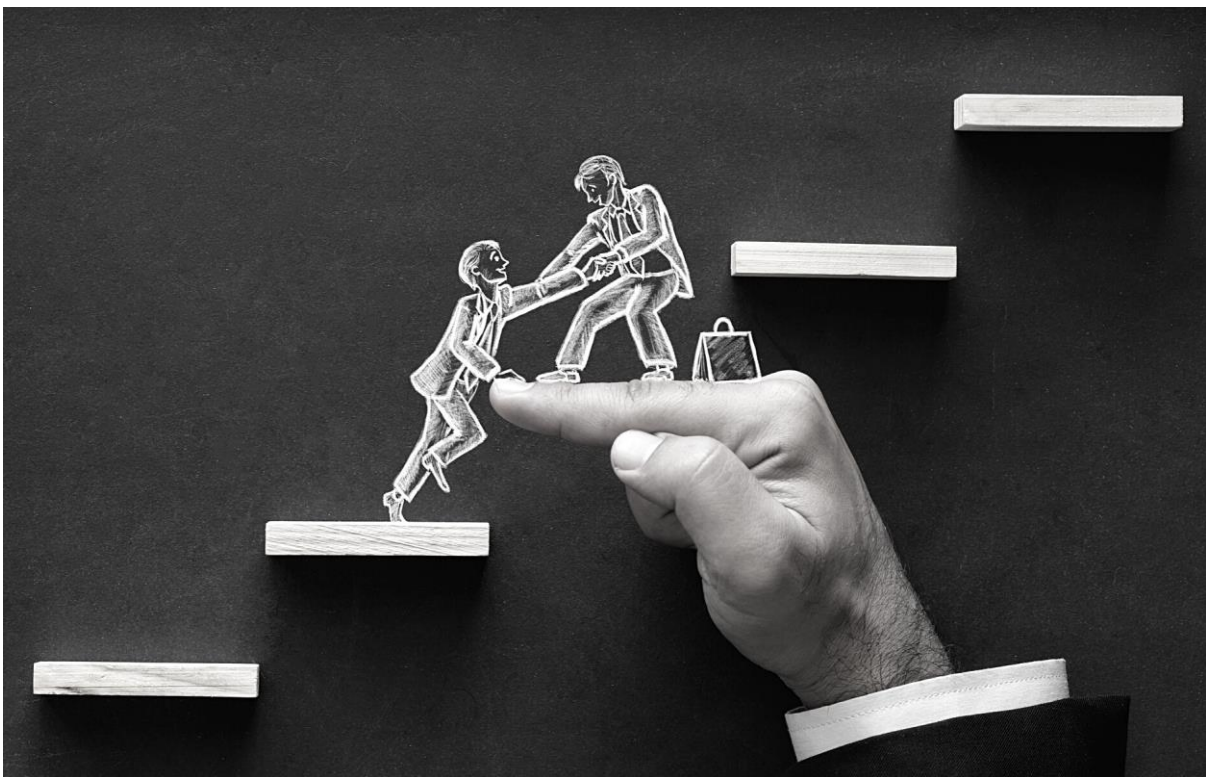


Workplace Scenarios



Foreword

This document gives some real-life examples of workplace behaviour that employment consultants and employers have sought an understanding of.

All behaviour has a reason. This document hopes to provide an understanding of the reasons why the behaviour is happening so we can better support autistic employees.

This resource has been written by a psychologist who has expertise in autism and anxiety.

The characteristics inherent with autism vary greatly from person to person, and as such every individual's experience of autism is different. The characteristics discussed in this document do not apply to every autistic person. It is important to treat each person on their merits.

Table of contents

Foreword	i
Table of contents	ii
Scenario 1: Talking too much	3
Scenario 2: Stimming	4
Scenario 3: Difficulty coping with change.....	5
Scenario 4: Repetitive actions	6
Scenario 5: Not looking me in the eye	7
Scenario 6: Not engaging with colleagues	8
Scenario 7: Coming across as rude	9
Scenario 8: Easily distracted	10
Scenario 9: Lack of motivation	11
Scenario 10: Sensitivity to sound	12
Scenario 11: Managing conflict at work	13
Scenario 12: Identifying triggers	14
Scenario 13: My employee doesn't ask for help	15
Scenario 14: Thinking negatively and catastrophising situations	16
Scenario 15: Meltdowns.....	17
Scenario 16: Shutdowns	18
Scenario 17: Excessive phone usage.....	19

Scenario 1: Talking too much

'My employee spends a lot of time talking about their special interest, to the point that it distracts them from their work and disrupts their colleagues.'

Some individuals on the autism spectrum can become hyper-focused on particular topics or areas of interest. This directed focus can often be especially beneficial in a workplace, in terms of having confidence in an individual completing a specific task thoroughly and precisely.

Autistic individuals might start talking about their own special interests if they have difficulty understanding how to make conversation with others. Due to their inherent difficulties reading non-verbal social cues, individuals on the spectrum are often unaware that others are not interested or are bored by their special interests.

If colleagues raise concerns regarding regular disruptions, it is important to directly address this with the individual. Specifically, address the importance of engaging with colleagues, with varied topics of conversation, at appropriate times. Recommend asking about others and their areas of interest.

Scenario 2: Stimming

'I have noticed my employee engaging in unusual behaviours such as hand flapping or spinning.'

There may be several explanations as to why an individual on the spectrum may engage in stimulatory (stimming) behaviours. To some degree, we all engage in stimming behaviours, such as clicking a pen, tapping our foot or chewing our nails. For an individual on the spectrum, engaging in stimming and other behaviours may serve the purpose of:

- reducing anxiety
- assisting to focus/concentrate on tasks or instructions (reducing all other sensory input)
- demonstrating excitement/enjoyment
- or because it feels good.

Again, stimming behaviours should never be judged. If they do occur in inappropriate contexts (for example, hand flapping in the middle of an important meeting), it would be appropriate to speak privately with the individual. Offer understanding for the need to engage in such behaviour and alternatives of how the individual can stim (for example, excuse themselves from the meeting to flap their hands outside the room or utilising some type of stimming toy, such as a stress ball or similar, if this is a workable alternative).

Scenario 3: Difficulty coping with change

'I have noticed that my employee appears to have difficulties coping with change.'

For many individuals on the autism spectrum, they are seeking and attempting to create predictability and routine in their day-to-day lives. When unexpected changes occur that are not anticipated and out of the influence of the individual (for example, a change in the day or time of an appointment, a changing deadline for a work task), the individual's level of stress or anxiety can increase, and subsequently impact their work performance and concentration/focus.

Often, being able to predict what is happening day-to-day helps to reduce an autistic individual's anxiety and stress. In addition, individuals on the spectrum can experience difficulty transitioning from tasks, especially if they are unable to complete one task/activity before moving on to the next.

As much as practicable, assist the individual on the spectrum to create their own routine (in the workplace) or provide them with a breakdown of daily tasks. Ideally, this should be presented visually. That way, the individual on the spectrum can refer to the list of tasks if they become distracted or lose focus.

Scenario 4: Repetitive actions

'I have noticed that my employee will complete a certain activity regularly, and in a very ordered, precise and similar way each time.'

The need to complete certain activities in a precise and particular manner may relate to creating predictability and routine in an otherwise changeable and unpredictable world. Seeking and creating predictability and routine may be just one means in which an individual on the spectrum can manage their anxieties around uncertainty.

Some situations or tasks call for the need to be precise and exact, whilst in other situations it may impact on the need for efficiency. It is important to recognise the strengths of the individual and, wherever possible, enable them to demonstrate their strengths of precision and thoroughness in relation to work tasks. Where their role may require a degree of efficiency, introducing a visual task breakdown of the steps required may assist the individual on the spectrum to perform to their potential.

Scenario 5: Not looking me in the eye

'My employee appears to not be looking at me when I am speaking with them.'

For many individuals on the spectrum, looking others directly in the eyes is extremely stressful and can sometimes be painful. Often, being required to look another person in the eyes also requires attending to other non-verbal communication cues, which may be to the detriment of attending to the content of what the other person is saying.

While neurotypicals (non-neurodiverse people) understand the importance of looking others in the eyes when they are speaking, an individual on the spectrum can be attending to something else and still understand what the other person is saying. By doing this, they can focus their attention on the content of what is being said, rather than the socially appropriate behaviours such as eye contact, smiling to encourage the other person, etc.

Scenario 6: Not engaging with colleagues

'I have noticed that my employee doesn't engage with others, such as looking at them when they are speaking, asking about others or participating in shared social activities.'

For many individuals on the autism spectrum, they can find it difficult to know how to behave in social situations or what social behaviour (for example, smiling to encourage others when speaking) is useful. Often the absence of appropriate social behaviours and interactions is interpreted by neurotypicals (non-neurodiverse people) as rudeness or disinterest.

Autism is defined as a neurobiological condition. As such the neural pathways relating to social skills and behaviour are wired differently. Many individuals on the spectrum seek to engage with others but often don't have the inbuilt rules to know how to do it, successfully.

Rather than explicitly instructing the individual on how to behave like others, understand the difference in how they engage with others and what the individual is seeking when engaging with others.

In a workplace situation, ensure that invitations to social events are extended to them. Provide an explanation as to the importance of returning a colleague's salutation of 'good morning' or 'hello'. Eye contact may not always be present during social exchanges. It is important to remind others that the individual is listening even if they are not looking at them.

Scenario 7: Coming across as rude

'I have noticed that my employee is often direct when speaking with others. Some individuals have mentioned that they often come across as rude.'

At times, the words or actions of an individual on the autism spectrum may be interpreted or perceived as rude, even though the intent was anything but rude. Unless it is explicitly brought to the individual's attention, they may not be aware that they have offended others. This may be due to the inherent difficulties autistic people have in understanding how others may think or feel, based on their actions.

Rather than shame the individual for their rudeness, it is more effective to point out to the individual how their behaviours and/or words may have been interpreted by other people as rudeness. Explain more appropriate ways to get their message across that is considerate of the others' viewpoints and their feelings. This can sometimes be achieved by role playing an example or scenario.

Scenario 8: Easily distracted

'I have noticed that my employee can become distracted from tasks. It is sometimes difficult or takes a considerable amount of time for them to get back on task.'

Many individuals on the autism spectrum can demonstrate considerable focus and concentration on activities or tasks related to special interests or work activities that complement their unique skill set. Often, individuals may become distracted when they experience interruptions from others, or interruptions from their sensory environment. Distractions may also occur if the individual is experiencing anxiety or stress. This might be related to not understanding what is required of them (for example, if instructions from a task/activity are unclear). Distractions may occur when an individual is transitioning from one task to the next.

In any event, creating a visual breakdown of the task, its individual steps and related timeframes for completion can assist the individual to understand what is expected, and potentially reduce their stress or anxiety.

If sensory stressors are identified by the individual, wherever practicable, make sure to work with the individual to develop strategies to reduce the impact of these stressors and the potential for repeated distractions.

In instances where the individual may become distracted by interacting with others or interacting with others beyond an acceptable amount of time, it is appropriate to let the individual know this, while acknowledging their efforts to engage with others. By providing a reasonable explanation as to why social interactions need to be limited during work time, it enables the individual to regulate their behaviour.

Scenario 9: Lack of motivation

'I have noticed that my employee showed initial enthusiasm but now appears to not demonstrate the same level of enthusiasm and has not been attending work.'

Given that many individuals on the autism spectrum have experienced difficulties with acceptance from peers and accessing opportunities in terms of employment, they may often be reluctant to speak up if they lack understanding of a task or have inherent difficulties navigating the social landscape.

Absences may be caused by a combination of increased anxiety or stress and limited resources and the appropriate means to deal with their anxiety and stress. If this is occurring, it is important to enquire after the individual to ascertain what the concerns are. This should be done in a non-judgemental and neutral manner. It is, however, important to explain the importance of attending work to maintain long-term employment. Acknowledge that there will be circumstances where absence is appropriate (for example, illness accompanied by a medical certificate), but repeated unexplained absences may be seen as grounds to terminate employment.

Offer acknowledgement around their efforts to date and that difficulties can arise. Offer solutions to improve any identified difficulties. If the individual is engaged with a psychologist or other mental health practitioner (and has disclosed this), suggest that they may find it helpful to also raise workplace or other issues that may be impacting on workplace performance.

Scenario 10: Sensitivity to sound

'I have noticed that my employee will react when there is a sudden loud noise, or there is persistent noise in their immediate environment.'

Autism is a neurobiological condition; the brain is wired differently. As such, it is characteristic that individuals on the spectrum will receive, interpret and respond to sensory input differently from neurotypical (non-neurodiverse) individuals. For some autistic individuals, certain sensory input (that is smell, sound, taste, touch and sight) can be quite unpleasant and even painful.

As such, it is important to have an open conversation with your employee to understand what some of their sensory sensitivities and preferences may be. As much as is practicable, offer to make accommodations, which will make the autistic individual more comfortable in their immediate environment. Such accommodations may also assist the individual to manage their anxiety or stress levels. If triggers are not managed well, they may result in the individual feeling overwhelmed and having meltdowns.

Scenario 11: Managing conflict at work

'In the past, when my employee has experienced or perceived conflict with staff, they will end contact with the individual or leave a job, rather than deal with the conflict.'

Managing conflict is difficult for most people as we often are unsure of the most appropriate way of addressing an issue. When addressing conflict, most of the difficulty comes from not knowing how others will react and also how to manage our own emotions in the situation.

For individuals on the autism spectrum, inherent difficulties associated with understanding own and others' emotions, as well as knowing the 'right' thing to say, and balancing this with a need for honesty and acceptance by others, makes the experience of conflict resolution even more challenging.

As individuals, it is not uncommon that our own wants and needs will conflict with others wants and needs, sometimes resulting in conflict. However, if issues are not addressed, others may be unaware that their behaviour or actions are affecting the individual on the spectrum.

If as an employer you become aware of concerns or potential conflict arising for the individual on the spectrum, it is important to support them to address the issue/s and discuss possible ways the matter can be rectified. It is also important to validate the feelings of the individual on the spectrum as it is likely that previously their needs and feelings have been dismissed or not considered important. Validation can be achieved by listening to and acknowledging their concerns, and supporting them to develop ways to address the issue/s. It is likely the individual on the spectrum will need your support and presence when discussing concerns with the other party.

These suggestions will assist the individual on the spectrum to develop important skills in managing conflict as well as developing the confidence to identify their emotions and to address concerns, rather than avoid them.

Scenario 12: Identifying triggers

‘How can I understand what the triggers are for my autistic employee so we can avoid situations resulting in heightened stress or a meltdown.’

Autism and its associated characteristics are experienced differently by each individual on the spectrum. In an effort to proactively assist the individual to manage any triggers that may lead to meltdown or shutdown it is important to have a conversation with the individual to ask them about any known triggers. For some, they may have difficulties with insight and may be unable to identify triggers. In this case, it would be appropriate to show understanding and to acknowledge your ability to keep an ‘eye out’ for any changes in their behaviour or mood. If this is observed, it would be appropriate to let the individual know afterwards what was noticed so that they can begin developing some understanding of their own behaviours/mood.

As described in some of the other scenarios, the most common known triggers relate to:

- Managing sensory experiences
- Uncertainty/change in routine
- Social demands/interactions with others

Some of these are more straightforward to address (for example, sensitivity to light – allow the individual to wear sunglasses in the office), whilst others may require more detailed strategies (for example, interacting with others – suggested appropriate conversation topics). The common triggers and the degree with which they impact the individual will vary for each person. Therefore, discussing triggers with the individual and identifying appropriate strategies is the best way to develop understanding.

Discussions should take place at a time when the individual is calm. Being able to think clearly, take on new information and reflect on actions and behaviours is possible when an individual is not experiencing heightened stress/anxiety. It is also during a calm state that an individual can be encouraged to practice learned strategies.

Scenario 13: My employee doesn't ask for help

'My employee doesn't ask for help when they are having difficulties understanding tasks. How can I make my employee comfortable asking for help?'

There are many reasons why individuals on the spectrum may not ask for help, even if it is apparent to others that they require assistance. Some of these reasons may include:

- Wanting to appear competent and capable to others
- Becoming so absorbed in the task that they forget that asking for help is an option or a potential solution to a problem
- Asking requires speaking and engaging with others, which for some, may be overwhelming and it may be difficult to formulate the 'right' way of asking for help
- Wanting to prove to others that they can 'do this'
- They may not realise that they don't understand the 'full picture' of the task
- Difficulties with executive functioning; asking for help requires troubleshooting, planning and initiating.

If possible, provide the individual with the time to try and work the problem out for themselves. If it is still evident that they are continuing to experience difficulties, let them know that you are available to provide assistance. Normalise the experience of asking for help, explaining that everyone does it from time to time. Also, be specific about where you notice they may require assistance and how you may be able to assist.

This is usually a better approach as opposed to offering general assistance. Often, offering general assistance is quite broad and may not assist the individual on the spectrum to notice what the specific difficulty is that they have encountered.

If you are aware that the individual has difficulty articulating themselves verbally, encourage them to ask for help via an email or a web chat.

Scenario 14: Thinking negatively and catastrophising situations

'My employee/client seems to think negatively and automatically sees the worst possible outcome'

It is not uncommon for individuals on the spectrum to view the world from a 'black or white' perspective. This is one possible reason for why someone may think and express situations from a negative perspective. Be aware that for many individuals on the spectrum, they have repeatedly experienced challenges and adversity throughout their lifetime. It is important that if someone expresses things from a negative perspective that it is validated, rather than dismissed. How the individual feels is how they feel and rather than dismissing their feelings, it is important to validate what they may be experiencing.

In situations like these, be sure to document the individual's achievements, to date. While perceptions and thinking are strong and at times, difficult to shift, it is also hard to refute the documented evidence that you have. It may be appropriate to commence each appointment by presenting their achievements to date and build on these by outlining (and documenting) what it is that each party are going to contribute, moving forward. By documenting each parties' roles and responsibilities, it reduces the likelihood of ambiguity and makes it clear, if there is ever a dispute as to what each party has/hasn't done. It also makes the person on the spectrum accountable for their behaviour and their progress through the process.

If negative thinking and self-talking persists in the face of evidence and reason, it may be worth considering whether the employee/client may be experiencing a comorbid mental health condition (anxiety and/or depression). This is a difficult conversation to have with someone, but if there are concerns, it is important to address these with the individual and/or their support person/network/parent. Comorbid mental health conditions that are not addressed and appropriately managed may continue to affect the individual's commitment to the employment journey as well as their perceived success in the process.

Scenario 15: Meltdowns

‘My employee appears to experience inexplicable outbursts.’

The behaviour you are observing is more accurately described as a meltdown. This can occur for individuals on the autism spectrum when they become overwhelmed by too much sensory stimulation, too many demands being placed on them and/or increased anxiety.

Often, an individual on the spectrum will give us clues that they are becoming overwhelmed. Often, they are unable to identify within themselves what these clues are (difficulties with interoception¹). As employment consultants and employers, we need to assist them to identify and label what we observe. This can assist the individual to sooner identify what is going on for them, should it happen again.

It is important to never judge the individual when they are experiencing a meltdown. Unlike a tantrum, which is frequently deliberate and a means to gain a reaction or response from others (think of a toddler screaming because the parents have said ‘no’ to chocolate at the checkout). A meltdown is not deliberate and instead often the last resort for an individual who is feeling overwhelmed. They may not have other resources to manage the regulation of their emotions and other internal states.

How to help

Strategies, such as providing instructions visually with time frames and stepped out, can assist the individual and reduce the likelihood of experiencing a meltdown. In addition, gaining an understanding of the individual’s sensory needs and accommodating these may also assist them to manage their sensory system and reduce the likelihood of meltdowns.

¹ Interoception is an internal sensory system where the internal physical and emotional states of the body are noticed, recognised, identified and responded to.

Scenario 16: Shutdowns

‘My employee appears, at times, like they have ‘shutdown’; they are unresponsive.’

When considering the fight/flight/freeze^{2*} responses we commonly know about relating to anxiety – meltdowns would be the equivalent of the fight response and shut downs would be the equivalent of the freeze response.

Shutdowns frequently occur as a result of accumulated stress due to the experience of situations of high demand. High demand areas may include one or more of the following areas:

- Social situations
- Situations that require a lot of thinking
- Lack of sleep
- Emotional situations
- Situations with active or physical elements.

The build-up may occur over hours, days or weeks. It is often a ‘straw that broke the camel’s back’ event that tips accumulated stress over to the point of a shutdown.

During a shutdown, it is not uncommon for the individual to seem unlike themselves. As the focus has shifted to protective mode (basic functions), it is likely that the individual will experience difficulties in effectively communicating what they need.

If your autistic employee experiences a shutdown, consider it a ‘reset’ for the individual. An accumulation of stress has resulted in the individual needing to take some time out. During these times, provide the individual with space to rest, recuperate and recover, without placing additional demands on them, particularly the need to communicate. Following recovery, discuss the shutdown experience with the individual, being mindful about communicating in a calm, understanding and constructive manner. It may be necessary to work out some practical ways for the individual to manage accumulated stress differently, to reduce the likelihood of future shutdowns.

² The fight-flight-freeze response is your body's natural reaction to danger. It's a type of stress response that helps you react to perceived threats.

Scenario 17: Excessive phone usage

'My employee appears to be using their phone in unreasonable situations, such as meetings or when they are supposed to be working.'

As with other employees in a workplace, the expectations around the use of mobile phones and the internet for personal use needs to be explained to individuals on the spectrum.

Many individuals on the spectrum have a strong sense of justice (black and white thinking). It is important to reinforce the expectations around the use of mobile phones and the internet for personal use with all employees.

This also reduces the possibility of another employee approaching the individual to highlight their breach in appropriate behaviour. That other employee might not be capable of effectively communicating with someone on the spectrum. If this does occur, as a leader it is important to acknowledge the reasons why that other employee did what they did, but also to remind them that addressing these issues is the duty of management, supervisors or team leaders; not of other employees.

Make sure that if there is any inappropriate use of mobile phone or internet, to address it as soon as practicable. Also refer the individual back to written documentation as to why this behaviour is inappropriate in certain contexts.