

Principles of Autism to Autism Communication

Introduction

In my time as a white autistic trans woman, I have been fortunate enough to be close friends and lovers with several autistic people. I have noticed a peculiar style of communication developed in these relationships which differs drastically from how I feel forced to interact with the non-autistic. I want to share this little piece of my life with you so that hopefully you can find at least a little bit of the joy and comfort these things can bring.

I am writing this primarily for other autists who have, for whatever reason, not discovered this form of inter-autism bonding. This could be due to isolation, shame, habitual over-masking or simply not figuring out the trick of it. Through these kinds of close bonds, I have learned a great deal about myself, which has enabled me to develop better relationships with both normal people and those without autism. I hope it gives you the same.

While each one of the relationships I am basing these principles on has been unique, they have tended to have some common elements. None of the elements here have been quite universal, but they are common enough that they can reasonably be considered paradigmatic. These absolutely should not be considered normative! Very little could be more antithetical to autistic people than a normative mode of communication, but hopefully you can use this as a starting point to better develop a way of relating to people that feels more natural to you.

Speak Plainly

The core of autism to autism communication is to speak plainly. This means that you should pick the words that most clearly communicate what you are trying to say with the minimum of additional interpretation. Avoid implying something when it could be stated outright since it is easy to miss implications (even non-autistic people have some difficulty with this!). The goal is to make it easy for people to understand what you are saying.

When trying to interpret something that was said to you by another autistic person, it is important not to search too far into the implications of what they said. Conversations flow better when people do not need to search for hidden meanings. It also makes it less likely that what was said will be misinterpreted, so the speaker does not have to search so hard for the perfect combination of words to convey what you mean.

Make It Explicit

Even with all the care in the world, sometimes implicit meanings will jump out at you, or a string of statements will suggest an unstated logical conclusion. When this happens when you are listening, you should ask about those unstated meanings. Sometimes they will come from honest misunderstandings that you can then clear up. Other times those unstated conclusions might be consequences the speaker just had not thought of that you can help them work through.

If you suddenly realize that what you are saying may imply something you do not mean, it might be worth briefly clarifying that you do not intend that interpretation. This is especially true with people you do not know well or who are new to communicating in this way. That clarification may result in a brief side conversation making sure you both understand what was said.

The purpose of all of this is to clearly distinguish the intended message from any unintended meanings. This does not mean that the unintended meanings are unimportant. A lot of bigotry and other implicit bias works on exactly this level where someone in a more privileged position can say something that seems reasonable on the surface but has a lot of implicit assumptions that hurt others.

Aside from these general considerations, there are a few areas where it makes a big difference to take extra care about being explicit.

Topic Changes

Topic changes should be explicit. This prevents statements from being interpreted in a context they were not intended in. It also allows people to say one last thing on the previous topic before beginning a new one. This can be done very briefly. Something as simple as "You mentioned cats and crows a minute ago, and ..." works just fine as long as it clearly indicates the new topic.

Answering Questions

You should ask for clarification before answering a question if you do not understand what they are asking for. It may also be helpful to ask why they asked their question if that might change how you would answer. After you clearly

understand what is being asked, try to answer a question directly (assuming that you want to answer it, of course!) because to do otherwise signals either evasiveness or not caring about the asker.

Once you have answered what was asked, it is a good idea to try to intentionally head off any potential misunderstandings or provide additional context that you think would change the way that someone would interpret your answer.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is difficult to interpret properly. It requires a lot of context to interpret correctly, and even with all of the context it can be difficult to know how many layers of implied negation or misinformation to unravel to arrive at the intended meaning. It can be used between people who know each other very well, but its inherent hazards make many distrustful. Irony and satire can be similarly difficult to interpret, and many autistic people will distance themselves from people who use them too much, even to the point of cutting off entire friend groups.

Infodumping

It is sometimes the case where we feel compelled to explain at length about one of our special interests. Something will happen that reminds you of it, or someone will ask a question that tangentially touches on it. This will prompt us to give a (probably much too long) lecture on the subject. This is called infodumping.

If someone infodumps at you, that means they trust you, at least a little. It is them sharing a part of themselves that

means a lot to them, and you should react accordingly to it. that does not mean that you have to listen to it, but you should be at least gentle in declining, and if you might be interested later, explicitly say that with a general time frame that might be better.

Body Language

Autistic body language works very differently than how non-autistic think body language works (I suspect that even their body language does not work the way they think, but that is yet another zine). It is highly individual, so the meanings of movements must be learned anew in each relationship. Even with high familiarity, it is often best to confirm that you are reading it correctly.

Of particular note here is eye contact, and more generally how to read attention from where someone is looking. It is often the case where two autists will have an entire conversation and not even look at each other. Even doing other things does not necessarily mean that they are not focused on the conversation. Sometimes other brain processes need to be distracted to make the focus go where desired.

However, this does not mean that all body language is acceptable in all situations. Sometimes what one person needs to do to pay attention legitimately upsets another for difficult to change reasons such as trauma or a hitting a sensory sensitivity. This is usually frustrating for everyone involved. Often, an acceptable compromise between everyone's needs can be found, but occasionally two people are simply incompatible in this way. This does not mean that

either of you did anything wrong. It just happens sometimes.

Emotions

Emotions tend to be difficult for autistic people. Often we have difficulty figuring out how we feel, and sometimes the emotions sneak up on us so we suddenly have a big one with little warning. For these reasons, it is usually helpful to treat emotions about a topic as separate from that topic. This lets us put a little bit of distance between the two which helps us see how our emotions influence our thinking in other areas and then correct for that where it is unwarranted.

If someone you are talking to has one of those sudden big emotions, it is natural to want to talk about it immediately, especially if it is someone you care a lot about. Offering to switch topics to those sudden emotions is a good way to show that you care about them and that you want to help them work through their emotions. However, it is often the case that the best way to help them is to stay on the initial topic, so if they decline, try to respect the desire to stick to the impetus of the emotion and offer to talk about it again after you finish that topic.

When emotions run particularly high, a discussion about emotions about a thing might give second order emotions (emotions about emotions about a thing), or third order emotions, etc. These should also be treated as separate topics to keep the conversation organized.

Trust

This society was not made for us. We are frequently told that we are doing communication wrong, that the ways of

relating that work best for us are in some critical sense incorrect. The ways that we work often leave us vulnerable to misinterpretation and ostracization from non-autistic people. Applying these principles to our relationships requires trust that we will not be attacked for it. Once trust is lost in this way, it is hard or impossible to regain.

Someone following these principles must take care to respect that others will have a variety of responses to breaches of them, up to and including immediate and lasting disengagement. because of the variety of responses people may have to particular ways of responding, you should take some time when starting one of these relationships to make sure you both understand what matters the most to each other so that it is easier to avoid bad reactions.

Vulnerability

Once you have established a high level of mutual trust with someone, that allows you to let your guard down around them. In one way, this should feel easy. All you are doing is saying clearly what you think and feel without feeling the need to double or triple guess how you express yourself. Of course, many of us have years or decades of painful experience where our attempts to do just that have been painfully rejected, so allow yourself time to work through those emotions. It might also help to talk those bad experiences through with someone, who could be your communication partner, but not necessarily! Some of us have a lot of difficulty talking about that stuff, so definitely check in with them before bringing that up.

Even aside from previous bad experiences, it can take some time to open up about a lot of things. There are a lot of habits that we can carry with us that makes actual connections difficult or impossible. Many of these are shared with non-autistic people who also make lists for this purpose, so you can find some of those for tips. The most common autism-specific pitfall is for us to use the same masking behaviors with autistic people as we do with non-autistic people. If you've been masking all of the time for many years, it can take a long time to drop those habits, so make sure to give yourself and your communication partner enough space to work on that.

Negotiation Checklist

As with many new relationship skills, it can be helpful to purposefully take some time to talk through all of the details with your communication partner. This will help you figure out which parts are important to you and which you can skip over in the future. You may discover that some of the decisions you make initially do not actually work for you. Make sure you allow for amending things after you have tried them out for a while. Here are some potential topics for this kind of initial negotiation.

How much sarcasm/irony/satire are you both comfortable with? And how clearly does it need to be indicated?

What is a signal you can use to quickly disengage from the conversation? For example, if something that you were talking about made for uncomfortable emotions that you need to focus on. Make sure the signal is something you can do if you cannot say anything if going non-verbal is a possibility.

Are there any topics that may trigger a trauma response (or other unpleasant high emotion state)? This does not mean you absolutely cannot talk about it at all. You may just need a warning before it gets brought up and an understanding that you may have to disengage suddenly.

Are there any phrases or sayings that you have a consistently difficult time interpreting explicitly?

If your communication partner sees you masking (or other connection-limiting behaviors), should they point it out? If so, how?

Endmatter

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