

Best Practice Guide for Healthcare Settings: Supporting Autistic Individuals

1. Understanding Autism

- Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference affecting communication, social interaction, and sensory processing.
- Each autistic person is unique; needs and preferences vary widely.

2. Communication

- Use clear, simple, and concrete language.
- Allow extra time for processing and responding.
- Offer alternative communication methods (e.g., communication cards, writing, devices).
- Avoid idioms, sarcasm, or ambiguous phrases.
- Address the individual directly, not just their support person.

3. Sensory Considerations

- Be aware of sensory sensitivities (lights, sounds, smells, textures).
- Offer a quiet waiting area or allow waiting outside until called.
- Minimize unnecessary physical contact and explain any required touch in advance.
- Allow use of sensory aids (headphones, fidget tools, sunglasses).

4. Environment

- Provide clear signage with symbols or pictures.
- Keep the environment calm and predictable.
- Reduce clutter and unnecessary noise.
- Offer visual schedules or step-by-step guides for procedures.

5. Preparation and Predictability

- Explain what will happen before, during, and after appointments.
- Use visual aids or social stories to describe procedures.
- Allow visits to the facility before the actual appointment if possible.
- Give advance notice of any changes to routines or staff.

6. Involving Family and Support Persons

- Encourage the presence of a trusted support person.
- Listen to caregivers' insights about communication, triggers, and calming strategies.
- Respect the individual's preferences regarding support.

7. Consent and Autonomy

- Always seek informed consent in a way the individual understands.
- Respect the right to refuse or ask for breaks.
- Involve the individual in decision-making as much as possible.

8. Managing Anxiety and Distress

- Recognize signs of anxiety or distress (e.g., stimming, withdrawal, agitation).
- Offer breaks and a quiet space if needed.
- Use calming strategies familiar to the individual.
- Avoid rushing or pressuring the person.

9. Staff Training and Attitude

- Provide regular autism awareness and communication training for all staff.
- Foster a culture of patience, respect, and flexibility.
- Challenge stereotypes and assumptions about autism.

10. Documentation and Follow-Up

- Record communication preferences, sensory needs, and successful strategies in the individual's file.
- Provide written or visual summaries of appointments and next steps.
- Offer follow-up support or contact information for questions.

Quick Reference Checklist

- Use clear, direct language
- Offer alternative communication methods
- Minimize sensory overload
- Provide visual supports
- Explain procedures step-by-step
- Involve support persons as needed
- Respect autonomy and consent
- Allow extra time and breaks
- Document preferences and strategies

Creating an autism-friendly healthcare environment improves outcomes, reduces anxiety, and ensures equitable care for autistic individuals. Adapt these guidelines to suit individual needs and specific healthcare settings.