

AUTISM FOUNDATIONS · 2.2

# The Autism Spectrum: Why It Is Not a Linear Scale

The autism spectrum is not a straight line from 'a little bit' to 'a lot'. This summary explains what the spectrum actually describes and why the 'mild to severe' framing causes more confusion than clarity.

FOR

Adults and parents

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

## IN SUMMARY

# The Autism Spectrum: Why It Is Not a Linear Scale

## What the spectrum actually describes

- **A profile across several dimensions.** Autism varies across multiple semi-independent dimensions: social communication, sensory profile, routines, executive function, language, cognitive ability and co-occurring conditions. A person can be at very different points on each one.
- **Support needs fluctuate with context.** The same autistic adult can function very differently in a quiet familiar environment compared with a noisy open-plan office, or in a settled period of life compared with after a major change.
- **Two people with the same diagnosis can look very different.** Both can meet the criteria for autism and still have meaningfully different daily lives, strengths and difficulties.

## Why the old labels fail

- **'High-functioning' often gets read as 'needs less help'.** Autistic adults given this label often find their support requests are taken less seriously, even when their actual difficulties have not changed.
- **IQ does not predict 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 has been a poor proxy for actual support need.
- **DSM-5-TR uses three support levels, not functioning labels.** Level 1, 2 or 3 in each of the two diagnostic domains, with the explicit note that levels can change over time and can differ across domains in the same person.
- **Describing the profile is more useful than applying a label.** Saying 'sensitive to noise, needs predictable transitions, fluent verbal communication, finds open-plan offices unmanageable' tells a clinician or teacher more than 'mild autism' ever did.

## How we can help

- **An assessment built around the profile.** NeuroFX autism assessments describe the specific profile across the domains that matter for daily life, rather than applying a single overall label.
- **Practical support that fits the profile.** Sensory adjustments, workplace or school adaptations, support for co-occurring anxiety, depression or ADHD, and signposting to autistic-led peer networks.
- **Both NHS and private routes are options.** Your GP can refer to NHS services. NeuroFX is a CQC-registered private clinic offering adult and paediatric autism assessment where waiting is a barrier.

### WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if the pattern has been persistent across more than one area of life and dates back to childhood. NeuroFX offers private autism assessment for adults and for children aged 6 and upwards. Seek same-day help via 111 (or 999 in an emergency) for any mental health crisis.

### SOURCES

DSM-5-TR; Lord et al. 2022 (Lancet Commission); Alvares et al. 2020 (Autism); NICE CG142

**NEXT STEPS****Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.  
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