

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition affecting how people communicate, interact, and experience the world. It is characterized by differences in social interaction, communication, and often includes restricted interests or repetitive behaviours. "Spectrum" highlights the wide range of support needs, from independent living to high-care requirements.

Key Aspects of ASD

- **Neurodevelopmental:** It is present from birth, though it may not be diagnosed until later, as it is caused by differences in early brain development.
- **Unique Strengths and Challenges:** Individuals may have unique skills, such as intense focus or exceptional memory, alongside challenges in social situations.
- **Sensory Experiences:** Many autistic people are under- or over-sensitive to sensory input, such as sound, light, or touch.
- **Comprehensive Terminology:** ASD now encompasses conditions formerly diagnosed separately, such as Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder

The autism spectrum is not linear.



It looks more like a variable wheel.



Benefits from working with RDA

Abnormal Sensory Responses

Riding stimulates the tactile senses both through touch and environmental stimuli. The many sounds of the outdoor farm situation help to involve the auditory system. The rider learns to differentiate significant from less significant stimuli in the environment. An improvement in this area occurs as the rider learns to attend to their horse and those things that may influence the horse rather than attending to the environment in general.

Concentration

Programs include educational concepts, learning numbers, colours, shapes, patterns and sequencing. Memory and concentration can be improved through playing games.

Social Isolation

Group lessons provide riders with the opportunity to join in with their peers and understand concepts of teamwork and participation in social rituals such as appropriate greetings and thanking volunteers.

Psychological Benefits

Adaptive equipment assists riders to participate in a sport to the best of their ability. This includes competition opportunities. Learning to control the horse and other skills provides riders with a sense of achievement.

Resistance to Change; obsessed with maintaining routine in their world

New horses, volunteers and activities are introduced one at a time where possible. New experiences teach riders to cope with changing environments.

Abnormal ways of relating to people, objects and events

Through regular routines and game playing, riders learn about appropriate behaviours, saying please and thank you, teamwork and care for animals.

Speech and language difficulties

The excitement of riding encourages riders to speak and communicate about their activities.

Suggestions for working with someone with ASD:

- Be aware of individual cues, behaviours, likes and dislikes.
- Be sympathetic – try to see the world through the participant's eyes.
- Be clear, direct and literal in your instruction and communication.
- Ensure you use a participant's preferred name when giving instructions (eg, someone named Christopher might only answer to Chris)
- Volunteers and Coaches should wear name badges.
- Use routines, schedules and even timers / clocks (so participants can see how long a task will take) to help reduce stress and anxiety levels.
- Use horse-related rewards (such as trotting), either immediate or accumulated.
- Use sensory toys, music and special interests to engage participants.
- Allow time for some participants to process answers to questions or make decisions.
- Speak clearly and slowly, keeping sentences short and concise.
- Use picture cards, social stories and / or sign language.
- Be careful to teach the correct way to perform a task the first time, as ASD participants have difficulty changing once, they have learnt how to do something.
- Be adaptable – strategies such as using a specific reward can suddenly become ineffective and new ones will need to be developed.
- Never try to stop a behaviour, instead try to replace it with a more acceptable one.
- Once trotting is introduced, participants may want to trot more and, at the halt and walk, they may bounce on the horse's back to achieve this stimulation – discourage this by being clear when the participant will trot next.
- Use repetition when teaching a new skill – be persistent and consistent in your coaching approach and reward system.