



GUIDE FOR GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

RECOGNISING AND SUPPORTING INTEROCEPTION, ALEXITHYMIA, AND PAIN PERCEPTION IN AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS

This fact sheet provides general practitioners with essential insights into the unique healthcare needs of autistic individuals, focusing on interoception, alexithymia, and differences in pain perception. It highlights how these factors can affect the way autistic patients experience and communicate symptoms, and offers practical strategies for providing effective and compassionate care tailored to these unique challenges.



Interoception in Autistic Individuals

What Is Interoception?

Interoception is the internal sensory system that allows individuals to perceive and understand bodily sensations like hunger, thirst, heartbeat, temperature, pain and the need to use the toilet. This sense is essential for emotional regulation, physical health, and overall well-being.

How Interoception Affects Autistic Individuals:

- **Variability in Sensory Perception:** Autistic individuals might experience interoception differently, which can lead to challenges in recognising and responding to bodily needs. For example, some may not realise they are hungry until they are extremely hungry, or may not feel the need to use the restroom until it becomes urgent.
- **Impact on Health Management** Differences in interoceptive awareness can affect various aspects of health, such as hydration, constipation and nutrition.

Service Provision Considerations:

- **Differences in Symptom Communication:** Autistic individuals may express bodily discomfort or other symptoms differently from non-autistic individuals, which can sometimes lead to differences in interpreting their health needs.
- **Potential Delays in Recognising Health Issues:** Since some autistic individuals may not recognise internal signals immediately, issues like dehydration or gastrointestinal discomfort might only be addressed when they become more severe.

Recommendations for Effective Support:

- **Ask Direct and Specific Questions:** Instead of asking "Are you in pain?" consider questions like "Do you feel any discomfort in your stomach or head?" This helps address any gaps in interoceptive awareness.
- **Use Visual Tools:** Incorporate visual aids, such as body maps or charts, to help patients identify and communicate where they might be feeling discomfort or pain.
- **Monitor Basic Health Needs*** Regularly check on hydration, nutrition, and other basic needs, especially if the patient has a history of challenges with interoception.

Alexithymia in Autistic Individuals

What Is Alexithymia?

Alexithymia is characterised by difficulty in identifying, describing, and understanding one's emotions. It is common among autistic individuals and can significantly affect how they communicate their emotional states and distress.

How Alexithymia May Present in Autistic Individuals:

- **Challenges with Emotional Awareness:** Individuals with alexithymia might find it difficult to differentiate between emotions or even recognise what they are feeling. For example, they might describe feeling "off" but be unable to specify whether it's due to sadness, anxiety, or physical discomfort.
- **Impact on Mental Health:** This difficulty in identifying emotions can contribute to mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, as emotions may go unrecognised and unprocessed.

Service Provision Considerations:

- **Communication Differences:** GPs may encounter challenges in assessing mental health conditions in patients with alexithymia, as these patients may describe their emotions in ways that differ from standard diagnostic criteria.
- **Risk of Misdiagnosis:** Due to challenges in expressing emotions, there may be a risk of misdiagnosis or under-diagnosis, potentially leading to inadequate treatment.

Recommendations for Effective Support:

- **Utilise Concrete Language:** Use specific, concrete questions rather than open-ended ones. For instance, instead of asking "How do you feel?" you could ask, "Do you feel more anxious or more tired today?"
- **Provide Multiple Options:** Use an emotion wheel to assist them in identifying and labelling their emotions or ask how they usually identify their emotions.
- **Consider Physical Symptoms:** Understand that emotional distress may manifest as physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches, and address these with the understanding that they may be linked to unexpressed emotions.



Pain Perception Differences in Autistic Individuals

Understanding Pain Perception in Autism:

Pain perception in autistic individuals can vary greatly. Some may have heightened sensitivity to pain, while others may have reduced sensitivity. These differences can influence how pain is experienced, expressed, and managed.

How Pain Perception May Differ in Autistic Individuals:

- **Heightened Pain Sensitivity:** Mild discomfort may feel intensely painful. For example, a routine procedure like a blood draw might be experienced as excruciating.
- **Reduced Pain Sensitivity:** May not recognize pain until it becomes severe, which can delay treatment and increase the risk of complications.
- **Atypical Pain Expression:** Autistic individuals may express pain differently, such as through changes in behaviour (e.g., withdrawal, agitation) rather than verbal complaints.

Service Provision Considerations:

- **Challenges in Assessing Pain:** GPs might find it difficult to assess the severity of pain based on the patient's report or behaviour, leading to potential under- or over-treatment.
- **Risk of Overlooking Symptoms:** Reduced pain sensitivity might result in conditions being overlooked or undiagnosed, as the patient may not report pain as expected.

Recommendations for Effective Support:

- **Ask Specific Questions About Pain:** Instead of asking "Are you in pain?" ask "Do you feel any discomfort here?" or "Can you show me where it hurts?" Use body maps to help identify pain locations.
- **Observe Non-Verbal Cues:** Pay close attention to non-verbal signs of discomfort, such as changes in posture, facial expressions, or behaviour, which may indicate pain or distress.
- **Provide a Calm Environment:** Sensory sensitivities can heighten pain perception, so creating a calm, quiet environment during examinations can help reduce discomfort.



Recognising and understanding the nuances of interoception, alexithymia, and pain perception in autistic individuals is key to providing effective, affirming healthcare. By adapting communication strategies, being mindful of sensory and emotional differences, and employing specific tools to aid in diagnosis and treatment, GPs can offer more empathetic and supportive care to autistic patients. This approach not only enhances health outcomes but also promotes a more inclusive and respectful clinical environment.

