



CREST

Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats



Autism and Extremism

The Questions that Operational Practitioners
Should be Asking

PRACTITIONER REPORT

NOVEMBER 2023

NADINE L. SALMAN

ZAINAB AL-ATTAR

Autism and Extremism

The Questions that Operational Practitioners Should be Asking

PRACTITIONER REPORT

Nadine L. Salman | Department of Psychology, Lancaster University

Zainab Al-Attar | School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire

This report was produced as part of the CREST project, which aims to consolidate best practice in assessing the risk of extremism in individuals. You can find all the outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/

ABOUT CREST

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is funded by the UK's Home Office and security and intelligence agencies to identify and produce social science that enhances their understanding of security threats and capacity to counter them. Its funding is administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award ES/V002775/1).

www.crestresearch.ac.uk



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION 4
- 2. MAKING SENSE OF CLINICAL JARGON 5
- 3. RISK ASSESSMENT 7
- 4. ENGAGING THE NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUAL..... 12
- 5. INTERVENTION, PROTECTION, AND DIVERSION..... 15
- BIBLIOGRAPHY 18

1. INTRODUCTION

Existing research does not indicate that autism is a causal factor for extremism engagement in the general population. Nevertheless, while estimates vary, a proportion of individuals within extremist populations have autism. These individuals may follow a different pathway to engagement and may have different needs than their neurotypical counterparts. Just as it is important to understand the relevance of mental ill health in the context of extremism engagement, it is also important for practitioners involved in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) to understand vulnerability, risk, and resilience among individuals with autism, as well as how best to support them to mitigate risk and encourage disengagement.

This document has been written to provide a brief introduction and overview of some key considerations around autism in extremism contexts. It is based on a systematic review of the existing literature, as well as findings from focus groups with practitioners working with neurodivergent individuals in PCVE contexts, and international case studies of individuals with autism and extremism concerns.¹ This document is not a risk assessment instrument, rather it is designed to support practitioner understanding of autism and neurodivergence within extremism contexts.



¹ You can see all outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/

2. MAKING SENSE OF CLINICAL JARGON

WHAT IS 'NEURODIVERSITY' AND HOW DO WE TALK ABOUT IT IN THE CONTEXT OF EXTREMISM?

“Neurodiversity” refers to the diversity and variability in the development of the brain, and in ways of processing information, throughout the population. Within this, “neurotypical” individuals are usually considered to be those who think and process information similarly to the majority of the population, while “neurodivergence” is broadly characterised by differences in brain function.

Neurodivergence is often used as an umbrella term for a variety of neurodevelopmental disorders including autism, ADHD, learning difficulties and disabilities, developmental language disorders, tic disorders, and some acquired brain injuries (Exceptional Individuals, 2023; HM Inspectorate of Prisons et al., 2021). The impact of these conditions can differ depending on the individual, their symptoms, and their characteristics, which can include strengths and skills as well as difficulties.

Throughout this document, we conceptualise the role of neurodivergence as “contextual” to emphasise how neurodivergent features may affect individuals’ experiences, functioning, and behaviour in ways that may, in some individuals, become a context in which their vulnerability unfolds at that specific point in time – rather than directly ‘causing’ this vulnerability or linking with it permanently (Al-Attar, 2020). Conversely, these traits can also contextualise resilience and disengagement in ways that differ from neurotypical populations.

Neurodiversity

‘Neurodiversity’ refers to the diversity and variability in the development of the brain, and in ways of processing information, throughout the population.

AUTISM

Autism is a type of neurodivergence characterised by cognitive and behavioural patterns broadly defined through two key diagnostic criteria: social communication and interaction challenges; and restricted, repetitive behavioural patterns (World Health Organisation, 2019a). However, alongside these core diagnostic criteria, individuals with autism may present a range of different characteristics, facets, or symptoms, such as sensory under- or over-sensitivity, vivid fantasy and ideation, and differences in executive function and cognition (Al-Attar, 2019; National Autistic Society, 2023). Autism is considered a “spectrum condition”, meaning that it can affect different people in different ways, and encompasses a range of experiences and behaviours (National Autistic Society, 2023).

Several different terms can refer to autism. The European diagnostic classification manual (the ICD-11) and the DSM-5 use the term autism spectrum disorder (ASD; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019a). It is also sometimes called autism spectrum condition (ASC), and historically, has been referred to as Asperger’s syndrome (AS). The “broad autism phenotype” (BAP) refers to traits of autism, which may not meet the threshold of a clinical diagnosis. Where autism becomes a context for extremism vulnerability, there

is no known correlation between degree of autism and degree of vulnerability or strength of links and it is common to find individuals with mild autism or autistic traits within the extremist cohorts.

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

Autism is the most widely researched form of neurodivergence in these contexts, and the primary focus of this document. However, it also shows a high level of co-occurrence and shared symptomology with ADHD, another form of neurodivergence, that may have contextual relevance (Al-Attar, 2021). Research suggests that approximately 40% of individuals with autism also have ADHD (Rong et al., 2021).

ADHD is characterised by inattentiveness and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. Inattentiveness can include difficulties in regulating attention to tasks (particularly when not interesting), being easily distracted, and forgetfulness. Hyperactivity and impulsivity may be characterised by restlessness, talking excessively, interrupting others, and engaging

in impulsive (sometimes reckless) behaviours (World Health Organisation, 2019b). These symptoms, as well as other related features and traits, may interact with, compound, or exacerbate autistic traits. They may often mask autism, and autism may inversely mask ADHD, and one or both conditions may be missed in many individuals, especially with mild forms. Such undetected neurodivergence may be found across the general and extremism population. However, the research on ADHD in extremism contexts is currently limited.

COMORBID PSYCHIATRIC CONDITIONS

As well as ADHD, individuals with autism can experience a range of other mental illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety), disorders (e.g., personality disorders), and other forms of neurodivergence (e.g., dyslexia). It is therefore important to consider how these may interact and affect the individual, their experiences, and their behaviour.

3. RISK ASSESSMENT

This section provides a brief summary of ten key areas to consider alongside risk assessments for individuals with extremism concerns who have autism. These include seven facets of autism in line with the Framework for the Assessment of Risk and Protection in Offenders on the Autism Spectrum (FARAS; Al-Attar, 2018, 2019) The remaining three areas relate to considerations when ADHD is also present, other comorbidities, and wider biopsychosocial considerations. Alongside each area are some questions to consider when assessing an individual with autism and extremism concerns. These factors can contextualise extremism vulnerability and risk, but rather than directly causing this risk, they can become a context for push and pull factors linked to extremism and combine with or exacerbate other vulnerabilities.

3.1 CIRCUMSCRIBED INTERESTS

Extremists with autism may develop specific intense interests that draw them into and keep them engaged in extremism. While these intense interests may serve psychological functions for the individual such as alleviating negative emotions and affording positive emotions, they may become associated with harmful subjects, including terrorism. According to research, harmful interests may arise from precursor interests such as military history, especially the Second World War; mass murder and violence; weapons (firearms, knives, and bombs); computers and technology; extremist narratives or ideologies; conspiracy theories; and politics. Technical and weapon-related interests may confer criminal capability (e.g., bomb-making), while multiple interests may converge to shape risk. Topics of interest may also include negative experiences or injustices in personal or public life..

Questions to consider:

- What role do the individual's interests play in their pathway to extremism engagement?
- Where and with whom does the individual engage with risk-related interests (online and offline)?
- What needs does engaging in these interests address? Does it provide positive feelings such as excitement, mastery, connectedness with others, or a deep sense of identity and purpose? Does it reduce negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, agitation, and stress?
- Do other factors (e.g., stressors) exacerbate the need to use risky interests to self-soothe? Do interests link to pre-occupations with life difficulties and stressors?

3.2 VIVID FANTASY AND IMPAIRED SOCIAL IMAGINATION

Fantasy life is a normal aspect of functioning and is especially important for autistic individuals as a source of wellbeing, creativity, and a way of processing feelings and events, and it can often be associated with topics of interest. At-risk individuals with autism may experience vivid extremism-related fantasies and ideation, often linked to their interests. This can include detailed visual fantasies depicting violent ideation or preoccupations with death, which may be inspired by existing violent imagery viewed online. Violent ideation may be associated with intense interests related to extremism or terrorism, and may redress feelings of anger, distress, and injustice or provide excitement and mastery. Fantasy

RISK ASSESSMENT

Neurodivergence, Vulnerability, and Risk in the Context of Violent Extremism

can be a way to address unmet needs in reality (e.g., being a powerful character who exacts justice or vengeance). In some cases, particularly where individuals become desensitised to violent imagery, they may transition from fantasy to action and start to act out aspects of their interest by acquiring physical items, role-playing and in some but not all instances, offence enactment. Fantasy life is typically based on copied information (e.g., from videos) without abstract hypothetical thinking around how enactment in reality may look and feel different. This does not mean that the individual cannot differentiate fantasy from reality, but instead means that their fantasy may not be inhibited by realism.

Questions to consider:

- What risk-related fantasies does the individual experience?
- Where does the inspiration for risk-related fantasies originate? Are these fantasies adapted from extreme content?
- What are the triggers for risk-related fantasies and what feelings do fantasies generate?
- What might be stopping the individual from acting out risk-related fantasies?
- What might be compelling the individual to act out risk-related fantasies?

3.3 NEED FOR ORDER, RULES, ROUTINES, AND PREDICTABILITY

Autistic individuals may have a need for predictability, order, structure, rules, and routines. Changes to routines or perceived loss of order and predictability in personal or public life can cause stress, anxiety and frustration that may contribute to a sense of threat or grievance. 'Rule-based' ideologies that claim to restore order, punish rule-breaking, and restore predictability in society, may be attractive to at-risk individuals.

Questions to consider:

- Does the risk-related interest, fantasy, ideology, or group meet a need to restore order, punish rule-breaking, or provide a sense of predictability?
- Does a disruption to routines, order, or rule-breaking feed into a threat or grievance narrative for the individual?

3.4 OBSESSIONALITY, REPETITION, AND COLLECTING

Interests may become obsessive and repetitive in their pursuit and include the collection of associated items, images, or videos. This can include collections of weapons, extremist information and memorabilia, and virtual content such as memes, propaganda, and violent videos. These collections may provide opportunities for detection, or in extreme cases, grounds for conviction. As well as obsessively pursuing their interests, at-risk individuals may demonstrate a fixation, preoccupation and repetitive thinking and communication linked to specific grievances or feelings of injustice.

Questions to consider:

- What purpose does any collecting behaviour serve for the individual (e.g., what feelings does it generate)? Does the collecting behaviour feel compulsive?
- Do collecting behaviours increase risk of harm or offending? Consider whether the items/content collected are directly linked to offending (e.g., preparation of terrorist acts, offensive weapons).
- Does the individual appear to be fixated on a grievance, injustice, or specific individuals or groups?

3.5 SOCIAL INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

Many autistic individuals may be intelligent and verbally fluent, but their social communication and interaction styles may be different and make many social environments challenging for them, in some cases leading to social difficulties. Social and relationship difficulties experienced by individuals with autism may lead to isolation, feelings of resentment, and personal grievance. This may, in combination with other factors, fuel revenge fantasies and identification with extreme ideologies that offer an explanation or social status. Social difficulties may push individuals to retreat into online communities, where they can communicate about their interests and may feel more competent and connected, but may be exposed to more extreme content and actors. A lack of social awareness may also lead individuals to “leak” their extreme views, resulting in referrals to authorities. Autistic individuals may be skilled at communicating about their interests and fluent and influential in this respect. The online space in particular may best speak to their natural communication style as it uses explicit, visual information, and they can curate their social interactions and communication around their interests and areas of skilful communication.

Questions to consider:

- Have social interaction and communication difficulties contributed to experiences of stress, threat, grievance, and injustice that may relate (directly or indirectly) to extremism pathways?
- Does extremism engagement (online or offline) fulfil social needs?
- Does the individual appear to have additional vulnerabilities (e.g., to exploitation) related to a lack of social awareness?
- Do communication strengths linked to extremist interests afford social acceptance, status, or identity?

3.6 COGNITIVE STYLES (DIFFICULTIES AND STRENGTHS)

It is important to consider the individual’s cognitive styles (i.e., ways of thinking and processing the world around them), both as strengths and potential difficulties. One autistic cognitive style is the tendency to overfocus on minute details (of an interest, or a fixation on a grievance) whilst overlooking the bigger picture and context. This could lead to a lack of consideration of the consequences of one’s immediate specific actions. Information that is presented in the form of facts, categories, fine details, and patterns, may resonate and have a pull, making theories of the world that categorise events and people and explain the world in a patterned way, appealing. Many extremist ideologies present themselves in such a way, making them easy to process and seem like a logical way of explaining and ordering the disorder in the world. Attention may become transfixed and stuck on details of interest or pre-occupation (e.g., extremist interest or pre-occupying grievance) and the individual may have difficulty shifting their focus and mind away from this topic. Difficulties as a result of cognitive differences may also exacerbate social and academic/occupational challenges, leading an individual to underachieve or become isolated, possibly contributing to grievances. Other cognitive styles linked to autism may include difficulties reading what others are thinking when this differs from one’s own thoughts, and intuitively reading others’ emotions, anticipating hypothetical outcomes of behaviour and the different social contexts surrounding behaviour. This could impede intuitive appreciation of the impact of one’s own extremist behaviours on others (e.g., direct and indirect victims). It could also limit appreciation for how extremist behaviour in real world contexts has a different impact to the narrow context portrayed in extremist propaganda and ideologies. These cognitive differences do not necessarily impede understanding of what is right or wrong, or legal or illegal, but instead lead to extremist information being processed in a different way that contextualises vulnerability.

Questions to consider:

- Have difficulties in education, work, and managing day-to-day demands contributed to distress and pushed towards a grievance narrative?
- Does the individual demonstrate an attention to detail in risky interests that could confer terrorist capability (e.g., bomb-making) or susceptibility to an ideology?
- Does the individual have an appreciation of the wider context and social and legal consequences of their extremist interests and actions?
- Does the individual struggle to understand how their actions may be perceived by, or may affect, others?

3.7 SENSORY HYPER AND HYPO-SENSITIVITY

Over-sensitivity to sensory input may contribute to difficulties in school, work or social spaces and subsequent isolation, and may drive some individuals to self-soothe through risky interests and online spaces. It may also lead to a perception of the world as threatening. Meanwhile, under-sensitivity may be expressed through sensory-seeking behaviours, including pursuing interests that offer sensory input and reward (e.g., violent video games, fire, explosives, weaponry, and online gore or graphic imagery). Individuals may experience desensitisation from repeated exposure, leading them to seek more extreme content and engage in riskier behaviour in order to derive the same sense of sensory reward.

Questions to consider:

- Have sensory sensitivities (directly or indirectly) contributed towards stressors that push towards grievance narratives, or self-soothing through extremism engagement?
- Does extreme content and behaviour provide a sensory reward for the individual?

3.8 ADHD AND OTHER FORMS OF NEURODIVERGENCE

Individuals with autism and ADHD or other forms of neurodivergence may experience additional difficulties that may exacerbate some of the above challenges. The combined social difficulties can contribute to experiences of isolation and underachievement. Difficulties in organisation, planning, and prioritisation may exacerbate professional and academic challenges that may contribute to grievances. Impulsivity associated with ADHD may be linked to impulsive risk-taking behaviour and stimulation seeking through extremism. The presence of ADHD may also intensify sensory seeking behaviours, and increase the sensory pull of extreme content, including taboo topics linked to different forms of extremism and harmful behaviour.

Questions to consider:

- Does impulsive, reckless, or risk-taking behaviour play a role in behaviours of concern (e.g., accessing extreme content, sharing extreme views, violence)?
- What rewards (e.g., sensory, novelty, interest) does extremism engagement provide for the individual?
- Does the individual switch between or seek several different risky interests, ideologies, or groups?

3.9 OTHER COMORBIDITIES

Additional factors often interact with or exacerbate difficulties associated with neurodivergent traits and symptoms, creating complex and interacting needs. This can include a range of other diagnoses and mental illnesses. This may include (but is not limited to) anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, and personality disorders. It is important to consider how these difficulties can interact with or exacerbate the challenges experienced by individuals with autism. One example could be autism-related interests becoming more intense, angry, nihilistic, or destructive during periods of depression.

3.10 BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND INDIVIDUAL CASE FORMULATION

As well as other diagnoses, additional contributory factors can include trauma (e.g., experiences of abuse) and other life stressors (e.g., familial, relationship, and employment difficulties). These can be exacerbated by a lack of support services, especially during transitional periods, such as the transition to secondary school or adulthood. Such difficulties can drive individuals to self-soothe through their risky interests and behaviours. It is therefore important to maintain a holistic approach and consider how different factors can interact to shape an individual's risk.

Questions to consider:

- Do additional mental health difficulties or life stressors contribute to feelings of isolation, hopelessness, threat, and/or grievance?
- Does engaging in risky behaviours or interests help to soothe distress associated with mental health difficulties and life stressors?

4. ENGAGING THE NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUAL

This section outlines some of the ways in which an awareness of features of autism and neurodivergence more generally can help to inform engagement with neurodivergent individuals of concern. It provides some suggestions for how practitioners can establish effective communication with individuals with autism, how they can capitalise on strengths and individuals' motivations for engagement, and how to minimise causing additional distress to the individual. This section is structured according to the ten areas for consideration outlined in the previous section.

4.1 CIRCUMSCRIBED INTERESTS

- Exploring the individual's interests can help to encourage engagement, establish rapport, and lower anxiety.
- Exploring risk-related interests (e.g., in interviews) can help to elicit details about motivations and behaviours.
- Consider that the individual may be less willing or able to engage in topics outside of their areas of interest, and rapport may be maximised by engaging in conversation and activity linked to their healthy interests.

4.2 VIVID FANTASY AND IMPAIRED SOCIAL IMAGINATION

- Exploring risk-related fantasies can help to elicit details about motivations, behaviours, source material, and escalation beyond fantasies.
- Consider that the individual may find it difficult to imagine hypothetical scenarios, particularly in relation to others' perceptions or feelings, or

how their fantasy may not have the same impact in reality.

- Fantasies may help the individual to alleviate stress or provide a sense of reward and hence engaging in conversations about their healthy fantasy life may soothe, put them at ease, and establish rapport.

4.3 NEED FOR ORDER, RULES, ROUTINES, AND PREDICTABILITY

- Consider the impact of disruptions to routines, the possible negative consequences for the individual and their behaviour, and the impact that this stress can have on their engagement.
- Consistent schedules and routines for meetings can help to minimise stress.
- Providing a clear plan, structure, and rules for interactions can help to minimise anxiety and stress and ensure that the individual understands expectations within interactions and their relationship with the practitioner.
- Providing clear information about the steps in investigations, interventions, and criminal justice processes can help create predictability and reduce distress.

4.4 OBSESSIONALITY, REPETITION, AND COLLECTING

- Consider that some repetitive behaviours and comfort items (e.g., from their collections) may help to reduce anxiety, particularly in stressful situations.

- Exploring the details of collections can help to elicit details about motivations, behaviours, sources, and purpose of the collections for the individual.
- Where obsessions and pre-occupations detract from productive engagement, explore ways to reduce overall stress, and structure bounded or limited time to discuss obsessions and offer clear instructions that the conversation will follow that structure and move on.

4.5 SOCIAL INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

- Use explicit, precise, matter-of-fact communication. Consider blunt, detailed or efficient responses as indicators of good communicative engagement. Minimise social chitchat and make the social rules and conversation aim clear. Where excessive irrelevant details are derailing the conversation, explain the rationale for moving on. Consider that the individual may experience social anxiety and difficulties in engagement and understanding others' expectations.
- Adapting to the individual's communication style in line with their cognitive strengths can help to facilitate understanding and engagement. For example, using factual and detailed explanations of the logic and reasons for events, actions, and required behaviours, rather than emotional explanations or implicit social cues.
- Visual representations can facilitate communication.
- Rapport can be enhanced by explicit, efficient, factual information, and giving and sharing of healthy interests. Trust can be enhanced by making the interaction clear and predictable, with a clearly stated logic and expectations.

- Consider that the candour associated with autistic communication styles can facilitate detection, engagement, and insights. However, also consider added ethical measures and reasonable adjustments to communication, such as offering explicit, matter-of-fact explanations of the consequences of disclosure to individuals whose understanding may be impacted by their cognitive profile.

4.6 COGNITIVE STYLES (DIFFICULTIES AND STRENGTHS)

- Understanding and adapting to the individual's learning/cognitive styles can facilitate engagement, communication, and understanding (e.g., using factual, logical, and detailed explanations).
- Consider that the individual may find it difficult to imagine hypothetical scenarios, particularly in relation to others' perceptions or feelings.
- Avoid overwhelming the individual with questions, information, and different types of sensory input simultaneously (e.g., visual information, noise).
- Consider that the individual may find it difficult to shift their attention between different topics, questions, and people. They may need additional cues and time to facilitate these transitions.

4.7 SENSORY HYPER AND HYPO-SENSITIVITY

- Consider the individual's sensory sensitivities and whether these can be an additional source of distress or distraction during engagement (e.g., lighting, noise, touch, etc.).
- Visual imagery can help to facilitate engagement and communication, whilst sensory stimulation behaviours and aids may be soothing.

4.8 ADHD AND OTHER FORMS OF NEURODIVERGENCE

- Allowing regular breaks and movement during interactions may help to manage stress and attention. Interactive communication involving movement or activities (e.g., drawing, going for a walk) may facilitate engagement.
- Short bursts of conversations, interspersed with novelty, may be productive. Stimulatory activity may be rewarding, however reasonable adjustments that limit to the effect of impulsivity on decision-making would enhance ethical rigour by ensuring the individual does not make impulsive decisions that are oriented towards stimulation and reward without attention to consequences.
- Providing or allowing fidget items/toys may also be helpful to manage stress/focus.

4.9 OTHER COMORBIDITIES

- Consider how comorbidities and symptoms may affect engagement and communication. For example, consider the impact of anxiety, paranoia, and psychosis on the willingness to engage with and interpret the communication of practitioners.

4.10 BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider the individual's familial relationships and whether engaging with their family may be helpful. If the individual is in education, consider whether engaging with their education provider may be helpful.
- If the individual already receives some support (e.g., from a social worker), consider whether engaging with the support provider may be helpful, particularly for understanding the individual's support needs.
- Consider psychosocial adversity that may impede or enhance engagement, and minimise any adverse psychosocial impact of engagement.

5. INTERVENTION, PROTECTION, AND DIVERSION

This section outlines some of the ways in which an awareness of features of autism and neurodivergence more generally can help to inform interventions and diversion among neurodivergent individuals of concern. This section emphasises the importance of adopting tailored “neurodivergent-friendly” approaches to reduce vulnerability and potentially, risks. Many of these approaches can include harnessing protective factors, including leveraging strengths conferred by neurodivergent features. These considerations are outlined here in line with the ten areas discussed in previous sections.

5.1 CIRCUMSCRIBED INTERESTS

- Address and monitor links between extremism and harmful interests. Consider that it may not be effective to remove or challenge these interests directly; this may cause additional stress.
- Diversion or adaptation into a more pro-social sub-interest may be more effective.
- Consider other safe interests that the individual may have and support them to pursue these.
- Consider the needs met by extremist interests and enhance healthy means to meet such needs, including with healthy interests that serve similar functions.

5.2 VIVID FANTASY AND IMPAIRED SOCIAL IMAGINATION

- As with interests, consider that it may not be effective to discourage or challenge fantasies directly and may cause additional stress.

- Reduce stressors that trigger and maintain harmful interests. Enhance sources of healthy fantasy life that meets equivalent functions or meets same needs.
- Nurture healthy fantasy life, especially at times of stress.

5.3 NEED FOR ORDER, RULES, ROUTINES, AND PREDICTABILITY

- Ensure a clear explanation of and structure for an intervention.
- Address daily sources of unpredictability and loss of order in the intervention and help to develop a sense of predictability, structure, and order in life. Support at times of change, including positive transitions and support to prepare for such transition and understand its rationale and practical routines.
- Explain the possible explanations of moral disorder, rule breaking and social injustice and provide a space to safely address concerns about injustice and threat to order.

5.4 OBSESSIONALITY, REPETITION, AND COLLECTING

- Consider that the individual can be highly dedicated to their interests and tasks and a degree of obsessionality and intensity of focus is a healthy state.
- Diversion or adaptation into healthier interests, collections, study, and/or employment can help

INTERVENTION, PROTECTION, AND DIVERSION

Neurodivergence, Vulnerability, and Risk in the Context of Violent Extremism

to reduce engagement in extremism-related behaviours and provide prosocial opportunities.

- Reduce sources of stress and offer clear rationales for the risks and harms associated with risky collections, repetitive behaviours, and rituals.

5.5 SOCIAL INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

- Address social needs by exploring sources of social stress, social goals and skills needed to achieve them.
- Help to develop, rehearse, and generalise social skills.
- Tailor communication and interactions during interventions to the individual's natural communication styles and strengths.
- Consider that additional social situations associated with traditional community integration approaches may increase stress and vulnerability if not appropriately tailored.
- Explore the strengths enabled by the online space and where possible develop such strengths offline as well as deploy them towards healthy online interactions.
- Consider that an aversion to some social situations may reduce the likelihood of engaging with a terrorist group.

5.6 COGNITIVE STYLES (DIFFICULTIES AND STRENGTHS)

- Support with difficulties in education or employment (e.g., reasonable adjustments, strategies) can improve prosocial opportunities and reduce stress and grievances.

- Consider the individual's cognitive strengths and how these can be applied in education, employment, and interventions.
- Address the pull of extremist information and develop access to counter-information that has similar pull.

5.7 SENSORY HYPER AND HYPO-SENSITIVITY

- Consider that some intervention environments may include aversive sensory stimuli (e.g., lighting, noise) and journeys to the intervention may add to aversive sensory load. This could lead to fatigue, stress, and impede ability to benefit from the intervention.
- Safe sensory stimuli/content which offers reward and soothing may be developed as a source of stress relief, stimulation, and healthy interests.

5.8 ADHD AND OTHER FORMS OF NEURODIVERGENCE

- In addition to the above, facilitating appropriate support and treatment (including referral for psychosocial services and medical professionals, where appropriate) to manage ADHD symptoms may improve social and occupational functioning and resilience.
- Facilitating reasonable adjustments for neurodivergence at work, education, and in social networks can improve prosocial opportunities and reduce grievances.
- Providing healthy alternative sources of reward, stimulation, and novelty may reduce engagement in risky behaviours.

5.9 OTHER COMORBIDITIES

- Facilitating appropriate mental health diagnosis, support, and treatment may improve outcomes.
- Interventions and treatments need to be holistic; as symptoms of one condition may interact with symptoms of another.

5.10 BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider wider environmental and systemic factors such as school, mental healthcare, and social support. Where possible, multi-agency support can help to provide a more holistic approach.
- Address any additional safeguarding issues that may be present in the individual's home environment.
- Interventions involving family support and engagement may be more effective than focusing on the individual alone, where social environments may be impeding resilience.
- Consider support and interventions that can be provided within education environments (e.g., reasonable adjustments, support with building cognitive strategies and skills, opportunities to engage in interests in a prosocial way).
- Consider support in the workplace (e.g., reasonable adjustments).
- Interventions that encourage the individual to build healthy relationships outside of extremist groups can be helpful. However, as above, it is important to consider neurodivergent needs and how social situations can present additional difficulties.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

READ MORE

Al-Attar, Z. (2018) Interviewing Terrorism Suspects and Offenders with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. *The International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*, 17(4), 321–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14999013.2018.1519614>

Al-Attar, Z. (2019) *Extremism, radicalisation & mental health: Handbook for practitioners*. Radicalisation Awareness Network: Health & Social Care Subgroup, European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/pages/page/ran-hsc-handbook-extremism-radicalisation-mental-health-handbook-practitioners-november-2019_en

Al-Attar, Z. (2020) Autism spectrum disorders and terrorism: How different features of autism can contextualise vulnerability and resilience. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 31(6), 926–949. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2020.1812695>

Worthington, R., Al-Attar, Z., Lewis, A., & Pyszora, N. (2021) *Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) on Neurodiversity and Violent Extremism*. AVERT. <https://www.avert.net.au/s/Rapid-Evidence-Assessment-on-Neurodiversity-and-Violent-Extremism.pdf>

Further reading:

This Practitioner Report was produced as part of the CREST project, which aims to consolidate best practice in assessing the risk of extremism in individuals. You can see more outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/practice-consolidation-and-assessment/

REFERENCES

Al-Attar, Z. (2018). Development and Evaluation of Guidance to Aid Risk Assessments of Offenders with Autism. Unpublished MA Dissertation, Sheffield Hallam University.

Al-Attar, Z. (2019). Introducing the FARAS – a Framework to Aid Risk Assessment with Offenders on the Autistic Spectrum. 18th International Conference on Offenders with an Intellectual and/or Developmental Disability, Birmingham, April 11.

Al-Attar, Z. (2020). Autism spectrum disorders and terrorism: How different features of autism can contextualise vulnerability and resilience. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 31(6), 926–949. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2020.1812695>

Al-Attar, Z. (2021). Framework for the Assessment of Risk & Protection in Offenders with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (FARAH). Unpublished Manual.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fifth Edition). American Psychiatric Association. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

Exceptional Individuals. (2023). Neurodiversity & Neurodivergent: Meanings, Types &

Examples. Exceptional Individuals. <https://exceptionalindividuals.com/neurodiversity/>

HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation, & HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. (2021). Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system: A review of evidence. <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/neurodiversity-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>

National Autistic Society. (2023). What is autism. <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>

Rong, Y., Yang, C.-J., Jin, Y., & Wang, Y. (2021). Prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in individuals with autism spectrum disorder: A meta-analysis. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 83, 101759. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2021.101759>

World Health Organisation. (2019a). 6A02 Autism spectrum disorder. In International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems (ICD) (11th ed.). <http://id.who.int/icd/entity/437815624>

World Health Organisation. (2019b). 6A05 Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. In International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems (ICD) (11th ed.). <http://id.who.int/icd/entity/821852937>

For more information on CREST
and other CREST resources, visit
www.crestresearch.ac.uk



CREST

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND
EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS