

# Understanding Common Barriers in Communication and Strategies to Support Communication

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# Workshop Overview

- Describe common communication barriers for autistic adults
- Understand the impact on relationships with family, friends, and professional
- Identify at least three proactive strategies to support communication

# Terms & Definitions

- **Neurodivergent** - Someone who has some sort of variation to their neurology or overall brain structure.
  - Umbrella term that can apply to a range of diagnoses: Autism, ADD/ADHD, etc.
- **Neurotypical** - Someone who is NOT neurodivergent

# Traditional View of Autism vs. Reality

## Autism Spectrum

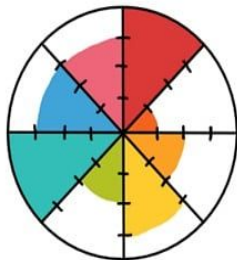
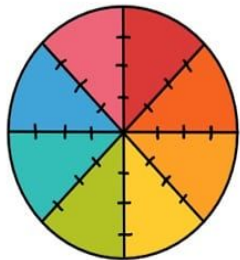
The Autism Spectrum is NOT linear



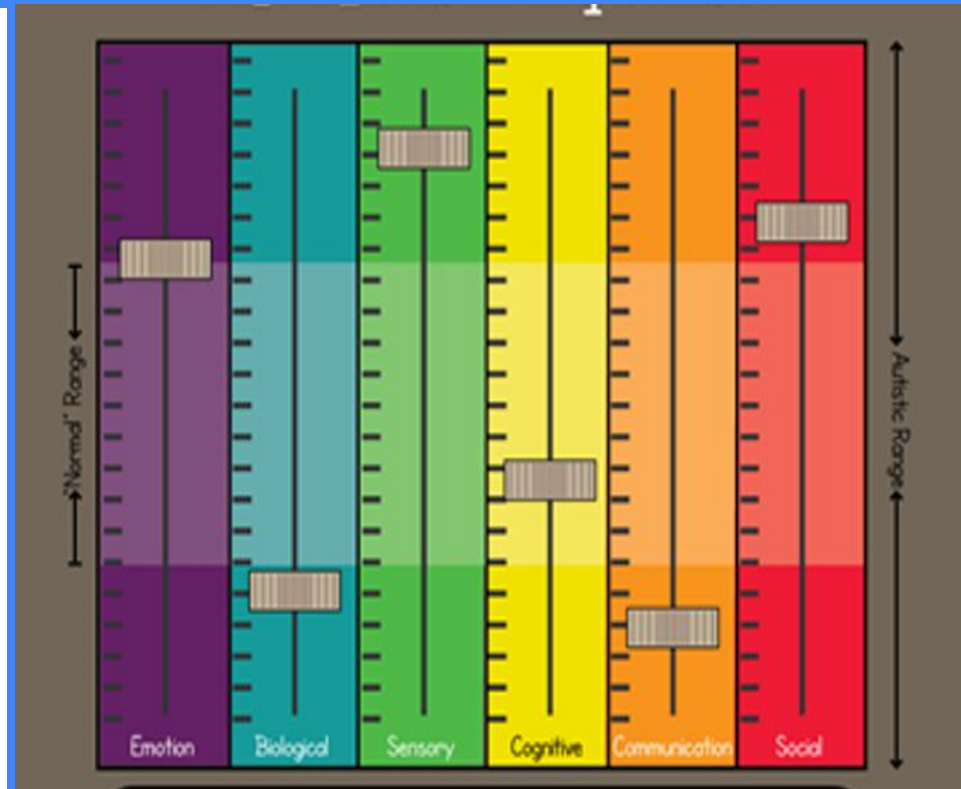
less autistic

very autistic

The Autism Spectrum looks more like:



- Social differences
- Interests
- repetitions
- sensory sensitivities
- emotional regulation
- perception
- executive functioning
- other

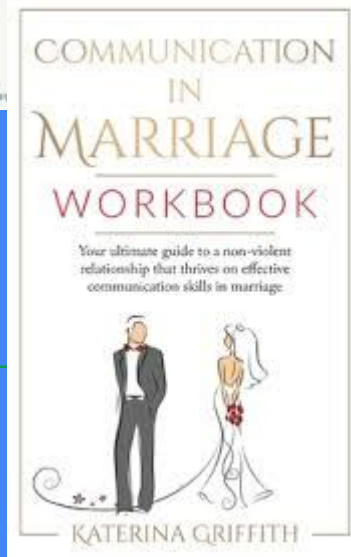
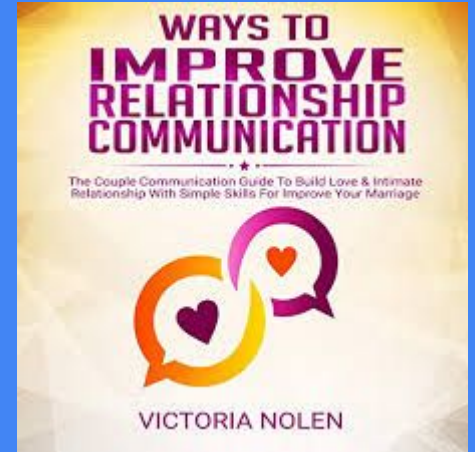


# Types of Communication

- Language: the way we represent information, what words mean and how we put them together
  - Receptive - The understanding of language
  - Expressive - The use of language
- Speech: A verbal means of communicating, using sounds to make words
- Non-verbal means of communication: gesture, facial expression, eye contact, etc.
- Pragmatic: The way in which individuals use language in social situations. It includes following the unspoken rules of communication including turn-taking.

<https://thespectrum.org.au/autism-strategy/autism-strategy-communication/>

# What is Good Communication?



# Autistic Communication Is Not “Deficient”, Just Different

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- Might have been labeled as antisocial
  - Told their communication style was rude or inappropriate
  - May have led to symptoms of depression and increased anxiety
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# Common Myths About Autism

- “Selfish”- only talks about themselves
  - Dishonest
  - Isolates, Withdrawn, Shy
  - Procrastinator, unmotivated, “lazy”
  - Lacks empathy
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# Research Says...

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- Autistics prefer to talk to other autistics
    - Crompton et al. (2019) Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective.
    - NJ Sasson, KE Morrison (2019) - Autism, First impressions of adults with autism improve with diagnostic disclosure and increased autism knowledge of peers.
  - Double Empathy Problem
    - Milton (2012) On the ontological status of autism: the double empathy problem.
-

# What do autistic adults say about communication?

- Impacts daily functioning
- Impacts ability to access services and resources
- Negatively impacts employment
- Leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation, may lead to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety

Crane, Pellicano, and Cummins (July 2020) Autistic adults views of their skills and needs. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders.

# Themes Identified From The Study

- **Theme 1:** Complex views on communication
- **Theme 2:** Communication difficulties arise due to internal and external factors
- **Theme 3:** We need personalized support but society needs to change too
- **Theme 4:** Impact of communication difficulties is far reaching

# Theme 1: Complex views on communication

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- Wide range of benefits but also negative consequences
  - Awareness of individual strengths, difficulties and preferences
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## Theme 2: Communication difficulties arise due to internal and external factors

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- Anxiety exacerbates communication difficulties
  - The communicative environment can be overwhelming
  - The communication partner makes a difference
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# Theme 3: Personalized support and societal changes are needed

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- Support for specific life situations
  - Identify what others could do to support communication
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# Theme 4: The impact of communicative difficulties is far reaching

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- Withdrawal from society
  - Communication difficulties leads to feelings of vulnerability
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# Masking/Camouflaging

Masking/camouflaging - A social survival strategy. Looks different for everyone, but can include:

- Forcing or faking eye contact during conversations
- Mimicking gestures
- Hiding or minimizing personal interests
- Developing a repertoire of rehearsed responses to questions
- Pushing through intense sensory discomfort including loud noises
- Disguising stimming behaviors



# Masking/Camouflaging

**People may mask for a variety of reasons, such as:**

- Feeling safe and avoiding stigma
- Avoiding mistreatment or bullying
- Fitting in or feeling a sense of belonging
- Avoid being singled out or embarrassed

# Masking/Camouflaging

- Mental health impacts: anxiety (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019), depression (Cage et al., 2018), increased risk of suicidal thoughts (Cassidy et al., 2019)
- Exhaustion/Autistic Burnout
- People think masking = Cure



# Supporting Effective Communication



# Strategies to Support Communication

- Support from others, especially in areas of
  - Employment and developing interview skills
  - Forming romantic relationships
  - Demonstrating assertiveness and when to ask for help
- Support self-advocacy and diagnostic disclosure (Crane et al. 2019a, Krieger et al, 2012)
- Clarification of understanding for all parties involved

# Strategies to Support Communication

- Change on a societal level
  - System that provides support at an environmental level (e.g. peer mentoring, adapting tasks, use of strengths)
  - Increased societal awareness
- Use of a health passport
  - Example: <https://www.autismandhealth.org/>

# Strategies to Support Communication

- **Sensory Differences For Autistics**
  - Determine if environment is too loud, too bright, too busy, etc.
  - Determine if and when it is appropriate to touch or hug an autistic individual
    - Ask for permission

# Sources

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1460-6984.12552>

<https://thespectrum.org.au/autism-strategy/autism-strategy-communication/>

<https://laconciergepsychologist.com/blog/autism-communication/>

Q&A



## Contact Information:

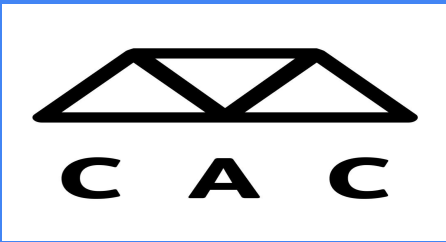
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