

COMMUNICATION TIPS

Providing coaching in your social and communication expectations is super important when working with an autistic employee



Communication

Communication is made up of:

1. The words we use
2. The tone we use (how we say the words)
3. The rhythm of speech (the rise, fall and energy of our words)
4. Humour, sarcasm and idioms (not literal meanings)
5. Facial expressions, eye contact and body language.

Autistic employees tend to miss non-verbal communication, such as body language, tone, inference, facial gestures and sarcasm.

Autistic communication styles

Autistic communication styles can be less socially driven and based more around exchanging thoughts, ideas and areas of interest.

An autistic employee may find it difficult to determine essential information and filter out less important information.

If there is too much information being presented at once, it can lead to 'overload', making it difficult for any information to be processed.

Noisy and crowded work environments can also affect how much information can be processed.

Saying they understand when they don't

Some reasons for this:

- They think that they do understand
- Without context they do not know that they do not know
- Don't want to be seen as incapable
- Reflex – say yes automatically

Checking for understanding is crucial.

Eye Contact

Difficulty maintaining eye contact is a common autistic characteristic. For many autistic people, avoiding eye contact isn't a sign that they are not listening or disinterested. Due to differing cognitive abilities, it may be challenging for them to coordinate listening and looking behaviors, while receiving and processing information.

Small talk

Autistic employees may view small talk as unnecessary and prefer conversations to be more about 'content' than 'social connection'.

Try and find common ground - learn about your autistic employee's interests and hobbies. When they feel safe and are more confident they may engage in small talk.

Helpful communication tips

- Avoid slang, sarcasm and humour until you get to know your autistic employee better.
- Be literal, clear and concise.
- Avoid figurative language
- If you have expectations and rules around communication at your workplace, make sure you let your autistic employee know. For example, tell them if there is an expectation that they say good morning to customers or staff
- Ask your autistic employee to write instructions down and check their understanding by asking them to tell you what they understood.
- Where possible, provide instructions in writing. This allows for extra processing time and can be referred back to if needed.



How you can help

- **Ask:** Ask what their preferred communication method is - is it text message, email, skype
- **Use their name:** if you need their attention
- If you ask a question, **pause** for the response. They may need a little more time to absorb and process information before giving their response.
- **Be patient:** autistic employees can find it hard to find the words to express their feelings
- **Encourage questions:** explain that it is ok to ask for help.
- **Think before you speak:** your autistic employee processes communication on the words spoken.
- **Provide context.** Context allows your autistic employee to narrow their thinking to what is important and ignore what is not relevant in an individual circumstance.
- **Treat them equal:** as you would any other adult. Don't assume they have limited cognitive skills. A lack of response may be because they have difficulty responding verbally.

Giving feedback

- Provide a confidential, non judgemental space to chat
- Clearly explain your expectations
- Regularly provide feedback on performance to enable development in the role.
- Focus on optimism: reassurance, and encouraging comments.
- Provide meaningful and specific feedback: If your autistic employee behaves inappropriately, it was probably not intentional. Provide feedback on what was inappropriate, why it was inappropriate and suggest a more appropriate behaviour.
- Give positive feedback: specify what they did well and why you are praising them for it. This will help to build communication confidence.
- Take time to ask questions and listen: active listening demonstrates your support.
- Encourage your autistic employee to tell you if they need support with anything.
- Provide reassurance in stressful situations.
- Be open and honest: honesty and kindness goes a long way.