

# Bridging the **DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM**



So you've learned about the Double Empathy Problem and you want to make some adjustments to make life easier for the autistics around you. What do you do now?

This guide will give you practical ideas of how to make communication easier between neurotypicals and autistics. Historically, society has expected autistics to adjust their communication to fit neurotypical norms. Here, you'll learn more about autistic communication and how you can practice it!

Not sure what the Double Empathy Problem is? Check out our guide by [clicking here!](#)

# AUTISTIC Communication Styles

A good first step to bridging the gap between neurotypical and autistic communication is to understand some common styles of autistic communication.



## Literal, Honest, and Specific

Autistic individuals tend to be fairly literal. Sometimes they can misunderstand metaphors, miss sarcasm, or struggle with figurative language. Autistic folks also tend to be accurate and specific when they talk: a generality that is mostly true can feel incorrect. Often, truth is a high priority for autistics in communication, and metaphors or generalities can feel like a lie. Autistic folks won't generally pretend to be excited about your new bag if they don't actually like it.



## Direct and Efficient

A lot of neurotypical communication is not about communicating information, but is rather about showing social relationships and connections. You see this in small talk or little white lies. Autistic communication tends to be more straightforward and direct: sometimes neurotypical people can experience this as bluntness or rudeness. In reality, it's not that an autistic person doesn't care about your feelings - it's that they prioritize truth, accuracy, and directness. Another example of this is that in neurotypical communication, conversation goes back and forth in turns. An autistic person may not notice if they've been talking for a long time or if the other person isn't talking much, and they may not be bothered by silence.



## Highly Connected Thoughts

The autistic experience of the world is often one with many connections between thoughts. Those connections aren't always what neurotypical people would expect or find normal. This can feel like an autistic person is jumping around in topics, but usually they see connections between the different topics. It can be hard to follow why an autistic person brings up a new topic, but there is usually a reason.



## Differences in Nonverbal Communications

Many autistic people don't pick up on the nonverbal cues that neurotypical people use. They may have a hard time reading facial expressions or body language. Other autistics use different body language and nonverbal cues. For example, many autistic people have "flat affect": they don't show a lot of emotion on their faces. This can read to neurotypicals like boredom, arrogance, or disinterest. In reality, they simply don't show a lot of emotion on their faces. Others may have facial expressions that read to neurotypicals like anger or confusion, but feel different internally.



## Processing Time

Many autistic individuals take longer to process words than the average person. You might notice that when you chat with autistics, they pause to gather their thoughts or they may need you to repeat things. This is not an autistic person trying to be difficult: a little patience will go a long way.

# AUTISTIC Communication Styles

In addition to general communication styles, autistic people have built up their own culture of communication. You will probably encounter some of these features in autistic communication.

## Infodumping

Infodumping is the term autistic people use to refer to the way they talk about their special interests. This is when someone shares a lot of information all at once about a topic they care a lot about. For neurotypical people, it can feel overwhelming or you may feel like the conversation is one-sided (which can feel boring or like the autistic person isn't interested in you). In reality, infodumping is often a sign that an autistic person likes or trusts you: they want to share something that makes them happy.

## Echolalia

Echolalia is when someone repeats words or phrases that they've heard before. Autistic people will often repeat lines they've heard in TV shows or movies, and many are great at recreating the exact intonation. You may have heard that echolalia isn't meaningful communication, but autistics say that this isn't the case. Sometimes autistics might use a phrase or word they've heard before to get at a concept they want to express. Other times, they might use it playfully. Echolalia can be a way of inviting you to join in with other quotes, or it can be a way of communicating with the words someone has available.

## Scripting

Scripting and echolalia have some similarities, and can sound the same because a person is saying something they have memorized or prepared. Scripting however is when an autistic person plans ahead of time and has phrases, questions, or words at the ready to help them through a conversation. You may have used scripting before if you had to make a stressful phone call and wrote down what you wanted to say beforehand. Scripting does not mean that an autistic person isn't interested or paying attention. It's a way of managing stress.

## Parallel Play

Parallel play is when two people hang out in the same space and do activities independently of each other. Many autistic people really enjoy the presence of someone else and don't feel the need to directly interact. While neurotypicals often feel like they need to fill a silence or talk to someone who is present, autistics tend to be more comfortable just being near.

## Gestalt Language Processing

Gestalt language processing (GLP) is one of the two types of understanding and using language. The other is analytic language processing (ALP), another name for what we have thought of as "typical language processing." Gestalt language processing starts with chunks of language that you might recognize as echolalia. Over time, those chunks can be broken down into smaller pieces and then built up again into phrases and sentences. Not all autistics are gestalt language processors, but it is more common in autistics. [Learn more.](#)

# Ways to Adjust Your COMMUNICATION

Now that you know about autistic communication styles, what can you do to make conversations more autistic-friendly? Here are some suggestions!

**Model good cross-neurotype communication by asking for what you need.** Remember that autistic communication tends to be direct, so instead of giving off nonverbal signals, tell someone what you need in a conversation. For example, if someone is infodumping and you feel overwhelmed, you can tell them what would help you. This also helps other people around you see that it's ok to ask for what they need.

**Get clarification.** People make many assumptions during communication. This is a necessary part of being social! However it can be helpful to check in on your assumptions more often when you're communicating across neurotypes. If you're ever not sure what someone means by their tone, body language, or language choice, ask!

**Educate others.** Now that you're familiar with the Double Empathy Problem and have some examples of autistic communication, you'll start to notice when other people misunderstand autistic communication or make assumptions (especially that autistics are bad at communication). When that happens, try to explain why those assumptions aren't accurate.

## SCRIPTS

- You know so much about this, I'm having a hard time following! Can you slow down a little bit?
- Oh I totally have a story about that! Can I share?
- Ok you are clearly excited because your volume keeps going up, but it's a too loud for me. Can you be a little quieter?

## SCRIPTS

- I can't tell if that was a joke or not. Was it?
- Your tone sounds like you're mad at me. Am I reading that right?

## SCRIPTS

- I know that autism is a communication disorder, but there's actually some good evidence that autistic communication is functional, but different.
- I don't think they're ignoring you. Some people find eye contact really uncomfortable.

# Avoiding **ASSUMPTIONS**

Because autistic communication is so different from neurotypical communication, many people make incorrect assumptions about autistic people. Here are some common assumptions/myths that you may notice, and the real facts behind what's going on. There are plenty of other assumptions that can come up in cross neurotype communication: these are just some examples.

**Assumption: disagreeing with someone means you don't like them, want to undercut them, or are saying something socially about them.** Reality: autistic people tend to be honest instead of focusing on going with the group or keeping the peace. When an autistic person disagrees with you, all it means is that they have a different opinion.

**Assumption: when someone doesn't respond with facial expressions or body language, they're not interested in talking to me.** Reality: many autistic folks have different nonverbal communication than neurotypicals. They may react less or in ways you don't expect. That doesn't mean they are uninterested.

**Assumption: paying attention and showing respect means sitting still and looking at the person who is talking. Someone who is too fidgety may be untrustworthy, nervous, or lying.** Reality: many autistic folks need to move around in order to process what they're hearing. Sometimes, looking a person in the eye can be really uncomfortable or even painful, and will mean that an autistic person actually hears less of what you're saying.

**Assumption: when someone needs to say something critical or negative, they shouldn't say it bluntly: that's rude/mean. To make it more kind, add compliments or other things to soften it and the other person will read between the lines** Reality: for autistic folks, reading between the lines can be challenging if not impossible. You may find that if you try to talk around something they won't understand: for example if you say "well, I'm getting tired," and stand up after hanging out, they may not realize you're saying "I need to leave." You may also notice that autistic folks will be straightforward when they have a criticism: if you ask them how you look and they think the outfit is bad, they'll tell you. This doesn't mean they're trying to be rude: they're just being honest.

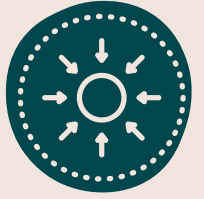
# Useful

## COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

If you're working to make your communication more autistic-friendly, there are some general principles you can use. Here are some ideas.

**Remember: each autistic person is different and may match elements of the autistic communication style more or less. Ask them their own preferences and adjust your language and communication to match!**

**Strategy 1:** Be specific with your language. If you want someone else to do something for you, ask explicitly instead of implying it. When you ask questions, remember that open ended questions (e.g. how was your day?) can be overwhelming. Asking something more specific can be helpful (e.g. what was something good about your day?). This can also apply to descriptions or statements: instead of saying "I like that," be more specific: what do you like?



**Strategy 2:** Work to mirror the communication style of the person you're with. If they angle their body away from you, don't try to get in front of them. If they don't make eye contact, try out what it feels like not to look at the person you're speaking to.



**Strategy 3:** Be careful about overloading someone with too much spoken information. Especially when you're asking someone to do something, break it up into small steps (saying "first this, then this" can be helpful).



**Strategy 4:** Give the person plenty of time to respond, especially during transitions. Autistic folks may need more processing time, so if you ask a question, wait longer for them to answer. There may be more pauses in conversation. That's ok! If you're going to transition topics, places, or tasks, give them a heads up a few minutes before you need to make the transition.



**Strategy 5:** Take what they're saying seriously. If someone is using a script or echolalia, they are still communicating. Do your best to understand the point they're trying to get across and respond with the seriousness you would any other communication. If you can figure out what they're quoting from, they may appreciate you adding your own quotes too.



# COMMUNICATION PRACTICE EXERCISES

Now that you know about autistic communication styles, it's time to try incorporating them into your day to day life. Use these exercises to get better at adjusting your communication style to feel more welcoming and accepting to autistic folks. You don't have to do all of them: pick which ones feel the most useful to you and try them out!



## Exercise 1: Learn your own communication preferences!

One of the best things you can do to improve communication is to understand your own needs and preferences. Listed below are some examples of different communication styles. Each one is a spectrum: you can be closer to one end or another, or you can be close to the middle. Think about where you fall.



### Precise/Literal

You care about your language being exact and correct. You don't like to use generalities and you include details.



### Metaphoric

You use language more poetically: you may use metaphors, figurative language, or approximations.



### Consistent

You think it's important for things to be the same across all contexts: truth is always true, rules are always rules.



### Context Specific

You are likely to adjust the way you speak or behave based on what's going on around you and who you are with.



### Honesty/Truth Focused

It is very important to you to tell the truth all the time. You won't flatter or agree with someone if it's not accurate.



### Appropriateness/Social Focused

You're ok with stretching the truth or avoiding truths to keep social peace and make others happy.



### Detail

You notice all the details and tend to share them when you're speaking. You want to be precise: e.g. it's 3:58 not 4:00.



### Summarizing

You don't feel like you need to include every detail and you'll add more general statements that sum things up, even if it's a bit less accurate.



### Flat Facial Expression

Your face tends to stay still while you're talking or communicating.



### Labile Facial Expression

You make a lot of facial expressions while you're talking.

Remember that not all of these differences are preferences. For some autistic folks, they are needs: an autistic person may not be able to understand you when you speak metaphorically. Think about which of your communication styles are preferences vs. needs.

**Exercise 2:** Set aside time after you're around autistic people to notice what you like about their communication. You may want to write down some notes to help you remember or clarify what you're thinking. Noticing and appreciating the positives of the autistic communication style will show through when you're socializing with autistic folks, and may also allow you to adjust your own communication to mimic the things you like.

If you're particularly close to an autistic person, you can also share what you've noticed. This should be in a context where you already have a social connection and the appreciation is genuine: autistics are too used to patronizing attitudes that act as if it's a huge success to complete basic tasks. However, if you have a friend, family member, or colleague and you can find ways to shout out how their autistic communication is part of what you love about them, this is a great exercise.

**Exercise 3:** Ask an autistic person about their special interest and practice listening for as long as they want to talk. Really pay attention to what makes them excited or happy about it. If you know things about the topic as well, feel free to share them. The point isn't to learn anything specific, but to join in to how an autistic person wants to share what's important to them. See if you notice how they respond: do they light up when they're talking about it? Do you learn something interesting? What does it feel like to see someone sharing what's important to them?

**Exercise 4:** Practice noticing when you use metaphors in your everyday conversation. You can be as formal or informal as you want: maybe you keep a tally on your phone after each conversation of how many metaphors you used, or you could just take a minute after you talk to someone to see if you can remember approximately how many times you used metaphors in that conversation. Once you start tracking, see if the number goes down. If it doesn't, see if you can notice during a conversation when you use a metaphor or figurative language. This will help you be more aware so that you can adjust your language when you're talking to an autistic person.