

An introduction to friendships for people with autism

Many people with autism have friends, but the core features of autism can make it difficult for some to make new friends or keep current friendships going. This information sheet explains what a friendship is and gives some hints and tips about friendship.

Introduction

Friendships can be extremely positive as they give us people to talk to about our interests and feelings. Friends can also give us advice and guidance, as well as support in difficult times.

Some of the core features of autism can make friendships more difficult for people with autism. Many people with autism would really like to form genuine friendships but struggle to do so because of the difficulty of understanding social cues and non-verbal communication as well as issues associated with social anxiety. Other people with autism may not be interested in forming social relationships and this is not something to be concerned about.

It is not unusual for a person with autism to have very few friends and this can make you feel quite lonely. You could also find that, because you don't have a group of your own friends, you are heavily dependent on your family for social interaction and for support through life. This can become more and more difficult as parents and siblings get older.

What is friendship?

- Friends are people who are interested in us and our lives.
- We are happy to tell them about ourselves.
- We enjoy spending time with them.
- Friends usually have personality traits that we like.
- Friends usually have at least one shared interest and they enjoy talking about that interest or performing that activity together.
- Friendships are always equal and balanced; a person who always takes help and support from you but does not return those things is not a friend.
- A good friend can help you to understand your triggers and your anxieties and support you to cope with these things.
- Friends can help you to improve your social skills and guide you through socially complex situations.
- It is important to always be willing to contribute to the relationship in whatever ways we can.
- It is important to get to know a friend properly and not just catalogue a series of facts about them, this helps us to understand and appreciate them as a person.
- Understanding the traits that we appreciate in others is useful because it helps us to see what we like about ourselves.

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Important things to remember about friendship

Friendships should not start to have a negative impact on your life - Some people take advantage of the social naivety of someone who does not understand all the social rules.

A friend is not a carer - A true friend will guide you away from harmful situations and will support you through times of stress and overload. But they are not your friend purely to look after you and you should not rely too heavily on them.

Take responsibility for explaining any sensitivities and anxieties - You can help people to understand you and any behaviours and attitudes that they may not be used to. Good friends will accept these things and do their best to help you with your worries. They should not make you feel uncomfortable about the behaviours that help you to feel calm.

All people have characteristics that they could improve on - Some people may be easily offended, while others may be selfish or rude. You may also have traits that you may want to work on to improve your performance in social situations. However, you should never feel like you need to change who you are to make friends. People who expect a person to change in order to be their friend are not good friends.

Your friends will probably have other friends they want to spend time with - Try not to overload your friends with communication. Your friends may also need time to themselves, just like some people with autism do.

Conversations

How to start a conversation

- Stand about an arm's length away from a person if you want to start a conversation with them, this helps them to know it is them you are talking to. It is also helpful to face them but you do not need to make eye contact if this makes you uncomfortable.
- Conversations normally begin by saying 'Hello' or, if you need to attract the person's attention, you can say 'Excuse me'.
- You can continue the conversation if they say a greeting back to you like 'Hello' or 'Hi'. They may also ask you a question like 'Hello, how are you?'

Tips on what to say and what not to say

- It may be helpful to write down some topics that you feel comfortable talking about as well as some questions that you can ask people.
- Some common topics include the weather, their work or what activities they have done recently. For example, if you know that someone went to the theatre recently, you might ask them if they enjoyed it.
- It is considered rude to make critical comments of others, even if they are true, so try not to do this in conversation.

- Ask the person questions about them (e.g. age, where they live, what they enjoy doing etc.).
- Find out whether you have any similar hobbies to each other (e.g. music/history), and talk about these. If you don't have any similar hobbies, ask them questions about their hobbies.
- Take it in turns to arrange to meet up on a regular basis (once or twice a month) to do something you both enjoy and have agreed on.
- Give each other your phone number/email address, and ask how they prefer to arrange things - use the preferred method (texting/calling/email) to arrange meeting up.
- Only ask the other person questions you wouldn't feel awkward/anxious answering if they asked you the question.
- Social rules can change depending on the situation. This means that what is right in one situation may not be right in another. If you are unsure about what to do or receive a reaction you were not expecting, it is fine to ask for clarification.
- Sometimes there are things that may be true but are not good things to say to someone. For example, telling someone that they are fat may well be true but is not considered a nice thing to say and may upset that person.
- Saying 'please' when you ask for something and 'thank you' when somebody gives you something or helps you with something shows that you are a polite person and that you are grateful for their help.
- If you make a mistake or upset somebody it is usually a good idea to apologise for hurting their feelings. You can also ask them what you did wrong and explain to them that you did not mean to upset them.

Meeting new people and practicing your skills

Social groups

There are lots of social groups run by charities and organisations, specifically designed for people with autism. These are often based around a specific activity but may also just be general groups where you can meet other people with autism. These are very useful for developing your social skills because they give you a chance to practice with people who have similar experiences of social interaction.

However, you should also see if there are social groups in your area that are open to everyone. These groups tend to have some focus on a shared interest so if you choose a group about something that interests you, you know you will have something in common with all of the other people who attend. This will remove a lot of the pressure to think of things to say as it is likely that you will at least begin by discussing the interest you share.

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Meeting people online

You can also find lots of people online who share either your interests or your diagnosis of autism. This means that you will have something in common that you can discuss making it easier to think of things to say. The nature of the internet means that you will not have to interact directly with people and this may make you feel better about talking to them as you will only have to interpret their words, not their facial expressions and body language. Most online forums have a page of site rules and this will help you to know what is and isn't acceptable on the forum, which takes away another layer of pressure.

Social Stories™

Social Stories™ are a way of modelling situations so that you can practice your responses to different possibilities. This will help you to script conversations and understand the appropriate things to say and do in response to the actions and words of others. You should try to do this with another person that you trust and who understands you and also knows more about social rules and conventions.

Social autopsies

Social autopsies work with Social Stories™. They are a way of understanding past events and picking out the things that went well and the things you might do differently in the future. You can discuss events and situations with someone you trust and talk about the things that went right which will help you to learn the appropriate behaviours you have picked up or that you have naturally and help you to understand them better. You can also discuss the things that went badly or just not quite how you expected them to go. This will help you to see which aspects of your behaviour were not appropriate in that situation and help you to work on those things for the future.

Conclusion

There is no reason why you can't make friends and enjoy spending time with them. The key to good friendships is that you understand that you do not need to change who you are. Good friends will accept stereotyped behaviour and anxiety as well as limited social understanding, as long as they understand why these things happen and that no offence is intended. However, many people - those with autism and neurotypicals alike - are simply not interested in these social relationships and you should not feel forced into them just for the sake of looking "normal" to others.

Useful resources

- Autism Connect – A social network for people with autism and those who support them. www.autism-connect.org.uk
- *Navigating the world of digital social communication* by J Begley (Autism West Midlands)