



The Work Inclusion Project

Autism & Communication

Autistic people tend to communicate in **direct and literal** ways that can be misinterpreted by non-autistic people, who may be more comfortable with less explicit, vague communication. Conversely, autistic people may find it very difficult to understand ambiguous or figurative communication by non-autistic people.

Non-autistic people tend to **misinterpret autistic communication** in ways that result in adverse judgements about autistic people. Non-autistic people can wrongly assume that an autistic person is being **rude**, or that there is some **unspoken 'hidden' meaning** or intent behind the direct communication. Autistic people can find it difficult to guess what assumptions and judgements non-autistic people are making about them. This misinterpretation by non-autistic people and difficulty working out how they arise, cause autistic people a lot of **stress and anxiety**.

Autistic adults typically will have experienced these difficulties with communicating with non-autistic people and being **negatively judged** for it, for **their whole life**. While a non-autistic person may find it difficult to have to think carefully about not replicating these misunderstandings of autistic people, they have the advantage that most people are not autistic and so it is not something they have to contend with in all their interactions with other people. For autistic people, these difficulties may arise for **most of their interactions** with other people, because most people are not autistic. It is important to recognise that the **burden** of these communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people is not equally shared, **but disproportionately falls on the autistic person**. Autistic people are much more likely to have experienced **poor mental health** that can be triggered or exacerbated by communication difficulties at work.

It is **stressful and exhausting** to always be on alert for how someone may misinterpret what you are saying or how you are saying it. It is **frustrating and demoralising** to know that however clear and explicit you may be, a non-autistic person may project some hidden meaning on to your communication that is not there, that you cannot accurately



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predict or deflect, and face being **judged negatively** for this inaccurately projected “reading between the lines” of autistic people’s direct communication.

Autistic people can ask a lot of **clarifying questions** and give very **detailed answers** to others’ questions, as an instinctive strategy to manage the **stress of anticipated misunderstandings**. Non-autistic people can wrongly interpret autistic clarification questions as **rudeness** or being ‘**difficult**’, which can lead them to not answering the questions asked or doing so in a way that creates more **uncertainty and confusion**. Rather than clearing up misunderstandings this can make things worse. This means autistic people can find themselves being **misinterpreted** while also being **refused clear and unambiguous answers** to explicit clarifying questions they have asked to avoid misunderstanding the other person.

Autistic people are often described as not seeing the ‘**big picture**’ and are criticised as **too detail-focussed** around details that non-autistic people do not consider significant. The ‘big picture’ in these situations is the **web of assumptions** that may seem implicit to non-autistic people, who may well not be able to explicitly articulate or explain the assumptions they are relying on. Where autistic people do not share or do not understand the web of assumptions underlying a non-autistic person’s communication, and the non-autistic person is unable to articulate or explain their assumptions, **autistic clarification questions can be wrongly perceived** as rude, challenging authority, or otherwise intentionally being ‘difficult’. This can leave the autistic person confused and unclear while being adversely judged for their efforts to try and gain clarity and avoid confusion.

Good management communication practice will often be sufficient, where there is a **culture of learning and growing** that support autistic communication needs. Autistic-friendly communication practices are more inclusive for those with other learning or communication disabilities, and will also benefit wider **mental health** initiatives, providing a useful **stress mitigation strategy** for all workers.



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12 Rules for Autistic-friendly Communication

Communication that reliably and consistently:

1. Recognises the disproportionate burden and cost to autistic people of communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people
2. Does not hold autistic people to be responsible for the communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people
3. Uses language that is clear, literal, unambiguous, and consistent
4. Neither assumes nor relies on “reading between the lines”
5. Is not conditional on the comfort of non-autistic people, e.g., ‘tone-policing’
6. Provides non-judgemental opportunities for clarification questions
7. Promptly responds to clarification questions directly and unambiguously within an agreed timeframe
8. Explicitly acknowledges when something is not known, where an explanation is not available, or prior agreement needs to be varied
9. Sets out expectations in specific, measurable terms
10. Promptly follows up verbal communication with clear written summary, including all expectations in specific and measurable terms
11. Provides advance notice in writing of intended areas for discussion in meetings, annotated with detail proportionate to the level of importance the issues have for the autistic person
12. Is never at risk of being withheld punitively or withdrawn.