



Providing insights which incite  
personal and interpersonal growth!

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## PEOPLE with AUTISM: Why Do They Do What They Do?

**"Try to understand why people do what they do. They have their reasons even if we don't know what they are."**

Have you ever thought about that with respect to individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD)? Often we are quick to view their comments, silences, meltdowns, and actions as meaningless, unanticipated, inappropriate, or even defiant. Yet I believe that if or when they are able to process and to voice explanations for their actions, they usually have very valid reasons for them!

What then causes them to do what they do? Here are some possible explanations:

1. Sensory processing. Each of us is constantly bombarded by sensory information. What our brains do with that information can vary widely, and can produce just as wide a variety of responses! But frequently those responses are perfectly valid given the way that our brains processed the input. Do you perceive a noise as painful? It makes sense that you would cover your ears, run from the noise, or try to drown it out in another manner. Are you adverse to certain sensations? Then it seems appropriate that you would avoid getting your hands dirty (and any tasks that would lead in that direction), or refuse to wear particular clothing, or react abruptly (or even forcefully) to distasteful touch. These responses make even more sense when paired with some of the following explanations.
2. Being motivated by special interests. Individuals with ASD typically have an area (or areas) of intense interest, to the exclusion of others. They may ignore or refuse other topics or activities, not to be rude or disobedient, but because they are more interested in --or feel compelled to follow--opportunities to pursue or engage in their special interest.
3. Inability to glean from external assistance. The nature of their diagnosis makes it difficult for individuals with ASD to learn from past experience, to establish a connection between rewards, consequences, and their behavior, or to ask for help from others.
4. Misinterpretation of language or the social environment. ASD often causes individuals to interpret things literally, to miss intended meanings, to overlook or misunderstand social expectations, and to incorrectly process what they hear (auditory processing), see, or experience. Their lack of information or experience may also make it difficult for them to anticipate how others will respond, or to communicate how they are feeling or what they are thinking.
5. Unique personality traits and characteristics of their age and maturity level. Sometimes people "do what they do" because they are young and inexperienced, or because their personality dictates that they are more extroverted or introverted. Many of the behaviors that we observe in individuals with ASD cannot--and should not--be attributed to their diagnosis. Sometimes they may make an inappropriate choice, or an immature decision, or take an uncalculated risk, just because they're human. Let's face it--haven't we all "been there, done that" many times over?

If we keep an open mind, and make a true effort to understand why those around us do what they do, we will make great strides in our efforts at promoting social effectiveness. "When we try to understand why people do what they do, we have more compassion." What a great goal--to become more compassionate parents, teachers, administrators, employers, therapists, doctors, neighbors, and friends through our efforts to better understand ourselves and others!

Thank you,

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