

How to communicate with non-verbal autistic adults



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Our lives revolve around communication. Most of us first learn to speak through listening and repetition. However, some autistic adults are non-verbal, meaning that they have little or no speech.

How do we successfully communicate with them? This resource is designed to help you understand more about non-verbal autistic adults and to give some practical advice on communicating with them.



Understanding non-verbal autism in adults

Autistic brains work differently. They are not better or worse, just different. In addition, it is important to remember that every autistic person is different. While there are some common features that affect many autistic people, there is no single factor common to all.

One of the areas where autistic people frequently have some degree of difficulty is communication, and often verbal communication. Many autistic children are slower than others to develop speech, and a few may never speak much or at all. That means that there are autistic adults with very little or no verbal capability.

The reasons for this are complex and unclear. What is known is that non-verbal autistic people do want to communicate and are not non-verbal as a result of a lack of intelligence. They still have a great deal to bring to the world, and simply need some adjustments to enable them to contribute.

The importance of communication

Communication is a basic human need. The explosion in the use of video conferencing during COVID-19 lockdowns has shown how vital people find it to stay in touch with friends, family and work colleagues.

Without communicating with others, we quickly become very isolated which is bad for our mental health. Communication is important to tell others what we need and to ask for help, to reach out to others to help and support them, and to share our thoughts and ideas with the world.

Communicating with a non-verbal autistic person may take a bit more effort than you are used to or require you to be a bit more creative in how you communicate, but it is every bit as valuable as any other communication.



Most of us have experienced situations where straightforward verbal communication was not possible – when you have no spoken language in common, for example.

There are always ways to communicate successfully if you have the will to find them and make them work.



Be patient

Patience is essential component to successful communication with non-verbal autistic adults. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, autistic people often find the world a very strange place. They need to give things a lot more thought and consideration than you might be used to, as things that you take for granted may not be obvious to them at all.

They are often deep thinkers, who need and want to fully process thoughts and ideas before responding. So if you say something, do not be surprised if the autistic person you are talking to does not immediately acknowledge you or reply in any form. They are probably thinking through their response. When you think about it, wouldn't it be great if we all gave carefully considered responses rather than impulse reactions a bit more often?

Secondly, you may well need to be patient in taking in what the autistic person is saying to you. If they have some speech, this may be slow or difficult for you to understand the first time. If they are using another way to communicate, such as technology that lets them point to words or pictures for what they want to say, this is also likely to be slower than normal speech, but none of this makes what they are saying any less important.

Finally, if you are impatient and become frustrated with the slow pace of the conversation, many autistic people will quickly pick up on this and become stressed and anxious.

That is one reason that many autistic people who can speak still prefer to carry out a lot of tasks using non-verbal methods like email and texts –

it gives them time to consider their response without feeling rushed into something they later regret saying, as well as keeping a record of the conversation that

they can later refer back to if they are still struggling to make sense of something that has been said.



Respect personal space

Many autistic people are hypersensitive in one or more of their senses, so they may find loud noises, smells, bright lights or unexpected touches, amongst other things, extremely stressful. When you are communicating face to face with an autistic adult, it is a good idea and good manners to give them plenty of space.

Remember that all autistic people are different, so while some may adore hugs and may even hug you first, others may find an unexpected hug extremely stressful. If you have a loud voice, consider making an effort to speak a little more quietly, at least until you get to know the person better and understand what are and are not issues for them.

Think about the location you are in – bright lights around you or the noise of lots of other people speaking may be extremely difficult for the autistic person to cope with as they are unable to filter out these other stimuli and focus on the conversation.



Again, ask the autistic person what works for them – they will more than likely know and be very happy to be asked and to tell or show you.

Be clear and consistent

Autistic people are often very literal and can struggle with things like tone, body language and reading between the lines. When you are communicating with an autistic person by any means, be as clear as you can about what you mean, even if it feels a little more blunt compared to what you may be used to. That is not the same as speaking to the autistic person as if they are stupid, it is a case of making sure that the words you say convey the whole meaning that you are trying to get across.

Autistic people may well respond to you in a similar way, being much more direct than you may be used to. Again, this is not rudeness, it is a consequence of how many autistic people see the world - they choose words to communicate exactly what they mean, rather than saying something else and implying a different meaning by tone or body language.

Consistency is also vital in communicating with autistic people. They will usually think carefully about what you say, and differences in word choices from one moment to the next may cause confusion when none is intended.



The timing and circumstances of your communications are important too. Autistic people are often very dependent on their routines to help them cope with a strange world, interrupting them in the middle of another task to try and communicate may not get the best response!

Ask them when it would be best to speak to them, and if you make an arrangement to do so, try to be prompt or to give as much notice as possible if changes cannot be avoided. Then allow the autistic person some time to think through and get used to the change.

How augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) can help

Augmentative and alternative communication methods are objects, devices and methods that a non-verbal autistic person can use to help them to communicate without using speech. What can be of particular help to non-verbal autistic people, in addition to simple signs, pointing and exaggerated facial expressions, are apps (such as app2vox) that allow the person to “speak” using pictures.



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Communicating with a non-verbal autistic adult can be a very different experience from communicating with a verbal adult, but it has the same aims (to exchange thoughts, ideas and views) and the same potential benefits (to support and learn from each other, and to grow together). Get to know the person you are communicating with and ask them what works best for them. We all need to communicate, and there is always a way to do so if you have the will to find it.

