

How autistic and non-autistic people can understand each other better

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Autistic people often experience difficulties with social communication. It's so common, in fact, that it's one of the central criteria for an [autism diagnosis](#).

For as long as we have been diagnosing autism, doctors and researchers have regarded social [communication](#) difficulties as autistic ["impairments"](#). But in more recent years, research has begun to show that—just like autistic people have been saying for a long time—communication breakdowns go both ways.

In other words, neurotypical people can have just as much difficulty understanding autistic people as the other way round. This is now sometimes referred to as ["the double empathy problem"](#).

In [my new book](#), *Understanding Others in a Neurodiverse World*, I draw on linguistics, the study of language, to look at the double empathy problem a little more closely. And I consider how autistic and non-autistic people can better communicate with each other.

In the world of linguistics there is an idea called ["relevance theory"](#), which tries to make sense of how it is that any of us understand what another person means.

For example, if you hear me say "it's getting a bit chilly," depending on the context, there are a number of things I might mean by this. I might mean: "I'm cold." But I could just as easily mean: "could I borrow a jumper please?" or: "is it okay if I shut the window?" Or even: "it's probably time to head home soon," and any other number of things.

Words, in essence, don't mean much. To work out the right interpretation of my words, you need to be able to correctly gauge what I wanted you to understand, or my "intended meaning." We do this all the time with each other.

Yet historically, early autism researchers assumed that misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people were due to autistic people not being very good at [recognizing intentions](#). We now

know that these misunderstandings run both ways and relevance theory can help us understand why.

Because there are often so many potentially different ways we can interpret somebody's words, our brains rely on shortcuts to help us identify the most relevant interpretation. This is calculated by weighing up how much effort you need to put in when working out someone's intended meaning. The more similar we are to another person, the more likely it is that we think the same way, meaning less effort is required to find a relevant interpretation.

Herein lies the problem. Autistic and non-autistic people experience the world and think very differently. So, what is relevant to an autistic person may not be relevant to a non-autistic person. And vice versa.

It's important to recognize this because difficulties with social communication can affect all areas of an autistic person's life.

For example, communication difficulties between autistic people and their [health care providers](#) contribute to the significantly poorer physical and mental health [outcomes](#) that autistic people experience. This includes a [life expectancy](#) that is significantly reduced compared to neurotypical people and a higher prevalence of serious medical conditions such as diabetes and hypertension than remain untreated for longer.

Difficulties with social communication can lead to far higher rates of loneliness and social isolation among autistic people. Social communication challenges also contribute to the barriers that autistic people experience in [education](#), [employment](#) and in accessing [secure housing](#).

How can we improve things?

One of the most useful things that neurotypical people can do when engaging with autistic people is to not make assumptions about there being common ground.

One useful example of this is when we talk with people from another culture or language background. In such circumstances, we often make extra mental efforts to consider the different ways they may be thinking. This is something that can really help to improve communication between autistic and non-autistic people.

Consider when you watch a TV show in a foreign language that you are somewhat familiar with. You try to tune your ear in to identify the intended message without worrying too much about every word or the exact grammar.

This works well when people use [English as a lingua franca](#) (Elf) in international and intercultural business settings. When two or more people from different language and socioeconomic backgrounds use English to communicate, they often start from varying points of reference and individual ways of thinking.

Different things will be more or less relevant to each of them. But Elf users make extra efforts to work out what their interlocutor is saying and develop new language norms together in the moment.

The American autistic rights activist Jim Sinclair gave a seminal speech at the 1993 International Conference on Autism in Toronto, Canada. In "[Don't Mourn For Us](#)," they offered an insight on communication still relevant today:

"It takes more work to communicate with someone whose native language isn't the same as yours. And autism goes deeper than language and culture; autistic people are "foreigners" in any society. You're going

to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You're going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you've probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood..."

Embracing this mindset could help to bridge the communication gap between autistic and non-[autistic people](#), promoting better understanding, empathy and connection.

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