

## An open letter from the autism community to all our police officers

We are very aware that you are undertaking essential work on the front-line as part of a critical community response to COVID-19 and the resulting extraordinary conditions and for that we are extremely grateful. We also recognise that in facing difficult situations daily you apply the values of Police Scotland, of integrity, fairness and respect, for which you are much appreciated.

In order to assist you with the difficult tasks you face we'd like to share some facts/observations about autism, its impact on us, our behaviours and how that can be perceived by those we come into contact with especially those in authority.

- At least 1 in 100 Scottish citizens are autistic.
- Anyone could be autistic - children, adults, parents, staff, all genders, all ethnicities, all sexualities, people with other disabilities and co-existing conditions such as Ehlers-Danlos
- Autism is not always 'visible'. In our daily interactions many of those we meet are completely unaware of the struggles we experience with social interactions, communication, sensory overload, anxiety.
- Some of what are considered classic autistic 'behaviours' - lack of eye contact, rocking or hand flapping, mutism or poor verbal communication are autistic responses to stress but easily misunderstood as something more menacing. Not doing any of these things of course, doesn't mean we are not autistic
- Some autistic 'behaviours' like looking away or down when being spoken to, help us concentrate and hear what is being said - many of us can't look at you and focus on your words at the same time
- Autistic people live with heightened 'fight or flight' response MOST OF THE TIME but especially in social situations, situations that are fluid and unpredictable and where we are being expected to do several things simultaneously, e.g. listen, respond, react. We have all experienced situations where our anxiety-led behaviours resulted in misunderstandings and challenging responses from others. Tense situations can and do escalate very quickly as you know
- Even light physical touch can be truly painful and scary for us, especially when stressed and frightened
- We like to understand 'the rules' in any given situation, we think very logically, and like to have certainty and a sense of control. Knowing what is expected of us makes life easier for us all.
- The most anxiety provoking thing for autistic people right now – on top of the general anxieties in the community - is seeing other people apparently ignoring the law and guidelines.
- The next is lack of clarity regarding exactly what activities are acceptable under the current legal guidelines
- But even when we do feel confident we understand these, some activities, like an essential car trip, can remain extremely stressful especially knowing that we could be stopped to justify the journey. In such a situation our autistic responses to the feelings of anxiety and fear are easy to misunderstand
- We don't always understand social or authority hierarchies and consequently can be outspoken at the wrong time to the wrong people. We are fiercely sensitive to anything we perceive as being 'unfair'.
- Autistic people can be right 'know it alls'. We tend to do our research, read everything, collect information and then of course we want to share all that when the opportunity arises. This can sound like 'cheek'.
- We do not tend to understand sarcasm, it confuses us and can cause distress. We respond best to clear, calm, direct communication.
- Many autistic people have support-workers or carers to help them with daily tasks and activities and are unable to do some activities alone eg shopping

**PLEASE:** Keep in mind that anyone you interact with may be autistic. If you stop someone in a car or approach them in the street or a public space or park and you are received in a manner that you think is a bit odd, e.g. they won't look at you, you feel their tone of voice is combative or they come across as a bit of a 'know it all', listen to their words and not just how they are saying them; autistic people will be trying very hard to find exactly the right words to tell you what they mean. They may laugh inappropriately. They may not be able to speak at all. Please avoid touching them. Use very clear specific language.

We want to keep all of our community safe and make your job as easy as possible. Thank you.