

AUTISM FOUNDATIONS · 2.1

What Autism Actually Is: A Modern Clinical Explanation

A plain-English explanation of what autism actually is in 2026, how it shows up across a lifetime, and what to do next if you recognise it in yourself or your child.

FOR

Adults and parents

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

17 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

What Autism Actually Is: A Modern Clinical Explanation

What autism is

- **A lifelong difference in how the brain develops.** Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition with a profile of strengths and difficulties that is stable across life. It is not an illness, not a phase, and not something caused by parenting.
- **Two main areas of difference.** Social communication works differently, and there are restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or sensory experience. Both areas need to be present for a diagnosis.
- **Sensory differences are central.** Hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to sound, light, texture, smell, temperature and internal sensations. These are part of the underlying neurology rather than preferences that someone can be talked out of.

What it looks like in real life

- **Social communication that takes more effort.** Reading tone, facial expression and the unwritten rules of conversation can be tiring. Direct, literal communication is often more comfortable than implication or small talk.
- **A strong preference for routine and predictability.** Unexpected change can feel destabilising in a way that surprises people who do not experience it. For many autistic people, routine is a regulation strategy that supports day-to-day functioning.
- **Deep, focused interests.** Often pursued in significant detail. These interests are a source of identity, expertise and wellbeing for many autistic adults, rather than something to be reduced.
- **Stimming and self-regulation.** Repetitive movements or sounds that help with regulation. They serve a useful purpose, and clinical understanding has shifted firmly against trying to suppress them.
- **The picture often only becomes visible when demands rise.** Secondary school, university, parenthood, a new job. Many autistic adults describe a lifelong sense of having to work harder than peers to manage everyday social and sensory load.

How we can help

- **Start with your GP.** Ask for an autism assessment referral. NHS waits for adult autism assessment are long in many regions, often two to four years.
- **Consider a private route if waiting is the barrier.** NeuroFX is a CQC-registered private clinic offering autism assessment for adults and for children aged 6 and upwards. Combined ADHD and autism assessment is also available where a dual picture is suspected.
- **Good post-diagnostic support covers more than the report.** It covers sensory adjustments, workplace or school adaptations, support for any co-occurring anxiety, depression or ADHD, and signposting to autistic-led peer networks.
- **Treatment focuses on environment as well as the person.** The goal is good day-to-day fit between the autistic person and their environment, not making them less autistic. Sensory adjustments, routine and reasonable adjustments at work or school all play a part.

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, including thoughts of self-harm.

SOURCES

NICE CG142; NICE CG128; NICE CG170; Lord et al. 2022 (Lancet Commission); Lai et al. 2014 (Lancet); DSM-5-TR; ICD-11; Russell et al. 2022

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.

neurofx.co.uk · info@neurofx.co.uk · 0333 533 3303