Step by Step: Creating Autism-Inclusive Health Walks







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For further information about topics covered in this toolkit, visit www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/autism-toolkit-links

Introduction

Ensuring Health Walks are accessible and inclusive of autistic people

This toolkit is aimed at anyone involved in a Health Walk who wants to make their group even more inclusive. If you're wondering how to create an environment where autistic people feel safe and welcome, read on! Please feel free to share the toolkit with anyone else who'd like to learn more about autism and inclusive Health Walks.

Paths for All has worked in partnership with a number of organisations to produce this guide, including SWAN (Scottish Women's Autism Network):

SWAN is proud to collaborate with Paths for All. We've seen the transformative impact that walking, especially communal walking with other autistic people, can have on autistic individuals. We've received amazing feedback from our trial Health Walk group, with one participant sharing, '...even this one-hour walk was good for my health physically and I began to feel less isolated,' illustrating the amazing benefits of these walking sessions in a non-pressured social situation.

We at SWAN believe that this collaboration with Paths for All is vital in promoting community wellbeing alongside physical wellbeing and inclusivity for autistic individuals, especially those experiencing isolation and seeking companionship and understanding in an understanding and supportive environment.

Acknowledgements

Paths for All would like to thank the following people and organisations, who kindly shared their experience and expertise in the development of this toolkit:

- East Dunbartonshire Day Services and their autism community group
- · Get Walking Lanarkshire and their Walk Leaders
- Inverclyde Bothy (Cycling UK)
- · National Autistic Society Scotland
- · SWAN and their volunteers
- The Huss family

Why the inclusion of autistic people matters

Making Health Walks accessible to all

Although we like to think all Health Walks are accessible to everyone, some people face greater barriers to participation than others. By increasing awareness and understanding of these barriers and how to overcome them, Health Walk providers and their Walk Leaders can be better equipped to make Health Walks more inclusive and welcoming to all. Paths for All provides training, guidance and other resources (such as this toolkit) to members of the Scottish Health Walk Network to help with this.

Everyone benefits from Health Walks that are diverse, inclusive and accessible to people of all abilities.

Reducing barriers to physical activity

Autistic people are at particularly high risk of being physically inactive since going somewhere new, meeting new people, social interaction, changes to routine and sensory overload can all be challenging. This can contribute towards social isolation and loneliness, mental health issues and deterioration in physical health. Health Walk providers who are aware of these challenges, and who take them into consideration when planning their walk, can help autistic people access physical and social activity in a way that's

What the law says about autism

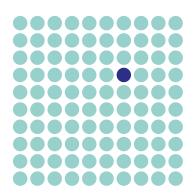
manageable and enjoyable.

Although not all autistic people consider themselves disabled, they are protected against discrimination under the <u>Equality Act 2010</u>. This means the law requires that, if needed, reasonable adjustments should be made to enable them to participate in Health Walks.

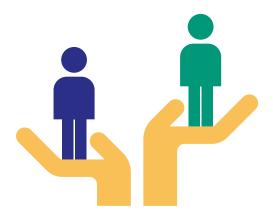


Want to know more about autism?

Autism facts



1 in 100 people are known to be autistic.



People are affected in different ways, meaning the level of support needed (and the situations in which they need it) will vary from person to person.



Some autistic people have accompanying learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions.



Sometimes autism is referred to as a 'hidden disability'. The sunflower symbol has been adopted by some to let others know they need additional support, help, or a little more time or understanding.

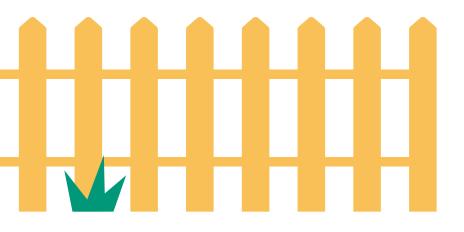
Understanding autism

Autism is described by the <u>National Autistic Society</u> as "a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world". It's one of a range of neurodivergent conditions, meaning an autistic person's brain is 'wired' differently to someone who is non-autistic or neurotypical.

What does autism look like?

It's important to note that everyone who's autistic is different. However, some common characteristics include differences in:

- Social communication
- Social interaction
- Repetitive behaviour
- Hypersensitivity (over-sensitivity to light, sound, taste, smell or touch)
- Hyposensitivity (under-sensitivity to light, sound, taste, smell or touch)
- Special interests (highly focused interests or hobbies)
- Stimming (repetitive movements or behaviours that help reduce or manage stress)
- Extreme anxiety
- Meltdowns and shutdowns in response to feeling overwhelmed
- Masking the above in the company of others, which can be very stressful and tiring



What's positive about being autistic?

There tends to be a lot of focus on the struggles and difficulties of being autistic but autistic people can share some positive traits. We all have individual skills, attributes and positive characteristics and it's no different for someone who is autistic. Some of the strengths they may bring to a Health Walk include:

- Attention to detail
- Good observational skills
- Long-term memory and recall
- In-depth knowledge of particular topics
- Finding innovative solutions
- Having creative ideas
- Determination
- Honesty
- · Strong sense of justice
- Loyalty and commitment
- Good sense of humour

The above qualities could make autistic participants ideal candidates for progressing to a supporting role on the walk (e.g. taking the register, looking after the first aid kit, and helping risk assess routes) or training to become a Walk Leader.

Autistic participants may also bring personal skills or interests to the group that can enhance everyone's enjoyment of the walk, e.g. a good knowledge of local history, nature, foraging or wildlife.



Want to know more about autism?

What it can be like to be autistic

- For a greater understanding of some of the challenges that can be faced by autistic people, see National Autistic Society: 'What is autism?'
- National Autistic Society's 'Too much information' campaign highlights what sensory overload and the need for extra processing time can be like through a series of short videos.
- Sumita shares her firsthand experience of meltdowns and shutdowns in National Autistic Society's 'Stories from the spectrum, on meltdowns and shutdowns'.
- Sarinah explains 'How it feels to have an autistic meltdown and how you can help' on BBC's The Social.
- Autism West Midlands has produced a handy factsheet about 'Meltdown and shutdown of autistic people'.
- Mental Health charity Mind explores the relationship between autism and mental health.



For further information and links to the above resources, visit www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/autism-toolkit-links



Keeping active as an autistic person

The Chief Medical Officers' <u>physical activity guidance</u> outlines the benefits to all of us of moving more on a daily basis. Moderate intensity physical activity, such as walking, is encouraged but any activity is beneficial. Something is better than nothing and walking is an ideal way to reduce sedentary behaviour!

How an autistic person can benefit from walking or wheeling

The potential benefits of walking or wheeling, taking part in a Health Walk and spending time in nature are the same for an autistic person as for anyone else, including improving physical and mental health and reducing sedentary behaviour. Other benefits include increasing self-esteem, connecting with others and improving general wellbeing.

There was a certain amount of anxiety about leaving the house [during the pandemic], but as soon as I was in the woods I felt more grounded. Each day I returned home with a sense of accomplishment.

Virn Stothers, who is autistic and featured in Paths for All's Humans of the Walk campaign



Want to know more about the benefits of walking?

Personal experience

<u>Find out more</u> about how daily walks helped Virn manage her anxiety and how she shared her love of nature with the local community during Covid.

Top tips to help plan your Health Walk

As with all Health Walks, an ideal route is accessible, convenient for participants to get to, offers an attractive environment and makes use of well-established and connected paths.

The following additional tips may help make your Health Walk more accessible specifically for autistic participants. However, everyone is different, so please remember to 'ask your audience' and involve them from the outset as they are the experts in what works best for them. Flexibility and a willingness to adapt based on individual feedback is key:

Continuity

Create a sense of continuity (e.g. meeting at the same time and place each week, using the same Walk Leaders, or following familiar routes), which can be less stressful than facing the unknown each time.

Plan B

Have a Plan B in place in case changes are unavoidable and let participants know as soon as possible if it will be put into action.

Wider paths

Allow enough room for people to walk or wheel alongside each other while respecting additional personal space.

Group size

Keep groups small and avoid crowds.



Top tips for creating a calming environment

If possible, try to avoid the following, which can cause extreme anxiety for autistic participants...

Change

Unnecessary and sudden last-minute changes to plans. If changes are unavoidable, try to communicate them clearly in advance so people know what to expect.

An assault on the senses

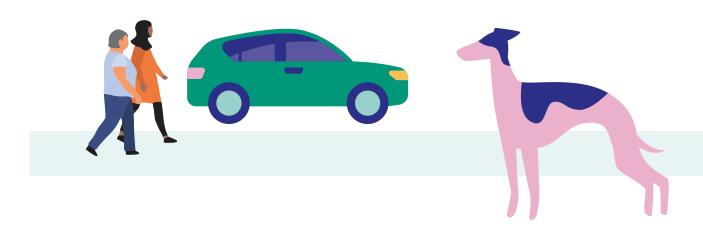
Noise, bright lights and strong smells can cause sensory overload. Autistic people can find it harder to filter out non-essential information for the senses, e.g. background noise.

Busy roads

Choose routes that avoid busy and noisy main roads.

Pet dogs

Which can be loud, unpredictable and get in the way. However, trained assistance dogs should always be welcomed on a Health Walk and, if necessary, can be kept at a distance from any participants who are fearful of dogs. For further information about 'Dogs and Health Walks', please see Paths for All's <u>Dogs and Health Walks</u> advisory note.



To help participants feel welcome, accepted, and understood please also consider the following approaches...

Respecting preferences

Participants may have particular coping mechanisms that help manage sensory or social overload. E.g. some people find it helpful to use noise cancelling headphones if they find noise or social situations overwhelming, or they might need some alone time to recharge during the walk, or find it reassuring to always walk at the front or back of the group. Creating a sensory profile can help identify their needs and how to address them.

Welcoming stimming

Stimming, or self-stimulatory behaviour, is a common aspect of autistic behaviour that's often misunderstood by neurotypical people. It refers to repetitive actions or behaviours that help an individual self-soothe, regulate their sensory experience, express emotion or focus. Examples include rocking, flapping hands, spinning, or using stim toys like stress balls or fidget spinners. It's a healthy and beneficial behaviour that should be accepted and encouraged, not suppressed.

Involving buddies

Participants might bring a carer, support worker, family member, guardian, friend or assistance dog with them to provide support, especially for their first walk. Make sure they feel welcome and encourage them to be active together out-with the group too. If an autistic participant attends on their own and would like additional support, you could create a specific volunteer buddy role or ask another organisation to provide this role during the walk (your local Third Sector Interface may be able to help). If you have a spare Walk Leader, they may be able to act as a buddy for the individual (leaving the main Walk Leader to focus on their leading responsibilities). However, no-one should feel under pressure to take on a buddy role.

Feeling safe

If walking with an autistic person, the route of your Health Walk should be risk assessed as usual but it might be helpful to involve the person in the assessment and/or create a sensory profile or support plan that will help them feel safe too. They could identify personal challenges or triggers you wouldn't have thought of and suggest solutions or adaptations they'd find helpful. For example, sensory factors you might need to consider include loud noises or bright lights.

Creating a profile

- Find out if the person has any sensory differences that could impact on them taking part in the walk.
- Involve them and/or carers and/or support workers in identifying potential triggers and mitigating factors.
- Share the profile with the participant (and Walk Leaders), to help inform them of what to expect and how to feel safe during the Health Walk.

Profile example

Challenge	Who might be affected?	How can it be controlled?	What further action is necessary?
Ambulance sirens	Bob, who is very sensitive to unexpected loud noises and becomes very distressed.	Prompt Bob to use his noise cancelling headphones as soon as sirens can be heard in the distance.	Explore alternative routes that avoid going past the hospital or fire station.
Dogs	Amy finds dogs unpredictable and loud and being near them causes extreme anxiety.	Encourage Amy to stay within the middle of the group, which can act as a protective buffer.	If there's a dog nearby, try to steer them away from Amy and ask the owner to lead it away from the group.
Unanticipated choices, e.g. deciding which route to follow	Rowan finds on-the-spot decision-making very stressful.	Keep options to a minimum. Try to anticipate the need to make choices (e.g. route options) in advance and give plenty of warning.	Minimise fuss, discussion and demands. Reach a decision quickly.

Communication

It's common for autistic people to communicate differently to neurotypical people. A key aspect to inclusivity is understanding and accommodating differences in communication style. It's important to be patient, direct and clear in your communication and encourage others to do the same. The following tips could help get your message across, make it easier for an autistic person to process information, and create an environment where everyone feels comfortable and understood.

1. Promoting your Health Walk

Top tips to help promote inclusive Health Walks.

- Use positive messages: Physical activity messages should focus on the short-term mental and social health benefits to the individual (e.g. "move to feel good" and "make new friends").
- **Use inclusive language:** Choose language and imagery that makes it clear your group welcomes a wide variety of people, which could include a participant wearing a sunflower lanyard, indicating a hidden disability.
- Provide opportunities for two-way communication: Ensure you provide
 a variety of ways prospective participants can contact you to ask questions
 and encourage them to reach out. Being able to make contact prior to
 attending an activity can help allay fears, build confidence and enable
 people to make informed decisions.
- Virtual walks: Create a 'virtual walk' video or booklet outlining what to
 expect during a walk (including a detailed description and photos of each
 route), so participants are mentally prepared for what to expect in advance.
- Link in: Approach relevant local organisations and services such as Scottish Autism's supported living services, National Autistic Society's local branches, ENABLE Scotland's local branches, local autism support groups, carers' forums, health and social care professionals, and relevant charities, and ask them to speak to their clients or members about attending a walk.
- Educate others: Share your knowledge of autism with others to help increase awareness and understanding. Feel free to share this toolkit.

2. Making contact before the Health Walk

There are some simple steps you can take in advance of the walk to make things easier and more comfortable for everyone.

- Promoting understanding: Talk to Walk Leaders and other members of the group about what autism is and how it can affect people to help increase their awareness and understanding. You could even share this toolkit with them!
- Involving autistic participants: Speak to participants who are autistic and/ or their carers, family members or support workers (where relevant) to find out what works or doesn't work for them.
- Offering to meet: In advance of the walk, meet to discuss their needs, listen to suggestions, put faces to names and provide reassurance. You could invite the Walk Leader along to introduce them to each other too.
- Sharing information: Share as much information about the Health Walk as
 you can with the participant in advance to help reduce anxiety. This could
 include documenting and photographing or filming some of your route so
 participants can make an informed decision about taking part. Or you could
 send them a photo of the Walk Leader(s) so they recognise a familiar face
 when they get there.
- Discussing refreshments: For many participants on Health Walks, staying for a cuppa and a chat afterwards is a real incentive to taking part! However, it's not for everyone. If your group does offer refreshments make sure participants know in advance and tell them it's OK if they would prefer to leave straight after the walk instead.



3. Verbal communication

Considerations will vary during the Health Walk since everyone is different in how they give and receive verbal information and the extent to which they understand or interpret others. However, it's worth bearing the following in mind:

- Clear and simple instructions: Take your time and keep instructions clear and concise.
- Allow for processing delays: Allow time for information to be processed and check for understanding.
- Stick to the plan: If there are unavoidable changes (e.g. a delay setting off because you're waiting for someone to arrive) communicate clearly and succinctly what has changed and why, which can help reduce anxiety.
- Directness: Many autistic people have a communication style that's direct and to-the-point, which can sometimes be misinterpreted by non-autistic people as blunt or rude. This is often because autistic individuals may not use or understand social cues and indirect language in the same way others do.

Want to know more about sharing your route?

- Paths for All teamed up with SWAN to offer a demo Health Walk to their Stirling meet-up group. An introduction and overview of the walk was circulated in advance.
- West Dunbartonshire Community Voluntary Services' Walking Friendly Photographic Route Maps provide a visual illustration of what people can expect on a particular route.
- The Phototrails website shows photos along with maps and other information like path surfaces and gradient for those who like a bit more detail.
- Google Maps can provide a Satellite or Street View of your route if anyone would like a preview before giving it a go themselves.





For further information and links to the above resources, visit www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/autism-toolkit-links

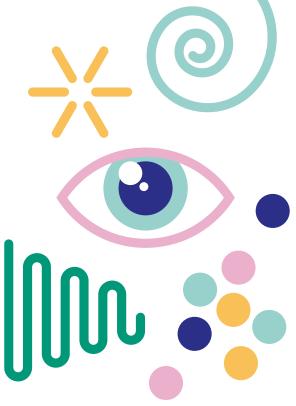
- Questioning: Autistic people often have a strong need for clarity and understanding, which can lead them to ask many questions for context or explanations. This can be perceived as being intense or intrusive, but it's generally driven by a desire for comprehensive understanding.
- Misunderstandings: Autistic people might find certain non-autistic communication habits confusing or frustrating. For instance, the use of metaphors, sarcasm, or indirect language can be difficult to understand, leading to misunderstandings or feelings of exclusion.
- **Small talk:** Some autistic people struggle with small talk and banter (which can be hard to interpret) and may prefer to talk about topics they are passionate about.
- Non-verbal and selective mutism: Those who are non-verbal do not speak at all, whereas selective mutism is a severe anxiety disorder where the person is unable to speak in certain social situations. In either case they may find non-verbal means of communicating helpful, e.g. pictures, diagrams, social stories or written or audio. But never assume that because someone doesn't speak they don't understand what you are saying!
- Very verbal: Some autistic people can be very chatty especially when talking about their special interests. They might not pick up on non-verbal cues from the person they're talking to that it's time to stop talking, so be clear and respectful.



4. Interpreting and processing other sensory information

We all use information from our senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling) to interpret the world around us. However, processing that information can be more challenging for autistic people whose individual senses may be over or under sensitive at different times, or who may struggle to filter out or navigate their way through a lot of different sensory information at once.

• Too much information: Many autistic people find it difficult to filter and process all the different information bombarding their senses at once, which can lead to sensory overload. If they appear stressed or distracted, they may need to take time out in a quiet place to recalibrate.



- Social cues: Social cues are non-verbal ways of communicating meaning, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, body space and boundaries. Autistic people can find it hard to 'read' social situations, which can lead to misinterpreting other people's intentions, so clearly explain what you mean without ambiguity.
- Eye contact: In western culture, maintaining just the right amount of eye contact is interpreted as showing interest and understanding. However, some autistic people find maintaining eye contact uncomfortable or distracting and may prefer to look elsewhere during a conversation, even though they are listening to what's being said. Conversely, they might over-compensate with an intense gaze or stare while trying to take in and interpret meaning from various visual clues.
- Social overload: Being sociable, making conversation and trying to process non-verbal cues can be very tiring for autistic people. Recognise and respect that they might not want to talk sometimes.
- Adapt: Continue to adapt to the needs of individuals as you get to know them better.

Want to know more about sensory differences?

Autistic people may experience some senses differently from non-autistic people. Understanding these additional senses as a Walk Leader will allow you to adapt your approach and route so they're more inclusive and comfortable for all.

Hyposensitivity

This describes an under-responsiveness to external stimuli or not recognising sensations such as hunger, pain or danger (e.g. traffic). People who are hyposensitive may seek more sensory input from their environment, e.g. by moving constantly, or being drawn to loud noises or vibrant flowers.

Balance

The vestibular system helps regulate a sense of balance, movement and spatial awareness. Differences in vestibular processing might make an autistic person more sensitive to movement, leading to discomfort or disorientation with certain motions or speeds of walking. They might prefer certain routes that are more stable and predictable and avoid others that are uneven or require more balance.

Body awareness

Proprioception helps interpret where our bodies are in relation to other objects and how different body parts move. An autistic person might struggle with knowing where their body is in relation to other people or objects, leading to clumsiness, a tendency to bump into things or standing too close to others. They might also struggle with walking at a specific pace, either tending to walk too fast or too slow.



Want to know more about how to improve communication?

Resources: Communication methods

- Different Minds' 'Autism and the Social Rulebook' eBook has been written and created in partnership with autistic adults and gives an insight into the differences between autistic and non-autistic communication styles.
- Disability Equality Scotland has Top 10 Tips for communicating with someone who's autistic.
- National Autistic Society explains Social Stories & Comic Strip Conversations.
- Lea Berta, who lives with an autism spectrum disorder, shared with Paths for All how she benefits from just the right amount of interaction on a Health Walk.



For further information and links to the above resources, visit www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/autism-toolkit-links



Want to know how to make your walks even more engaging and enjoyable?

Soothing

You might like to provide a 'Stim Box' with toys like stress balls or fidget spinners for anyone who would find them helpful.

Calming

You could try introducing calming or meditative techniques to help participants manage their anxiety and stay grounded during a Health Walk. For example, you could use the 54321 technique: name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. Or count the number of steps you take between landmarks, e.g. to the next bench, gate or tree.

Interesting

Find out if autistic participants have special interests or hobbies that you could chat about during the walk, e.g. Harry Potter, video games, collectibles or animals. Or think about how their interests could be incorporated into a walk,

e.g. local history, photography, trains, nature and wildlife, geology, or postcodes. Use your (and their!) imagination to come up with ideas for making the walk more interesting.

Varied

See the <u>Let's Walk</u> section on our website for inspirational and creative ideas (including seasonal variations) for turning walking into a fun outdoor activity if participants need a bit of extra motivation. But if you're introducing a new or additional activity to your Health Walk, remember to give participants advance warning so they know what to expect.



Further information

Where to find out more about autism

- National Autistic Society provides support, guidance and advice to help create a society that works for autistic people in the UK. This includes a training module on 'Autism, sport and physical activity' and a comprehensive accompanying booklet.
- Scottish Autism is an organisation dedicated to enabling autistic people to lead happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. They offer training in different aspects of autism and how to support people on the autistic spectrum.
- Scottish Government's Different Minds website busts myths about autism and includes insights from people who have lived experience of being autistic.
- Scottish Women's Autism Network offers peer support and networking opportunities for autistic women.



For further information and links to the above resources, visit www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/autism-toolkit-links



Where to find out more about making Health Walks more inclusive

If you are keen to make Health Walks more accessible and inclusive for a wide range of people who face additional barriers to participation, you may also be interested in:

- Connecting autistic adults with local Health Walks: Inverciyde Bothy
 developed a key partnership that helped make the connection between
 autistic adults and local Health Walks.
- Providing pre-walk information for autistic participants: Paths for All developed pre-walk information for autistic participants ahead of a demo Health Walk delivered in partnership with SWAN.
- All Ability Health Walks Training for Walk Leaders: A collaboration between Scottish Disability Sport and Paths for All, this course aims to increase Walk Leaders' confidence in supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities, impairments and long-term conditions in Health Walks. Contact training@pathsforall.org.uk for further information.
- Dementia Friendly Walking: Paths for All's Dementia Friendly Walking programme, supports those who want to make Health Walks more accessible and inclusive for people living with dementia.
- Dogs and Health Walks: Paths for All's advisory note for Health Walk providers includes information about assistance dogs.
- Walk and Roll Toolkit: Produced by Paths for All in partnership with Get
 Out Get Active Tayside, this toolkit aims to help make Health Walks more
 accessible to people who use wheelchairs, mobility scooters and
 mobility aids.

Further opportunities to learn are being developed on an ongoing basis, so please contact Paths for All for the latest information or to let us know what you'd like help with.



For further information and links to the above resources, visit www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/autism-toolkit-links

Can you help us?

Are you autistic? Would you be willing to share your experiences of taking part in a Health Walk? If so, we'd love to hear from you! We're particularly keen to hear from autistic participants, Walk Leaders or Health Walk Coordinators about what they find helpful (and not so helpful) on Health Walks so we can improve our guidance and develop our collection of case studies to make them more representative of Scotland's diverse population.

You can see examples of previous Success Stories from a wide range of participants on the <u>Paths for All website</u>.

Contact your Development Officer or email SHWN@pathsforall.org.uk.



Paths for All is a partnership organisation; for a full list of our current partners please visit our website www.pathsforall.org.uk.

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