

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTISM

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a set of developmental disorders of the brain that make it difficult for individuals to communicate and socialize with others and cause individuals to engage in repetitive behaviors or have extreme interests. The term “spectrum” refers to a wide span of symptoms individuals can display.

There is a range of severity, with some individuals being mildly affected and others being severely impaired. Some individuals with autism have intellectual disability while others can be very bright and have special talents.

There are other psychological characteristics that can be associated with ASD, including difficulties with behavior, activity level and attention, and medical conditions including gastrointestinal, sleep, and motor coordination difficulties.

WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

Researchers are learning more about the causes of autism, whereas in the not-so-distant past, we knew very little. Researchers are investigating both genetic and environmental factors involved in autism and how a combination of these factors can lead to autism.

Geneticists now know there is no one genetic explanation for autism and that there are number of rare gene changes, called mutations, that are associated with autism. More than a hundred autism risk genes have been identified, but only in a small portion of cases can a specific genetic cause be identified.

Environmental risk factors are still being investigated. Many factors are thought to occur before birth including a mother and/or father's age at time of conception, maternal illness during pregnancy, and extreme prematurity and very low birth weight. Other environmental factors include maternal exposure to pesticides and air pollution. Many individuals with these risk factors, however, have children without autism, therefore it is a complex interplay between these factors and genes that increase the risk of having a child with autism.

IS THERE A CURE FOR AUTISM?

Currently, there is no cure for autism. It is considered a lifelong disability, however there is a lot that can be done to improve the functioning and quality of life of individuals with autism. Research suggests that early intervention can have significant benefits to individuals with autism and their families. There are also a number of treatments and supports, however, which improve the lives of individuals at any age. Some individuals and supporters of the Autism Rights Movement do not advocate finding a cure for autism or eradicating autistic traits, but rather supporting individuals for who they are and helping them develop coping skills.

CAN INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM LIVE NORMAL ADULT LIVES?

There is a wide spectrum of functioning levels and capabilities in individuals with autism. Some individuals need high levels of support and may live in a group home as an adult. Approximately one fourth of individuals with autism are nonverbal and approximately 40% have intellectual disability. These individuals may attend a day program or work in a sheltered workshop. They likely will not have families of their own.

Other individuals may need little or no support. They may live on their own or with family members. While many individuals with autism struggle with social relationships, some have long lasting friendships and get married. Some have families of their own.

There is also a wide range of employment options for adults with autism. Some individuals are experts in their field while others may work part time or be underemployed. Many individuals with autism have good employment skills such as reliability, accuracy, and being detail oriented. Jobs that have social demands, require excellent organizational skills, or are fast paced, however, tend to be more difficult.