



Autistic Communication and Socialising

It is true that many autistic people do sometimes struggle with certain social situations. It is also true that many non-autistic people sometimes struggle when socialising with autistic friends, relatives, and colleagues. That isn't to say autistic people don't enjoy socialising. Most autistic people really do enjoy company and want to have friends. Sometimes autistic people are unsure of how to socialise successfully with others, and may have had negative experiences socialising in the past. This can contribute to us feeling anxiety around socialising. We can sometimes appear uninterested in other people, or appear not to be listening, but that is not necessarily the case. Socialising can be an exhausting minefield!

So why is socialising more tiring for autistic people? Consider what most people do when they are getting ready to socialise: check they are dressed appropriately; make travel arrangements; double-check pockets for essentials like phone, money and keys.

An autistic person will do these things too, but before socialising they may also be:

- Writing a list of relevant conversation topics in their head, or on paper.
- Trying to remember details about their friends which may be relevant.
- Worrying about how to get there.
- Worrying about what they may have said or done last time.
- Worrying about whether it will be a difficult sensory environment.
- And much more...

During the social event, many autistic people are:

- Constantly checking what we are saying to ensure it is appropriate and won't offend.
- Rephrasing something several times in our head before it comes out of our mouths, at which point we have probably missed the appropriate moment to say it.
- Worrying we aren't asking enough questions or asking too many.
- Worrying about info dumping about something we love that our friend doesn't care about.
- Processing lots of sensory information and concentrating hard on everything going on.
- And again, much more...

When it comes to socialising on video calls, matters are further complicated, as there is less information for us to judge:

- Is the other person engaged in the conversation?
- Are they sitting comfortably?
- Are they wringing their hands at something I have said?
- Have I made sure that everything behind me is ok for them to see?



And since it is letting people into our homes, that adds an extra level of vulnerability – some autistic people do not routinely have visitors, so having someone seeing the inside of our homes may increase anxiety. Not all autistic people are incredibly well organised and tidy regardless of what stereotypes say.

Following any social engagement, many autistic people are likely to:

- Analyse the whole conversation to ensure we were not too inappropriate.
- Wonder about the action to take if we were inappropriate -- Do we text and apologise? Would that be okay or be seen as odd?
- Need downtime to process the sensory input of an out of our home location.
- And more again

Most autistic people use a huge amount of energy to socialise but that does not mean we don't want to do it.

Autistic Communication Characteristics

In recent years we have seen more research done into autistic communication and social skills by people like Damien Milton (who is, himself, autistic) and what has been found is that autistic people communicate differently but no 'worse' than non-autistic people. Work done by Catherine Crompton in 2019 helped provide compelling evidence for this. However, it is the case that – just as autistic people can struggle to understand and communicate well with non-autistic people – non-autistic people struggle to understand and communicate with us. This makes sense as communication is a two way street.

So, it is not the case that non-autistic people are brilliant at communicating and autistic people are terrible. What's actually going on is we have totally different communication styles and there is often a two-way break-down when we try. If you have a group of only autistic people, however, you do not get this same break-down in communication because we share the same communication style, which proves it is not that we are 'lacking' – simply different.

You might be wondering in what way our communication differs. Obviously, everyone is an individual and no two people (whether autistic or not) are the same but the following does generally outline natural autistic communication styles.

1. Clear use of language.

Autistic people tend to be clearer and less ambiguous in our language. This doesn't mean autistic people are unable to understand or use metaphors or sarcasm (though, some might) but that we don't tend to hide information 'between the lines' when we speak. We say what we mean and mean what we say. This can mean we sometimes miss the hidden implication in what other people are saying but also that non-autistic people misinterpret us because they are looking for a hidden layer that simply isn't there when we speak.

2. Social housekeeping.



When non-autistic people meet up or start a conversation, there tends to be an introductory section to the conversation. This involves asking the other person how they are, checking up on certain things that have happened in their life (e.g. how their job interview went or how their house renovation is going) and asking after spouses and children etc. At Autism Understanding Scotland we have taken to calling this 'social housekeeping'. It's something many autistic people just don't do, at least not to the same extent as non-autistic people. That's not to say we don't care – we often care very deeply about our friends and family members – but we tend to assume that anything important will come up in conversation naturally rather than us needing to check-box the information at the beginning of each interaction. Plus, we often really want to get to the 'point' of the conversation, which brings us to 'info-dumping'...

3. Info-dumping.

You are probably already aware that autistic people tend to have 'special interests' (or SpIns). We like talking about our SpIns. We like talking about our SpIns a LOT. It's not – as it may appear – because we don't have any interest in the other person or their likes. In fact, it's often a bonding experience for us because we want to share the feeling we get when we become immersed in a fascinating SpIn. It can also be anxiety related — sometimes we don't know what to say and when we reach into our minds for a conversation topic, SpIns tend to be easily accessible. Sometimes, rather than being a SpIn or a bonding exercise, we info-dump because Autistic people tend to like to feel that we are in possession of all the relevant facts surrounding something and we feel uneasy if we might be in possession of incorrect information. As such, we assume other people also want to have these facts (if you have seen the brilliant Hannah Gadsby's Douglas this will probably feel familiar) and we're more than happy to provide said facts if they are ones we already possess.

"I have a piece of information you seem to be missing. You may or may not be ready to hear this information, but I'll tell you anyway. Because knowledge is power, ignorance is a cage, and feelings can be dealt with"

- Hannah Gadsby, Douglas

4. Sharing stories

Often the stories we use to empathise look like 'one-upmanship' to non-autistic people but we are genuinely trying to find something in common with the person speaking – a way of showing we understand what they're going through. What can appear incredibly rude or self-centred to non-autistic people is often an autistic person's way of showing solidarity. An example might be telling a friend you are excited about your new pet. Your autistic friend may then interrupt to tell you about a pet they own(ed), or how they felt when they were expecting something exciting and new too. The chances are that they genuinely want to let you know that they understand your excitement, so much so that they are sharing it with you too. Many autistic people will then want to hear all about your new pet – but by this point, many non-autistic people may have been put off by mistakenly believing we are displaying one-upmanship.



5. Interrupting.

Autistic people tend to interrupt more than non-autistic people. This looks rude to non-autistic people. It looks like we think what we have to say is more important than anything else. In reality, we often interrupt in an attempt to show we're listening and empathising and have something relevant to add. Sometimes we interrupt literally to finish the other person's sentence and it really is to show we're in-sync and keeping up with what they're saying. Some autistic people worry if their autistic friends are not interrupting us as it may be a sign they are less than interested in the conversation.

We also interrupt when we have information that we feel we need to share and we are concerned we will forget it if we don't share immediately. We are often happy to circle back to the previous topic once we have shared our thoughts.

6. Over or under-sharing and explaining.

Related to our use of stories to empathise is the way we often overshare information about ourselves and overexplain where we are coming from. Again, this can be a bonding exercise. It can also be connected to the above mentioned needing the 'truth' or the right facts all of the time. There have been many occasions when an autistic person may have told someone things about themselves that might seem inappropriate or 'too much information' to other people but to us, once the topic has arisen, we may feel not mentioning it would be like lying by omission...and lying makes many of us extremely uncomfortable. Many autistic people also like to make sure (probably because we are so often misconstrued) that we are being clear so will also overexplain things (the length of this article might be a good example of that – we really would like to make it an awful lot longer!). However, many autistic people have been stung by oversharing/overexplaining or simply aren't confident enough to do it in the first place and then we often go to the other extreme and undershare or underexplain. All of these can end up making us look untrustworthy to non-autistic people as it can look like we're justifying or lying when we go on too long or that we're hiding something if we don't say enough.

7. Eye contact.

Many autistic people have what could be described as atypical eye contact. Some autistic people always avoid eye contact while some may give quite intense eye contact. Some autistic people may give lots of eye contact at times, and little to none at others. For some of us, how much eye contact we give can depend upon:

- How much other sensory input we are processing
- How tired we are
- How stressed we are
- And many more reasons...

To non-autistic people it can appear we're not listening when we don't give a certain level of eye contact. In actual fact, many of us are actually often much better able to take in and process what someone is saying if we don't have to worry about eye-contact. Other times we look like we're hiding something when we don't give eye contact.



It is also the case that when some autistic people give a LOT of eye contact, which gets misconstrued as either flirting or aggression when that's not intended at all.

8. Tone of voice and/or facial expressions not matching internal emotions.

Sometimes when autistic people say things our tone of voice doesn't seem to match the content of what we're saying according to traditional thought. Other times our facial expressions don't seem to match, either.

"I have been accused of being angry about things when I genuinely didn't feel any anger. I did, perhaps, feel enthusiastic about it and somehow the loudness of my voice and speed at which I'm speaking ends up sounding like anger when that wasn't my intention."

- Felicity, Senior Autism Practitioner, Autism Understanding Scotland

Some autistic people might be told we look confused when we're not. Some that we seem upset when we are perfectly content. Quite a few autistic people have said to Autism Understanding staff that using Zoom so much since the beginning of the pandemic has made them much more aware of what their face is doing while they're talking or listening. They have reported that this can be useful but also disconcerting at times.

Given the differences in communication between autistic and non-autistic people you can probably see why situations often arise where there's a misunderstanding. The good news, however, is that when autistic people know about non-autistic communication and non-autistic people know about autistic communication we can all be much more understanding of those differences, and meet each other halfway.

Communication and Language Development

Language is another area where autistic people can develop differently.

Some autistic people acquire language really quickly, but our sentence structure can be different to what you might expect. Yoda type speak not uncommon is. This may be less noticeable in more fluent speakers.

Some autistic people struggle to express ourselves verbally. It may take some time to develop a vocabulary. Some autistic children may not start talking until later than their peers. Equally, some autistic children develop language much earlier than peers.

Some autistic people have little or no spoken language at all. This does not mean we are not capable or competent. There are lots of ways to communicate other than spoken word – sign language, Makaton, pictures, text, gestures, etc. There is a misconception that non-speaking autistic people all have an intellectual disability. This is not the case for all. Many non-speaking autistic people find themselves being talked about rather than spoken with when in earshot. This is often because some believe that non-speaking autistic people won't really understand or care about what is being said. Many non-speaking autistic adults have written about this being extremely problematic. Many were paying close attention to what was being said about them, so it is good practice to be mindful of the language we use and include non-



speaking autistic individuals in discussions about them. This is also an issue for autistic people who are speaking too, particularly those who have intellectual disabilities.

Some people worry that by allowing their child to use other methods of communication, it could mean their autistic child is less likely to speak. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that this is the case. People, autistic or not, are more likely to express ourselves if our communication preferences are valued. Not being able to convey your thoughts and feelings, or being misunderstood, can cause a lot of frustration. If an autistic person can communicate — regardless of their method — value that and let them crack on using any which way they choose.

Another thing to remember is that all behaviour is communication. This goes for everyone, autistic or not. How someone is acting will tell you as much about how they are feeling as their words, sometimes more. If an autistic people in your life is behaving in a way that you find strange, pay attention, and ask us – we could be trying to tell you something.

Communication and Situational Mutism

Mutism is not entirely uncommon within the autistic community, and some autistic people are diagnosed with selective mutism. The name suggests that there is some control over when and where they speak, but that is not the case. Situational mutism may be a more apt name. Some autistic children may talk at home, but not at school. Some autistic people only talk around people deemed “safe”, while others may mask their need to not talk and tend to only be mute when they are around people who are “safe” to be mute around.

Ability to talk for someone who has mutism can be influenced by a lot of things including:

- anxiety, especially social anxiety
- sensory input (too much or too little)
- tiredness
- hunger
- how much they have already talked that day
- hormones
- stress

After a long day, some autistic people may find our brains are so busy processing information that we can't say much by the evening, especially if the day has been emotive and draining. Fear of rejection from people we don't know very well can contribute to some autistic people forcing ourselves to talk even when we are finding it difficult to do so. Then, when in the safety of our own homes or around trusted individuals, we may find ourselves unable to speak out loud.

“There are times when I have had a long day when it feels like my ability to speak is non-existent. The drawbridge goes up, portcullis goes down. All the words are still in my head, they just don't get out the castle gates.”

- Marion, CEO at Autism Understanding Scotland



There might be anxiety around saying the wrong thing. For someone worried about making a mistake, often not doing anything is the most effective way of avoiding errors. You can't say the wrong thing if you are not saying anything at all. In this situation, having other people develop their knowledge and understanding of autism, particularly around communication styles, can help a lot.

Situational Mutism can also occur when your brain is so filled with masking other things like holding in meltdowns, stimming, or processing sensory stimuli that it leaves no space to talk.

If someone in your life has Situational Mutism, it is important to value the times they are verbal and respect the times they are not. When someone cannot verbalise what they want to, it can be very distressing or annoying. Being understanding and offering other forms of communication is incredibly useful.

"When I first started experiencing more and more Situational Mutism as an adult, I used to get really frustrated with myself. I couldn't understand why I wasn't able to talk. Now I recognise it is just a part of my lived experience. It's ok that I can't say words out loud at times. I can communicate in lots of different ways, and this is supported by my family and friends. Now I am more accepting of my communication differences I am finding myself getting less distressed."

- Marion, CEO, Autism Understanding Scotland

Some autistic adults are known to text other people in the same room as them when we cannot verbalise, or to write down what we want to say. Sure, it's a little different for most people, but if the autistic person feels respected, accepted and still able to contribute, then it's ok to communicate this way.

Using pictures, BSL, Makaton, apps like LetMeTalk, or any other way to communicate is fine too. There is no evidence that using alternative or augmented communication (AAC) methods slows down the development of spoken language.

It is essential that those who experience Situational Mutism are involved in deciding which forms of AAC work best for them. There should be plenty of choice and control.

When someone is non-speaking, others must remember that ability to talk is not linked to IQ, and that if you are talking about us within earshot, that we can hear and understand everything that is being said. Having others talk about us as though we are not present is not good practice.

The important thing is that communication in all forms is valid, and that we recognise that inability to speak is not rudeness, shyness, or a choice. For some autistic people, Situational Mutism is just a part of our lived experience and it's important that appropriate supports are put in as necessary.