

AUTISM

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT LEVELS

WRITTEN BY PSYCHOLOGIST CINDY NICOLLET
REVIEWED BY AUTUMN O'CONNOR, EXECUTIVE EDITOR,
UNTAPPED HOLDINGS



Autism holds a spectrum of differences, some of which are classified under three different levels of support needs. These levels are determined in consultation with a diagnosing psychologist. To best understand the levels, the use of clinical language must be used. Such terms as 'disorder' used here in this article relates only to diagnosis. We urge you to refrain from clinical language with autistic individuals as it stigmatizes and invalidates the experience of their condition.

Prior to 2013, the diagnoses of Aspergers Syndrome (AS) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were classified, with two distinct sets of criteria, within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders released a fifth addition, which brought about a number of diagnostic changes. Most notably, AS and ASD were now classified under the umbrella term of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), with the addition of three levels, to distinguish the degree of severity of the two diagnostic criteria – deficits in social communication and social interaction and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities.

Individuals with an ASD, Level 1 diagnosis require some support initiating social interactions and may experience difficulties noticing the non-verbal social rules of social interactions. With regard to repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities an individual may experience difficulties with skills inherent with executive functioning, such as planning and organising. Some individuals with the diagnostic label of AS may be considered as satisfying the diagnostic criteria for an ASD, Level 1 diagnosis.

Individuals with Level 2 and Level 3 diagnoses require substantial and very substantial support, respectively, in terms of social communication and social interactions as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities.

As each individual on the spectrum is unique, in terms of their abilities and inherent difficulties, it is important to consider the typical presentations at each of the three levels as a guide and not as absolutes.

It is always possible to find accommodations for individuals, irrespective of their level of autism diagnosis.

