

Information about the aim group
Module 3
attachment

What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that is probably caused by a genetic problem and/or abnormal brain development. In the brains of people with autism, incoming information is improperly processed and stored. The social relationships and communication skills of a person with autism are both delayed and abnormal. Asperger syndrome and PDD-NOS are commonly occurring forms of autism.

Many autistic persons have little insight into their own handicap and limitations. They often have no realistic expectations regarding their own future life and career.

In addition, communicating with their employer, colleagues and customers is very difficult for them. Striking up a conversation is a struggle. Times when they are not at work (coffee breaks, lunch, after work) are particularly hard for them.

If an unforeseen situation disrupts their normal time or activity routine, they can have trouble dealing with this or can even panic. They often want to follow familiar procedures. This can irritate you or your colleagues. Sudden changes can often elicit fear. While one autistic person will sometimes display initiative, another will never do so.

There are also advantages:

- Autistic people are generally loyal employees and are not often sick.
- Boring work is not a problem for them; they enjoy routine.
- They like to have clarity regarding what is expected of them; they can then get on with their task.

Employees with autism do not see any connection between activities. If they have to start a new activity, training will be required. They have communication problems; misunderstandings are common. Because nonverbal cues often go unnoticed, assignments are then incorrectly interpreted. They often have no realistic picture of work per se.

It is very difficult for them to stand up for themselves, to request a day off, or to ask whether they could leave an hour earlier. They frequently have difficulty with verbal instructions, especially if these instructions are given gruffly. Their skills (fixations, for example) are often overestimated. If an autistic person loves working on a PC, this does not necessarily mean that he/she can enter data into a system without making a mistake.

In various situations, having a single contact person (coach, mentor or supervisor) at the workplace has proven very beneficial. This is a company employee who knows the autistic employee well and knows what to do when the symptoms of the disorder are more obvious than usual. This mentor can also act as the autistic person's spokesperson; when colleagues understand the situation, this will protect the autistic person from criticism or situations causing fear or anger.

Tips for mentoring employees with autism:

- the workplace needs to be structured in terms of space, time and resources.
- responsibilities should be clearly delineated.
- in general, the level of work should not be too complicated.
- instructions should be short and clearly stated; they might even be written out in simple steps.
- provide clearly stated agreements about work that make use of standard procedures.
- having a good rapport between mentor and employee is essential.
- assign the autistic person a permanent mentor and be sure that the autistic person knows who will replace his/her mentor should this be necessary.
- having a congenial working atmosphere is important. - many autistic persons will not be able to deal with a fast-paced, production-oriented environment.
- calling on another colleague to act as the autistic person's 'buddy' can sometimes be effective.

What is ADHD?

Your position of in-company mentor involves motivating and stimulating employees; you are more of a coach than a manager. In this capacity, you increase the employee's ability to work independently and teach him/her to be more confident in taking initiatives. Despite all your efforts, however, an employee may struggle or be unable to work independently. This may be due to certain behavioural disorders. This handout provides additional ways for you to learn to communicate more efficiently with these kinds of employees.

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) is the cause of a very common behavioural disorder. You may also have heard of ADD, a form of ADHD that does not include hyperactivity.

ADHD involves three important symptoms:

1: Attention problems

People with ADHD have difficulty keeping their attention on a task. They can be quickly distracted by various kinds of stimuli around them. This can be confusing for you because you notice that they can sometimes concentrate very well on certain activities, such as watching TV, working with a computer, etc.

2: Impulsiveness

Many adults with ADHD act before they think. They might, for example, provide an answer before the question is completed. They lack that inner control that helps them abstain from a behaviour.

3: Hyperactivity

Adults with ADHD have trouble sitting still, they can hardly stop talking – they just keep going on and on – and they find it hard to relax. On the other hand, their hyperactivity may also appear diminished but it is still there in the form of inner unrest.

People with ADHD may not display all of these characteristics. Some of them will only have problems with paying attention and remaining focused; for others, hyperactivity is the main difficulty. Among adults with ADHD, attention problems cause them the most trouble.

Someone with ADHD can find it very hard to follow up on an agreement. They can also be forgetful and have difficulty organising their work, their schoolwork, their housekeeping, etc. This may lead to problems at school, at work, and with friends and relatives. People with ADHD are often ashamed of their failures, negligence and carelessness and try to conceal these from others. Adults with ADHA often have a poor image of themselves and their abilities. Yet, people with ADHD may have positive characteristics; they can be very energetic, they are often creative, and they can be good at multitasking.

General symptoms of ADHD:

- being easily distracted
- having difficulty with details
- often failing to complete assignments
- being unable to plan
- being unable to concentrate
- being unable to organise
- being restless
- having trouble relaxing
- interfering with others (interrupting conversations)
- having trouble waiting their turn
- being forgetful
- doing (or wanting to do) several things at once
- being quickly disappointed
- being unable to keep on achieving
- having difficulty dealing with feedback
- going to bed late, waking up during the night, and having trouble getting up early

Tips for mentoring employees with ADHD:

- give the employee a workplace where he/she will be least interrupted.
- give the employee a digital calendar on the computer and teach him/her how to work with it.
- take a little time every day to talk with the employee about his/her work.
- give instructions slowly and clearly.
- communicate verbal agreements in writing as well.
- do not communicate too many tasks all at once because the employee will be unable to keep track of them.
- give positive feedback more often than usual.
- provide as much structure as possible.
- team the employee up with another employee who is good at planning.
- help the employee set priorities.
- always give a deadline for a task.

People with ADHD can have trouble dealing with things that they 'have' to do. This puts too much pressure on them and makes it harder for them to deal with their disorder. People with ADHD are also more likely to be oversensitive to criticism. They have a greater tendency to feel defensive as a result of your feedback, no matter how delicately you have communicated it. In these situations, however, always remain specific and straightforward.

With the right medication, ADHD can usually be kept very well under control.