### Personal factors that might influence a person's behaviour

**Constitution** – This refers to the person’s physical state, for example do they have any allergies, chronic illnesses or a sensory impairment? It includes any mental health needs the person is experiencing and also whether any drugs they are taking might be affecting their behaviour. Is the person in pain and unable to explain this? Under this heading, think about any syndrome, disorder or condition the person may have and its impact on their behaviour.

**Personality and character** – Is the person an extrovert or introvert, moody or laid back, easily aroused and frustrated or quiet and withdrawn? How does their personality affect their behaviour? Do they have a ‘bad reputation’ that may not be justified?

**Sense of self** – Does the person have a positive or negative self image? Low or high self esteem? How much self knowledge does the person have? Are their cultural and religious needs understood and addressed?

**Communication skills** – This includes the person's ability to understand and act on the communication of others and to communicate their own thoughts, feelings and needs to those they are with. Can the person hear and see clearly the verbal and non verbal communication of others? Are their language and cultural needs understood and being addressed?

### Environmental factors that may influence a person's behaviour

**The quality of the physical environment** – This includes lighting, noise, amount of personal space, heat, humidity, colour, smells, etc.

**The quality of the social environment** – Is the person bored and under stimulated? Or is it too busy with too many other people? What is the quality of the person's relationships? Are the key people in their life hostile and cold or emotionally close and supportive? Does the person have a chance to spend time with the important people in their life such as family or friends? Is the person lonely?

**Power and choice** – Can the person make choices in their daily life? Or do they have very little control? Is the person supported to make choices? Do the people supporting the person stress conformity and make them comply with their wishes? Or are the person’s choices and decisions respected and acted on? Is there access to advocacy support?

**Unpredictable occurrences** – Is the person startled or unsure about what is happening to them and in their environment? Do events happen to the person without them being prepared or without considering their needs and wishes? Can the person influence their daily routine?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological state</th>
<th>Other people’s communication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has the person recently experienced any changes, loss or bereavement in their life? Has he or she been a victim of abuse (sexual, physical, hate crime, etc)? Is the person anxious, lonely or feeling excluded?</td>
<td>Do the people in day to day contact with the person communicate well or poorly? Do they use words and non verbal communication that are too complex and difficult? Does communication often break down between the person and their main supporters?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Incentives and negative consequences</strong></td>
<td>Is the person getting positive rewards (incentives) as a result of a particular behaviour? Or is the person experiencing negative consequences?</td>
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Personal factors help to explain why different people behave differently even when apparently in the same situation and seemingly having the same experiences. Environmental factors will help you to explore some of the things you might be able to change. These help to explain why challenging behaviours sometimes increase or decrease following any changes in where a person lives, or how they spend their days, or when the people who support them change.

**The interaction of personal and environmental factors**

It can often be the case that personal and environmental factors combine to cause a person to behave in challenging ways. For example, if a person has difficulty in speaking due to their disability then this is a personal factor. However, if other people have difficulty in understanding them then this is an external factor which might make the situation worse. When both of these factors come together, it may lead to the person feeling frustrated or ignored and the person might then behave in a challenging way in order to get people to listen or take notice of them.

When working with a person with a particular syndrome or condition, you and your colleagues will need to have a full understanding of its possible effect on behaviour. For example, a person with autism and a learning disability may present behaviour that their family members and support workers find difficult to understand and that they believe to be challenging. Once you can understand how the person’s autism affects them and their behaviour, you will be better equipped to know what to do and how to prevent specific responses on other occasions. It is easier to understand a person’s behaviour if you have
a better understanding of their experiences: this may include considering how having an autistic spectrum condition has affected their communication, social interactions, rigidity of thought and their sensory awareness.

This doesn’t mean that environmental factors are not important – they are often the trigger for particular behaviours. However, a better knowledge of a syndrome or condition might help you to gain a deeper understanding of a person’s behaviour and its possible function.

What happens in the environment around the person is often under the control of the people supporting them. It is important to recognise that everyone offering support has the power to change the environment in ways that are often not available to the person being supported. For example, if you know that a person you support finds being with lots of people in a small room difficult, then you can reduce the impact of this simply by ensuring that the person does not spend time in confined spaces with lots of people. Don’t forget, in most cases, personal and environmental factors interact and this can increase the risk of behaviour that challenges being exhibited.

Activity

Think about a person that you have supported in the past or someone you support now. Can you identify any possible factors that may contribute to them using behaviour that is difficult for people to understand and manage or which may cause harm to themselves or other people?

Discuss your ideas with a more experienced colleague or your manager and find out from them what they think are the main factors that contribute to the person’s behaviour.

Improving communication

Communication difficulties can often create problems for people with a learning disability and for people with autistic spectrum conditions. Communication breakdown may contribute to challenging behaviour. It is important to understand each person’s individual communication and work to better understand what they are trying to convey.

All communication has three parts to it:

1. Verbal messages – the words we use.
2. Paraverbal messages – how we say the words, sometimes called intonation.
3. Non verbal messages – our body language or behaviour.
Knowing that only eight per cent of our communication is verbal is important when thinking about its impact on behaviour, as this means that many people with a learning disability or people with autism will have real difficulties in picking up non verbal cues. Most people have an expectation that there will be consistency between our spoken communication, tone of voice and behaviour. People who have a learning disability or people with autism may not have the ability to communicate in such complex ways; this could then lead to a lack of understanding between the person and those who are supporting them. A breakdown in communication with a person you support can result in the following feelings.

- **Frustration** – because the person is unable to influence what is happening to them or other people’s behaviour. People with poor communication skills can become passive because they are always on the receiving end of other people’s actions or decision making. In addition, they may become frustrated and angry because of their lack of power in influencing their environment.

- **Isolation** – many people who are difficult to understand get less attention from other people including those employed to support them. As a result, they have fewer opportunities to develop close relationships and less incentive for getting on with people. It is very important that the issues of communication are addressed. Everyone offering support needs to develop consistent and clear ways of building positive relationships that address issues of likes, dislikes, preferences, choices and decision making.