

## Autism Hour Guide for Businesses

Hosting a regular Autism Hour is a great way to make your autistic customers feel welcome in your venue or store. Things are tougher than ever for autistic people and their families who have been hit hard by the changes brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. However, by creating a time each day or week where autistic people can shop or use your service, you are helping our community to feel safe, included and welcome in society.

**Gary Grant, Founder and Executive Chairman of The Entertainer, said:**

*"We always strive to make our stores a happy place for people to visit and so it is imperative that we adapt our in-store environment to create a more comfortable space for autistic people. The Entertainer is somewhere for children to explore their imagination and become inspired by all of the toys available and our Quiet Hour aims to help more families feel confident when it comes to shopping with us."*

### Understanding autism

More than 60% of autistic people think that the public don't understand how autism and new surroundings can affect someone's behaviour. Before we tell you how to host Autism Hours, we want to share with you five things that autistic people and their families want the public to understand about them.

**Autistic people may:**

- feel anxiety about changes or unexpected events
- be under- or over-sensitive to sound, smells, light, taste and touch. This is called sensory sensitivity.
- need time to process information, like questions or instructions
- face high levels of anxiety in social situations
- have difficulties communicating and interacting with others

Any of these or a combination could lead to a meltdown or shutdown. However, every autistic person is different. By making a few simple changes to your business, you can help autistic people to feel safe and calm.

### Guidance for you and your staff:

**What does my business providing Autism Hours mean?**

A typical Autism Hour would include:

- Turning down music and other noise: Overwhelming noise is a common barrier to autistic people accessing shops. Where possible, in-store announcements and other controllable noise should be reduced.
- Dimming the lights: Lighting, particularly fluorescent strip lighting, can be overwhelming for autistic people. Wherever possible, while maintaining a safe premises, lights should be dimmed or switched off.
- Sharing information about autism with employees: Not everyone needs to be an autism expert, but everyone should understand autism to provide autistic customers with the best experience possible in your business. If you need more information about autism, you can find out more on the National Autistic Society's website.
- Giving autistic people time and space to process information: Shopping environments can be overwhelming, so providing autistic people more time to process information in the way they prefer can help prevent distress or anxiety. If you have space, create a quiet room and advertise it on your website and in your premises.

### **Hosting Autism Hours with social distancing:**

The coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately impacted the lives of autistic people and their families. Many have seen their lives change abruptly with little time to process and no certainty about the future. Care has been cut back, schools have changed the way they teach and offices have shut down. Often these changes took place without consideration for the autistic people and families who relied on the support provided in these settings. The routines and relationships that helped them carry out their day-to-day lives were disrupted, leaving many feeling stressed and anxious. This is why it is more important than ever that businesses consider their autistic customers when making changes to their premises. Small adjustments can make a huge difference to their experience. Here are some examples of things you can do:

- Teach staff and security to recognise various schemes that help autistic people, carers and family members to identify themselves, such as the I am autistic card, carers ID or sunflower lanyard.
- Make sure that you have clear information about your social distancing measures, such as one-way systems and queueing protocols on your website so that autistic people can prepare. You can also make sure that this is clear in your premises with signage.
- Put up a poster for your customers to remind them to be aware of invisible conditions. Allow autistic people to call ahead and check that you have certain items and, if possible, reserve them (such as click and collect).
- Allow carers (also called Personal Assistants) to accompany autistic people in stores.
- Be aware that not all autistic people can wear a face covering. This can be due to communication issues or feeling overwhelmed by the sensation.
- Be aware that not all autistic people will understand social distancing or may accidentally break social distancing due to sensory overload, finding it hard to navigate areas (particularly avoiding obstructions) or their train of thoughts.
- Be advised that some autistic people who do understand social distancing and masks could become anxious (potentially to the point of overzealousness) by observing people breaking social distancing.

**How can I provide training to my staff to make sure they're able to help autistic customers?**

Autism Hour is not about being an autism expert – we've heard from autistic people and families that just a little extra understanding can go a long way. As a starting point, [you can share this leaflet with your staff](#). The main thing is to be friendly and welcoming.

## What do I have to do before our Regular Autism Hour?

**Plan your changes to reduce the sensory overload at your venue:** dim bright lights and switch off background music. Avoid non-essential tannoy announcements, and if possible, switch off check-out beeps.

**Make sure your staff are prepared:** the main thing is to be welcoming and friendly! The advice in the *How to support autistic customers leaflet* will help your staff adjust their communication and behaviour to provide a positive experience for autistic customers. To ensure your staff are prepared, do circulate the leaflet before Autism Hour, and keep the leaflet and this FAQ present to help make sure everyone feels confident and able to respond to things which may come up.

**Share on social media:** Advertise your Autism Hour to customers on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and remember to use the hashtag #AutismHour.

**If you get any questions about Autism Hour:** We know good customer relations are at the heart of your business, but your staff may need to deal with some different questions during Autism Hour, so we've provided you with this FAQ. The second section suggests how to answer questions from customers.

### What if we get it wrong? It's hard to make all of these adjustments.

If you're concerned about your ability to make the adjustments necessary to implement your Regular Autism Hour, here are a few things to remember! Firstly, every effort you make will make a difference. Autism Hours are about creating an improved customer experience, not a perfect one. On the day, during your Regular Autism Hour, if any of your customers has a meltdown or is still having a difficult time despite your adjustments, we advise giving that individual time and space to deal with the situation and to calm down in their own time. If your business has a quiet room/area, you could ask them if they'd like to use this.

## Guidance for answering questions from customers about your Autism Hours

### Why are you conducting Regular Autism Hours?

The National Autistic Society has highlighted how overwhelming public spaces can be for an autistic person trying to deal with too much information. They can be crowded, unpredictable, loud and bright, often made worse by encountering members of the public that simply doesn't understand them and their autism. This has resulted in 64% of autistic people avoiding the shops, and leaves autistic people and their families feeling socially isolated.

We are following the success of the National Autistic Society's Autism Hour campaign to create an autism-friendly space for our customers. We've dimmed our lights, switched off background music, and educated our staff about autism to help autistic people and their families feel able to shop in a more accessible environment.

### **Why do you not always do this?**

We want to learn more about how we can make our business a more welcoming environment for autistic people and their families. Big change can take some time, but The National Autistic Society has been helping us to better understand the small changes we can make which will make the biggest difference for autistic people. We're proud that our staff now understand more about autism, and that will be a long-term benefit for our business being better able to support autistic customers.

### **I don't think you know anything about autism?**

I'm sorry you feel that way. We know that autism affects everyone differently, so while it would be difficult for us to become experts in autism, we're keen for our staff to learn more about autism so that we're better able to support autistic customers.

As part of this, we are always keen to learn how best to support autistic people, and would love to learn more about what we can do to help you access our business.

### **Why are non-autistic people here?**

Our Regular Autism Hour is all about creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone. We want everyone to respect what the Regular Autism Hour stands for, and hope that by welcoming everyone, the public may also learn more about autism by witnessing the small changes which are happening today.

### **What training have you had?**

We have not received any formal training for this event, but the adjustments we have made have come from the National Autistic Society's Autism Hour campaign, which it developed in conjunction with autistic people as part of its work. We have shared this information around our business so that all our staff understand what is going on today, and how to create a better environment to welcome autistic people and their families.

### **This time isn't convenient for me - couldn't you do it at X time?**

We have had to find a time which works for our business, as well as our customers. We're keen to hear your feedback about which times might suit you better so we can consider that when we host Autism Hours in the future.

### **This environment isn't actually autism-friendly for me.**

We're very sorry to hear that. While we are doing everything we can to improve our venue's suitability for autistic people and their families, we know that it's hard to create an environment which works for everyone as each autistic person is different and has different needs. Our Autism Hours try to make small changes which will make the biggest difference for the most autistic people - such as dimming bright lights, switching off background music, and informing our staff about autism. This is following the National Autistic Society's successful Autism Hour campaign, which suggested these adjustments. We recognise this will not make the perfect environment for every autistic person, however they provide important first steps for change. For this reason, I'm really interested to hear what other adjustments we could make to help you access our business, and we can consider this for our future Autism Hours.

### **I had a meltdown during your Autism Hour - why was this advertised as autism-friendly?**

We're very sorry to hear that. Is there anything we can do for you/can we provide you a quiet space to recover? While we are doing everything we can to improve our venue's suitability for autistic

people and their families, we know that it's hard to create an environment which works for everyone as each autistic person is different and has different needs. We are trying to create an improved environment for autistic people - not necessarily perfectly autism-friendly. We believe this is an important first step.

### **Why should I care about autism?**

According to The National Autistic Society, around 700,000 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum. Together with their families, this means autism is a part of daily life for 2.8 million people. Autistic people can get overloaded by everything around them. This can make the world a terrifying, isolating place. But it doesn't have to be like this. Small changes - such as dimming our lights and switching off background music - can reduce the overload for them, and make shops/services like ours much more accessible.

### **More information**

Please find more information on our website: [autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world](https://autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world)

Should you have any questions or need more support please email [campaign@nas.org.uk](mailto:campaign@nas.org.uk)