

Talking about autism and neurodiversity

This guide aims to give you the confidence to talk about autism and neurodiversity at work, and with colleagues who have a diagnosis. Getting language right and having supportive conversations about strengths and challenges creates a culture of acceptance where staff can thrive.

How to talk about autism

Be led by the person you are speaking to or about. Every autistic person has a different experience and relationship with their diagnosis. For many, being autistic is a big part of their identity and something to be proud of. Others may be coming to terms with their diagnosis and new identity. Always be positive where you can. Autistic people tell us that they want others to understand both the challenges and strengths associated with autism.

Terminology

The majority of autistic people prefer to identify as an *autistic person*, rather than a *person with autism*. For example: *she is autistic*. Some people may say *on the autism spectrum*. *Aspergers* is no longer given as a medical diagnosis so is not used widely.

People may refer to autism as a *condition* or *neurodevelopmental difference* and some people use *disability*. Negative words such as *disorder* should be avoided. The terms *mild* or *severe* or *high* or *low functioning*, are very simplistic and so can be offensive. It may be best to talk in terms of how being autistic affects a person: *She is autistic, and says she struggles with the social side of a new job, so we're offering her a buddy to help her settle in.*

Negative language like *suffering from* or *paralysed by autism* can be misleading, stigmatising and disempowering. In many cases it is a co-

occurring condition, such as anxiety, depression that causes difficulties. It is more appropriate to say *struggling with anxiety*, for example, rather than *struggling with autism*.

Communication tips from autistic people

- Avoid abstract language, sarcasm or metaphor - some autistic people find these confusing and can take things literally.
- Ask us how we'd like to communicate - e.g. we might not like talking on the phone, or might find video calls to be a sensory overload.
- Don't think we're being rude because we react honestly or avoid shaking your hand. Most autistic people have strong sensory sensitivities which make physical contact uncomfortable or distressing.
- Don't expect eye contact. For some of us it's hard to interpret facial expressions and listening is easier if we look away.
- Do be patient and understanding. We may take longer to process the meaning of your words, give us a little time if we need it.
- Do treat autistic people with respect. If we are quiet or behave differently, don't speak down to us, treat us as equals.
- Don't be sad that we're autistic. It is who we are and being autistic is a different way of processing the world. It's challenging at times, but we wouldn't be the same if we weren't autistic.
- Do mean what you say and keep your promises. Don't say you'll call in 5 minutes if you mean fifteen. Sudden changes to routine can be difficult to process and cause anxiety. If you say an interview is happening, don't cancel it last minute.
- Do give us as much relevant information upfront as possible. Share questions in advance, as well as maps and pictures of new environments to help minimise anxiety.
- Ask us direct questions rather than vague open-ended questions.

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Offer adjustments

Ask your colleague if there is anything that could help them at work in terms of adjustments to the environment, communication styles or management. This may be too broad a question for some people, so you may want to talk them through some of the adjustments we suggest in one of our other guides: 'Making your workplace accessible.'

Learn more

This is one part of the Autistica Employers Guide to Neurodiversity. If you haven't already registered for our other guides and updates, visit: autistica.org.uk/employers-guide