligent and they think I am being obstructive if I don't respond at once. I have "come out" in my current workplace and there is a huge difference between the people who will now give me space and time and those who still think I am just being difficult or over-reacting.”

“Frequently having to deal with unplanned changes. Having to multi-task.”

“Poor communication from seniors, imprecise instruction. Uncertainty. All leading to a breakdown, long term sick leave and subsequent dismissal on the grounds of capability.”

What helps?

“Regular supervision with a respected manager.”

“Active support and understanding from management.”

“Managing my own workload so I can incorporate time out.”

Environmental Factors and Sensory Overload

What helps? Supporting the employee in adopting appropriate strategies such as being able to wear headphones while working, check nearby lighting and replacing with low-level lamp if necessary, discouraging the use of sprays in communal spaces (eg hairspray, perfume, room freshener etc). Try to position the autistic employee near an exit or a quiet corner.

Bullying and Harassment

People can be highly intolerant of ‘difference’; women who don’t conform to cultural expectations and norms report feeling they are under pressure or subjected to subtle forms of harassment or marginalisation that are not always easy to see or identify.

Respondents to our survey reported issues around not being able to conform to the group culture or workplace politics:

- too honest
- doesn’t share interests, doesn’t like gossip
- not being able to infer chain of command
- being too ‘by-the-book’

What helps? “Active support and understanding from management”

Perfectionism

- working hard to produce good results but then expected to reproduce the same high standards over and over

- low self-esteem
- other staff or employers not recognising the effort required
- stress, exhaustion

What helps? “Awareness. I understand now why I have certain difficulties, and can be more objective about my responses to situations instead of just feeling stupid and frustrated all the time.”

Difficulties Asserting Needs and Boundaries

What helps? “People giving me time and space and realising that, intelligent (and emotionally intelligent) as I may be, there are things I can't cope with and things I don't get.”

To learn more about autism in women and girls, register for our Right Click Women and Girls programme where there are in-depth discussions on employment from the perspective of autistic people and professionals.

References

¹ Office for National Statistics (2016) Dataset: A08: Labour market status of disabled people (20 July 2016)

Resources

Scottish Women's Autism Network: www.swanscotland.org

Equalities Act (2010). Legislation.gov.uk. (2010). Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

Hendrickx, S. (2015). Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age. Jessica Kingsley

James, L. (2017). Odd Girl Out: An Autistic Women in a Neurotypical World. Pan MacMillan

National Autism Project: <https://nationalautismproject.org.uk/the-report>

Right Click for Women and Girls: www.scottishautism.org/womenandgirls

Spectrum Women: Walking to the beat of Autism: <https://www.jkp.com/uk/spectrum-women-1.html>

National Autistic Task Force: <http://nationalautistictaskforce.org.uk/an-independent-guide-to-quality-care-for-autistic-people/>