

Brief Introduction to Autism

According to the National Autistic Society, there are about 700,000 people in the UK living with an ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) condition, that is about 1:92 people. There has been a steep rise in the numbers of people diagnosed with ASD over the last twenty years or so, while this may look like there has been an increase in the proportion of people in the population with ASD, most researchers suggest that this is mostly because of better and earlier diagnosis rather than actual increase in those who live with the condition.

Definition of Autism

The term “autism” and its use to describe a neurodevelopmental (to do with the way the brain develops) disorder is well known today, but less than 100 years ago there was little understanding and a confusion about the nature of the condition. Even the term

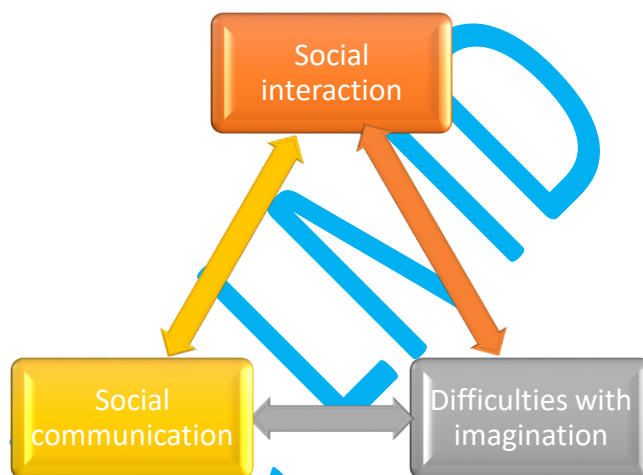
“Autism” which was derived from the Greek for self, meaning “self-centred” or “self-obsessed” is inaccurate, as was the idea that there was a relationship to a type of childhood schizophrenia or that the child had somehow been the victim of a cold and uncaring mother labelled as “refrigerator mothers”

Following work in the mid-20th century by two doctors, Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner, the former working in Germany and interested in the high functioning condition which now bears his name, the latter working in the United States, a proper scientific investigation of autism began.

Although Kanner published his first paper in 1943ⁱ real understanding only became apparent from as recently as the early 1960's. It is now agreed that while there are several sub categories, the accepted definition of autism is:

“Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that prevents individuals from properly understanding what they see, hear and otherwise sense. This results in problems of social relationships, communication and behaviour.”

It is not an illness and cannot be “cured” or “treated” though some people may take medication for other difficulties which they may have alongside their autism, for example to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Having other difficulties alongside autism is known as “co-morbidities” and there are many of these which will be discussed later.



The Autism Triad

Kanner and other researchers noted a pattern of difficulties common to all of their patients. This became known as the “Triad of Impairments”. The term “impairment” is a negative label which suggests that the characteristics are always negative, which they are not.

Not all people who have autism are the same or have the same difficulties. A common myth is that everyone who has autism has a “special talent” the so called “autistic savant” a person trapped within themselves except for an extraordinary ability – to play the piano, paint or like Dustin Hoffman’s character in the film “Rainman”, ability to memorise numbers. Autistic savants are as rare as gifted people in everyday life.

These days it is less common to group all people together under the single name “autism” but use the term “autistic spectrum disorder” (shortened to ASD) instead. This better reflects the fact that the condition is a spectrum and has a range of expression in individuals.



Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise from the 1988 film “Rainman” for which Hoffman won the best actor Oscar for his portrayal of autistic savant Raymond Babbitt.

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There are also more males diagnosed with ASD than women. Some experts attribute this to the genetics of autism, with males being more vulnerable to sex-linked genetic conditions, others suggest that because the condition presents differently in women and they are less likely to “stand out” at school or other social places, there is a general tendency to underdiagnose females with ASD. This will be explored further in later sections.

Word Count 700

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ⁱ Kanner L (1943). "Autistic disturbances of affective contact". *Nerv Child*. **2**: 217–50.

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