

Communication is a two way process for sharing information and ideas between two or more people and can be verbal or non-verbal.

This information sheet introduces communication, and how it may be different in autistic people. Autism can affect people of any intellectual ability and is sometimes accompanied with other diagnoses, like “associated learning difficulties” .

For most of us, communication is a tool for social bonding. By sharing our thoughts, opinions, experiences and emotions, we get to know and understand other people and ourselves. We are also able to form and maintain relationships.

For effective communication to happen it is important to have ALL of the following:

WHAT: something to communicate - a message

HOW: a way of communicating - common to both sides

WHO: somebody to communicate with - you cannot communicate alone

WHY: a purpose - motivation to communicate.

A desire to communicate and interact with other people is an important human characteristic, but some autistic people lack an understanding of what communication is for. Not realising they can have an impact on their world and the people in it, they may fail to develop the essential communication skills the rest of us take for granted. Autism is a condition which affects social communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Some autistic people have delayed language. Some do not develop speech at all. Others have excellent verbal ability. Even where there is speech, wider aspects of communication, like understanding hidden meanings and interpreting body language, may still be affected. The same is also true in reverse – people who are completely nonverbal may understand more than others think.

Communication difficulties and autism

Difficulties in using and understanding language:

- Problems with pace, volume, quality of speech, tone and inflection of voice
- Echolalia – repetitive echoing of the speech of others
- Incessant talking, with no regard to the interest or attention of the listener
- Making comments out of context

More overleaf...

Difficulties in using and understanding language (continued):

- Making tactless remarks and/or using inappropriate language
- Use and understanding of body language – facial expression, gesture, proximity, body position, eye contact
- Literal understanding – problems with irony, idioms and metaphors, jokes and teasing, judging the sincerity of other people's words
- Processing delay
- Following instructions
- Expressing and understanding emotions

Difficulties with social use of language:

- Social timing – may interrupt conversation
- Poor concentration
- Lack of joint attention and shared interest
- Letting people know s/he has something to communicate
- Starting, ending and keeping a conversation going
- Taking turns in conversation
- Knowing if the listener is interested, understands and is paying attention
- Difficulty recognizing suitability of when and where certain topics can be talked about, who to, for how long and the appropriateness of language to be used

Tips to improve your communication with autistic people

- Modify your own language
 - Say their name first to get attention
 - Keep language short and simple
 - Say what you mean and mean what you say – be clear and specific
 - Avoid inferred meaning and ambiguity
 - Avoid or explain irony, sarcasm, jokes, turns of phrase
 - Give instructions in correct order of action and break down into small steps
 - Be positive – avoid 'no' and 'don't' and say what you want to happen, not what you don't want to happen
 - Make abstract concepts concrete
 - Give more time for processing information
 - Provide visual support to make your communication clearer
- Be aware that the ability to talk does not mean that they will understand the subtle nuances of communication

More overleaf...

Tips to improve your communication with autistic people (continued)

- Teach specific skills for essential language functions e.g. asking for help, asking for a break from activity, making requests, accepting and rejecting requests, expressing pain, anxiety and other emotions, explaining that s/he doesn't understand
- Create as many communication opportunities as possible

Useful resources

Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome by O Bogdashina

What Did You Say, What did You Mean? by J Welton

An Asperger Dictionary of Everyday Expressions by S Hamilton