

Understanding Autism

Handout 4 - Communication



Making communication easier for autistic people

- It helps to find a calm environment, without sensory distractions.
- Try not to talk too quickly. An autistic person may need more time to process verbal communication, so may miss some of what you say. It helps to offer to clarify.
- Understand that a person may find one to one conversations easier than group conversations.
- Understand that telephone calls can be difficult for many autistic people, particularly unexpected calls or a call with someone they don't know.
- Understand that an autistic person may take words more literally, and not always pick up on hints, sarcasm, your facial expressions, tone of voice or body language.
- Written information is often easier for autistic people to process, as they can process it in their own time.
- Understand that communicating can be tiring for autistic people, as they have to work hard to interpret what other people mean.
- Understand there is a risk that a person may agree to things they haven't fully understood to escape from an overwhelming situation.
- It often helps to be direct instead of overly polite. For example, say "Please would you help me" rather than "Would you like to help me?".
- Understand that an autistic person may struggle with small talk, and may worry about upsetting others by saying the 'wrong thing'.
- Understand that a person may be trying their best to listen by fiddling or moving.
- Sometimes an autistic people may seem blunt in how they communicate without intending to be rude.

Eye contact



Some autistic people find eye contact intense and uncomfortable.

A person may find they are better able to listen by not giving eye contact. We listen with our ears not our eyes !

Some people may give the impression of eye contact by focusing on another part of a person's face when talking with them.

When feeling overwhelmed an autistic person may struggle to process information. They may find it particularly difficult both to focus on what other people are saying and to communicate effectively themselves.



Non-autistic people's communication can be confusing !

For example, a person may give a very vague instruction like "Can you sort the office out please". When the message is confusing, an autistic person may not feel confident to ask for clarification. They may assume they are struggling to understand because of their autism. It's even more confusing when people say things they don't always mean such as "We must meet up for a drink sometime".

Effective verbal communication

Being direct and clear

Questions like “How are you managing with your medication?” can be hard for autistic people to answer. It helps to ask more specific questions such as:

- Are you remembering to take your medication each day?
- Have you had any side effects?

Understand sensory differences

An autistic person may struggle to focus on a conversation if there is background noise, movement and even strong smells.



Checking understanding

It's important not to under-estimate or over-estimate an autistic person's understanding, and to carefully check that your message is clear.

An autistic person may at times not quite ‘get the gist’ of what others say, particularly if they've not been direct.

It can help to ask the autistic person to explain what they've understood from what you've said.

Being put ‘on the spot’

Unexpected situations and phone calls can be challenging for many autistic people, who may need more time to process what others are saying and to work out what to say themselves.

For example, if there's a problem with a card payment in a shop an autistic person may feel overwhelmed and struggle to work out what to do.

Written communication



Some autistic people find written communication such as emails easier, as it gives them more time to process the information and consider their response.

It helps to break long paragraphs up to make the information easier to process. A person may ask a lot of questions to make sure they've understood clearly.

Make the key messages in a letter or email very clear, as an autistic person may not find it easy to pick out the important points.

You often hear it said that autistic people take things literally

It's important to understand what this actually means.

Autistic people may rely more on the actual words people use than on the implied meanings and non-verbal messages. People may struggle to ‘read between the lines’.

Think about the sentence “Would you like to take a seat”.

Without reading between the lines you might think you're being offered a free chair to take home! It's taken for granted that you interpret the sentence to mean that you should sit down, and that you'll understand it's a direction rather than a question.



Non-verbal communication



Body language, voice tone and facial expressions

Reading these non-verbal clues can be difficult for many autistic people. It doesn't always come naturally, and people often have to work hard to solve the puzzle.



An autistic person may take others at their word, even when their non-verbal clues tell a different story. E.g. when a person says they are ‘fine’ - yet both looking and sounding tense.



The same sentence, different meanings

Think about this sentence:
“She didn't say he lost the keys”

This seems a simple sentence when written, but can have very different meanings depending on which word is emphasised when spoken.

If you put emphasis on the word ‘she’ it implies that someone else may have said he lost the keys.

Emphasising the word ‘say’ suggests that perhaps she'd only hinted that he'd lost the keys.

Emphasising the word ‘he’ suggests that perhaps she's saying someone else lost the keys.

Emphasising the word ‘lost’ suggests she's saying he didn't lose the keys, but did something else with them.

Emphasising the word ‘keys’ suggests that she's saying he lost something else.

People with a learning disability and autism

Autistic people who have a learning disability may have a smaller vocabulary than people typically do, so alongside previous tips in this handout, using everyday words and avoiding complex sentences is also very important.

Easy Read information



Many people with a learning disability need support to access written information.

Easy Read can make information easier to understand by using large text, pictures, easy words and short sentences.

Alternative and augmentative communication

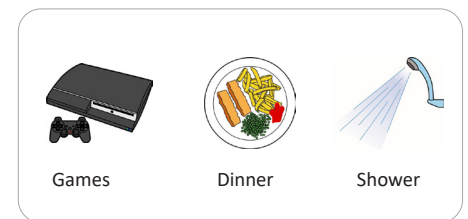
There's no such thing as a typical person with a learning disability. Some people lead independent lives, and others may need support ranging from a few hours a week to 24hrs a day.

Some people will be very able to communicate verbally, others may use alternative or augmentative communication methods.

Alternative communication is used instead of speech, and augmentative communication is used in support of speech. Makaton is a communication method used by some people with a learning disability.

Makaton is a language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate.

People may also use photos and pictures to express their needs, understand their schedules and make day to day choices.



Some people may use an electronic communicator, and some may have a communication passport which tells others about their needs, things they find challenging, communication and day to day things like activities and foods they enjoy.

Communication through behaviour

Some autistic people who have a learning disability may communicate through behaviour if they struggle to verbalise their needs and feelings. For example, becoming distressed when in a noisy/busy place.

Repetitive language

Some people may get pleasure from repeating phrases. This can be a form of 'stimming', and is often calming and soothing for the person. Some people may like to ask the same question repeatedly and to hear the expected answer. This can be very reassuring when feeling anxious.



Autism alert cards



In a stressful situation an autistic person may struggle to communicate their needs.



Using an autism alert card, or sunflower lanyard, to tell people they are autistic ensures that others are more aware and understanding.



Download from The National Autistic Society website.

Search for 'alert card' at www.autism.org.uk

Alert cards help avoid misunderstandings

For example, a distressed young autistic man wearing a hood may appear threatening to others without realising it.

Health and care passports



Health and care passports ensure people's needs are understood if they have to go to hospital.

Go to www.surreypb.org.uk for the traffic light version for people with a learning disability.

Go to www.autism.org.uk for the autism health passport



On Zoom meetings, everyone else finds the background noise unbearable as all the noises come through on one channel - that's what the office is like for me all the time !



I sent an email to my colleagues explaining about my autism, that I struggle with vague communication, and find it difficult to read between the lines. As a bit of a joke, I'll often say that neurotypical (non-autistic) communication is my second language !

People now check to ensure we've understood each other, and no longer seem irritated by my many questions asking for clarification.



I use my autism alert card when I feel overwhelmed and struggle to communicate. Sometimes my brain just freezes and I can't work out what to say.



Just because I'm autistic, some people talk to me like I'm a child. This annoys me, as I'm in my 20's and have A Levels.



We can tell when George is getting overwhelmed. Although he doesn't communicate verbally he tends to start rocking and shielding his eyes.



Try not to use lots of big words and jargon when talking to me. I struggle with idioms too. One person said "You can't teach your grandmother to suck eggs".



My support workers always communicate with me by text. They understand that I struggle with phone calls.



Don't assume we will just 'pick things up'. When I was a teacher I didn't get any post for months as I had no idea what people meant when they said "It's in the pigeon hole". I was looking for a pigeon !



I had a misunderstanding at work when my manager asked if I'd 'like to' help her. I said no as I was busy doing something else. It turns out she was politely 'telling' me to help her. She thought I was trying to avoid doing the job.



I'm glad my doctor checked that I'd understood properly. She was talking about a training course, and I'd thought she was talking about a course of treatment !



Group conversations can be hard to keep up with. I really struggle to judge the right time to contribute, and end up just withdrawing.

I take my care passport to appointments. It tells people about my communication and sensory differences. This makes things easier for both me and the hospital staff.



Jasmine loves Disney films and can quote exact dialogue in detail. She often doesn't quite understand the overall plot of the film though.

