

Autism and Perception of Reality Fact Sheet

Imagination & Counterfactual Thinking

To understand perception and reality, we must rely upon what is called counterfactual thinking. This is the ability that draws upon our cognitive functioning (theory of mind & executive functioning) to help us understand what is real and factual and what is made up. For example, when watching a TV program such as Peter Pan, a neurotypical person will process that Peter Pan is flying in the film, but will also be able to consciously recognise that young men actually cannot fly in reality.

Due to differences in cognition for autistic people, it can sometimes be difficult for the person to understand fiction and reality, and this, at times, can cause the two to become blurred. This can be particularly difficult for the person and can mean the person may place themselves in risky situations. Due to being unable to foresee or predict the consequences of their existential actions, this may lead to accidental self-harm or accidental suicide if they partake in dangerous online trends/games or assume rules in a virtual world apply in real life (i.e. getting '3 lives' in a game).

Another concern with Autism & Perception of Reality can be linked to time spent gaming or accessing virtual reality platforms. Long periods of time spent gaming can mean the person may be more likely to be exposed to cyberbullying and violence for longer periods of time, and with a potential inability to differentiate between fiction and reality, they are more at risk of being unable to 'switch off' from their virtual persona. Long periods of time accessing virtual reality can mean the person becomes more isolated, and this can become a catalyst for low mood and depression.

How can you identify when a person is finding it difficult to differentiate between fantasy and reality?

- The person appears to be more complacent with day-to-day tasks and doesn't see the importance of these (i.e. getting dressed/personal hygiene).
- The person may verbalise that they are someone different or act in a similar way to their virtual persona.
- You may recognise that the person is spending more time gaming or isolating themselves to access virtual content.
- You may notice a change in behaviour when the person has been gaming, or the person appears to have low mood when/after accessing content online.



- When explaining facts to the person they may appear to disbelieve you or refer to a virtual example to disprove your version.
- The person may try and prevent you from viewing their online content or try and hide specific aspects of their games/chat rooms etc.
- Behavioural presentation may become anxious and aggressive if the person is challenged on what is real and what they perceive.

How can you help support a person who may be struggling with fantasy and reality?

It is likely, if the person is feeling low or is unable to communicate how they are feeling, that it may be difficult to engage in conversation. The following, although not exhaustive, are some helpful strategies that may support more effective ways to aid the person's understanding of reality:

- Where possible, encourage open communication with the person and ask about their online presence in a supportive way – any language should not appear to be negative about their hobby/interest, as this may cause the person to mask their involvement in virtual/online platforms.
- Try and identify times where the person is completing activities or socialising away from gaming.
- Limit (as far as practicable) access to certain games/online platforms for underage people. For example, games will often have an age limit to ascertain the appropriateness of the content for the age of the person.
- If the person appears to be feeling low or beginning to isolate themselves, encourage the person (if they are able) to go for a walk with you or do an activity they enjoy with you. This may support a more relaxed mood and encourage communication about how they are feeling.
- Be vigilant for any self-harming or changes in behaviour that appear to be self-neglectful, linked to time online.
- Support the person to identify hobbies and interests away from online gaming platforms.
- Validate authentic experiences with the person, use photographs of the person or encourage the person to create a memory box where they can validate their reality.
- Provide accessible information to the person that can be read in their own time, around topics such as cyberbullying and staying safe online.
- Answer any questions in a literal manner for example, if a person asks if they have '3 lives' (like in their game), be clear in your response, i.e. "No, people only have 1 life".
- Do not try and underplay or minimise the person's beliefs, as this can cause the person to mask/fawn, listen to the person and be compassionate to their understanding – they are more likely to remain honest with you if anything does cause them anxiety when they are gaming/online.

