

AUTISM

**The Health Protection (Coronavirus)
Regulations and Autism:
A Guide for Police Officers and Staff**

AUTISM

Autism is characterised by differences in the way a person communicates and interacts with others and makes sense of the world around them. It is thought around 1% of the population are autistic.

Autistic people have different communication needs to non-autistic people. They typically understand language literally and may find interpreting non-verbal communication, sarcasm and ambiguous rules difficult.

They may also experience high levels of anxiety and/or sensory sensitivity. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities.



COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES



UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE



OTHER NEEDS

THE IMPACT OF THE REGULATIONS

The Regulations make it the law that everyone must stay at home unless they have a 'reasonable excuse' to be out. They also restrict gatherings to two or fewer people. The government has issued additional non-statutory Guidance to the public on what measures we can all take to stop the spread of coronavirus.

The new Regulations and the Guidance have been drafted rapidly and some mixed messages about what they say have been spread. The relationship between the Regulation which legally prohibits going outside and the Guidance which tries to explain what is a reasonable excuse is unclear to many members of the public.

We do not know how they will affect autistic people in particular but we expect they could be affected in two ways:

- i) they might find it hard to work out what the Regulations and the Guidance mean for them personally and
- ii) the Regulations will disrupt the routines and structure autistic people often need to feel safe.

UNDERSTANDING THE REGULATIONS

The Regulations and the Guidance contain words which can mean different things to different people like 'essential', 'vulnerable' and 'reasonable'. This can create confusion for some autistic people who find it easier understand information which is clear and direct.

Due to the lack of clarity, it is likely that the idea of a 'reasonable excuse' will be interpreted in different ways. This will affect how people then follow the Guidance and how they will influence their behaviour. It may also lead to conflict if someone sees another person behaving in a way which they think is not permitted by the rules.

Autistic people could interpret the rules in three different ways:

- i) Strictly
- ii) Rigidly
- iii) Not at all

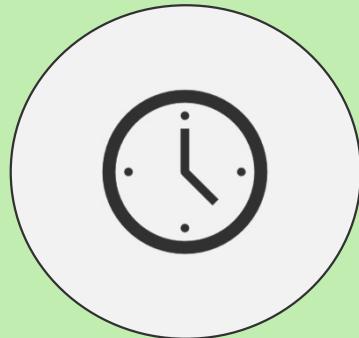
HOW MIGHT AUTISTIC PEOPLE INTERPRET THE RULES?



STRICTLY

Some autistic people might interpret the Regulations very strictly, for example by not leaving the house altogether.

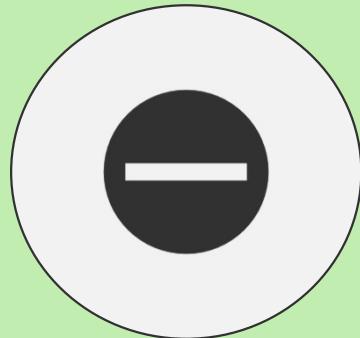
This might put people at risk if they do not leave the house for food or medical assistance and do not have someone to support them during this time.



RIGIDLY

Some autistic people might interpret the Guidance rigidly.

For example, they may only go outside once a day for exercise as the Guidance states even though the Regulations and the wider Guidance make it clear people can go out at different times for different reasons.



NOT AT ALL

Some autistic people may not follow the Guidance at all because they do not understand the Guidance and why it is important.

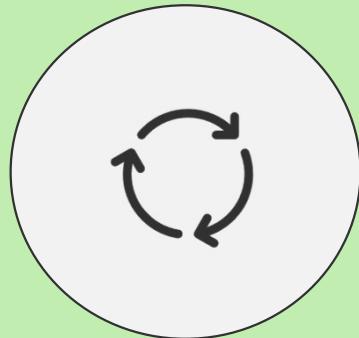
As a result, some autistic people may not know how to adjust their behaviour. They may behave as they would do normally without being fully aware of the impact this might have on them and others.

DISRUPTION TO ROUTINE AND STRUCTURE

The coronavirus and the new Regulations and Guidance have caused significant disruption to everyone's ordinary lives. For autistic people, this disruption might have an even greater impact. Autistic people find it helpful to follow a consistent daily routine. At the moment, autistic people are likely to be experiencing very high levels of anxiety due to the uncertainty of what is happening and disruption to their daily routines. As routines return to normal and noise levels get higher in public places autistic people may feel more anxiety in public places than before.

The lack of clear social rules about how to behave, when to wear masks, or how to maintain a safe social distance will also increase anxiety. Businesses and public sector organisations have introduced new measures to keep everyone safe. These new measures might be difficult to understand and may not have been communicated very clearly.

HOW MIGHT AUTISTIC PEOPLES ROUTINES BE AFFECTED?



ROUTINE

Relaxing lockdown may affect the ability of autistic people to follow their daily routines.

This may be distressing to some autistic people and they may find it difficult to adjust their routine in order to comply, especially if they do not understand why.



INTERESTS

Autistic people have specific interests which bring a lot of enjoyment.

They may continue to pursue their specific interests because they perceive it to be an essential activity or may be very anxious and upset if they cannot do this.



STIMULATION

Some autistic people may need to go outside to drive, run or bounce on a trampoline when stressed. This can provide sensory stimulation and help them to organise their emotions.

Without this stimulation, some autistic people will feel intense distress which can lead to self-injurious or aggressive behaviour.

ENFORCING THE REGULATIONS

The National College of Policing has already issued guidance on the Coronavirus Regulations which has emphasised the importance of engaging the public and explaining the regulations before enforcing them.

Research has found that when autistic people have contact with the police they often feel high anxiety but they do not always show this. They may show limited emotional responses in interactions. This does not mean they do not feel frightened.

When engaging with an autistic person, be aware that your uniform and position may cause them considerable anxiety. Autistic people respond differently to stressful social situations. Common responses include:

- i) reduced eye contact
- ii) reduced verbal responses
- iii) strong desires to escape which may lead to them running away

IF YOU KNOW OR SUSPECT SOMEONE IS AUTISTIC YOU CAN:



REASSURE

Give verbal reassurance and explain your role 'Our job is to protect the public. We are asking everyone why they are out and about.'

Do not assume autistic people will be reassured by non-verbal cues like smiles or non-threatening body language.



EXPLAIN

Give clear and precise explanations for asking them to do something.

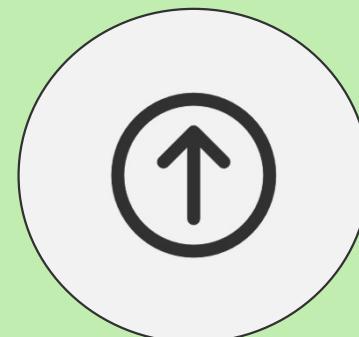
For example, 'Please keep at least 1 metre away from other people. This distance reduces the risk of you catching the infection or spreading it through coughing or sneezing.'



INFORM

Provide further information about the regulations and guidance.

Use visual resources to support communication and help understanding such as a flowchart. This is freely provided at the end of this guidance.



DIRECT

If visual information such as signs or arrows on the ground to indicate effective social distancing are available, please direct them to this.

Autistic people may find visual information easier to process than verbal information, particularly if they already feel highly stressed.

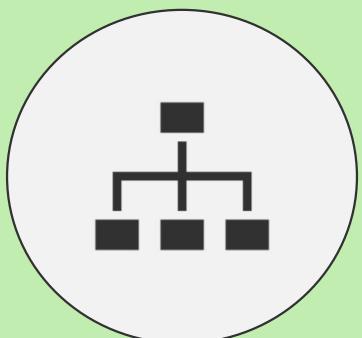
IF YOU DO NOT THINK AN AUTISTIC PERSON HAS A REASONABLE EXCUSE TO BE OUTSIDE CONSIDER:



UNDERSTANDING

Have the regulations been explained to the autistic person in a way they can understand?

Bear in mind explanations such as 'This is the law' are not likely to be meaningful to an autistic person. Use clear, precise language and visual information to help them understand the new law.



EXERCISE

Does the person have a reason for their movements or gathering?

Staying overnight in someone else's home may be lawful if the person has a reasonable excuse and gatherings in public may be 'reasonably necessary' in some circumstances. Explore what the person understands by reasonable.



ADJUSTMENT

Do you need to make adjustments under the Equality Act 2010?

The list of reasonable excuses is not exhaustive. Section 20(3) Equality Act 2010 still applies which requires reasonable adjustments to practices if they might place someone at a disadvantage due to their disability status.



RESPOND

An autistic person may still have a reasonable excuse to stay with others where they need to:

- 1) regulate their emotions by maintaining a routine
- 2) rely on others for support or care

FURTHER INFORMATION

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the more general NAS publication 'Autism: A guide for police officers and staff':

<https://www.autism.org.uk/products/core-nas-publications/autism-a-guide-for-criminal-justice-professionals.aspx>

More information about how to support autistic people is also available in the Nottinghamshire Autism Police Partnership's toolkit on Autism:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/autismandpolicing/resources/index.aspx>

CORONAVIRUS AND THE LAW

Applies from the 4th July (ENGLAND ONLY)

KEEPING THE VIRUS UNDER CONTROL



Coronavirus can infect people very easily. Someone who has the virus may pass it on to others through coughs or sneezes.



The virus may also be left on hard surfaces. This is why it is important to wash your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds.



To help keep the virus under control and stop it from spreading, we need to make changes to what we do in our day to day lives.



We must still limit our contact with others as much as we can and keep at least 1 metre apart from those we do not live with.

LIFTING LOCKDOWN



Some restrictions on what we cannot do in our lives are being lifted because the virus is not spreading as much.



We can now leave our homes more often. But there are new restrictions we must follow to keep the spread of the virus under control.



The Government has updated the guidance to help people understand what they can do to help stop the spread of the virus.



People can read the guidance if they want to by visiting this website:
www.gov.uk/coronavirus

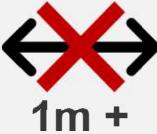
SUPPORT BUBBLE



A person who lives alone and another home can create a support bubble. The members of the support bubble must always stay the same.



A support bubble will be treated as if everyone is part of the same home even though they do not all live together.



Members of a support bubble do not have to socially distance from each other. They can also stay somewhere overnight together.



A support bubble can meet another person or group of people who live together but must keep at least 1 meter apart from them.

WHO YOU CAN MEET



Two different homes can now meet but must keep at least 1 meter apart. Meetings of more than two homes indoors are still not allowed.



Meetings can be indoors or outdoors. However the virus can spread more easily indoors so it is safer to meet outdoors if you can.



You can meet a different group of people who live together each time but you should avoid lots of meetings in a short space of time.



Meetings of more than 30 people in **private** homes or outdoor spaces are not allowed. The police are allowed to stop these meetings.

The government has lifted some of the restrictions on what we can do so we can start to do more in our everyday lives again. This table explains what changes have been made to the new Coronavirus laws and regulations and why.

WHAT CAN I DO?

The government says we have to make changes to the way we might do things in our everyday lives. This is because there is still a risk of catching Coronavirus. This table explains what we might have to do to keep ourselves safe in certain circumstances.

GOING OUTSIDE



You can now go outside as much as you want to. For example, you can go outside for exercise, rest, play sport or to socialise.



You can either meet up to 6 people from different homes OR two large groups of people who live together in the same homes.



You must keep at least 1 meter apart from those outside your home or support bubble. You should also avoid crowded places.

LEISURE



You can now go to pubs, cafes, restaurants, libraries, community centres, places of worship, outdoor playgrounds and outdoor gyms.



You can go to these places with people you live with or support bubble and one other home. You should not socialise with others there.



You may have to give your contact details when you visit these places. Someone may call you if someone who had the virus was there too.

SHOPPING



All shops are now allowed to reopen. This means you can go shopping for non-essential items such as clothes, games, presents etc.



New rules are in place to help keep people safe when they are shopping. Signs will be displayed to tell you what to do.



You may have to queue before you go into a shop and follow a one way system. You may also be asked to use hand sanitiser as you enter.

TRAVELLING



You should still try and avoid public transport where possible. You should try to walk, cycle or drive to places if you can.



If you need to use public transport, the law says you must wear a face mask or covering unless you have a good reason not to.



Good reasons not to wear a face mask are having a health condition or disability or if wearing one would cause you distress.

If you would like to access some more resources on Coronavirus, you can go to the NAS website where free information is available: <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources.aspx>

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