

Autism and Church



Training Notes and Resources

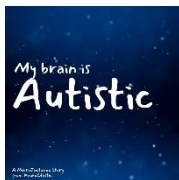


'For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful. I know that full well.'

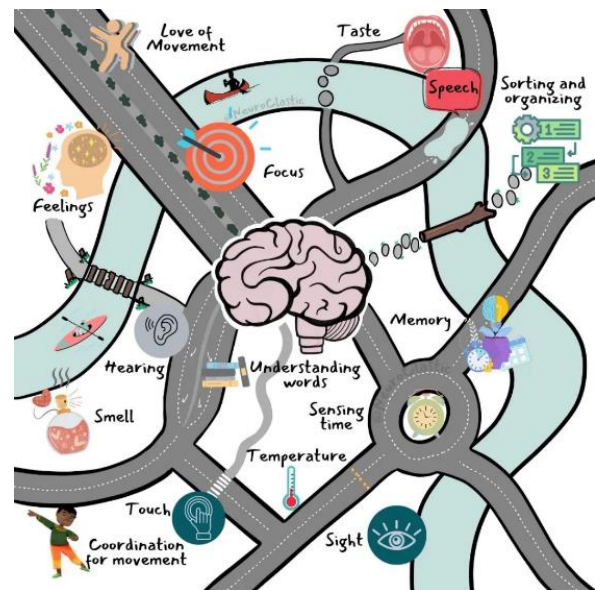
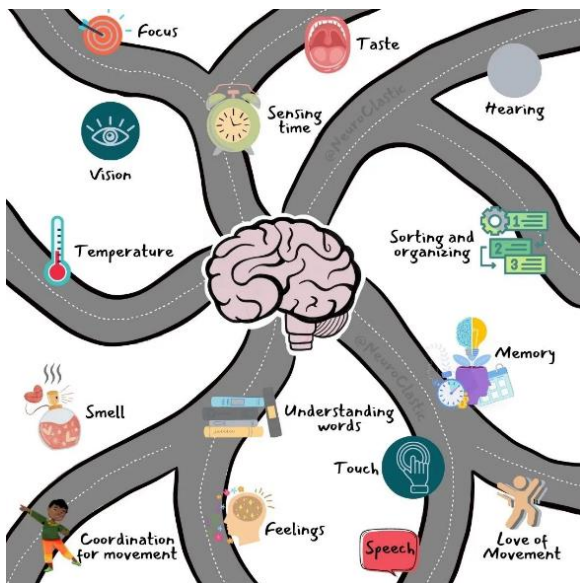
- Psalm 139:13-14

1. What is Autism?

A simple explanation is that the autistic brain is 'wired' differently.



Terra Vance has written a book 'My Brain is Autistic' with illustrations by Kate Jones. It is a wonderful visual explanation of autism which you can listen to, view online or download. For use with both children and adults: <https://neuroclastic.com/my-brain-is-autistic/>



At least 1% - probably much higher – of the population is autistic. It's not clear what causes autism, but genetics have a part to play. The suggestions that autism is caused by poor maternal relationships or by the MMR vaccine have been debunked. Autism is not a disease that can be cured. It is a lifelong neurological condition, woven through the autistic person and it looks very different from one person to another.

2. What Autism is Not:

- **A learning disability.** Some people with learning disabilities may also be autistic, and autism may make learning challenging – but some autistic people are extremely intelligent.
- **A mental illness.** However, some people who are autistic may experience anxiety or depression as a result of their environment or attitudes of society

- **More common among men than women.** Women may be better at 'masking' in order to fit in, but research seems to indicate that it is as common among women as men
- **A lack of empathy.** Autistic people can feel big emotions – but do not always know how to identify or express them.
- **A behavioural condition.** behaviour can be a form of communication, sometimes it's the only way that a person can communicate.
- **A scale from slightly to very autistic.** It is a spectrum of diverse challenges and abilities. A more recent symbol of autism is this infinity sign which shows the infinite diversity and variety of autistic people



3. There are three main areas of difference for an autistic person:

Feeling the world differently (Sensory sensitivities)

Connecting with the world differently (Processing information)

Seeing the world differently (Focus and attention)

Autism is a whole person experience, touching on mind, body, understanding, communication, relationships, environment, and of course the experience of church, and relationship with God.

Feeling the world differently (Sensory sensitivities)

This is one of the most important areas of autism for us to understand. All of us have sensory experiences, constantly, including what we can hear, see, taste, but also things like our awareness of our body, movement, balance and so on. And we are all different in the things we enjoy and, and the things we don't like.

Some sensory experiences we may **seek out**– such as the taste, smell and sensation of a good cup of coffee, yawning or wriggling in order to concentrate.

Some **we deliberately avoid** because they make us uncomfortable – e.g. certain types of lighting or noise. Most of the time however, we have brain mechanisms which allow us to filter out slightly irritating things: such as , dripping taps, traffic noise, smells etc so we can carry on with a conversation or a task in hand.

It seems that for autistic people, it's much harder to filter this sensory information – because of their mind mapping. Lights, sounds, taste, smells, the feel of clothing, even the sense of their own bodies – everything is happening all at once.

If you want an idea of how overwhelming this feels watch the 'Can you Make to the End' video from The National Autistic Society:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPknwW8mPAM#:~:text=Understand%20autism,%20the%20person%20and%20what%20to%20do.%20Visit>

Meltdowns, Shut Downs & Distressed behaviour

Triona's video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDD8-exFb-s>

Behaviour can be a form of communication. It may be telling us that something is going wrong for a person. This may lead to a meltdown (explosive) or shutdown (implosive)

When sensory input is overwhelming, upsetting, or painful, the person may have a 'meltdown' during which they:



- Cannot hear.
- Is in distress, not misbehaving.
- Is not DOING something to us – something is HAPPENING to them.
- Has no control
- Is experiencing something similar to a seizure.



DON'T: Talk too much, tell them to be quiet, shout or touch – the brain is too overloaded with sensory input already!



DO:

- **Premempt by making a plan to support in advance**
- **Pray.**
- Reassure.
- Offer a quiet, calm space.
- Be on hand to help with water etc.
- Keep everyone safe.
- Allow time to cool down and recharge
- Be there for family & carers.

Ideally, we should try to provide a **low sensory space** – calm colour, no wall art, low lighting and sound, where a someone could be guided to, to recover – even a simple pop-up black-out tent?



Self-regulation Autistic people may develop strategies for managing sensory processing by use of things like ear defenders, sunglasses, hoodies, ear pods, backpacks, soft toys, or things to fidget with, as well as tablets, phones, or even crochet or drawing.

All these things can help regulate the sensory experience. They help calm and enable listening and engagement.

Connecting with the world differently (Processing information & Communication)

- Behaviours can communicate many things: distress, peacefulness, anger, sadness, excitement, anxiety, happiness etc
- As we get to know people can we begin to understand what some of their body language, posture, expressions and behaviours might be telling us – it takes time.
- The ability to speak is complex, a whole package of elements that need to come together. Due to brain mapping or anxiety, some autistic peoples cannot speak or can only speak sometimes.
- Communication may be helped or supported using visuals, symbols, signing like Makaton, word boards, and technology.
- Autistic people are often straightforward and direct – which can sometimes be a bit more honest than we are comfortable with! Don't be offended.
- Body language, gestures, tone of voice, sarcasm, irony and metaphor can all be difficult for autistic people to 'decode'.
- E.g. "Invite Jesus into your heart" How big is Jesus? Will he fit? Will he stop my heart from working properly...
- Be clear, literal, and logical in communication.
- Open-ended questions can be hard: How was your day? Be specific: Did you enjoy your day? Juice or tea? Would you like to read or do a puzzle?
- Keep it simple, avoid information overload. It is tiring to process words.

Verbal communication:

- Use fewer words.
- Speak slowly.
- Repeat key words.
- Pause to give time to process and respond.
- Not too many questions
- Is the environment already busy or loud?
- Eye contact may be uncomfortable, talking side by side might be easier.

If an autistic person is comfortable or likes you, they may share at length about a special interest. This is great! But it is ok to thank them and let them know if you have other things you need to do. They may find a back-and-forth conversation difficult or pick up on cues – so be direct.

Visuals:

- Visuals help people to understand what is happening and what will happen next.
- help diminish anxiety.
- allow time to process.
- give a way to communicate needs or choices.
- can show when changes are going to happen.





Using visuals in church


- Put photos and/or videos on your website showing what the building, service and people are like.
- Make a visual timetable of the service: on the website, with laminated cards on a Velcro strip or along the bottom of the screen at the front of the church. After each activity the symbol can be removed, so the person can easily understand that something is finished.
- Bible stories, readings, songs and prayers can all be made with visuals.
- Offering choices of activities: Playdough, paint, lego or books? Tea, coffee, or water?
- Making easy-read notices to communicate upcoming events which may be out of the usual routine.





Come to the Table


 Sunday 5th March

 11 am at King's

 Sarah will be helping us explore the [Bible](#)

 Worship

 Communion

 Soup and cake for lunch

Free symbols for visual timetables:

<https://globalsymbols.com/> – a huge bank of symbols which can be made into picture and word boards and saved or printed as a PDF. These are incredibly useful and have quite a lot of Bible/spiritual images

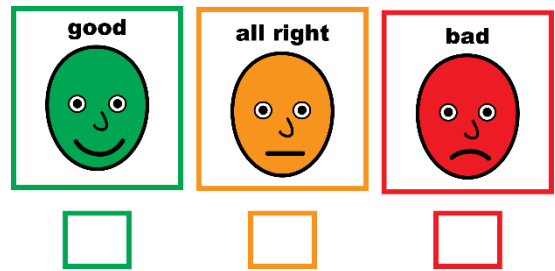
[Image Bank - Learning Disability Service \(learningdisabilityservice-leeds.nhs.uk\)](http://learningdisabilityservice-leeds.nhs.uk) More free symbols, a bit limited but also very useful

An example of a handout given to show a change of service.

Feelings

Autistic people have feelings! Sometimes very big feelings, but may have difficulty identifying, or knowing how to express them.

They may also find it tricky to identify other's feelings too, it can be hard to read and interpret facial expressions.



Communicate feelings in concrete ways. Pictures can be very helpful. Being open, talk about emotions, give them labels; John is angry because his lego model broke. He worked hard to make it.

Seeing the world differently (Focus and attention)

- Having a different kind of brain may also be good
- Autistic people often think and learn in different ways, bringing new perspectives.
- Often detail-oriented and highly observant.
- May have special interests which are great way to connect, motivate, build relationship and communicate.
- They can be creative thinkers and may be able to see options others overlook due to their enhanced ability to focus. Problem solvers.
- This can be great for churches too – I know of autistic people who have a special interest in hymns and hymnbooks. And in technology, or sorting out the car parking, or a special focus on theology.
- May offer unique insight into faith and knowing God
- May need a safe space to ask questions or share observations without being shut down
- Jesus befriended people at the margins – Zaccheus and his unique perspective



4. Strategies to support autistic people in church

- Be welcoming and friendly – it's better to make mistakes than just ignore people.
- What's the plan? Are you ready?
- Offer physical tour of the building if possible.
- Put photos or videos on website or social media.

- Get information about the person ahead of time, if possible, don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Consider sensory impact of lighting, sound etc
- Visual timetables of activities
- Offer sensory boxes or bags. Nice project for volunteers.
- Ensure leaders and volunteers are aware of the key issues, especially safety and distressed behaviour
- Think about a quieter, calm space.
- Be a friend – to the person, their families and carers – make church a safe, welcoming and kind space.

Bibles

It may be helpful to try a variety of Bibles, which may connect to special interests, be more visual or easier to read, such as:

New International Reader's Version (Accesible Edition by Biblica))

Good News Bible (Dyslexic friendly version)

Lego or Minecraft Bibles

The Action Bible (written like a graphic novel)

Quick and Easy read Bible from the Bible Trust

Free Bible Images – their website contains all sorts of artwork and photos for many Bible passages.

Sensory Experiences – more than words!

- There are many moments in Scripture where God communicates to people through their senses: the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, water from the rock, manna and quail, the burning of incense and sacrifices, the still small voice, the music of the Psalms, anointing oil etc
- Jesus touching people, speaking, listening, being with his followers on the mountain, having meals, in a boat, in a garden, washing feet...
- Two major sacraments: baptism in water and remembering Christ in the taking of bread and wine – both are sensory experiences.
- Autistic people both **avoid and seek sensory experiences** – and so we in knowing what is enjoyable, we can offer sensory experiences too as ways of experiencing the richness of Scripture – such as things to handle, to smell, to taste, or sounds.
- Godly Play <https://www.godlyplayscotland.co.uk/>
- Alma Autism <https://www.almaautism.uk/>

- Storytelling, artwork – looking at or making, drama, actions, use of simple props can also be very helpful and meaningful.

Walking in Faith

- Trust that God is at work! Pray! Ephesians 2:8 *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God”*
- Another church might be a better fit! Liturgical, Gospel Hall or relational and relaxed? Maybe outdoors?
- Is there a space for asking questions?
- Be prepared for an unconventional journey – together.
- Be a friend.
- Encourage growth in knowing Jesus, perhaps in smaller groups.
- Look for ways autistic people can contribute to the life of the church: everyone can serve – 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 *“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”*
- Be sensitive in offering prayer: autism is part and parcel of a person – and offering ‘healing’ may be offensive. Pastoral concerns such as prayer for anxiety, difficulties with school, etc are more likely.
- **Encourage – and be encouraged!** Our churches are full of autistic followers of Jesus, who may well be helping the body of Christ to flourish through their faithfulness, knowledge, friendship, and insights.



What is the one thing you could do right away to start making your church more autism friendly?

Websites:

Through the Roof <https://throughtheroof.org/>

Check out their videos on You Tube: [TTR Changes Lives - YouTube](#) especially Triona's video on supporting individuals with autism: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjWGNTeaFas>

[National Autistic Society \(autism.org.uk\)](http://NationalAutisticSociety.org.uk)

[Home - Aslan \(tonbridgebaptist.church\)](http://Home-Aslan.tonbridgebaptist.church)

<https://additionalneedsalliance.org.uk/>

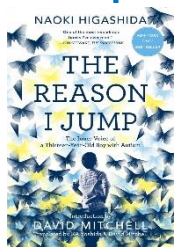
[Centre for Autism and Theology | The School of Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#) also their podcasts and webinars advertised here: <https://www.facebook.com/ResourcingChristianCommunities>

A wealth of information about many aspects of autism, especially for families <https://www.thepineshighland.com/#gsc.tab=0>

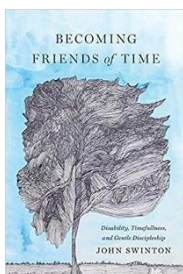
Makaton for church and worship:

<https://beckymakatontutor.co.uk/> - she has a number of free videos on YouTube

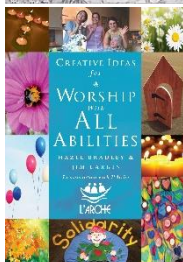
Helpful reading & viewing



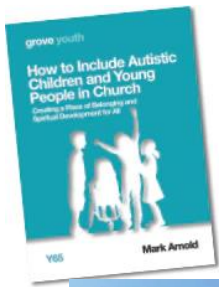
The Reason I Jump – book [The Reason I Jump: one boy's voice from the silence of autism By Naoki Higashida | Used | 9781444776775 | World of Books \(wob.com\)](#) and DVD (Can also find on Disney+) [The Reason I Jump \[DVD\] \[2020\]: Amazon.co.uk: DVD & Blu-ray](#)



[Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship \(Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability\) eBook : Swinton, John: Amazon.co.uk: Books](#)



All Ability Worship Ideas: [Creative Ideas Worship With All Abilities \(eden.co.uk\)](#)



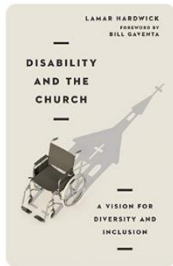
Mark Arnold booklet:

[Y 65 How to Include Autistic Children and Young People in Church: Crea – Grove Books](#)



Love Surpassing Knowledge by Naomi Graham (a Christian OT) – full of practical information and spiritual encouragement – highly recommended.

You can also watch a video of her on Through the Roof's You Tube Channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbCG2CWzoOU>



Dr. Lamar Hardwick 'The Autism Pastor' Disability and the Church