

AUTISM FOUNDATIONS · 2.10

Functioning Labels: Why 'High-Functioning' Is on the Way Out

Functioning labels like 'high-functioning autism' do not predict daily life accurately and have caused real harm. This summary explains why the field has moved on and what replaced them.

FOR

Adults and parents

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Functioning Labels: Why 'High-Functioning' Is on the Way Out

What the evidence shows

- **IQ is a poor predictor of daily functioning.** Research has shown that a child with a higher IQ is often no better at managing real-world demands than a child with a lower IQ. The label tracks the wrong thing.
- **Two labels, two different problems.** 'High-functioning' has been used to deny support to people who needed it. 'Low-functioning' has been used to assume away capacity and agency in people who had it.
- **The autism field has moved on.** NICE, the Lancet Commission on autism and most autism researchers now recommend describing the specific profile and support needs rather than applying a single overall label.

What is wrong with functioning labels in practice

- **They collapse a multi-dimensional picture into one word.** A person can have low support needs in social communication and high support needs in sensory or executive function. The label loses most of the useful information.
- **They do not predict mental health, work or relationships.** A 'high-functioning' autistic adult can be unable to hold down a job, manage daily living or maintain mental health. The label predicts none of these accurately.
- **DSM-5-TR uses support levels across two domains.** Level 1, 2 or 3 in social communication, and the same in restricted and repetitive features. Levels can change over time and can differ across the two domains in the same person.

How we describe support needs

- **Describe the profile.** NeuroFX clinical reports describe specific support needs across sensory, executive function, social communication, transitions, and any co-occurring conditions, rather than applying functioning labels.
- **Ask for a profile description if you receive a labelled report.** If a clinician describes you or your child as 'high-functioning' or 'low-functioning', it is reasonable to ask for a description of the actual profile and support needs.
- **Assessment that follows current standards.** NeuroFX assessments follow NICE guidance and current clinical consensus. Private autism assessment is available for adults and for children aged 6 and upwards.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

If autism has been on your mind for yourself or your child, NHS routes start with GP referral. NeuroFX offers private autism assessment from our Bedford clinic. Seek same-day help via 111 (or 999 in an emergency) for any mental health crisis.

SOURCES

Alvares et al. 2020 (Autism); DSM-5-TR; Lord et al. 2022 (Lancet Commission); Bottema-Beutel et al. 2021 (Autism in Adulthood); NICE CG142

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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