



# Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A Brief Guide for Taxi Drivers.

v1 March 2018



*"Sometimes, it just feels like I'm getting too much information; the noise; the chatter; the lights; all hitting me at the one time."*

*"I feel like a goldfish trapped in a bowl by an invisible wall of glass – looking out into a world I try so hard to join."*

*"The problem is that it is not visible to others that I am having a sensory overload."*

*"I understand the staring I suppose, but the tutting and head shaking and pained looks are just awful and make me very sad."*

*"I don't mean to be annoying."*

too  
much  
information.

until  
everyone  
understands.



Glasgow is aiming to become the first Autism Friendly city in the UK by leading the drive to make businesses and visitor attractions more accessible to those living with autism.

The first autism friendly logo for the city was designed by a pupil at St John Paul II Primary, Castlemilk. The design was selected from 180 entries across Glasgow and it will be used as the 'Go To' symbol of autism friendly businesses and attractions.

Glasgow city centre alone attracts around 55million visitors every year, and is one of the UK's top destinations for work, leisure and shopping. Just over 1% of the UK's population is affected by autism, and ensuring that Glasgow city centre is autism-friendly will further underline its reputation as an inclusive and family-friendly location.

GCC is working with the business community, Autism Network Scotland and other organisations to develop these proposals, with an initial focus on high footfall locations such as shopping centres, transport hubs, museums, cinemas and key operational staff across the city centre.

Several businesses and attractions have already made changes to become autism aware, for example, autism friendly opening times, and areas or quiet rooms for a person to go should they become overwhelmed.

Glasgow has five key objectives which will help to deliver an autism-friendly city centre:

- Customer Experience: Promote good customer care and help to create a positive customer experience.
- Customer Information: Provide useful information and guidance for any challenges that may arise for autistic people.
- Staff Training: Greater awareness and effective training allowing staff to be more confident in their approach to individual situations.
- Physical Environment: Working within the limits of businesses' physical environment to make reasonable and appropriate adaptations.
- Promoting Understanding: Organisations to be involved in raising awareness, promoting greater understanding by sharing information with the wider visitor base.

GTL intends to fully embrace Glasgow's aim to become an autism friendly city. Hopefully you will join us and, by doing so, you enjoy both the challenges, and rewards, it brings.

## What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is a spectrum condition. The term 'spectrum' reflects the wide variation in challenges and strengths possessed by each person with autism. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support.

Children and young people with ASD frequently experience a range of cognitive (thinking), learning, emotional and behavioural problems. For example, they may also have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, or depression.

Autism affects more than 1% of the population. You're therefore highly likely to encounter someone who is on the autism spectrum at some point in your taxi career. This may also include autistic people who aren't yet diagnosed. If you're a GTL driver, you will almost certainly meet autistic people; the majority of children and young adults under our education contract alone are autistic.

Almost everyone has heard of autism, but most autistic people and their families feel like other people don't understand them. They don't want or expect you to have expert knowledge, however, a bit of recognition of the challenges they face in public situations, and how they cope with those challenges, would go a very long way.

Research shows, when people recognise someone is autistic, and understand the differences in how they experience the world and the challenges this can present, they behave with more empathy and understanding.

It is appreciated you can only do so much but, as statistics suggest you are highly likely to meet an autistic person as a taxi driver, you can help by taking the time to read up on ASD; affording yourself with even a little bit knowledge on autism will prove invaluable to both you and any autistic passenger(s) you will meet.

We have provided information on some aspects of autism you should familiarise yourself with, which will assist you in understanding and therefore affording the best assistance you can to your passenger(s).

## Social Interaction.

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people, recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions, and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard for them to navigate the social world. They may:

- Appear to be insensitive, rude, or bad tempered.
- Seek out time alone when overloaded by other people.
- Appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate.

Autistic people may find it hard to form friendships or interact with others. They may be unable, or find it difficult to, read or display emotions. They may want to interact with other people but are unsure how to go about it and, if they do, they are taken the wrong way. They cannot help this, and it is important you do not take this as rudeness or in any other negative way.

## Social Communication.

Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Many have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say. They may find it difficult to use or understand:

- Facial expressions and emotions.
- Tone of voice
- Jokes, sarcasm, irony, figures of speech.

Some autistic people have fairly limited speech, or may not speak at all. They will often understand more of what other people say to them than they are able to express, yet may struggle with vagueness, abstract concept and even "normal" every day figures of speech.

Some autistic people benefit from using, or prefer to use, alternative means of communication and may even be able to communicate very effectively without speech, for example, sign language, visual symbols and the written word.

Others have good language skills, but they may still find it hard to understand the expectations of others within conversations, perhaps repeating, or 'parroting', what the other person has just said.

An autistic person can take what you say literally and, as such, it is vitally important any instruction or advice they receive is communicated in a clear, concise, and consistent manner they can understand and follow safely. It helps to be patient and allow them time to process what has been said and possibly reply.

## Repetitive Behaviour and Routines.

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people and many prefer to have a daily routine so they know what is going to happen every day. They may not be comfortable with the idea of change, but will cope better if they can prepare for any changes in advance.

What may seem small (even annoying), things to you, may be vital to the routine of an autistic passenger and often a coping mechanism. Some may have a preferred route to and from school (or work); may wish to sit on a particular seat, on a particular side, of your taxi; may not like a particular colour, or even have a preferred radio station or no sounds at all. Some autistic people may also carry a certain object for security or even rock, flap, and use other repetitive movements, such as repeatedly pressing buttons, as a self-calming strategy.

Time plays a very big part in an autistic person's routine. They may not have an understanding of time the way you do, with 1min being no different to 1hr. If given a time, they expect it to happen at that time and may not understand why they have to wait. Issues with time come in to play mostly with late bookings and can manifest in each individual to varying degrees but all have an adverse impact on everyone involved, not least the passenger(s) concerned.

## Meltdowns.

Some children with ASD like to stick to the same routine and little changes may trigger tantrums. They may flap their hand or twist or flick their fingers when they're excited or upset. Others may engage in repetitive activity, such as turning switches on and off, opening and closing doors, or lining things up. Sometimes, a break in routine, or sensory overload of too much information, can cause them to have a meltdown.

A meltdown is '*an intense response to overwhelming situations*'. It happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (eg shouting, screaming, crying), or physically (eg kicking, lashing out, biting).

A meltdown is *not* the same as a temper tantrum. It is *not* '*bad*' behaviour'. When a person is completely overwhelmed, and their condition means it is difficult to express that in an appropriate way, it is understandable that the result is a meltdown.

Meltdowns are not the only way an autistic person may express feeling overwhelmed. Other behaviours that may appear are less explosive but equally common, such as refusing to interact, withdrawing from situations they find challenging, or avoiding them altogether.

*(Sometimes, the passenger(s) you transport will be accompanied by an Escort. They will have been trained in autism and we only ask you take their lead and assist where you can. With or without an Escort, you are not expected to be an expert in autism and Base is there to assist you. Always contact Base through the advised channels immediately, or as soon as you can, with any issues and challenges you may be encountering. Base will contact the appropriate client for advice and take their lead).*

## Source Material.

The National Autistic Society (NAS). <http://www.autism.org.uk/>

National Autistic Society Campaigns:  
[Too Much Information and Until Everyone Understands.](#)

Autism Network Scotland. <http://www.autismnetworkscotland.org.uk/#>

Child Autism UK. <https://www.childautism.org.uk/>

National Health Service (NHS). <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/>

Glasgow City Council (GCC). <https://bit.ly/2DP1x6l>



#autism

*(This is only a brief guide for anyone transporting people with autism. For GTL drivers, there is another info sheet to accompany this one, with advice on what to do / contact in the event of any situation with any vulnerable passenger. Both guides are available from our admin office and the Drivers' Section of the GTL website. If you don't have a login, please contact our Admin office 09:00 > 16:00, Mon – Fri).*

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