

Autism & Communication Fact Sheet

The need to communicate is central to being human and we establish the importance of communication from a very young age. Autistic individuals may communicate in a different way than non-autistic individuals. For example, autistic individuals might use different types of body language, tone and inflection.

Autism & Communication

Autistic people can experience difficulties in communication, in particular if they have Alexithymia, which is a difficulty in identifying & expressing emotions or Semantic Pragmatic Language Disorder, where the person has difficulty understanding and using the meaning of words and phrases in context, both of which are very common in autistic people.

Some autistic people report feeling distressed and frustrated when they are communicating and not being understood. Sometimes, behaviour which challenges acts as communication, and should be interpreted in this way. Sadly, people who do not feel that they can communicate with others are more likely to experience anxiety, low mood and suicidal ideation.

How could we recognise when someone is struggling to communicate?

- Look for changes in 'usual behaviour', is the person isolating themselves more often or presenting with more/less severe challenging behaviours
- Has the person disengaged from usual communicative processes with others i.e. using communication aids or written text?
- Does the person appear to struggle in social situations, or are they avoiding usually attended social opportunities?
- Has the person engaged in self-harming behaviours?
- Is the person looking or actively searching for information on suicide or self-harm?

How can you help support effective communication?

It is likely, if the person is feeling low or is unable to communicate how they are feeling, it may be difficult to engage in conversation. The following, although not exhaustive, are some helpful strategies that may support more effective ways of communication.

- Mood thermometers can support people to identify how they are feeling without having to say this.
- Use communication aids such as PECs if preferred by the individual
- If you are able to talk to the person and, depending on their cognitive understanding, ask direct questions and avoid open-ended questioning. Asking questions such as “do you feel sad?” can be helpful; however, be aware that the autistic person may not be able to conceptualise what feeling sad may mean.
- Consider using none facing/nonverbal communication, such as keeping a diary or communicating over text messages. Some people may find it easier to write down how they feel than discuss this.
- Art therapies and journaling can support a person to express themselves.
- Provide accessible information to the person that can be read in their own time.
- Avoid trying to force communication (unless in an emergency situation).
- Create a capable environment for the person for example, encourage the person (if they are able) to go for a walk with you or do an activity they enjoy with you. This may support a more relaxed mood and encourage communication.

