Autism and boating

Introduction

The following information has been assembled as an aid to help us understand and appreciate individuals with Autism, and to understand what adaptations we can make in our training centres to create a better learning environment.

If an individual has been diagnosed with autism they will most likely have a support network in place. By asking about and understanding an individual's likes and dislikes, as well as gaining an appreciation of the support network and strategies in place an RYA Recognised Training Centre will be able to provide a more effective learning environment. The Centre can ensure that appropriate adaptations are in place and all instructors are appropriately briefed.

Consider asking about learning conditions as part of the booking process to widen the understanding you have of the students on courses. This will enable you to prepare more effectively, and also appreciate any additional needs an individual may have. An individual may also carry an 'Autism Card' with them.

The extent to which the condition affects an individual determines the nature of the challenges faced, and the support and/or care required, as well as their ability to 'function' in terms of communication, social skills and self-help strategies.

Background Knowledge

Around 700,000 people in the UK are living with Autism. This is a lifelong condition and not something they will grow out of. Children can be diagnosed by the age of 5, (some older) and studies have highlighted 4 times as many boys as girls are diagnosed, often due to girls being harder to diagnose.

Autism is managed by appropriate treatment from education and support providers, there is no cure,. Adaptations and appropriate techniques enable an individual to adapt and thrive.

There is a general lack of public understanding regarding the condition, as well as misrepresentation in the media.

As an "umbrella" condition, Autism describes a range of conditions characterised by: difficulty in social interactions, understanding and showing emotion, communication, and a tendency to engage in obsessive and repetitive behaviour.

Conditions that fall under this umbrella are:

- Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC): limited social, emotional and communications skills, with obsessive behavioural tendencies
- Asperger Syndrome: seen as a milder type of ASC where individuals behaviour is similar to mainstream society, however a lack of language development may be evident
- High-functioning autism (HFA): difficult to diagnose, showing some characteristics from the ASC and a tendency to exhibit more severe features. Those with HFA tend to be significantly more intelligent than the average person.

Understanding the term "spectrum condition", will also help us to appreciate the range of characteristics an individual may have, as well as the severity. The spectrum condition ranges from mild to severe, and changes from one individual to the next.

Diagnosis and how it can assist us

In the UK there are guidelines for the diagnosis, the route this takes, and the support and professional help available for autism once a diagnosis has been made.

Not all individuals will have a formal diagnosis and for some there is a reluctance to seek a diagnosis perhaps due to fear, denial from the parents or the individuals themselves; concerns of labelling; stigma associated with special education or simply the emotional impact of such a diagnosis
However, if carried out correctly, diagnosis can help with self-management strategies as well as accessing support, from both formal and informal sources.

Knowing if an individual is diagnosed will assist us in the provision of tuition and adaptation of an effective learning environment for each individual.

In addition to a diagnosis of Autism, an individual may also exhibit characteristics of overlapping conditions such as, Sensory Processing Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Semantic Pragmatic Disorder, Tourette's and Epilepsy.

Understanding characteristics and behaviour

Having an understanding of the characteristics that present themselves with ASC will help us to adapt or work with individuals in a sailing environment, both practically and theoretically. The main areas for consideration are:

- **Behaviour:** This varies from person to person in presence, in severity, in appearance and in visibility. Challenging behaviour may result from anxiety due to situations like perceived threat, frustration, or failure to communicate successfully. Other more subtle behaviours may be down to simple habits or uncertainty of what suitable behaviour might be. Other behaviours you may come across are:
  - *Echolalia*: The practice of 'echoing' what people say. This is a communication style used by some individuals with ASC, often seen with children and can be used as a form of escapism/safe place. This may show an understanding that a response is needed but lacks the knowledge, skill or awareness to respond.
  - *Stereotypy*: Obsessions and intense interests. This could vary from a particular TV character to an object such as trains, bicycles or technology, which provides individuals with comfort or a feeling of safety
  - *Stimming*, or compulsive, repetitive behaviour: Repeated hand movements, lining up objects, moving, rocking and/or repetitive noises

  Communication: A range of characteristics from not speaking and displaying "*Echolalia*" (the practice of echoing what others say), through to limited vocabulary or communicating in a 'conventional' manner. *Remember* **we** communicate in a variety of ways; verbal (spoken) and non-verbal (unspoken, body language etc), vocalise (make noises) in replacement or in combination of conventional words and conversation. The conventional verbal speech of an individual with autism may be more rigid and rehearsed, and range from limited vocabulary to larger than average, individuals may vocalise or make noises in order to communicate, or echo.

- **Social Interaction**: Individuals may have difficulties understanding social norms and rules, such as friendship, or making eye contact
- **Repetitive or Obsessive behaviour:** Obsessive interests can change with age or remain with individuals throughout their lives, and can be in in the form of a single obsession or a broader range reflecting personal enjoyment.

Sensory processing: A further characteristic of autism is being sensitive to particular tastes, sounds, smells and touches. For some individuals the sensitivity experience may be physical pain, others experience insufficient sensitivity making them less likely to recognise danger which may place them at increased risk. Sensory processing is closely linked with social interaction and behaviour, sensory processing is defined as: *"A problem someone may have dealing with information that is received by the brain via the main senses".* Understanding "sensory processing" and its effect on individuals is a key consideration to the tuition of sailing, due to the environment, noise and unfamiliarity, which may lead to an individual becoming either highly over-sensitive or under-sensitive in one or more of the following ways:

- <u>Sight</u>: Anxiety when confronted with busy patterns or displays
- <u>Hearing</u>: Extreme sensitivity to noise,
- <u>Touch</u>: Touch and pressure provide different responses, some people with ASC experience touch as unbearable and unpleasant, whilst others enjoy the firm pressure
- <u>Vestibular sense</u>: This is associated with an individual's sense of balance and may affect their inner ear, this can lead to an individual rocking, spinning or performing other repetitive movements
- <u>Proprioception</u>: A sense of body space and awareness of limbs in relation to their body, resulting in gross motor skills problems such as clumsiness or moving awkwardly.

What adjustments can we make?

It is important to remember that unfamiliar surroundings can cause anxiety due to uncertainty, which can lead to challenging behaviour or an individual becoming withdrawn and / or distressed. The more we understand an individual with autism, the more we can adapt which will in turn assist and enhance the experience we provide.

By adopting a '*Person centred approach'*, where each individual is treated uniquely, we are able to consider how bespoke support can be provided, considering and incorporating the preferences and needs of an individual, working with their strengths and abilities and enabling them to achieve their full potential. We can achieve this "Person centred approach" by:

- Communicating with the individual (or their key worker): ask them what their likes and dislikes are, what their preferred communication styles, and which situations make them feel anxious or scared.

- Be empathetic: have an appreciation of the individual's needs and abilities in terms of social interaction and activities, understand the reason for and behind behaviours, and assist by empowering them to make their own decisions.

- Taking an active interest in the person themselves: this will enable you to learn about and work with them on their preferred communication style, symbolic communication, sign language or electronic devices which will create a more effective and productive learning environment.

- Learning environments: structure and routine assist many individuals with ASC through predictability, making the world feel like a safer more accessible place. Therefore, knowledge of timing, as well as what is happening when is important, as is *sticking* to those plans. Creating this environment will enable individuals to feel calmer.

- A 'Transitional Booklet' might be a great resource to introduce. This will enable the groups to talk and to gain an understanding about what they are going to do. The booklet can talk about: who they are going to meet, their names and what they look like, the centre, what the centre looks like and the facilities (entrance, reception, changing rooms, toilets etc). It can also describe what is involved in going afloat, the boats, safety boats and the sailing area. A video

version could also make a great resources for individuals or groups to watch prior to their visit, or recap afterwards.

- Wherever possible, work with the individuals and their professional support network and families to gain more information about the individual's aspirations, needs and interests. An individual may have an object they always carry with them, which is associated with making them feel safe. If this is practical, let them carry it.

- Minimise distractions by keep the learning environment as consistent as possible. Reduce or minimise external sounds, leave equipment in the same place, ensure consistency in the staff teaching and avoid new people joining. Consider having a designated 'quiet' place, just in case things get too much and individuals wish to leave the activity.

- Gain an understanding for learning preferences to increase engagement through the knowledge of likes and dislikes, use of visual communication systems, stories and role play. By watching the groups behaviour, you will then start to identify preferred communication methods.

- Consider adding a general statement for learning conditions into your booking form enabling the participant/parents to provide information and complete if they wish.

- Breaking down activities and skills to be learnt through a 'step by step' approach. Repeating words or images will aid reinforcement and learning. For example, organise a number of days which slowly build on progression towards getting afloat: a) invite the group/individual to take a look at the centre and walk round, feeling the wetsuits and touching the boats b) Encourage them to climb into the boat ashore or securely moored, try on a wetsuit up to their knees or wherever they feel comfortable etc.

Consideration:

- The use of daily timetables- 'Now and Next', is often enough. Timings and routines in pictorial format may be especially useful for individuals who have rigid and repetitive routines that are difficult to change
- Personal Strategies- understand any strategies which may be in place to ensure reactive or proactive preparation and assistance if an individual is known to respond to certain situations with challenging behaviour, or that there is likely to be a lack of emotion (facial expressions etc).
- Bespoke sessions: consider running exclusive and bespoke sessions for individuals with ASC by providing quieter and shorter sessions, different sets of behavioural expectations, quieter lunchtimes. Allow learning to occur at a slower pace that is led by the participants, provide symbols on wall charts to explain situations, routines or necessary information.
- Noise: can be a great challenge to an individual with ASC. Try controlling the amount and severity of noise such as flapping sails, shrouds and engines.
  Crowds can also be difficult for most individuals with ASC, leading them to feel anxious and distressed.
- Communications: *Be Creative!!* Remember communication styles and methods are highly individual, and individuals with Autism will take things that are said quite literally.
  Having a good awareness of verbal and non-verbal communication methods will assist teaching and learning as well as helping to reduce barriers. The more visual an approach can be, the more beneficial this is likely to be for an individual with ASC. Visual systems will reinforce session delivery as well as supporting and explaining what is being said for the individual.
    - o Verbal: the way we talk and communicate (especially speech where distinguishing between pitch, tone and pattern) can be difficult for people with Autism to interpret. Consider your

tone, speed and volume; choice, order, emphasis and number of words, as well as vocal sounds can also have an impact. Speak calmly, keep things simple, use every day terminology and avoid the use of metaphors, complicated jargon or expressions

- o <u>Gestures</u>: the use of physical gestures may support verbal communication
- o <u>Symbols</u>: the use of "picture exchange" communication systems or electronic devices will assist some learners with Autism to grasp concepts
- o <u>Sign</u>: the use of simple sign, such as Makaton or basic sign language
- o <u>Non-verbal communication</u>: reduce prolonged eye contact and adopt non-threatening body language, with clear and predictable movements. Many individuals will not like being touched or an encroachment into their personal space – always ask.

Everyone has a preferred learning style, generally a combination of a few. Namely, visual, auditory and/or kinaesthetic learners. It is therefore important to use a combination of auditory, visual and kinaesthetic messaging to reinforce communication or instructions being given. These might include the written word, symbols and pictures, sign language or electronic devices. It is important that body language is non-threatening, relaxed, controlled, open, and natural as trust needs to be gained.

Another technique which can assist our communication includes the use of light cheerful speech, which again is open and non-threatening. Maintaining volume which is calm and predictable will develop a non-judgmental and compassionate environment, which in turn will encourage an atmosphere of trust.

Be sensitive to the sensory information being received. Reduce noise and avoid busy visual displays. Avoid the use of lots of colours at once, strong smells, pressure or touch, and accommodate for and manage any vestibular (balance) need or requirement.

Social stories can be used as a way of pictorially showing the stages and outcome of a new activity. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

The need to wear specific clothing or indeed the need for a change of clothing in a sailing environment may need to be a consideration for some ASC individuals. A general approach of easing Autistic students into the environment in which they will be learning through short visits, the opportunity of walking around in advance of the course or perhaps even visiting the venue for a picnic will go a long way towards setting them up for a successful and enjoyable experience.

Adaptations and the scope of sessions will be very individual, as will the boats used. For some, keelboats where wetsuits are not required will be more suitable, whereas for others this may not be a problem.

In summary:
To ensure effective support of people with autism we should aim to:
- ✓ Remember no two individuals are the same
- ✓ Create rapport, be empathetic and develop our verbal and non-verbal communication
- ✓ Engage early with the support network and make specific, bespoke allowances, and ensure you understand their particular unique requirements/needs
- ✓ Consider bespoke sessions to create unique environments linked to their preferred learning styles, taking breaks from the programme
- ✓ Be aware of Sensory Processing and the effects aspects of a sailing environment may have especially on anxiety, and how you may be able to control this
- ✓ Consider what pre-course guidance, specific resource and assistance you may be able to provide
- ✓ Be conscious of any literal communication and language use
- ✓ Check out the many recourses out there to help, such as RYA Sailability; National Autistic Society website and other RYA Training centres who may be able to provide guidance