



COMMUNICATION

Communicating in a way that provides clarity and promotes understanding

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is essential in any relationship. Communication creates shared understanding, enables collaboration and productivity, and serves to deepen personal and professional relationships. However, not everyone communicates in the same way. Autistic individuals may process incoming information, whether verbal, written or otherwise, in different ways than non-autistic individuals. These differences can impact communication across any and all settings (e.g., school, work, and community).

Communication is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors including:

- what is being said (the exact words)
- how it is being said (for example: tone or sarcasm)
- the non-verbal gestures (like facial expressions and body language);

all of which can change the meaning behind the message.

Autistics may communicate with a stronger focus on the exact words of the communication, while putting less emphasis on how the message is communicated. In contrast, others (non-autistics) tend to put more emphasis on how the words are communicated (e.g., tone of voice, intonation, or pace) and the gestures used while communicating (e.g., eye contact, use of hands or body). This difference in communication styles can result in confusion and frustration, and may leave everyone feeling like they have not been heard.

Despite differences in our communication styles, we can all benefit from learning how to communicate more clearly and effectively. For example, it is often good to start new relationships by asking others how they prefer to communicate (e.g., written or verbal information). In addition, it is helpful to say what you mean and mean what you say. That is, avoid the use of non-verbals (intonations or gestures) that change the meaning of the words.

We all benefit when we communicate clearly so that we are understood, and take the time to ensure our own understanding of other's communication. By taking the time to anticipate and prepare for different communication needs, everyone will be included and successful.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

When we use the following strategies, everyone benefits:

Say what you mean, and mean what you say

It is important to be literal, clear, and concise in your communication. Avoid the use of slang, nuance, and sarcasm as these increase potential confusion.

Maintain a calm, neutral tone of voice

Some individuals can be highly sensitive to sound. By always speaking in a calm and neutral voice, you avoid being misinterpreted as angry or shouting.

Give time and pause during a conversation

Some individuals may require time to process what they are hearing and to formulate their response. It is important to consider providing time and space to ensure everyone has adequate opportunity to process and understand what others have said. Pauses in the conversation are natural. It is appropriate to ask a question, and then wait for an individual to be thoughtful about their response.



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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES (CONT.)

Focus on sharing the conversation

Encouraging communication is important for wellbeing, and participation in conversation provides the benefit of practice. A good strategy for sharing the conversation is to consider asking the individual questions (e.g., 1-2 questions per topic). This will help to communicate that you are interested in hearing other's opinions and provide others with space to share their thoughts.

Be an active listener

Invest in the time to listen so that you truly understand. Active listening conveys to the person you're talking with that their experiences, opinions, and preferences matter. If you do not understand what the individual is saying, it is important to ask questions to clarify what they are trying to communicate. Also, reflect back what you have heard the speaker say. This will guarantee that you are both communicating effectively.

Consider steps to reduce background noise

Some individuals can find it difficult to filter out background noise and this can interfere with their ability to focus and be productive. It can also increase anxiety which will negatively impact their participation. Ask the individual if there are any distracting sounds or sensations that are problematic so that you can develop a plan for dealing with it together.

Provide meaningful feedback

Providing feedback that is honest, clear, and non-judgmental can help individuals learn to navigate complex interactions.

Take time to discuss any non-literal language that may be new to the individual with whom you are communicating

If someone does not seem to understand an expression or term you have used (e.g., jokes, idioms, metaphors, sarcasm, regional expressions), spend a brief moment sharing the meaning of that expression and how it is most often used. Taking the time to explain shows that you want to include the individual and that they are welcome.

Consider using visual supports

In settings such as the work environment or in a classroom, the addition of visual supports may enhance understanding in communication. Examples may include: schedules, a list of tasks to complete, a breakdown of the steps to a task, colour coding materials or instructions, reminders to check the time or check in with a supervisor or instructor.

Consider asking the individual about their preferred method of communication

Some individuals may prefer to communicate via text or email rather than face-to-face or on the phone. Also, we benefit from having instructions written, rather than provided verbally, so that we can confirm our understanding as well as refer back to the written instructions as needed.

Group size may matter

Some individuals find it easier to communicate one-to-one rather than in a larger group, because larger groups tend to be louder, overstimulating, and distracting. If important information must be delivered in a group setting, consider sharing key points and action items afterward in written form on when one-to-one.

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