let's talk about mental health
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BUSINESS CLUB

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Mental Health in your Workplace: Topics and Issues

Autism

What is autism?

Did you know that an estimated 700,000 people in the UK have autism, and in March 2022 there were 103,215 open referrals for suspected autism?

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition, characterised by differences in social skills, communication and behaviour.

This means that people with Autism experience differences in the way they communicate and interact socially, and their behaviour may be repetitive or highly focussed.

People with Autism also tend to experience differences with their senses that can affect the way they feel about and respond to their surroundings. Autism is a spectrum disorder which means it affects different people in different ways and can range from mild to severe. It is sometimes called ASD.

Autistic adults may:

- Find it hard to understand what others are thinking or feeling
- Get very anxious about social situations
- Seem blunt, rude or not interested in others without meaning to
- Find it hard to say how they feel
- Like to have the same routine every day and get very anxious if it changes
- Not understanding social "rules", such as not talking over people
- Avoid eye contact
- Get too close to other people, or get upset if someone doesn't respect their personal space
- Notice small details, patterns, smells or sounds that others do not
- Have a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities
- Like to plan things carefully before doing them

What can you do to help an employee with autism?

- Give clear and logical rules and expectations
- Provide a relaxation space in the workplace: e.g. a quiet room

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- Reduction in sensory distraction/overload in the workplace: e.g. maximise natural light, enable easy control of light and temperature, reduce strong smells, provide screens for desk or headphones
- Provide information about autism, and about support services, available so that all workers can access it
- Provide all instructions and policies to be written and communicated clearly and accurately
- Give tools to assist personal work organisation, for example visual timetables, organiser apps
- Provide an organised work schedule
- Include autism in harassment and bullying policies, to minimise harassment and bullying of autistic workers and so that managers or employees who bully or discriminate against autistic workers are dealt with appropriately.
- Provide confidentiality and trusted support with open and honest conversations

Reasonable adjustments for individual autistic workers might include:

- Paid time off when needed
- Fixed hours rather than variable shifts
- Reducing specific sensory stimuli in the workplace, e.g. locating that individual's workstation in a quieter or less bright part of the office
- Extra breaks to enable relaxation
- Individual support where schedules are unavoidably disrupted and when changes are introduced
- A clear routine and work schedule
- A personal workstation (rather than sharing a workstation or 'hot-desking')
- Relaxation of triggers for disciplinary action for matters such as sickness absence or mistakes arising from executive function impairment
- Additional training time off for treatment/appointments, as part of a policy for disability leave
- Re-allocating some work to colleagues, with their agreement.

Sources and Further Reading

What is Autism? - Autism Association of Western Australia

Signs of autism in adults - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Making workplaces autism-friendly (autismhampshire.org.uk)

Employing autistic people (autism.org.uk)

Autism Statistics, April 2021 to March 2022 - NDRS (digital.nhs.uk)