

Autism awareness among police officers: Qualitative analysis

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Background

142 questionnaires from police officers who had attended an autism awareness training session designed for officers working in a custody environment. A questionnaire was completed at the end of the session. It asked the following open-ended questions:

Q.7 Do you have any experience of autism?

Q8. Please provide more information about this experience i.e. personal/family/professional:

[Number of responses = 117]

82% of respondents were able to describe some personal knowledge of autism through a range of more or less close personal or professional interactions.

Q10. Have you had any interaction with an autistic individual in police custody? If yes, please provide more information about this interaction:

[Number of responses open to qualitative analysis = 85]

60% of officers had met an autistic person during the course of their work.

Further questions...

Q9. Have you had any previous autism training? If yes, please provide more information about this training:

[Number of responses open to qualitative analysis = 53]

Only 32% had received any autism training – and...

Q20. Please provide more information about what you did or did not like about the training:

115 responses

85 detailed likes/30 detailed dislikes

Q26. Please provide more details about what you learnt in the session:

Q30. Please provide more details about how you plan to change your behaviour or practice as a result of the session:

Q31. Please describe any other ways the session will impact you in your role:

Previous experience with autistic people

71 officers described having met autistic people in their role in the police, sometimes in custody but also as victims and witnesses of crimes.

41 officers had autistic friends and/or family members – two described how they had already been deeply worried about how their relatives would cope in the custody environment.

7 officers had previously worked with autistic people in another professional role e.g. in social care or nursing.

4 officers had worked with an autistic colleague within the police.

14 officers had some indirect knowledge of autism before the training e.g. their spouse teaches in a school with autistic children.

Points to note: Officers had met autistic people in a range of contexts. Unlike samples taken in surveys of the general public they have much higher rates of contact with autistic people through work.

Experience of working with autistic people in custody

This question also asked people to describe their interaction...

From 85 responses 24 described specific steps they had taken to adapt their approach to custody to make the autistic person more comfortable.

10 officers described changing communication technique, including avoiding the use of non-literal language, speaking calmly and more slowly.

6 officers described interventions to meet sensory needs including adjusting the light levels, changing search procedures and supplying a sensory toy. One officer had supplied a beanie hat to an autistic detainee to enable him to muffle noise whilst he was being detained.

7 officers described asking for support from carers, family members or an appropriate adult to ensure the autistic person had appropriate adjustments made.

2 officers described avoiding interviewing in custody where possible and bailing the detainee to return for interview later to avoid placing them in detention which they would find distressing.

Previous autism training

14 out of 53 respondents said the only previous training they had received which had mentioned autism was part of Mental Health Awareness training. This training is required to be offered under the Approved Professional Practice on Mental Health.

10 officers mentioned autism had been mentioned in other basic training.

7 respondents said that they had received training specifically about autism although this had typically not been offered through the police. One officer taking our training was also a foster carer who had received autism awareness training for this role for example. 4 mentioned receiving training from autistic people and highlighted the value of this.

3 officers said that autism had been covered during their First Aid training for the police.

8 officers described how autism had also been covered in another area of training they had received e.g. fire-arms training, management training.

What did officers think of this training?

Likes

75 overall enjoyed the training with most citing the video and the presenter's knowledge as strengths.

25 specifically highlighted the video.

5 highlighted the fact that the training materials in the Toolkit are particularly clear and concise.

Dislikes

30 respondents described things they did not like. These were diverse. So themes are less clear here...

Only 2 points stick out...

6 officers felt the training would be stronger if there were more opportunities for interaction, ideally with autistic people, during the session.

6 officers felt the training was not realistic about the operational realities of policing.

What have I learnt and what would I do differently...

50 officers described how they would explain things more slowly

46 officers described how they would use language with more care in communication e.g. choose words more carefully during the booking in process

24 officers described how they would identify autistic detainees ['identify' here is a proxy for asking specific questions during first response or at booking in]

18 officers described being more aware of sensory needs after the training

27 officers described how they had learnt from the study that their own behavior affects the interaction/the importance of empathy/its important not to treat autistic detainees as 'difficult'

18 officers said as a result of the training they would make use of aid such as the communication tools provided in the toolkit we developed