

How to Talk With a Person With Autism by Katie Taylor

As the prevalence of autism increases, the world is slowly (very slowly) adjusting to fit a changing population. Top companies are hiring people with autism for high-powered jobs, autism awareness is growing, and you can now book an autism-friendly vacation. But people with autism are still waiting for what seems like the most obvious adjustment: neurotypicals to stop being afraid to talk to them.

Talking to someone with autism doesn't require learning a new language or earning a degree. In fact, the rules for having a conversation with a person with autism are pretty much the same as having a respectful conversation with anyone, and friendships with people on the autism spectrum can be unique and refreshing.

There is no quick-and-easy formula for striking up a conversation with a person on the spectrum, but there are some basic principles that apply every time. Here are our 10 best tips for having a conversation with a person with autism:

1. Remember we're all human here

Too often people are scared of whatever's different from them. Someone may have heard of "meltdowns" or "stimming" and automatically assume they won't be able to have a conversation with a person with autism, but that's not true. People with autism process information differently, so communication may be different than what neurotypicals are used to, but that doesn't mean they don't want to have conversations.

Be prepared for a person with autism to use body language differently, or respond to your body language differently. You may have misunderstandings, and jokes (on both ends) may fall flat. Be patient and don't assume ill intent. Try not to label something as "awkward," when it's really just unfamiliar territory. Relax! Different is good—embrace it!

2. Don't Talk Down

Even if a person with autism is non-verbal, that does not mean they are unintelligent. Speaking louder or changing your voice may intimidate someone with autism (and make you look strange). Speak clearly and normally, and be

patient when someone is responding. They may be working much harder than you realize to understand what you said.

People with autism often deal with others talking down to them, and it's not appreciated. Try an age-appropriate conversation and then adjust if needed. Also, regardless of conversation ability, using gestures that you would use for children—like head pats or silly faces—are not helpful. In fact, touching without permission is never cool.

3. Eye contact is overrated

It's usually not comfortable for a person with autism to make direct eye contact. Making the effort to make eye contact will take focus away from the conversation, so it doesn't do you any favors to insist on it. A person with autism may be much more comfortable looking at another part of your face or away from you entirely.

Neurotypicals generally use eye contact as a form of nonverbal communication, but two people can have a perfectly good conversation even if they aren't eyeballing each other!

4. Use your words!

Even couples that have been together for years can get into a tizzy when one partner doesn't understand what the other thought was completely obvious. Someone may assume that because something is clear in their own mind, it's clear to whomever they're communicating with. That's a dangerous game at any time, but remember that a person with autism processes information differently and may not pick up on what neurotypicals think are obvious cues.

People with autism tend to take things literally, so actual words are more important than body language. If there's a misunderstanding, just politely repeat yourself or explain a different way!

5. Speak Frankly

Many neurotypicals like to sugarcoat things: "I was wondering if maybe you wouldn't mind closing the door if it's not too much trouble please?" That's a lot of work to ask someone to close the door! People with autism tend to prefer straightforward communication. It's best to speak plainly, and by the same token, to not get offended when someone speaks to you bluntly. Don't assume negative intent—after all, there's nothing rude about just saying, "Close the door."

6. Don't rely on sarcasm

People with autism don't pick up as readily on sarcasm and figurative speech. Think of a conversation with a person with autism as a chance to have a clear, honest, frank discussion without all the flowery language, nonverbal cues, and sarcastic remarks. It might feel strange at first, but it can be refreshing once you get the hang of it!

7. Please don't say, "You're not that bad."

Autism changes the way someone sees the world, and that perspective adds unique value to our families, our workplaces, and our world. Having autism is a part of someone's identity, and while they may want therapy to help them cope with the varying challenges of autism, they are not looking to be "fixed" or to be "as normal as possible."

If a person with autism is able to pass for a neurotypical, it could mean that they're suppressing a lot of their natural tendencies, which is stressful. Be the person they can be themselves with!

8. Louder isn't better

It's true that someone with autism may have a harder time processing what you're saying, but getting louder is not going to help. In fact, getting loud can be jarring and abrasive to someone with autism—just like nails on a chalkboard. If you are having trouble communicating, try phrasing things differently, writing things down, or simply changing the conversation.

9. Pay attention

A neurotypical person may have trouble understanding a person with autism, and the reverse is also true. Pay attention to someone so that you can help them be understood. Do you notice someone looking agitated? Ask if you can help in some way. Is there a loud TV program in the background? Turn it down or turn it off. Also, if you're paying attention you'll notice misunderstandings more quickly and be able to clarify. If you're taking the time to pay attention, you'll learn behaviors and preferences and be able to have more meaningful conversations.

10. Be flexible! Not everyone with autism is the same

People with autism exist on a spectrum, and just like anyone else, each individual is different. Just because you're friends with one person with autism doesn't mean you're an expert and will hit it off with everyone. Once again, patience is key. Your previous autism-friendly communication skills will likely be helpful when you meet a new friend on the spectrum, but they'll also likely need to be adjusted.

It may seem overwhelming to think that each person with autism will have a different communication style... but remember that's how the rest of the world works too.

Did you notice anything about these tips? They're good tips for *any* conversation. That's because talking to a person with autism is not that different when you keep basic rules of kindness and decency in mind.

We don't want to downplay the fact that there are some challenges to overcome when the autism and neurotypical world collide. But they're not insurmountable, and being willing to navigate a little extra awkwardness in the beginning could yield a beautiful relationship. So get out of your comfort zone and don't limit yourself to neurotypical friendships!

Taylor, Katie. "10 Tips for Talking to Someone with AUTISM (A Guide FOR NEUROTYPICALS)." *The Autism Site News*, 26 July 2019, blog.theautismsite.greatergood.com/autism-communication-tips/?gg_source=AUT&gg_medium=house&gg_campaign=Ad-720x360_Blog_How+To+Talk+With+A+Person+With+Autism_AUT&gg_content=2018-10%2F720x360bloghowt_181002125112.jpg.