

Communication Tips

For autistic/neurotypical relationships

Difficulty communicating between autistic and neurotypical people is really common - and it's important to remember that it isn't a one-way deficit. There are two very different ways of communicating happening, and both sides struggle to interpret the other correctly. Autistic people need to do some work to understand neurotypical people and to make themselves understood when interacting with them, and neurotypical people need to do the same amount of work (which might feel like more, because they're not used to it).

People in autistic/neurotypical relationships need tools to help each other communicate, which means both partners need to understand what's happening in the other partner's head.

When someone speaks, an autistic person processes the words, then has to consciously remember to manually interpret the facial expression, tone, and body language, then assign importance to each factor. A neurotypical person immediately, unconsciously processes all the non-verbal cues, and unconsciously assigns them more importance than the words. Neither partner can change the way their brain works, so both need to keep in mind that their partner processes information differently.

For autistic partners:

- Be aware that neurotypical people often automatically interpret lack of facial expression or body language as you being upset or angry, and that this is not something they can change.
- Understand that neurotypical people are so used to communicating with verbal and nonverbal cues simultaneously that they can't separate them out, so they often don't say exactly (or even close to) what they mean, and they expect the nonverbal cues to do the rest of the communication for them. They can't help this either.

For neurotypical partners:

- Make an effort to put most or all of the information you want to convey into the words you're saying, and to make these words as precise and accurate as possible, particularly if it seems like your autistic partner is misinterpreting what you're saying.
- Consciously pause if something your autistic partner has said makes you upset, frustrated or angry. Internally check whether their words were insulting or upsetting, or whether you have interpreted their body language or intonation in a way they didn't intend.

For both partners:

- Work out the visible signals you send when you're upset, or frustrated, or need to be left alone, and tell your partner what those signals are.
- Arguments happen in healthy relationships. In an autistic/neurotypical relationship, they can be exacerbated by communication differences, especially as accommodating your partner's communication style can be difficult when you're emotional. It can be helpful to analyse an argument once it's over and you're both calm, and work out if there were any communication issues making the argument more difficult to resolve.

Some useful scripts and phrases

"When you're frustrated your voice gets louder, and it feels like you're yelling at me, so I get defensive. Can you try keeping your voice at the same volume when we argue?"

"When I'm curled up or hunched over, it means I'm shutting you out because I need to be alone. Please come back later, and we can talk about whatever the problem is."

"When I'm curled up or hunched over, it means I want comfort - please hug or pat me, and we can talk about the problem when I feel better."

An important note:

You should never feel unsafe while arguing with your partner. Sometimes autistic people aren't aware of how loud their voice is, and sometimes neurotypical people aren't aware that they're coming too close or touching someone whose body language says not to. If your partner asks you to lower your voice, move away from them, or any other reasonable accommodation because they feel unsafe, do it immediately.

Some more potentially useful strategies:

- Have an argument in writing (over text, or a messaging app, or handwritten index cards). This can help both sides articulate what they're upset about and what they want, without having to navigate nonverbal communication. It also slows the process down, which can be really helpful for anyone who has difficulty processing their thoughts and other people's words when they're emotional.
- Allocate speaking time to each partner (e.g. Person A gets two minutes to speak, then a minute break, then Person B gets two minutes, etc.). This gives everyone space to process what's been said before immediately replying, which reduces pressure on the autistic partner and helps the neurotypical partner consciously process words instead of potentially inaccurate nonverbal information.
- Use the colour system: green for a slight preference, orange for a strong preference, red for a necessity. (You can add stages in between, change the colours, use numbers instead - whatever works for you.) This helps both partners understand how strong their partner's preference or need is, without anyone having to calibrate or interpret body language and nonverbal cues.