

Supporting Autism in the Workplace

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Mission Statement

The Autism Program of Illinois serves and supports persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families through a coordinated network of providers, parents, and university programs while developing, utilizing, and sharing best and promising practices.

SERVICE LOCATIONS

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY - Charleston

EASTERSEALS CENTRAL ILLINOIS – Bloomington, Peoria

EASTERSEALS ROCKFORD – Rockford

GRUPO SALTO – Chicago

HAVE DREAMS – Evanston, Park Ridge

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY – Bloomington

KREIDER SERVICES – Dixon

RCADD – Chicago

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY – Carbondale

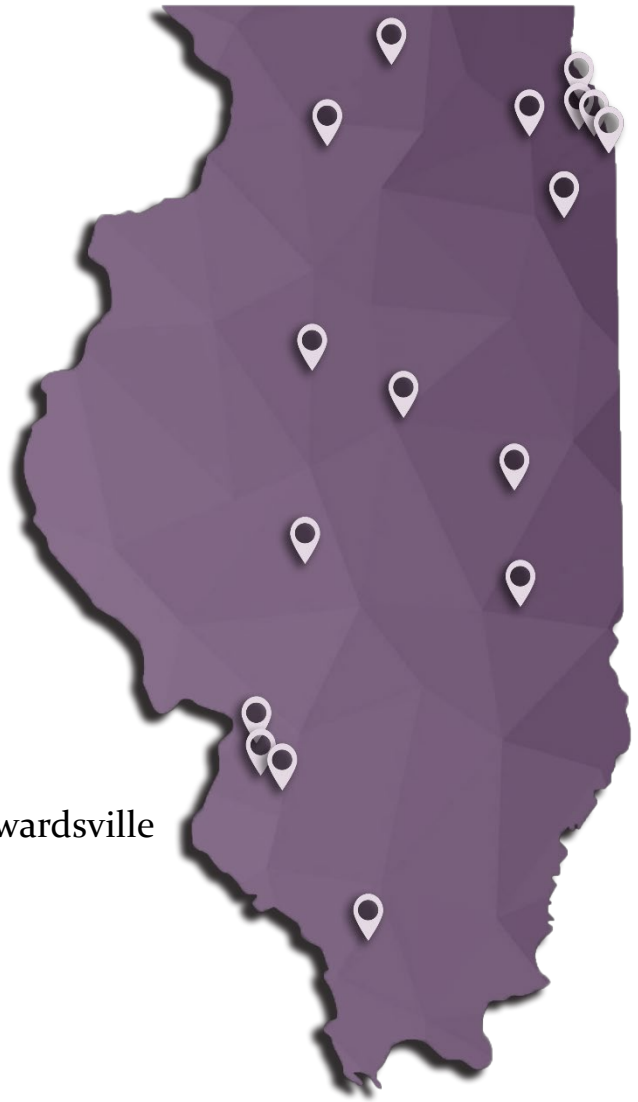
THE ANSWER, INC – Hillside

THE AUTISM CLINIC AT HOPE – Glen Carbon, Herrin, O'Fallon, Springfield, Vernon Hills, Edwardsville

TRINITY SERVICES – New Lenox

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS – Champaign/Urbana

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS – Chicago



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Services



Visit Our Website and Find Us On Social Media

The Autism Program of Illinois

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www.tap-illinois.org

TAP Illinois

TheAutismProgramIL

TAP of Illinois

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Learner Outcomes

- Participants will be able to describe autism and neurodiversity in workplace terms and challenge common myths.
- Participants will be able to identify strengths and barriers employees with autism may experience in the workplace.
- Participants will be able to recognize appropriate ways to discuss disclosure, offer support, and respond to accommodation needs.
- Participants will be able to apply clear communication, flexible practices, and psychologically safe team norms to build a more inclusive workplace.

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Autism Myths

- Have you ever heard any of these *myths* about autism?





- Individuals with ASD:
  - Will make no eye contact
  - Will not develop speech
  - Are geniuses
  - Vaccines cause autism
  - Academic success guarantees workplace success
  - An autistic employee who struggles with something is not capable of doing the job
  - Treating everyone exactly the same is always fair

Challenge assumptions by seeing the individual—not the myth.

What is The Autism Spectrum



Quick Learner

Duke

What is Autism?



- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurologically based developmental disorder caused by differences in the brain

- Research suggests that autism develops from a combination of environmental and genetic factors with onset in-utero or early childhood

- General characteristics include impairments in social interaction and communication skills combined with repetitive and/or restrictive behaviors/thoughts/interests. Each person with autism is affected in different ways and to varying degrees.

- Autism is a lifelong disorder.
- Autism occurs across all races, ethnicities and socioeconomic groups

- Evidence-based treatments can improve an individual's functioning over time

Prevalence of ASD

Surveillance Year	Birth Year	Number of ADDM Sites Reporting	Combined Prevalence per 1,000 Children (Range Across ADDM Sites)	This is about 1 in X children
2022	2014	16	32.2 (9.7 - 53.1)	1 in 31
2020	2012	11	27.6 (23.1-44.9)	1 in 36
2018	2010	11	23.0 (16.5-38.9)	1 in 44
2016	2008	11	18.5 (18.0-19.1)	1 in 54
2014	2006	11	16.8 (13.1-29.3)	1 in 59
2012	2004	11	14.5 (8.2-24.6)	1 in 69
2010	2002	11	14.7 (5.7-21.9)	1 in 68
2008	2000	14	11.3 (4.8-21.2)	1 in 88
2006	1998	11	9.0 (4.2-12.1)	1 in 110
2004	1996	8	8.0 (4.6-9.8)	1 in 125
2002	1994	14	6.6 (3.3-10.6)	1 in 150
2000	1992	6	6.7 (4.5-9.9)	1 in 150

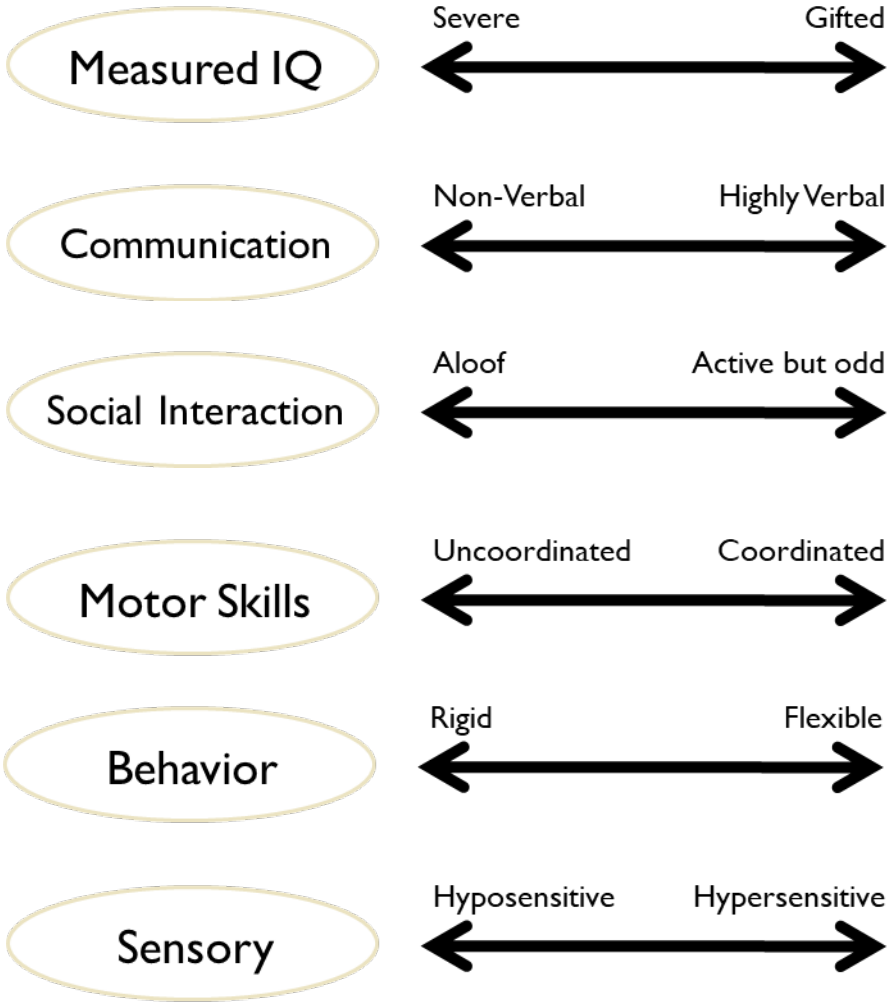
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Prevalence

- The CDC's most recent report, **April 2025, states that 1 in 31** children aged 8 are diagnosed with ASD.
- According to study published by NIH as of **2017 it was estimated that 1 in 45 adults 18-84** were living with autism
- Males dx 3x more often than females

Data and Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder | Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) | CDC

Autism – A Spectrum Disorder



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The “spectrum” means each individual has an uneven profile of abilities or an uneven skill set



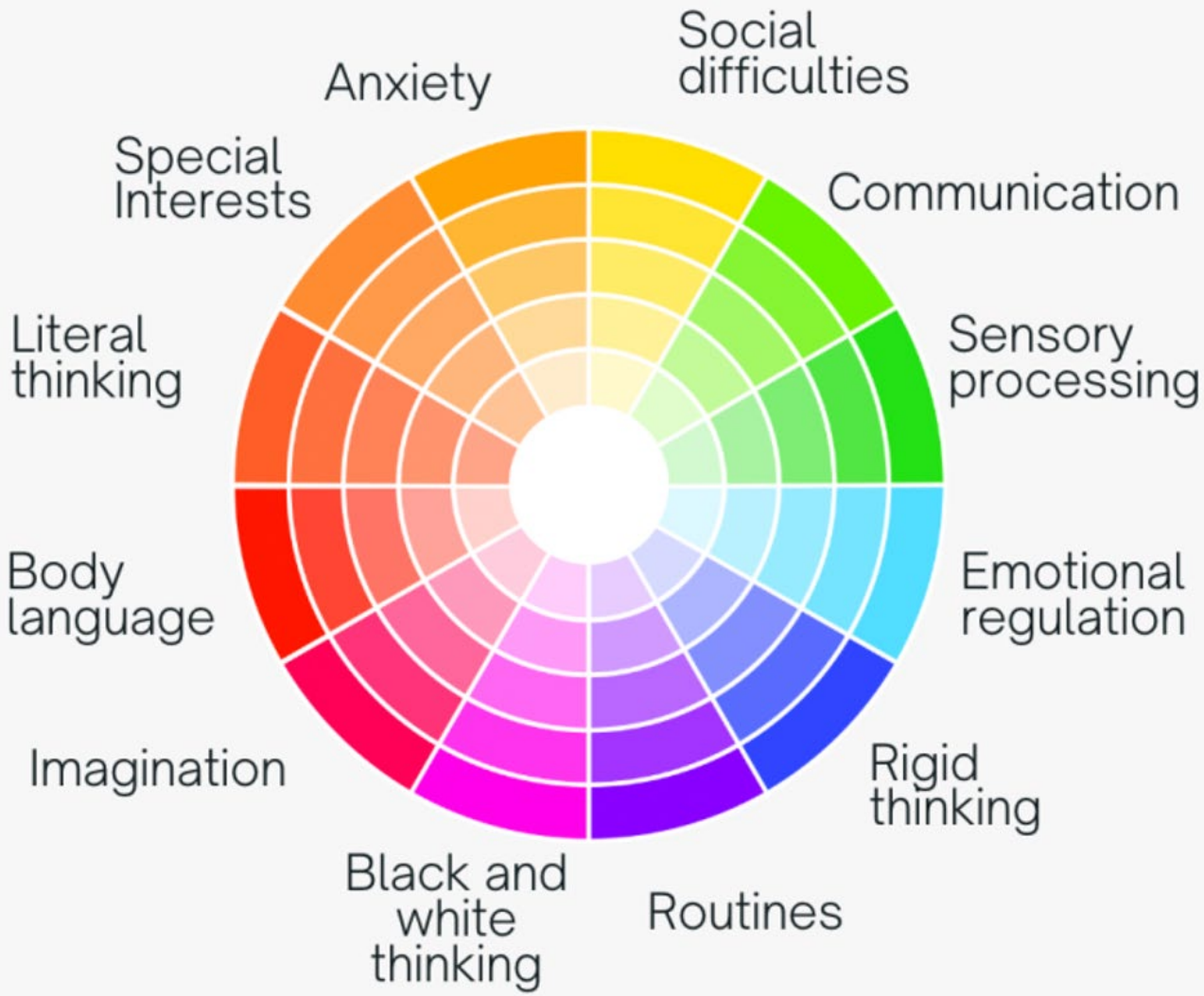
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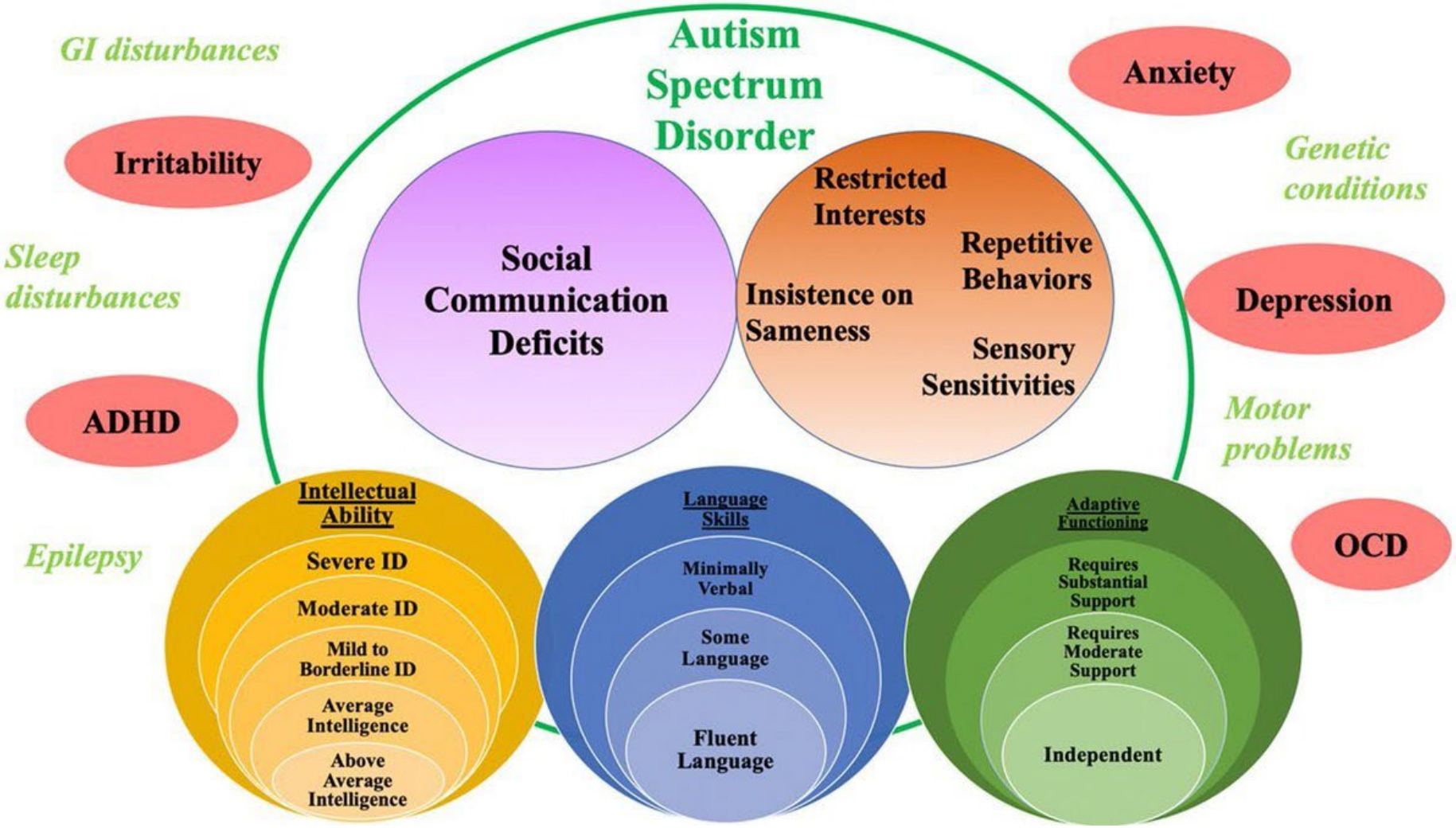
What people think the autism spectrum looks like:



What it actually looks like:



Autism is Complex and Requires Support



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The 3 Levels of Autism



Level 1

Requiring support

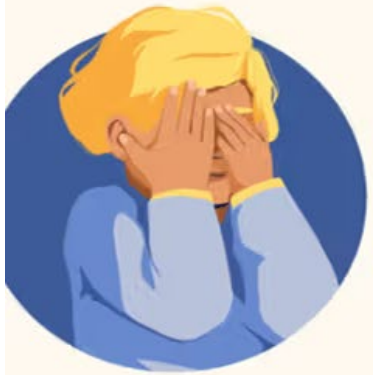
- Trouble understanding and following social rules
- Rigid or inflexible behavior
- Some stress during transitions
- May benefit from therapy or life skills coaching



Level 2

Requiring substantial support

- Atypical social behavior, like walking away mid-conversation
- High interest in specific topics
- Noticeable distress when faced with change
- May need school accommodations like reading help or social skills support



Level 3

Requiring very substantial support

- Severe communication deficits, such as being nonspeaking
- Repetitive behaviors like rocking or spinning
- Extreme distress when asked to switch tasks
- May need one-on-one time with an education assistant and may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools, like picture symbols

PsychCentral

infographic by Bailey Mariner


PBS
AUTISTIC VOICES

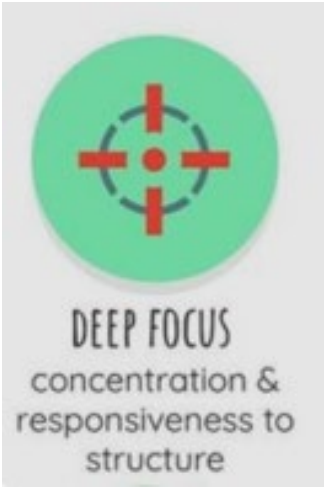
The Many Strengths of Autism

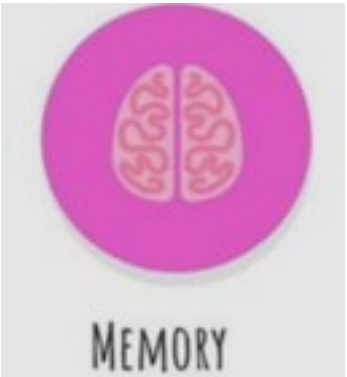






listen, look, learn
approach
fact finding





Absorb and
retain facts excellent long term memory superior recall





determination
challenge opinions



Social and communication differences (verbal and nonverbal)



Repetitive behavior, interests, or activities



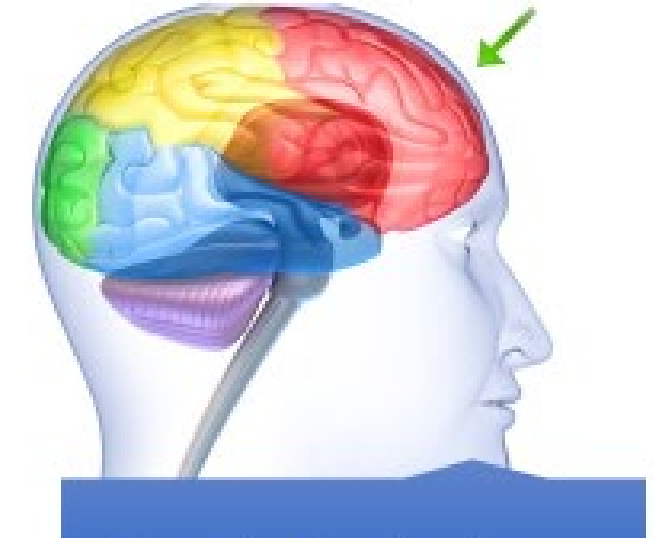
Attachment to sameness, routines, and behavior



Difficulty in making, maintaining, and understanding relationships



Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input



Executive function issues

Environment can create—or remove—barriers

The same polar bear. Two very different outcomes.

NATURAL HABITAT



ENVIRONMENTAL MISMATCH



The bear didn’t change. The environment did.

At work, ask: What barrier can we change?

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Challenges in the workplace

Common challenges can appear across social, sensory, and task demands.



SOCIAL + SENSORY

Unspoken social expectations

Sensory overload

Communication differences

CHANGE + PREDICTABILITY

Unpredictable demands & changes



ENERGY + WELL-BEING

Masking and autistic burnout

PLANNING + EXECUTION

Executive function challenges



Clear communication reduces workplace friction

Communication differences may affect how messages are understood, expressed, and processed.

WHAT IT CAN AFFECT

A capable employee may need more time to process or specificity—even when they understand the work.

Differences can appear in spoken language, nonverbal cues, tone, turn-taking, and processing speed.

BE DIRECT AND SPECIFIC

Use clear language, concrete requests, and defined expectations.

FOLLOW UP IN WRITING

Share agendas, key decisions, deadlines, and next steps.

ALLOW PROCESSING TIME

Pause after questions and offer time to respond before moving on.

CHECK SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Ask the person to summarize next steps; clarify without judgment.

Clear communication supports everyone without lowering expectations.

What would you do?

A missed deadline may reflect an unclear request—not a lack of ability.

THE SCENARIO

“Send it when you get a chance.”

The employee completes other work first.

The manager expected the item by Friday. The deadline is missed.

DISCUSS

1. **What assumptions might the manager make?**
2. **What is the actual barrier?**
3. **How could the instruction be rewritten?**

A clearer request names the task, deadline, priority, and what “done” looks like.

What would you do?

Vague feedback may create confusion—not improvement.

THE SCENARIO

“You need to be more professional in meetings.”

The employee listens but is unsure what behavior needs to change.

The employee continues behaving the same way.

DISCUSS

1. **What assumptions might the manager make?**
2. **What is the actual barrier?**
3. **How could the feedback be rewritten?**

“Professional” is often an interpretation rather than a specific behavior.

Executive functioning shapes how work gets done

It helps us plan, prioritize, remember, begin, shift, and complete tasks.

WHAT IT CAN AFFECT

A capable employee may know what to do—and still need clearer structure for when, where, and in what order.

Executive-function profiles vary. Focus on the observable work barrier, not assumptions about ability or effort.

Support the workflow—not assumptions about motivation.

MAKE PRIORITIES VISIBLE

Clarify what comes first, the deadline, and what “done” looks like.

BREAK WORK INTO STEPS

Use written instructions, checklists, milestones, and brief check-ins.

EXTERNALIZE TIME + MEMORY

Use calendars, reminders, timers, and written recaps—rather than relying on recall.

PLAN FOR TRANSITIONS

Give advance notice of changes, allow transition time, and confirm the new priority.

Clear structure can reduce friction without lowering expectations.

Disclosure is a personal choice

THE INDIVIDUAL DECIDES

- There is no single “right” time to disclose if ever.
- Medical information must be kept confidential.
- Do not ask whether someone has autism or about a disability’s nature or severity.

BETTER	**“What would help you participate fully or do your best work?”**
AVOID	**“Do you have autism?”**

Accommodations remove barriers

Individual support starts with the job barrier—not the diagnosis.

Work with the employee to choose a practical change, then check whether it works.

NOTICE THE BARRIER

Focus on the job or task—not assumptions about why someone is struggling.

ASK, DON'T DIAGNOSE

"Is there anything I can change or provide to help with this task?"

TRY + FOLLOW UP

Agree on a practical option, check whether it works, and revisit it as duties change.

START WITH SIMPLE OPTIONS

- Written instructions, visual reminders, and clear priorities
- Advance notice of changes and predictable routines
- Quieter space, lighting adjustments, headphones, brief breaks, Extra time during meetings to process information
- Flexible ways to communicate, learn, or demonstrate the work
- Modified scheduling or task structure when feasible

Personalize the support—and revisit it as duties change.

Building Inclusive Workplaces

Accommodations support individuals. Inclusive practices improve work for everyone.

BUILD INCLUSION INTO THE DEFAULT

Set team norms that make clarity, flexibility, and belonging part of everyday work.

Reduce barriers before someone has to make a special request.

Inclusive teams make it safe to ask, contribute, and be different.

MAKE EXPECTATIONS VISIBLE

Clarify priorities, deadlines, and expectations for success; follow up in writing.

OFFER FLEXIBLE PATHS

Allow different ways to communicate, focus, participate, and complete the task.

BUILD PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Make it safe to ask questions, seek help, raise concerns, and acknowledge mistakes.

MAKE SUPPORT ROUTINE

Train managers, invite feedback, and review team practices—not just individual requests.

Clear, flexible, respectful work benefits the whole team.


more
independent.

Let's talk Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity addresses the concept that humans are not neurologically "one size fits all." This means that it recognizes everyone's unique abilities and considers neurological differences. The neurodiversity movement is generally positive and inclusive.

- **Neurodiversity** describes the natural variation across human brains. People differ in how they process information, communicate, learn, focus, solve problems, and respond to sensory and social environments.

- **Neurodivergence** refers to natural differences in how a person's brain develops or functions, commonly associated with conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other cognitive or developmental variations. It is an umbrella term, not a medical diagnosis, and describes brains that diverge from what is considered neurotypical.

WHY IT MATTERS AT WORK

WIDEN ACCESS TO TALENT

Inclusive hiring and work practices prevent unnecessary barriers from screening capable people out.

LET PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE

Clear expectations, flexible communication, and appropriate support allow varied strengths and perspectives to show up.

STRENGTHEN BELONGING

When employees can get support without stigma, workplaces can improve wellbeing, retention, and trust.

Design for different ways of thinking—not one "right" way to work.

Online Supports

Organization for autism research Employment Support | Organization for Autism Research

Disability:IN Resources | Disability:IN - Neurodiversity at Work Playbook: Employee

Hire Autism Neurodiversity And Inclusion: What You Need To Know - Hire Autism

The Autism Program of Illinois- https://tap-illinois.org/

Chicago Autism Network- Chicago Autism Network

DHS office Locator- IDHS: Office Locator (state.il.us)

The AARTS Center at Rush- Autism Assessment, Research, Treatment & Services (AARTS) Center | RUSH- Autism Care | RUSH

The Arc of Illinois-The Arc of Illinois | Disability Assistance, Programs & Advocacy

Rhys Morgan - YouTube

Questions



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Students seeking academic accommodations- the UIS Office of Disability Services (ODS) in the Human Resources Building (HRB), Room 80
Ph. 217-206-6666
Email: ods@uis.edu
https://www.uis.edu/disability

All employees may contact UIS Access and Equity Office
Ph. 217-206-6222
Email: aeo@uis.edu.
https://www.uis.edu/aeo.

References

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Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder | Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) | CDC

National Center for Biotechnology Information

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