

Communication Tips

For autistic/neurotypical workplace 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).

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 assigns them more importance than the words.

Nobody can change the way their brain works, so everyone needs to keep in mind that the different neurotypes process information differently.

For autistic people:

- 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 people:

- 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 coworker is misinterpreting what you're saying.
- Consciously pause if something your autistic coworker has said makes you upset, frustrated or angry, or if they seem to be being rude or hostile. 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.

Some potentially useful strategies for managing conflict:

- Have a discussion 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 person (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 autistic people and helps neurotypical people consciously process words instead of potentially inaccurate nonverbal information.

This resource was written by an autistic author (2022).