

# Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

## What is ASD?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a complex, lifelong developmental condition that typically appears during early childhood and can impact a person's social skills, communication, relationships, and self-regulation. There is no known single cause for Autism, but it is generally accepted that it is caused by differences in brain structure or function. Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in Autistic individuals compared to in neurotypical development.

The DSM-5 is used by clinicians to diagnose Autism Spectrum Disorder with the criteria requiring that the core features of Autism be present in early childhood. However, for some people, the symptoms may not fully manifest until social demands exceed the person's capacity to cope with them. In addition, challenges may be masked by learned coping strategies and support.

## How do we assess it?

Type of Assessment	Assessment Options	Hours involved	Components	What is this useful for
Autism Spectrum Disorder Assessment	Comprehensive	Approx. 4-6 hours of assessment & 4-6 hours of report writing	Clinical interview, cognitive testing (i.e. WAIS-IV/WISC-V, ADOS-2 or other ASD assessment + Others), questionnaires and report	Gold standard assessment for ASD that is useful to gain diagnostic clarification regarding ASD. Also provides an assessment of IQ and recommendations
ASD and ADHD Assessment	Comprehensive Plus	Approx. 5-7 hours of assessment & 5-7 hours of report writing	A combination of the comprehensive ASD and ADHD assessment above	A detailed assessment to gain diagnostic clarification regarding ASD and ADHD and to determine cognitive strengths and weaknesses. Provides strategies

## How do we manage and support people with Autism?

Current treatments for Autism seek to reduce symptoms that interfere with daily functioning and quality of life. Autism affects each person differently, meaning that individuals have unique strengths and challenges and different treatment needs. Many autistic individuals need help in learning how to act in different types of social situations. They often have the desire to interact with others, but may not know how to engage friends or may be overwhelmed by the idea of new experiences. They also may have difficulties navigating romantic and peer relationships.

There are many types of treatments available and at Hardwick Psychological Services we typically undertake interventions and support for individuals classified as Level 1. These approaches generally can be broken down into the following categories, although some treatments involve more than one approach:



### **Behavioural and Psychological approaches:**

- Behavioural approaches focus on changing behaviours by understanding what happens before and after the behaviour.
- Behavioural approaches have the most evidence for the management of symptoms of autism.
- Psychological approaches can help Autistic individuals cope with anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.
- Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is one psychological approach that focuses on learning the connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.
- During CBT a therapist and the individual work together to identify goals and then change how the person thinks about a situation to change how they react to the situation.

### **Social-Relational approaches:**

- Social skills are the rules, customs, and abilities that guide our interactions with other people and the world around us. In general, people tend to develop social skills in the same way they learn language skills- naturally and through experience. This allows them to build a social “map” of how to act in situations and with others. For Autistic individuals it can be harder to learn and build up these skills, meaning they often have to guess what the social "map" should look like.
- Social skill development can include:
  - Direct or explicit instruction and "teachable moments" with practice in realistic settings
  - Focus on timing and attention
  - Support for enhancing communication and sensory integration
  - Learning behaviours that predict important social outcomes like friendship and happiness

### **Pharmacological approaches:**

- There are no medications that treat the core symptoms of Autism.
- Some medications treat co-occurring symptoms that can help Autistic individuals function better. For example, medication can also help manage co-occurring psychological conditions such as anxiety or depression, in addition to medical conditions such as seizures, sleep problems, or stomach or other gastrointestinal problems.

Individuals can self-refer to us for assessment and/or therapy or they can also be referred by their current treating practitioners.

