


Strategies and Resources: **Communication** – **Small Talk**

There are many different difficult aspects to consider when we think about communication:

- Understanding polite social ‘chit chat’- many autistic people don’t feel naturally comfortable engaging in small talk, but it can be a big part of any given day. Ordering a coffee, being in a lift with someone, getting a haircut - all these things and many more can mean small talk is looming. Firstly, think about what elements of small talk make you feel discomfort. Is it knowing how to start? What things are appropriate conversation? Are you uninterested in polite social chit chat or fail to see the point in it? If this is the case, weigh up what causes the most discomfort- is it having to engage in small talk itself because it feels pointless, or is it not understanding the rules and how to engage?
- If it is that you just find it pointless give yourself permission to not worry about it anymore. Don’t try to force yourself into doing something that you don’t want to engage in as it may just make you feel worse overall.
- If you feel you would like to be a part of small talk with people but have difficulty understanding how to do it, here are a couple of things to try:



Scripting and preparing questions: Prepare in advance things you can talk about. Pick something that is universal and felt by everyone. A lot of people start off by commenting on the weather, for example.

- Have a few prepared questions you can ask. Questions encourage the other person to speak allowing you processing time. Try to keep questions general and open ended if possible. This [website](#)** breaks down small talk in more detail.

****One point to note** is that although the website states *‘avoiding small talk...only serves to worsen anxiety in the long run’*, this may not be the case for you. If you don’t want to participate in small talk, that is fine and completely acceptable. We are all unique.

Some things we may struggle with:

We all communicate differently. For many autistic people, the unwritten socially acceptable rules of polite conversation or small talk, are hard to understand.

- Some autistic people may have narrow or singular interests and may not pick up on social communication cues, e.g., if we are boring someone, or dominating conversation.
- Social anxieties have an impact on communication and the ability to communicate. This can lead to feeling confused or exhausted. For example, you may be trying to process sensory issues at the same time as holding a conversation.
- Some autistic people get stuck on communicating one singular thought/ opinion or idea because they believe it to be the correct one or cannot understand/ see another’s point of view. This can be frustrating for the other person.
- Sometimes an autistic person’s communication style can be interpreted as confrontational or aggressive when really, they are just passionate about a subject or interest. Try to think about how you are presenting yourself- tone and loudness of voice, how close you are standing to the other person. Or if it

feels comfortable check-in with them- e.g., 'am I being too loud, I just really love...?'

- Some autistic people prefer non-verbal communication such as British Sign Language (BSL) and Makaton. This can include pointing, gestures, facial expressions and learning signs which may be useful for certain situations aka the sign for "home" when you'd like to go home.

Takeaways:

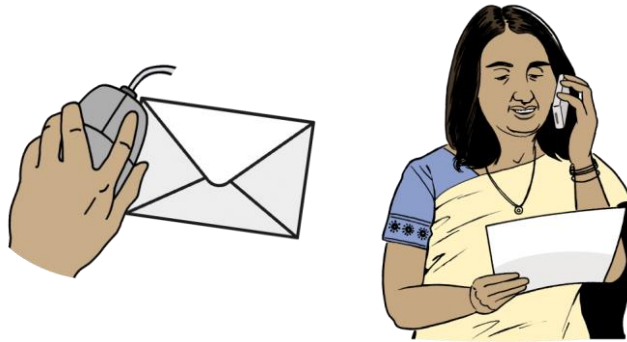
1. Take time to work out if you even want to be comfortable engaging in small talk. If it's not for you then that is ok. Wearing headphones or reading a book can make it less likely for a person to try and start a conversation with you
2. If you do want to engage in small talk, think about the aspects that make you feel anxious. Then work on strategies to try and combat those anxieties
3. If there are things that don't feel right about what someone has said to you or if you feel you don't understand a situation, talk it through with a person you trust

Useful links:

- Autism AIM have produced a Communication Profile, where you can say how you prefer to communicate with other people, in-person or remotely:
<https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/07/leeds-autism-aim-communication-profile-final-02.03.21.docx>
- App2vox is a free app that can help autistic adults, verbal and non-verbal, communicate with the people around them. It will launch in spring 2023:
<https://app2vox.com/>
- ASK (Autistic Space Kit) is an app made by and for autistic adults that has tools include cards to say how you are feeling about communicating with others, an autism alert card, scripts and emergency contacts:
<https://www.autisticspacekit.co.uk/>

Contact Us

This guide was produced by **Autism AIM**, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the Leeds, Bradford and Craven areas.



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