

What is autism?

- Autism is characterised by difficulty in understanding how other people usually think which can cause barriers when communicating. People with autism therefore feel like they are causing trouble for other people, which is why they tend to become withdrawn. This can give the impression that people with autism prefer to be alone, however they still experience loneliness to the same extent as anyone else.

- Processing different sensory stimuli is a different process in people with autism and can make them feel disorientated and make it very difficult for them to concentrate.

- People with autism usually have something called alexithymia, meaning that they can struggle to understand what they are feeling and might not be able to associate words to their feelings. This manifests as a difficulty in expression of feelings. This can seem like they do not experience emotions in the same way as other people, but this is not the case.

Lifeworks

- It is a local charity that supports people over the age of 14 who are autistic and who have an average IQ to not be marginalised

- It offers a range of services that help to provide coping strategies for clients and carers, as well as meeting new people and having some fun. Services include one to one meetings, advocacy, benefit support, social groups for clients, and support groups for carers.

- Lifeworks works in collaboration with other charities in order to help clients, from as early as getting them a diagnosis, to helping clients to get a job or to find housing.

How are people with autism marginalised from society?

- Lack of autism awareness in the workplace can cause friction and make it difficult for people with autism to maintain jobs. There are many stereotypes and bias towards people with autism that reflect badly on people that could be a valuable member of staff. This barrier to a regular income can result in poverty and homelessness. Lifeworks can help its clients to find appropriate housing in these instances.

- When people with autism are excluded from work, they are generally less exposed to social situations and therefore have less practice at communication. This can cause them to lose these skills that they may have acquired throughout their education, leading to further exclusion.

- Higher education is another area that proves difficult for people living with autism. Moving away from home and making new friends is a lot to process for anyone, but without the correct support people with autism can feel overwhelmed and not know how to look after themselves.

- Lifeworks helps to tackle this issue by giving advice and strategies to their clients, as well as working with universities to provide appropriate support for these individuals.

INFORMATION FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Advice for healthcare professionals

- Lifeworks recommends maintaining a sensory neutral environment such as making sure that the room is warm but not too hot and that there is not too much light.

- During an introduction, it is important not to look the patient directly in the eye, and to not offer to shake their hand, because this will make them feel uncomfortable.

- Avoid using complicated vocabulary, acronyms, and medical terminology.

- Patients with autism often feel anxious during appointments, so giving them time to process information and to ask questions is important.

- Lifeworks also suggest writing key points down for their patient so that they can use it as a point of reference later on.

Autism and mental health

- Anxiety and depression have a high prevalence rate among the autistic population, this is because they tend to experience more stress in carrying out daily tasks due to social stress, and as previously stated they are generally marginalised from society.

- Memory is not in chronological order for people with autism. Remembering an unhappy memory causes people with autism to feel the same emotions in exactly the same way as they did at the time. This means that all of the distressed feelings associated with that memory are felt at the same intensity as if they were experiencing it for the first time. Therefore, talking therapy is not a good way to treat people with autism who have mental health problems.

- Lifeworks recommends providing practical solutions such as establishing a healthy routine and finding new hobbies to help raise people's mood.

Issues caused by lockdown

- Many autistic people will feel comfortable during lockdown because they do not have to read social situations as often. However, people with autism still experience loneliness and may struggle to access help if they need it, because they might not be able to recognise that they are struggling.

- People with autism can sometimes feel anxious when other people get too close to them. Going out in public is therefore an issue for autistic people because when people are getting too close it induces anxious feelings. The added risk of catching COVID-19 further increases the anxiety.

- Lifeworks have been supporting people in lockdown remotely, and helping them to establish a good routine where they go outside regularly. They are also giving advice on how to carry out online shopping or how to shop safely.

Access to healthcare

- Anxiety can sometimes manifest as agoraphobia for people with autism, especially if they associate going outside with stressful social encounters. This can be an issue when an individual feels too anxious to go outside, and they need to go and pick up medication or go for a blood test.

- People with autism find it hard to express themselves, so explaining a symptom to others can sometimes be difficult.

References

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