

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM TO LIVE THEIR LIVES

Supporting health and wellbeing

Sarah

Background before support

Sarah is 24 and has recently graduated from University. She has moved into the area and started work at the local County Council offices. She has a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, with her condition often known as 'Asperger Syndrome'. She had disclosed this to the Human Resources department but wished to withhold it from her line manager as she felt she would be treated differently to her colleagues.

Four months into the work Sarah presents to her GP with headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite, anxiety, insomnia and feels unable to go into work. She is doubting her ability to do the job whilst confused as she knows she has the skills to do it easily. Sarah is fed up with overthinking and is wondering if she has made a big mistake in taking on full-time employment.

As a result, her confidence is shot despite having successfully navigated university without any support. She has started to use alcohol as a crutch but scared herself when she had a dangerous experience whilst trying to get home at night drunk, blacking out. It was this experience that led her to seek help.

The skills, competences and knowledge to make a positive change

GP

Sarah's GP is aware of the Royal College of General Physicians guidance on autism and has received autism awareness training including a conference run by a local support group. He is aware of Sarah's diagnosis and makes reasonable adjustments (e.g., giving her a double-slot to allow her time to share her feelings, anxiety and fears).

The GP asked short, clear, direct questions, giving Sarah time to think, process and formulate her responses. It became clear that whilst Sarah is confident and able to cope with stressors on a day-to-day basis, she is finding the work environment difficult, causing her to have stress that she has not experienced before. The content of the work is fine but she is finding working in an open-plan environment a challenge, with constant demands of her from different people and general activity overwhelming. She is now finding the sensory overload impossible to cope with, she cannot "think" or produce any work and has fallen behind what is expected of her. The resulting anxiety has only made her even less productive and now, to top it all off, she is experiencing all these new physical symptoms.

The GP explains to Sarah how anxiety can cause or contribute to the physical symptoms she is experiencing and reassures her that this is both understandable and perfectly natural. After talking to her about what she wants to do, the GP agrees to give Sarah a sick note for 2 weeks, during which time she can take time to recuperate, reflect and develop a plan. He suggests asking the HR department for referral to an Occupational Health Assessment which might generate some adjustments in the workplace that helped her and also to consider talking to her line manager about her diagnosis and how she is feeling.

Regarding the reduction of Sarah's anxiety and physical symptoms, the GP advised her to try sticking to a routine that included some known and pleasant or enjoyable de-stressor activities such as running/exercising or reading. He also gave her an information leaflet about a local autism support group so she might meet other people who may be experiencing similar situations and may have some solutions of their own.

Both agreed that the use of alcohol was not advisable in light of her experience. However, should she find it difficult not to use alcohol, Sarah should return to see her GP to consider how they could address this together. If her anxieties continued to impact on her they discussed the possibility of accessing the Practice Therapist who had also received some training on autism to help her manage her thoughts of anxiety and develop her own coping strategies.

HR and Line Manager

The HR department made a referral to Occupational Health. They were aware of the Equalities Act and recognised their responsibilities in considering reasonable adjustments in the workplace to support Sarah in undertaking her duties. They suggested they include her manager in the conversation about what would help her in the workplace and Sarah agreed.

She met with her line manager to discuss her condition and the problems she was experiencing in the working environment. The manager had received no formal autism training but was sympathetic and listened carefully to try and identify any possible solutions she might implement to make Sarah's life at work less stressful.

They agreed that Sarah need not "hot-desk" as was general office policy but could instead adopt a "permanent" desk in the corner of the room with a small booth structure around it. This would be away from the main thoroughfare to the kitchen and toilets where there was a very high flow of traffic and people would often stop and 'just ask.' This would enable Sarah to feel she has a grounded place and also to maintain focus on her workload rather than on avoiding unwanted distractions. This was enhanced as she would also be permitted to wear discrete noise-cancelling earphones whilst working.

Sarah was also allocated time to attend a female mentoring program to support her personal professional development that could also take particular account of her specific needs.

Finally, a series of checking-in sessions were agreed to review the arrangements and identify if there are any further adjustments that might help.

Line Manager

Sarah's line manager professed to knowing very little about autism but stressed that Sarah was extremely competent and was doing well. She agreed that they would timetable in regular supervision sessions so there was clarity for Sarah in when she should speak with her line manager as she was previously unsure when it was appropriate and didn't like to think she was being a bother.

In addition, both Sarah and her line manager enrolled on the Autism awareness training element of the general workforce development programme the Council had recently developed and was rolling out.

Sarah and her Colleagues

Sarah is a very private person and doesn't like talking about herself, and although she didn't want to share details of her "medical" diagnosis with "casual" colleagues at this time, she was happy to tell them that she found concentrating whilst working in an open plan environment a challenge. She explained that she wasn't being rude and thanked them for their understanding.

She met with her mentor on a regular basis so she could discuss some of the issues that arose on a day-to-day basis, such as office politics that confused and frustrated her and may have caused some insecurity in the past, impacting on her stress and anxiety.

Occupational Health

Sarah felt that with the adjustments and the understanding received from her line manager and Human Resources that she did not need to pursue the Occupational Health Assessment at this time. She confirmed that she was back at work and happier and that she was taking her GP's advice about exercise and had started yoga.

Occupational Health agreed to close the referral and advised that she could be re-referred in the future should she need to and they would see her as soon as possible, which reassured Sarah.

Outcome achieved for Sarah

Sarah was able to sustain her job, by making reasonable adjustments in the workplace. She was also managed her stress and health needs through recognising the impact of anxiety and introduced de-stressor activities and exercise.

Supporting outcomes

- Sarah gained more self-awareness as to sensory overload and how this may manifest itself in anxiety and physical symptoms.
- The GP provided her with the space and time to reflect on her next steps and the impact the anxiety was having on her life and health.
- She was able to take control of the situation, working as part of a team with her GP and her work place helping her find solutions.
- Reasonable adjustments were made by work showing flexibility and understanding of the effects of the work environment on some individuals.
- There was increased awareness of her needs at work and her line manager was keen to support this by making reasonable adjustments.
- Her line manager and Sarah attended the autism awareness training and encouraged others to do the same.
- Sarah felt much more in control of the demands in the workplace and able to talk to her support networks in place to problem solve when needed.
- She was able to have better working relationships with her colleagues. As she was able to relax she was able to be more open with them and, as a result, they respected her space.