

# Understanding Autism

## Handout 5 - Social rules and social interaction



### Working out the social rules

Trying to work out the social rules in different situations, and interpreting other people's communication and behaviour, can make socialising and social events very confusing and tiring for many autistic people.



#### Unwritten social rules and clues

Daily life is full of unwritten social rules and clues. For example:

- Adapting how we behave with different groups of people, and judging what to talk about
- Reading the 'mood of the room'
- What to wear to different events, and when to arrive and leave

Other people's behaviour can seem confusing for an autistic person, who may need support to understand why a person acted as they did. They may not realise when other people are being nasty, manipulative or

dishonest, making them vulnerable to bullying and abuse.

An autistic person may not find it easy to 'crack the secret code' needed to develop friendships. They may worry about making 'social mistakes', and think misunderstandings are always their fault. "It's like playing a game without knowing the rules".

An autistic person can often feel like an outsider in groups. Some autistic people find friendships with other autistic people more straightforward.

#### An autistic person may not always be aware of how they come across to other people.

For example:

- Seeming 'unfriendly' when sounding abrupt or avoiding eye contact
- Coming across as 'over-friendly' or 'over-sharing' at times
- Sometimes sounding or looking unhappy, when actually feeling okay

#### Explain social rules

Some autistic people may sometimes be vulnerable to their social behaviour being seen as inappropriate, or being misinterpreted as inappropriate.



If person make a 'social mistakes' they may not have picked up the social rules. It can help to explain these and even write them out. For example, 'When in someone else's house ask permission before turning on the TV or using the bathroom'.

#### Rule breakers

It's accepted that rules can be bent or broken at certain times, or for certain people. This adds another layer of confusion. A person can be seen as unpopular if they follow all the rules all of the time. An autistic person may get frustrated if another person agrees to do something then doesn't do it.



# Using visual stories

It can help to write a 'story' to explain what will happen in a situation to help people to predict events, learn about other people's point of view and understand what they can do if things don't go to plan.

Stories can be illustrated to make them easier for people with a learning disability to follow.

## An example of a visual story

Sometimes my train might be late.

It is not the driver's fault if my train is late.

If there is no message on the board, I can ask a member of staff if they know what time my train is due to arrive.

If I am worried about being late for work, I can use my mobile to phone my boss John to tell him my train is late. John knows that trains are sometimes late and will not be angry. If I still feel stressed I can play a game on my phone while I wait, to distract myself.



This idea of using visual stories has been developed by Carol Gray into a technique called 'Social Stories'. Visit her website for more information: [www.carolgraysocialstories.com](http://www.carolgraysocialstories.com)

# Social interaction and social events

Some autistic people can find it hard to make friends. They may worry about saying the 'wrong thing', misunderstanding others and feeling left out.

## Things that can help to make social interaction easier



Autistic people may enjoy socialising, but can find it tiring and hard work. Some people choose to socialise less often, and need time to recover after a social event, or a day at work or college. People may prefer to have a small group of reliable friends.

### Choosing the right environment

Busy places can be overwhelming. Autistic people often prefer quieter environments with fewer people.

### Taking a break

Scheduling short breaks into social events gives people time to recharge. Some people may need support to notice they need a break.

### Shared interests and experiences

Some autistic people build their social life around their interests. Some people enjoy meeting and socialising with other autistic people.

### Clear beginnings and endings

Having a clear idea of when you'll arrive and when you'll leave can be helpful for many autistic people. Staying just for an hour or two is enough for some people.

### Social conversation / small talk

An autistic person may feel awkward in social situations, as they're not sure what to say. Preparing topics or questions in advance can help.

### Disclosing autism

Some people find that telling others e.g work colleagues about their autism helps ensure people are more understanding about difficulties they may have with things like small talk.

## Masking



Masking is when an autistic person either consciously or subconsciously hides the signs they are autistic to better 'fit in' with others.

### Examples include:

- Making an effort to join in with small talk and laugh at jokes
- Maintaining eye contact during a conversation when finding this hard
- Stopping themselves stimming, e.g. rocking in their chair, in order not to look different
- Hiding the signs that they are feeling very anxious

Masking can be incredibly tiring as it involves carefully thinking about everything you say and do, rather than just being yourself.

## Empathy with others

We think of empathy as the ability to 'tune into' or imagine how someone else is thinking or feeling. Whilst an autistic person may struggle to 'tune into' the thoughts and feelings of non-autistic people, non-autistic people can also struggle to empathise with how an autistic person may experience the world. Empathy is also about how we respond to another person's feelings when we become aware of them. Studies show that many autistic people can struggle to pick up on how other people feel, but when they become aware, they are often incredibly sensitive to the needs of others.

# Social interaction and rules - our experiences



I got really stressed when my manager asked if I had put something about the company on Twitter - it felt like he was accusing me. My employment mentor explained that he would have asked everyone privately about this and wasn't just picking on me.



Rather than just teaching me social skills, it helps when people support me to understand the behaviour of non-autistic people too.

I need regular breaks to enjoy a social event - my dad even scheduled breaks into my wedding day for me !



I understand that my partner needs an hour 'alone time' when he gets back from work. We also do this thing called 'mutual monologuing' sometimes, where we both have 15 minutes to talk at length about our interests whilst the other person listens.

I always take a jigsaw with me to my relatives' house at Christmas. This gives me something to focus on when I've had enough chatting !



I avoid more than one or two social events a week as I find them tiring, particularly when I'm masking my autism.

I don't always get jokes, and sometimes worry that people are laughing at me.



I often feel like a bit of an outsider in large groups.

I find it overwhelming when it's so busy and I can't think what to say to people. I struggle to keep up with the conversations. People think I'm shy, but I'm not shy. I just don't know what to say.



My dog is my best friend - she's always pleased to see me, never lies and doesn't do sarcasm ! I think that's why so many autistic people love animals.

I used to mask my autism and anxiety at college. People thought I was doing fine, but I'd often be physically sick when I got home and go to bed by 6pm.



Ayisha likes to ask people the same questions a lot, and sometimes likes to just be with people without talking. As support workers we are learning to be a bit less chatty !



I enjoy going to autism groups as the structure is nice and clear, and people understand if I make a social mistake.



I really struggle to tell the difference between harmless banter and when people are just being nasty. If it's always just aimed at me, or goes on and on then I don't think it's harmless.

