

# 1+10 rules of communication with people with autism

## Face to face communication

Despite the differences, do not approach a person with autism as somebody who needs a special way of communication. Try to adapt yourself only when you feel that something works wrong. When communicating be natural and empathetic. However, remember that any recommendation has its limits. Each person with autism is unique. They can be as skilled as a linguist or understand spoken word only a little or not at all. Get rid of the prejudice that people with autism are not interested to talk to you nor to have any social contact at all. Try to show that you really care.

- 1 Do not enforce eye contact and do not worry about it.** Some people with autism have problem with eye contact, they avoid it or they stare at you. Both can be considerably unpleasant. People with autism do not often think about eye contact during conversation, they mainly concentrate on what they want to say. Try not to take it as bad manners or a demonstration of insincerity and untrustworthiness. A stare is also not an attempt to show dominance or to make you nervous. Do not draw attention to the differences in eye contact and do not insist on it in conversation.
- 2 Do not judge and do not get offended.** People with autism sometimes struggle to distinguish what they may say aloud and what they may only think about. Even if they like you and want to be on good terms with you, they might tell you something unpleasant. They might not greet you, thank you, apologize or be quiet at times when you expect it. Impolite behaviour is neither a demonstration of ignorance nor a way to offend you but a struggle to evaluate social situations.
- 3 Keep appropriate distance.** Some people with autism are not able to keep appropriate distance during conversation. They either stand too far or too close. Most of them are not aware that they are invading your personal space. They will not get offended if you point this out politely. If they still do not respect this information, you can turn sideways to feel more comfortable. Furthermore, you should also respect their personal space and avoid any unpleasant and unwanted contact.
- 4 Do not rely on information from nonverbal communication.** Sometimes you do not want to be too forward so you go by means of the soft tone of your voice, mild gestures or a facial expression to indicate your attitude. A person with autism might not get your hints. It is far better to express your opinions verbally. Similarly, nonverbal communication of people with autism can be hard to read. Their gestures might be exaggerated and their facial expression can appear stiff, sad or angry. This behaviour does not always correspond with their feelings and ideas. Acknowledge that your understanding of their body language might be incorrect. If you are not sure, ask them about their feelings.
- 5 Try to be straightforward in conversation.** Be specific and avoid hidden messages in communication. You do not have to make sure that they understand you after each sentence but try to minimize information with unclear, vague or ambiguous meaning. Just like for people without autism, it is important that a person with autism knows the "WHY, HOW, WHAT, WHO, WHEN, WHERE".

A person with autism may have difficulties to understand seemingly obvious information and at the same time have no problem to comprehend very complex issues.

- 6 Do not admonish, do not look down on people with autism but be helpful.** People with autism struggle with asking for, phrasing or announcing some information. They might speak too much or too little. They might use inappropriate volume and pace. Be diplomatic and tactful and do not point out the curiosities. Speak to the person with autism directly, not through their companion. Ask, if you do not understand or if you are not sure about something. Only share your opinions and advice when wanted by the person. People with autism might not be aware of their behaviour and a sensible advice can help them.
- 7 Gently moderate the conversation.** People with autism might ramble more and turn the conversation to their favourite topics, enter the conversation with seemingly irrelevant question, insist on details or butt in. You can point this out to them and then continue with the subject of the conversation. If a person with autism has obsessive need to finish what was said, it can be more effective not to interrupt them. If you want them to join the conversation, repeat what you are talking about. Showing your interest in their favourite topics will make communication easier for both of you.
- 8 Respect different ways of thinking.** Thinking of people with autism can be at times too detailed, too distinct or black and white. They can often approach relationships and communication as technical systems. Respect the way they interpret the world around them. However, wrong interpretations can cause inappropriate behaviour at times (e.g. aggression, vulgarisms) which you do not have to and should not respect.
- 9 Adapt to different communication styles.** People with autism face various difficulties in communication and it is hard for them to fit among naturally gifted communicators. Some people with autism have created their own way of communication. They might emphasize an important word by repeating it several times, mirroring the way in which we increase volume to emphasize something important. They might have a ritual at the end of a sentence with the meaning "over" to show that they have finished and another person can speak now. They might repeat a phrase like "Do you know?" until you answer them: "Yes, I know." When you understand their communication style and adapt to it, you can make communication much easier for them.
- 10 Get feedback.** Make sure you have understood the key moments of your conversation with the person with autism. Summarize what has been told and emphasize important parts of the conversation. If necessary, offer a written summary.

10+1 rules of communication have been created by Julius Bittmann, Hynek Jün, Kateřina Thorová, Self-advocacy club members and other people from NAUTIS team.