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**Autism Has Many Faces**

What does autism look like? Even for an expert, the answer's not always clear. That's because autism isn't just one disorder. Instead, it's a spectrum disorder, a set of issues that can be mild, severe or anywhere between.

Autism is called a developmental disability because it starts during a child's developmental period -- before age 3, says the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). It causes delays or problems in the ways in which a child develops or grows.

Children with autism may have high or low IQs. They may be chatty or silent, outgoing or shy, good or bad students. They may or may not have unusual talents. Some are easygoing, while others have severe behavior issues.

What do they have in common? Delays or disabilities when it comes to social skills such as ordinary conversation, eye contact, and hugging or holding another person, as well as emotional understanding of others. Children with autism have difficulty with both verbal and unspoken communication. They also have problems with routines and repetitive behaviors, sometimes repeating words over and over or obsessively following routines, the NICHD says. Most children with autism also share delays in motor skills.



**Cuts across groups**

Autism affects all racial, ethnic, and social groups. Boys are up to four times more likely than girls to be affected by autism, the NICHD says. If a family has one child with autism, the family has a 5 to 10 percent chance of having another child with autism.

Most experts agree that early intervention is important in treating autism. But how can parents spot problems that might lead to a diagnosis?

Developmental pediatrician Adrian Sandler, M.D., is medical director of the Olson Huff Center in Asheville, N.C. He says you can see red flags that might point to autism in a child as young as 1 year old.

According to the NICHD, a child should immediately be evaluated for autism if the child:

- Doesn't babble or coo by 12 months of age
- Doesn't point, wave, grasp or make other gestures by 12 months
- Doesn't say single words by 16 months
- Doesn't say two-word phrases on his or her own by 24 months
- Has any loss of any language or social skill at any age

If the doctor finds that a child has signs of autism, the child will be sent to a specialist to be tested and to rule out other disorders,

the NICHD says.

"You certainly want an evaluator with a good background in the autism spectrum -- a child psychologist, developmental pediatrician or neurologist -- who can do a careful observation. Expect a lot of questions," says Robert Naseef, Ph.D., a psychologist and author. "A good evaluation is more than a label. It will help with interventions."

## Therapies can help

There is no standard treatment, and no cure. But many therapies can help, the NICHD says. Once parents place their child in a good education program, they often mix and match approaches to meet the child's needs. Therapies include:

- Individual education programs (IEPs), tailored to a specific child.
- Comprehensive treatment programs, which cover learning methods, behavior change and developmental goals.
- Programs that focus on reducing behavior problems and teaching skills.
- Programs that try to increase good behavior, reduce problem behavior and improve lifestyle.
- Medications, which are often used to deal with a specific behavior.

*Krames Staywell*

## Tax Deductions for Charitable Contributions and Volunteer Work



After retirement (and even before), many people are looking for meaningful ways to spend some of their newly free time and to make a difference in the world -- and volunteer work is often the solution. Whether you use expertise developed during your paid career or throw yourself into something new, volunteer work allows you to help worthy causes, pursue your interests, and meet new people. And the IRS is willing to give you a little help, in the form of tax deductions for some of your volunteer expenses.

Of course, volunteer work isn't the only way to help others. If you are fortunate enough to have cash or property to donate, your charitable giving can fund worthwhile endeavors -- and the attendant tax breaks are nothing

to sneeze at, either. Whether you give money, property, or your time, this article explains some basic rules about claiming tax deductions for your good work.

### What Is a Qualified Organization?

No matter what or how much you decide to donate, your gift will be deductible only if you make it to a qualified organization. This means the group must meet the IRS's requirements for receiving tax-deductible donations.

Most public charities are qualified organizations, as are many nonprofit private foundations. If you are uncertain whether an organization qualifies to receive deductible donations, you should ask the organization for a copy of the IRS letter approving the organization's tax-exempt status.

If you are unable to verify tax-exempt status with the organization itself, you can check IRS Publication 78, a list of organizations qualified to receive tax-deductible donations; you can find it at the IRS website, [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov). Or, you can contact the IRS's Tax Exempt Customer Account Services line, at 877-829-5500.

### Cash Donations

If you donate money to a qualified organization and receive nothing in exchange, your donation will be fully deductible (as long as your contribution isn't too large relative to your income). However, you may not deduct a cash donation unless you have a tangible record of the donation, no matter how small the amount. You might know that you put \$5 in the church basket every week, but without a receipt, that donation is not deductible. To claim a cash donation, you will need one of the following:

- a canceled check
- a bank statement showing the name of the charity and the date and amount of the check, or

- a written receipt from the charity that includes the name of the charity and the date and amount of your contribution. If you donate \$250 or more, you must obtain a written acknowledgement from the charity. The acknowledgment must state the amount of your donation and whether or not you received goods or services in exchange for the donation.

If you receive something in return for your cash donation, such as services, items of property, or even benefits (if they are financial in nature), then you must reduce your deduction by the value of the items or benefits you received. For example, if you pay \$200 for tickets to a charity dinner, but the dinner itself was worth \$50, you may deduct only \$150 as a charitable contribution.

If you donate more than \$75, the charity generally must provide you with an estimate of the value of benefits you received in exchange for your donation. The IRS has said that you may rely on the charity's written estimate of the value of those benefits.

## Property Donations

You may donate almost any type of property, whether used or new (although certain types of property must be in good condition, so you can skip the running shoes with holes in the soles). Property contributions run the gamut from used clothing and cars to investment securities, real estate, artwork, and other collectibles.

When you donate property, you may typically deduct its fair market value on the date you donate it. For example, let's say that the day after you retired, you boxed up all of your suits and other professional clothing and took them to your local Goodwill store. You may not deduct the full price you originally paid for the clothing; instead, you may deduct only its value used, on the day you donate it. You can figure out this value by looking at comparable items in thrift stores or consignment shops.

Sometimes, you may not deduct the fair market value of property, but instead may deduct only your tax basis in the item -- basis is a tax term that takes into account what you paid for the property, what you've spent to improve it over the years, and any tax benefits (such as depreciation) you've already claimed for it.

Stricter rules also apply to more valuable property. For example, you may have to submit additional forms to the IRS or have the property appraised to determine its value. You can find more information in IRS Publication 561, *Determining the Value of Donated Property*.

## Volunteer Work

People who volunteer their time and expertise believe they have something valuable to offer. So, you may find it distressing that your services, expert though they may be, are worth a tax deduction of precisely zero. This rule is not unique to volunteer work; in fact, it is consistent with other tax laws. With only rare exceptions, the general rule is that you must spend cold, hard cash or give away stuff before you may claim a deduction.

However, you may deduct many of the expenses you incur for volunteer work, including:

- the cost of hosting a party or fundraiser for the organization
- advertising that you buy on behalf of the organization
- supplies you purchase to be used in volunteer work, such as stamps and stationery
- the cost of a required uniform (and the cost of keeping it clean), and
- telephone expenses.

Some local travel expenses are also deductible, such as bus, train, or taxi fares. If you use your own car, you may deduct the parking fees, tolls, and cost of your gas and oil for those miles you travel for the charity, but you may **not** deduct the cost of insurance, maintenance, registration fees, or depreciation, as you could if you were using your car for business. If you don't want to keep track of your actual gas and oil expenses, you can simply keep a log of the miles your travel for volunteer work and deduct the IRS rate per mile (14 cents for travel in 2010).

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## Less is More: How to Simplify Your Life

Life today is complicated. Most Americans are pulled in multiple directions every day by commitments to their families, workplaces and communities.

Many people have responded to the pressures of modern life by seeking ways to consciously simplify their routines and attitudes at home and work.

"The goal of living a more simple life isn't to arrive at a static point in your life but to become skilled at balancing your personal relationships, workplace issues, finances and other demands," says Heather G. Mitchener, coauthor of *The 50 Best Ways to Simplify Your Life*.

### Being in the moment

One way to simplify your life is to practice mindfulness -- to slow down and recognize and appreciate the simple things in life. To be mindful instead of mindless, stay in the moment and be conscious of what you're doing. Don't think ahead or look back.

"When we look ahead constantly, we not only rush through the less pleasant tasks, we also tend to hurry through the things we love to do, because we're always thinking or worrying about what we have to do next," says Ms. Mitchener.

A good way to practice being in the moment is to follow your breath, a technique that doesn't require any special training or self-consciousness. To breathe mindfully, take notice of your breaths and try to make them as calm and even as possible. Your breaths should be long and slow and should come from your diaphragm rather than your upper chest. Pay attention to each breath, letting thoughts fall away.

"You can do this exercise any time you think of it," says Ms. Mitchener. "Make it a goal to be mindful, in general, but also set aside short periods to practice. This will improve your ability to make mindfulness a habit. As you learn to live this way, you'll feel more centered."

### Slow down

If you feel like you have too much information in your life, stop subscriptions to magazines, newspapers or e-mail newsletters you rarely have time to read. Leave the radio and TV off unless you're really listening to something that matters to you. Turn off your cell phone unless you're making a call or waiting for one that's important.

To reduce the amount of "stuff" in your home, ask yourself these questions before you buy something: Do I really need it? How often will I wear or use it? Where will I store it? Is there a reason why I must buy it?

### Get organized

Begin by sizing up the problem areas in your home or workplace and making a plan of attack. If you're easily discouraged, start with a small, confined area, such as a single drawer. Otherwise, target an area that gives you the most grief. Your goal should be to clear out clutter that causes you to waste time -- a hall closet that has become a catchall for everything from clothes to sports equipment.

Learn to focus at work. Multitasking can be an asset, but often the lack of focus it requires means you actually get less done in a day, or less done well. To increase your focus and break free from distractions:

- Begin each day by setting priorities on what you want to accomplish.
- Check e-mail at set times, rather than letting each new message interrupt you.
- Set aside a time to retrieve voice mail and return calls.
- Keep a calendar of your deadlines and obligations.

*Krames Staywell*



For assistance with challenges like these, please call your New Directions EAP at 800-624-5544 or [www.ndbh.com](http://www.ndbh.com)