

Mentor

Do's



Don'ts

***"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."
–Nelson Mandela***

A mentor's strength lies in their commitment and willingness to work with a mentee towards their goals.

Mentoring can be highly rewarding for mentors as well as beneficial for mentees. As a mentor for an autistic mentee, you will learn about different ways to think, different ways to learn and a lot of different ways to be. You will become a better leader and stronger communicator and no doubt get a personal sense of satisfaction knowing that you have helped guide your mentee.



Getting to know your mentee

Attending autism training and learning about the key characteristics of autism will enable you to get to know and better support your autistic mentee.

It is important to remember that it takes time to learn about your mentee. The Mentee 'About You' form is a good first step. Either ask your mentee to fill it out prior to your first meeting or you could fill it out together at your first meeting. This information may help drive your early conversations.

Autism varies greatly from person to person. Each individual's experience of autism is different. As a mentor for an autistic mentee it is vital that you learn what the condition means for your mentee, both at work and in life in general, and treat them on their merits.

Understand that your autistic mentee may have a different way of communicating than you and they may 'appear' anywhere from aloof to overly friendly at your first meeting. That is because some autistic people struggle with understanding the social conventions of new situations and/or they want to build their trust in you before letting their guard down.

The first session should have a conversation about what the mentee is looking to get out of the relationship, their goals for career development, and how they feel they can reach their full potential. It's also a time to explore shared interests. What hobbies are they interested in? What music do they enjoy? What are their likes and dislikes? Many autistic people have hobbies that they absolutely enjoy but perhaps don't have a lot of people to share their love of their hobbies with. Don't forget to share about yourself with your mentee as well. It can be difficult for some people to articulate their goals for career development – sharing about yourself can give the person a guide as to what sort of things to discuss.

Giving your mentee your [Mentor 'About Me'](#) form prior to the meeting enables them to pick out any interesting things about you that they may want to talk about.



Establish boundaries and clarify expectations of roles

Establishing boundaries and expectations and clarifying the mentor-mentee roles gives your mentee clear 'rules' to follow. This needs to be one of the first actions you take with your mentee. Let your mentee know in advance that you are going to be talking about this, and make sure you follow it up with a written record and an opportunity to speak about this again in future if they are unsure.

The establishment of boundaries will assist your mentee distinguish the mentor-mentee relationship from the relationships they have with friends, family, and other members of staff (including management and colleagues). In the absence of explicit clarification and a mutual understanding of your respective roles, confusion may arise.

From the outset, you should decide the frequency of the meet ups and where there will be held and for how long, for example, a half hour meeting at a coffee shop once a month. Ensure they are scheduled at a mutually suitable time and entered into both calendars. Autistic individuals can have executive functioning difficulties (*see Appendix*) and a helpful strategy might be to send reminders prior to meetings.



Support and facilitate

Explain your role of mentor and how it may differ from other roles at work or in their personal lives. Take a lead in building the relationship, setting meetings, focusing on growth and achievements. Provide your networking experiences, share your knowledge and learnings, serve as a positive role model. Encourage and motivate. Support your mentee to move out of their comfort zone in a way that is comfortable for them. This will enhance their problem solving and creative thinking capabilities and help them to acquire new skills and build their confidence. Focus on areas that need to be developed always focusing on the growth of the mentee and never attacking his/her character.

However, be careful not to minimise any challenges they may have. Empathising with those difficulties avoids appearing to dismiss their challenges.



Set goals

Both mentor and mentee should work together to define what success looks like. It is important to 'guide' the success but not enforce your judgement of what their success should be. It is important to set goals – both long-term and short-term - for what the mentee would like to accomplish personally and professionally, skill sets they would like to improve upon, and set a direction for the relationship to grow. Whether it's developing leadership skills, interviewing for a new role, or developing social skills and confidence, your experience and advice will be invaluable.

Understand that goal setting can be hard for an autistic employee, if:

- They have difficulty focusing on self
- They have difficulties with executive functioning skills (*see Appendix*)
- It is hard to identify, acknowledge and articulate achievements, capabilities and strengths
- They are put 'on the spot' and are anxious about giving information quickly
- The goals may lead to change in routine and uncertainty
- They may find it intimidating talking to a "superior" about their goals
- It involves abstract concepts
- It may lead to ridicule or criticism from others.

Work together to set realistic and achievable goals. Advice and guidance should never be condescending. Recognise when goals are accomplished (no matter how big or small). An optional resource your mentee could access to help with this is the **Be Your Best Academy – [Beat Procrastination!](#)** course.



A relationship established on trust

Your role as a mentor is to guide your mentee and assure them that you are there to help them strive for their goals. The relationship needs to be one of trust and mutual respect. Sometimes individuals on the autism spectrum have difficulty trusting others because they have often felt misunderstood or let down by others. It is important to be a trusted advisor and provide reassurance in stressful situations. Often, individuals with autism are not seeking for others to ‘fix’ the problem; rather, they are seeking someone to listen to them and validate their concerns. By being a confidant in this way, the mentee will be more likely to come to you for guidance in the future, when problems arise. You should respect confidentiality and not discuss your mentee's merits or failings with others, fail to keep to agreed mentoring appointments or otherwise breach their trust in you.



Provide reassurance

Individuals on the autism spectrum want to be capable at their jobs and may become anxious if their performance is not 100% perfect. It is especially important to provide reassurance if you know that they are doing their job well – you cannot assume they know. Also provide reassurance if they do make an occasional mistake – that we all make mistakes from time to time and those mistakes can often lead to enhanced learning. Providing reassurance and understanding will likely increase the possibility that the individual will seek support when problems are encountered.



Be reliable and honest

Reliability and honesty are key to a successful relationship. It is important, when supporting individuals on the spectrum that as the mentor, you meet your commitments to your mentee. Be clear in your language and follow through on your promises. Be friendly and sincere, but always maintain professional boundaries.



Communicate openly and honestly

Even though you may be the more experienced person in the relationship, each mentoring session should be a back-and-forth conversation where you prompt critical thinking and self-evaluation in your mentee. This may not be easy for your mentee at first as self-reflection can be an inherent difficulty for autistic people. Your role is to listen, prompt, understand your mentee's needs, and support them in their growth. It is important to actively listen to your mentee (without judgement) and communicate with honesty and consideration.

Avoid using sarcasm until you have a better understanding of each other's humour, as individuals on the spectrum may interpret communication quite literally if they do not understand your humour.

Your mentee may not understand the benefit of having a mentor. Take a lead in organising your mentoring meetings and communicating achievements you make along the way.

Act as a sounding board for problems and opinions but remember you do not have to 'fix' everything. Talk openly about your and other people's views and opinions and why they are relevant, even if they are different to your mentee's. Give and expect respect.

Help build social connectedness

Help to create a workplace culture in which individuals on the autism spectrum are included, in a way in which they are comfortable. The best way to do this is to ask them their opinion and discuss accommodations. It might be helpful to go over the "rules" of an event, for example, how the food will be presented, sorts of topics to discuss to "break the ice", when it is ok to leave and who to say goodbye to. You can invite them to attend social and work events with you present and help them to meet other people in the organisation. Social events can be overwhelming and may be avoided by people on the autism spectrum. However, being invited is always appreciated and having someone to go with will make it easier.

Explain work culture and expectations

Your mentee may be unsure of "typical" social norms, unwritten rules, and unsaid cues within the workplace. These may have caused anguish in the past and may lead to them feeling awkward and unsure of themselves.

Provide information on work culture and expectations and what they should avoid. Provide as much information as possible as this will reduce the likelihood of making assumptions or experiencing confusion interpreting 'grey' areas. Some work hidden curriculum conversation topics can be found [here](#).

Be a positive encouraging role model

Be respectful of your mentee's time, opinions, and decision-making. Your mentee may ask questions to flesh out a problem or to gain greater understanding of a situation and your perspective will be beneficial. Serve as a positive role model by modelling desirable behaviours (for example patience, tolerance, and reflective listening).

Be considerate when giving feedback

Individuals on the autism spectrum are typically emotionally sensitive. They can internalise put-downs, offhanded remarks, and criticism. They may experience greater sensitivity to feedback which can stem from having lower levels of self-esteem or inner doubts about their work abilities or bad experiences in the past.

It is important to give context for both compliments and developmental feedback. Feedback should be considerate, meaningful and specific. If feedback is provided effectively your mentee is more likely to understand it and know what actions they need to take to improve their performance. If feedback is given poorly, it can enhance your mentee's already low self-esteem and self-worth. Autistic employees tend to have a greater innate need for assurance and approval.



Regularly check in on your mentee.

Do pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues of your mentee. Due to interoceptive difficulties (*see Appendix*) they may be the last to know if they are stressed or anxious. If your mentee is quiet, anxious or withdrawn, discreetly ask if they are okay and seek understanding. If they are anxious about something, provide reassurance and validation. Use I statements, for example “I notice that you seem a little stressed”. ‘I’ statements can make the discussion feel less confrontational.

It is exhausting trying to make sense of a world with many unwritten social rules. Providing reassurance about little things regularly can stop the little things from becoming big issues and will help the individual to build confidence in themselves and by extension, confidence as a valued employee and colleague.

What NOT to do:



Don't be dismissive

Do not dismiss your mentees concerns. Always come from a nonjudgmental perspective as it will allow the mentee to feel more comfortable sharing with you. Always maintain sensitivity, awareness, and acceptance. If a problem does arise for your mentee, take them seriously. Never accuse them of being “oversensitive” or belittle their experience. Do not say, “don’t worry about it” or compare them to others.



You shouldn't tell them what to do or do their work for them

You should not unduly influence the mentee’s professional decisions. Just telling people what to do eliminates a huge part of the mentor/mentee relationship where you work through challenges together to achieve growth. You do not have to be the problem solver, rather your role is to teach them problem solving skills. Nor should you do work that your mentee could and should do for themselves.



Don't set unrealistic expectations and goals

Do not impose expectations on your mentee and feel frustrated when they are not met. This approach will not be helpful to you or your mentee. Accept that everyone develops in different ways at different times.



Don't be too nice

It's not helpful being too nice, too sympathetic or condescending. At a certain point, too much positive reinforcement can be detrimental. While listening sympathetically is helpful, your mentee needs a mentor who will gently challenge them and yet believe in them and only provide support if necessary.



Don't talk overly about your own experiences.

While you may be a more experienced professional, mentees often do not have confidantes that will actively listen. This time is to benefit your mentee; make sure that the focus of conversation is on him/her whilst also demonstrating that there are many pathways that can lead to reaching employment goals.



Avoid too much small talk

While small talk can be useful to establish common interests with a mentee, do not engage with too much small talk as it can be difficult for autistic mentees to navigate small talk due to its ambiguity. It can also take time away from more deep and meaningful conversations. Talking more does not necessarily mean sharing more. Mentors should focus on imparting wisdom and guidance.



Try not to assert strong opinions

Do not assert your strong opinions on what is the best course of action for your mentee. Mentees learn through self-discovery and need to be free to make mistakes. Lessons need to be learned by the mentee, not taught by the mentor.



You don't have to know all the answers

Mentors don't have to know everything or be able to help with everything. It can be more rewarding to admit that you don't know something so you can work through it together.



Your role is not to teach them how to 'act neuro typically' or stop appearing autistic

Mentors need to remember that autistic people have authentic autistic traits and the purpose is not to teach them how to stop showing these. Stimming is a soothing behaviour and should not be repressed. Autistic people have different sensory processing and any overwhelm they tell you about is real.

"There is a balancing act with mentoring: helping autistic people to navigate new and overwhelming social situations and help them with strategies, but also supporting them to be their authentic selves. Allow them to call out "I'm autistic, it's been a big day at work today and I don't have the energy for a chat now, but I'll be fresh tomorrow and can chat then" or stuff like that"

Mel – autistic advocate

Appendix - Cognitive Processing & Autism

Executive Functioning is a term used to describe the many tasks our brains perform that are necessary to think, act, and solve problems. Executive functioning includes tasks that help us learn new information, remember and retrieve the information we've learned in the past, and use this information to solve problems of everyday life. Some people on the spectrum experience difficulties in some of the areas relating to Executive Functioning - this is known as Executive Dysfunction. Someone who has Executive Dysfunction may seem to lack initiative or the ability to problem solve, plan and stay organized, they may have trouble sequencing information, and self-regulating their emotions.

Sensory Differences

Sensory information includes things you see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. **Sensory overload** occurs when one or more of the body's senses experiences overstimulation from the environment. Sensory processing fluctuates, an autistic person will not always have exactly the same sensory processing challenges. Stress exacerbates sensory processing challenges. Learning new things requires extra focus and can result in an autistic person having less capacity for sensory challenges. And remember that being in the new job, everything is new, the job tasks, the social interactions, the work environment

Signs of sensory processing challenges:

- Hypersensitivity to sensory input, typical lighting feeling bright
- Hyposensitivity – talking loudly, not able to manage senses to the subtle or gentle end
- Oversensitivity to sounds, sights, textures, flavours, smells and other sensory input
- Difficulty focusing due to competing sensory input

Interoception is a lesser-known sense that helps you understand and feel what's going on inside your body. It is now being recognised as our 8th sense. Autistic individuals may have difficulty making sense of bodily information. They may misread or miss altogether the cues sent out by their body to indicate fatigue, thirst, hunger or stress.

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is the ability to recognise and comprehend the thoughts and intentions of others. Autistic individuals may experience difficulties with being able to understand the perspective of others and perceiving how their own behaviour impacts others.

Context

- Context is understanding the different variables that can relate to the situations, tasks or stimuli
- Context is required to adapt learning to different situations or environments
- Contextual sensitivity is crucial for social interaction, communication and flexibility in thoughts and behaviour
- Context is required to predict and make sense of the world. The brain will guess more often without context. The autistic brain can lack fast implicit guessing.
- Support by making the implicit explicit and the abstract concrete.

Central Coherence

- Getting the point or gist of things
- Pulling information from different sources to establish a greater understanding
- Seeing the 'bigger picture'

A lack of central coherence can result in misinterpretation of situations and communication

The hidden curriculum is the social information that everyone is expected to know without it being taught. These workplace social rules are assumed to be known and understood. The hidden curriculum can be confusing to autistic individuals.