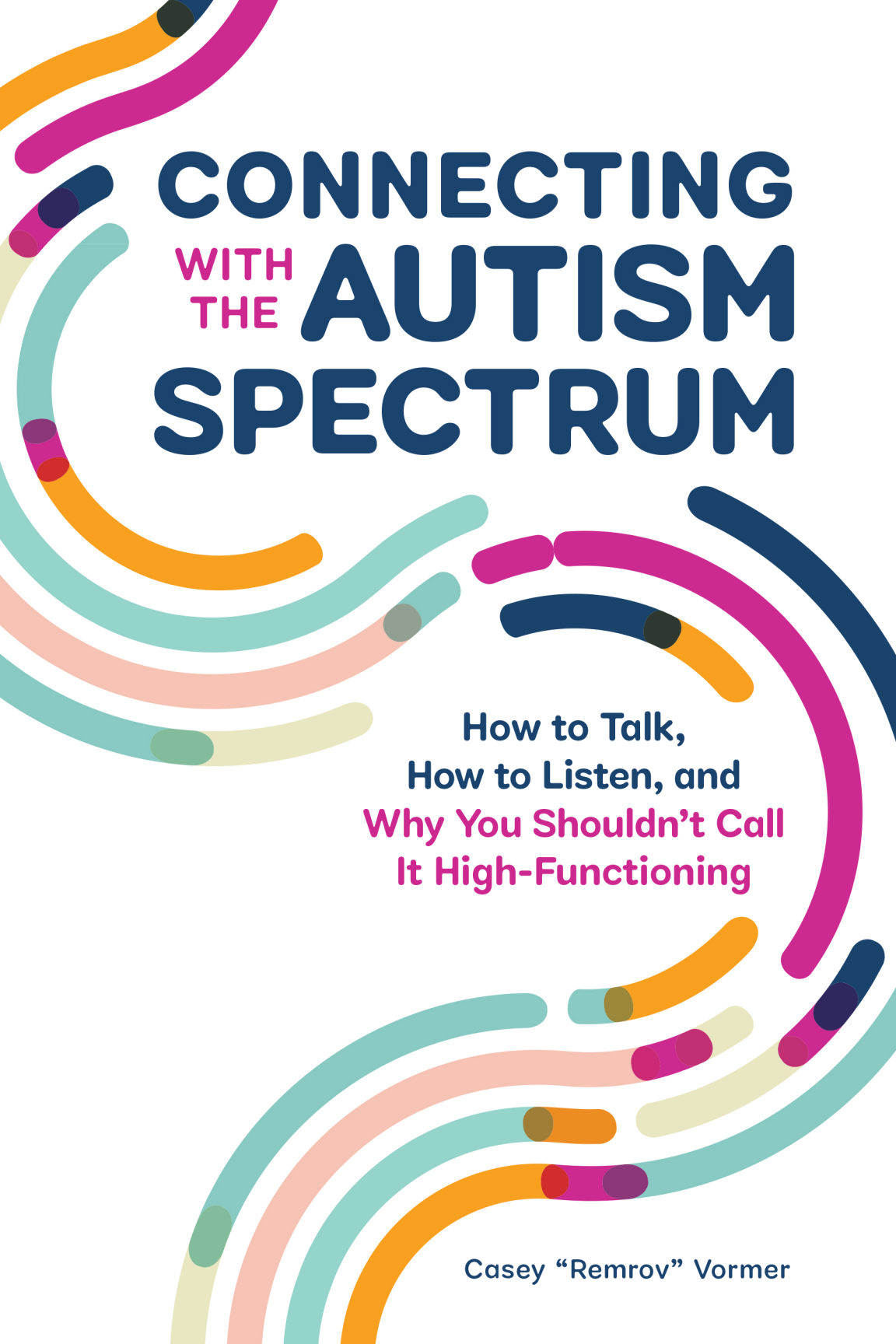




CONNECTING WITH THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

How to Talk,
How to Listen, and
Why You Shouldn't Call
It High-Functioning

Casey "Remrov" Vornier

Connecting with the Autism Spectrum





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Introduction

When I was six years old, I walked onto the schoolyard and saw all the other kids around me playing games, shouting, laughing, and talking. They were all communicating and interacting in a very natural way, but I was extremely overwhelmed by the loud noises and the sight of all those kids. It was frightening, but the thought of becoming an outsider or an easy target frightened me even more. The best thing for me to do, I felt, was to try to fit in and make some friends. But I didn't know how to interact with the other kids. I didn't understand anything about their games, their words, and their actions. While all those other kids seemed very outgoing, my whole world was inside my own mind, and I couldn't find a way out of there. After contemplating what to do for quite a while, I found myself completely confused and overstimulated. I sat down on a bench, in a quiet corner, by myself.

For many years I struggled intensely with different aspects of my life. Social interaction, communicating, making friends, school, and work—everything was about getting myself through every single day without being bullied by kids or shouted at by adults. Every moment was about trying to make sense of the world around me and keep myself standing. I created a whole set of tricks to hide my differences and challenges, not knowing why everything was so difficult for me. After being tested by specialists and psychologists many times, I was finally diagnosed

with classic autism at the ripe age of 21. My struggles were far from over, but I did finally understand why everything “normal” was so difficult for me.

When I look at my past, I realize I went through a lot of situations that no one should have to go through, autistic or not. I wouldn’t have suffered so much if only there had been more understanding about autism. There are many books written about autism by writers who are not on the autism spectrum, and that’s why I decided to write this book: so that people can learn from a person on the inside what it feels like to be autistic. Besides providing background information and facts about autism—like exactly what autism is, when it was first discovered, how it is diagnosed, and the symptoms of autism in children and adults on the autism spectrum—I will “show” you what it’s like and how it feels like to be autistic by sharing my own story. My main goal is to offer insight and advice on how to communicate and interact with autistic people in any situation, whether it’s at school, at work, or in a friendship. It is often said in the autism community that if you know one autistic person, then you know *one* autistic person. Of course, no autistic person is exactly the same as me, but we have many things in common. It is my hope that this book will help steer you in the right direction to improve your interactions with people on the autism spectrum so that everyone feels heard and respected.

How to Use This Book

Even though I will be sharing some basic facts about autism, most of this book comes from my own experiences as an autistic person. The difficulties and challenges I have encountered in my past, and still encounter on a regular basis as an autistic adult, may not be exactly the same as those that someone else with autism faces. Neurotypical (non-autistic) people can use this book as a guide to interacting and socializing with autistic people in many different situations. Neurotypical people need insight on the difficulties and challenges autistic people face so they can recognize the root of communication issues, even if the techniques and solutions might vary. It bears repeating that no autistic person is the same as me, and other autistic people might not share the same story. They might also encounter other challenges and difficulties or express themselves in a different way. So, what holds true for me might not necessarily be true for everyone on the spectrum.

There are many books about autism written by people who are not on the spectrum themselves. Even though they can share very valuable information, they don't know what it really feels like to be autistic. That's why it's important that people learn about autism directly from autistic people.



CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Even though I had many challenges and difficulties as a child, I wasn't diagnosed until I was 21 years old, in 1998. I grew up in the '80s, and autism wasn't as well understood as it is today, especially in the small city of Apeldoorn in the Netherlands where I grew up. Besides that, I had such a clever set of tricks to mask my difficulties that it wasn't all that obvious. Like others on the spectrum, I went undiagnosed for many years of my life. People noticed that I was different, but I was often just thought of as being misbehaved, lazy, selfish, rude, stupid, or awkward. It's hard to express in words how frustrating it is to be seen as something you're just not, especially when you're trying so hard to fit in and be polite.

Decades before I was born, autism was already recognized by researchers like Dr. Leo Kanner and Dr. Hans Asperger, but it was only autistic people with the most severe symptoms who were diagnosed. Nowadays, much more is known, and people who used to go years without understanding the cause of their challenges may be diagnosed at a much earlier age. This chapter is here to give you some basic background info on the medical history of autism and to help you understand how it is diagnosed, some common symptoms, and how those symptoms affect thinking and communication.

What Is Autism?

The word “autism” is typically defined as a neurological and developmental condition characterized by difficulties in social interaction and communication skills. I remember very well when I was diagnosed as a young adult. People saw me as a little kid, and that’s exactly how I felt. I still played with toys and was basically a kid on the inside (still am—more on this later). I struggled with every aspect of my life, and I just didn’t know why things that came so naturally to others were so difficult for me. From the time I was little, I had received many different bogus “diagnoses,” including “trouble coping with parents’ divorce,” but they didn’t seem to fit. To be clear, roughly 40 percent of adults on the spectrum are also diagnosed with a separate anxiety disorder. Symptoms of anxiety are often related to autism, but when a person suffers from anxiety, they don’t necessarily have to be autistic.

After finally receiving my autism diagnosis, the mystery was solved, and things fell into place. I finally understood why everything was such a struggle. There is no universally recognized or agreed-upon way to diagnose autism in adults, so the same methods used to diagnose children are often used with adults. This section will look at which methods are employed to diagnose kids, and what an adult can do if they suspect they’re on the autism spectrum. It will also cover the most common symptoms found in both children and adults, such as difficulties with socializing and communicating, and challenges with sensory issues.

How Is Autism Diagnosed in Children?

Because autism is such a broad spectrum, diagnosing it can be difficult. There is no way to identify it medically, like with a blood test, so doctors have to look at the behavior and development of a child. For children, the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS-2) is used. The ADOS-2 is a standardized tool that is used to assess and diagnose autism spectrum disorders. It includes a number of play-based tasks with toys and puzzles that involve social interaction and communication with the doctor or examiner. Doctors look at how the child interacts with the examiner while doing the tasks, and base part of the assessment on that interaction.

Genetic screening is another method, but it is used less often because it doesn't always give results, and it's not actually intended to be used to diagnose. It can be helpful in understanding more about autism, and it can sometimes give parents information about any possible medical problems they may encounter, such as issues with digestion, sleep, seizures, allergies, and other physical difficulties.

Another essential part of diagnosing a child is parental interviews. Parents are asked to detail as much information as possible about the birth and development of their child, and what makes them think that their child might be autistic. The way a baby interacts with parents, such as not responding to facial cues like smiling or eye contact, can help determine a diagnosis. In older children, school visits can also help establish a diagnosis; specialists will observe if a child cannot carry on a conversation, doesn't respond to their name being called, or can't play "pretend" games. Often it is teachers, doctors, or other trained professionals who first notice signs of autism in children.

How Is Autism Diagnosed in Adults?

Nowadays, we know so much more about autism, and people usually get diagnosed at a much younger age. Symptoms are often recognized a lot sooner and more easily. Just because I wasn't diagnosed until I was 21 years old did not mean that my symptoms and troubles were not severe. It was simply not recognized as autism in those days.

If an adult suspects that they may be on the spectrum, they can start out with a self-assessment. There are websites that provide self-tests designed to screen the possibility of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Even though these are not official diagnostic tools, they can be good ways to find out if you have signs or symptoms related to autism. If the test confirms your suspicions, you can seek out a specialist to learn more.

Adults are mostly diagnosed with a series of in-person interviews, observations, and interactions. They are asked to share everything they experience in daily life and provide details about their difficulties in school and/or work and with social interactions. When I was diagnosed at 21, the psychiatrists used a test like the ADOS-2 as well. They interviewed me and asked me questions about all my experiences, from childhood into adulthood. They also interviewed my mother for details about my birth and development. Knowing the details about an adult's childhood, development, issues at school and work, and social relationships is very important in making an autism diagnosis. Some cognitive or mental health conditions other than ASD can result in similar difficulties, or can be diagnosed alongside it. The more details, the better.

MASKING UNMASKED

Many autistic people know that they are different and that they have a lot of challenges. This can be a painful thing to realize. Just like everybody else, autistic people like to fit in and have friends, so we tend to *mask*—a term used to describe the act of hiding our autism. I noticed that I was very different when I was little, and I started to develop a whole set of tricks in order to hide my difficulties and challenges. I did this to try to avoid being bullied and to prevent teachers from getting angry at me, which happened on a regular basis. I didn't know how to communicate or socialize with other kids, so I literally mimicked them. I memorized every single word and action, without understanding any of it, and then attempted to copy it again in similar situations. This was, for me, the only way to survive and get through the day without negative responses from others.

Nowadays I tend not to mask as much, because being autistic is more accepted and understood. I do still attempt to “please” others, though, by trying to make my autism less obvious, especially when I don't know a person very well yet. For example, I tend to look at people's eyebrows during a conversation. Eye contact is something that is very difficult for many autistic people, but looking away constantly can give the impression you're not interested in what they are saying. When I look at a person's eyebrows, I can avoid looking into their eyes but still make them feel like I'm making eye contact. When I know a person better, I prefer to look at their mouth. This helps me concentrate more and understand their spoken words better, since I can lip-read at the same time.

Masking autism can make it a lot more difficult to diagnose. If you're good at masking, then it looks as if nothing is different about you, so people might not even

see a reason to diagnose in the first place. If a person who's being assessed to get a diagnosis is also masking during the test, the outcome might not be accurate. I'm pretty sure that the masking I did as a child contributed to my late diagnosis as well.

Common Behaviors

Autistic people encounter a variety of difficulties throughout the course of their daily lives. Some experience more challenges with social interaction and communicating, and others more with sensory issues or other obstacles. In order to cope with these challenges, we develop certain behaviors, or mannerisms, which are quite common and recognizable in almost every autistic person. Some of these happen automatically, and others we do on purpose because we know it will help us get through a certain situation. We stim. We have special interests. And we have certain routines. These common behaviors are very important to us, because they make it possible for us to lead our daily lives in a way that is manageable.

Stimming

Stimming is short for self-stimulation. It is another thing we tend to mask, hide, or try to diminish, because to neurotypical people it can look quite strange. But it is a lot healthier for us if we don't suppress it. Twirling hair during a conversation, chewing on a pencil during class, or pacing around while waiting for something are all examples of stimming.

Stimming can be any kind of physical repetitive movement, or it can be the repetition of sounds, words, or

touching objects. Rocking back and forth, hand flapping, repeating words over and over, or touching certain surfaces continuously are all actions autistic people do to comfort themselves. Stimming is still sometimes seen by society, and even some doctors, as negative, but for autistic people, it's simply a natural and useful response, and a tactic to protect ourselves against overstimulation. It helps calm the nervous system and replaces a negative experience or feeling with something positive. Certain kinds of stimming can also be a way to express ourselves when we can't voice our feelings with words. In general, there are five different kinds of stimming.

Auditory Stimming

Auditory stimming involves a person's sense of hearing. The person might hum or repeat certain words. I like to repeat words that I like the sound of over and over. Like the word "bottom." I enjoy over-enunciating it in a British accent. It's something I can do to relieve stress that is not so rude that it gets me in trouble. Auditory stimming can also include things we do to protect ourselves from loud sounds. When a fire engine drives by with a loud siren, you will definitely see me covering my ears. Like many other autistic people, I have extremely sensitive hearing. A loud siren is just unbearable to me. If I don't cover my ears, I can actually feel pain in my teeth and bones.

Tactile Stimming

I'm fascinated by the feeling of velvet. When I'm sitting in a chair that's made of velvet, I can't stop rubbing my hands over it. This is an example of tactile stimming. It includes all stimming that uses the sense of touch, usually rubbing

hands over a certain surface or object. It can also be twirling hair or doing any repetitive movements with hands or fingers.

Visual Stimming

Visual stimming involves a person's sense of sight and can include staring at spinning objects, such as fans, or lights. I have always been fascinated by sparkly lights and shiny objects. My mom used to call me a magpie when I was little, because I gathered everything that was sparkly and shiny. But visual stimming can also include lining up and ordering objects by size or color, for example, or turning the lights on and off repeatedly, which I also used to do because it was fascinating to study the shifting light and shadow.

Vestibular Stimming

Vestibular stimming is all about movement and balance. Standing in line at the supermarket, or anywhere else, makes me very nervous. I always tend to pace around a little or rock from side to side. Or sometimes I twist from left to right. These are some examples of vestibular stimming. It includes all kinds of stimming that uses movement, such as rocking back and forth, pacing, jumping, or spinning around.

Olfactory Stimming

This includes any stimming that uses the sense of smell, such as repeatedly smelling certain objects or putting inedible things in your mouth to "taste" them. Personally, I don't do this. My sense of smell is very sensitive, and it can be too overwhelming.

Special Interests

Many autistic people are very detail oriented and can focus extensively on a certain task or subject. We tend to have special interests on which we can focus for great lengths of time and in such a way that we forget everything around us and are able to shut out the noisy and overwhelming world. Special interests can be anything from *Star Wars* or another movie or TV show to trains, a certain country, astronomy, or medical science. We tend to learn everything about it, and we really know how to nerd out. A good way to start a conversation with an autistic person is to ask them details about their special interest. I've always enjoyed it when people asked me about things I knew a lot about, because it felt like this was the only way I could connect with people. It is important to inquire in a positive way, rather than being judgmental or making fun of our special interest. But be prepared to receive a lot of information about it! A subtle attempt to change the subject might go unnoticed, so if you start to get bored, it is better to politely say that you enjoyed learning about the topic, but you'd like to talk about something else now.

I have always been very interested in medical sciences, especially neurology, as well as biochemistry, quantum physics, and other branches of science. I love to read science books and spend a lot of time learning and watching documentaries. Having these special interests can be very helpful to people on the autism spectrum. In times when we are nervous or anxious, we can fall back on them to help us feel safe. It is especially wonderful if we can transform our special interest into a career, but a special interest can also turn into an obsession. It can become unhealthy

if other important things in life are neglected because of it, like forgetting to eat or drink, or if our work or school starts to suffer.

Routines

The outside world is unpredictable and confusing for many autistic people, and this can cause a great deal of fear and stress. Being out and about or interacting with people always leads to the unexpected. So, having routines in our daily lives and in our home can help reduce the chaos we experience. It makes us feel like we have something under control because we know what to expect.

Routines can include having breakfast, lunch, and dinner at exactly the same time every day, walking the exact same way to school or work every day, or sitting in the same chair or in the same place on the couch every time. I live alone now, so I have everything under control myself. But when I still lived with others, it was very nerve-racking for me if somebody else was suddenly sitting in my place on the couch. As a child, I would get very anxious if my mom was cleaning the house and I came home to everything out of place. I would not be able to relax until everything was back in order.

Of course, it is impossible for everything to always stay the same, and changes have to happen sometimes. The best way to deal with this is for somebody to explain it to us beforehand and to offer something that will limit the sense of chaos and anxiety. For example, watching a movie in a separate room while the living room needs to be cleaned. When it comes to change, communication is key.

DOES AUTISM LOOK DIFFERENT IN GIRLS?

Recent research has indicated that autism may appear differently in girls than in boys. This might also be why there's a higher number of boys diagnosed with autism than girls. Historically, doctors—the vast majority of them men—thought autism to be about four times more common in boys than in girls. Some researchers now believe this is not true.

New studies show that girls may be better at masking than boys, and therefore their autism may not be as obvious. As Maia Szalavitz discusses in a 2016 article from *Scientific American*, girls with autism may be closer to neurotypical males in their social abilities than neurotypical girls or autistic boys. They often go undiagnosed for this reason. They may get diagnosed with anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or eating disorders, which could exist as a separate issue or could be a misdiagnosis of ASD. It may be much harder to diagnose girls and women because the diagnostic criteria that are most commonly used were developed based on the experiences of boys and men.

I've met many other autistic people, and personally I've never noticed much difference in how autism presents in men and women. I've known both those who were diagnosed as adults and those who were misdiagnosed for many years of their lives as well. And I've met men and women who were, just like myself, very good at masking. Even though we're all different individuals, many of us share the same difficulties and often relate to each other's stories.

Dr. Leo Kanner

Leo Kanner was an Austrian American psychiatrist who was the first to define autism. In 1924 he came to the United States, and in 1930 he established the first academic department of child psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University. In 1943, he published an article titled "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact." In this case study, he discussed 11 children who all had a powerful desire to be alone and a strong need for sameness and predictability. Kanner noticed that these kids had an inability to relate to other people and objects, and that this caused issues in socializing and interacting with people. He observed that most of the kids had speech delays and used speech in an unusual and repetitive way, but they seemed to have a great memory and could easily memorize random facts, numbers, or song texts. He diagnosed the children, who would previously have been described as "mentally retarded, schizoid, or idiotic," with early infantile autism instead. He borrowed the word "autism" from Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist, who used this term to describe the inward and self-absorbed aspects of schizophrenia in adults. But Kanner did not believe that autism was an early form of schizophrenia, because the clinical signs were not the same. And unlike schizophrenia, kids seemed to have autism from birth. People with developmental disabilities were still seen as "mentally retarded," but Kanner wrote that it was important to also look at their positive contributions and assets.

Hans Asperger and Asperger's Syndrome

Hans Asperger was an Austrian pediatrician and medical professor. He is mostly known for giving his name to Asperger's syndrome in 1944. He wrote articles and

presented case studies about what he called a “particularly interesting and highly recognizable child.” He wrote all his articles in German, so his work was overlooked for decades by English-language scholars. It was only after his death that his work had a more global impact.

As a child, Asperger himself was very solitary and found it difficult to make friends. This helped him empathize with the children he studied and wrote about. He wrote that many of the kids with “autism psychopathy” had exceptional gifts but were often clumsy and lacking in nonverbal communication skills and understanding of others’ feelings. Asperger observed that these children had trouble maintaining direct eye contact or understanding facial expressions, and were extremely sensitive to touch, taste, and/or sound. However, he recognized that it was actually the autistic characteristics of a child that could help them to thrive and succeed in their education and careers. Autism spared them from being distracted by things that distracted non-autistics and helped them focus intensively on their studies and tasks. In contrast to Leo Kanner, Asperger believed that autism could be present in either highly intelligent children or in children who were considered “mentally retarded.” In 1981, Lorna Wing, a British psychiatrist, introduced the name Asperger’s syndrome after taking interest in Asperger’s research. In 1991 his work was translated into English and started to gain more notice. This eventually led to Asperger’s syndrome being recognized as its own separate condition.

WHY ASPERGER'S IS OFF THE SPECTRUM

A reexamination of Nazi-era documents in the late 20th century revealed that Hans Asperger, while not officially a member of the Nazi Party, participated in the Third Reich's euthanasia program. The goal of this program was to create a "pure" society by euthanizing those who were seen as a "burden." Asperger sent children with disabilities to the Am Spiegelgrund in Vienna, where many were euthanized between 1940 and 1945. Asperger was rewarded by the Nazis for his loyalty and was provided with greater career opportunities.

These ties have caused a lot of controversy, debate, and anger among people who have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and their families and advocates. There has been a lot of discussion and concern about whether Dr. Asperger's name should be linked to this condition. Even though this was a very painful lesson to learn from history, it isn't the reason Asperger's is no longer an official diagnosis. When the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-5) was being prepared in 2011, there was not enough evidence to support the distinction between autism, Asperger's syndrome, and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified). The scientific community decided to note a spectrum with various levels of ability instead of these separate diagnoses. Thus, changing science, along with a changed view of history, removed Asperger's name from the autism spectrum.

Both Ends of the Spectrum

Anybody who has ever read about autism or looked it up on the internet has probably come across the terms “high functioning” and “low functioning.” These terms are used to describe an autistic person’s severity of symptoms and predict the ways it will affect their capability to lead what is considered a normal life. Many autism advocates, including myself, think these terms are not accurate and feel that we should reconsider them. The terms are derived from an outsider’s point of view and are based on assumptions about someone’s capabilities, rather than the autistic person’s actual experiences of reality. These terms can be very misleading and can underestimate or overestimate what an autistic person is actually capable of and what their challenges are. However, because they are used so frequently, it can be helpful to clarify their meaning. So, what are people talking about when they talk about “high” and “low” functioning?

High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder

“High-functioning autism” is not an official medical term or diagnosis. It’s a label that is often used when people talk about an autistic person who has troubles with communication and social interaction but doesn’t have an intellectual disability. Some “high-functioning” autistic people do very well with school and work, while others find it impossible to finish an education or to hold down a job. They might need strict routines, but they can handle basic life skills and possibly live independently. The problem is that the term “high functioning” only describes how an autistic person is seen by other people. Many autistic people are very good at hiding their autistic traits in public. People often don’t see

their real struggles or their meltdowns. For example, people see that I can have a normal conversation with them, but what they don't see is that having a conversation can take so much out of me that it wipes me out for the rest of the day. The term dismisses our struggles and expects us to have certain abilities that we might not have at all. People call me "high functioning" very often, but if there were a camera in my apartment and they could observe me the whole day, they might reconsider that term.

Low-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder

"Low-functioning autism" is considered a more severe kind of autism. People with so-called low-functioning autism are described as having an intellectual disability paired with more severe symptoms, such as extremely impaired communication and social skills, and very inflexible and repetitive behavior. This term can also be inaccurate and harmful to autistic people. It can reduce the expectations for a person who might actually be able to achieve a lot. For instance, people tend to think that a nonverbal autistic person is "low functioning" and not capable of many things. But this person might have fewer struggles with certain aspects of life than an autistic person who's considered "high functioning." A person who is nonverbal might be able to hold down a job, while a person who's considered "high functioning" cannot.

When I was younger, I wasn't able to have conversations. I struggled a lot with language and many other aspects of my life. I got through every day by literally mimicking other people. It was assumed I had very low intelligence. It turns out that I'm actually highly intelligent, and even though it's not easy, I am now able to have conversations. I live independently and manage my own life. I believe it is

important to look at every autistic person individually and recognize their obstacles—but more importantly, we should acknowledge their skills and avoid labeling them with “high functioning” or “low functioning” altogether.

Thinking on the Spectrum

Personally, I’ve always seen autism as a difference rather than a disorder. Of course, it comes with obstacles, but there are many positive things about it as well. Autistic brains are wired differently, so how we think and process information is different, too. The neurotypical process of thinking enables non-autistics to do things autistic people often find challenging, but we are often able to excel in thought processes that neurotypical people find challenging. There are essentially four distinct ways people on the autism spectrum process thoughts.

Bottom-Up Thinking

Autistic people are often detail oriented, and most of us see the details before the concept. This is called “bottom-up” thinking. Neurotypical people are usually “concept-before-the-details” thinkers. For example, I recognize people by the details of their appearance. But if one of those details is suddenly different, like someone grows a beard or gets a drastic haircut, I might not even recognize that person. In daily life we are bombarded with tiny details of sensory input that often go unnoticed by neurotypical people. This can be very overwhelming, but the good thing about it is that we can use all these tiny little details to create new concepts and ideas.

Associative Thinking

Many autistic people are associative thinkers, while neurotypical people are often linear thinkers. Linear thinking is step-by-step thinking. It can lead to not seeing the relationships between things, making them easier to label, categorize, and judge. Associative thinkers see relations and connections everywhere and tend not to categorize things. When I hear or read a certain word, I suddenly see a lot of “pictures” in my mind that have something to do with that word. This happens in quite an unstructured and even chaotic way. It’s a complicated spiderweb of memories, pictures, and thoughts.

Analytical Thinking

When I make a decision, I often do so by considering facts and logic rather than emotions. Like many other autistic people, I find it very difficult to recognize my own emotions or what my “gut” is saying. When making choices, neurotypical people can be very sensitive about how a question or choice is presented or framed. Most people prefer an outcome that is presented in a positive light as opposed to a negative light, even if the two choices are identical. Autistic people have a decreased susceptibility to this “framing effect,” because they tend to make their choices based on logic rather than emotions or feelings.

Lateral Thinking

When I want to create something or solve a problem in my apartment and I go into a hardware store to find resources, I never ask for help. I know that if I look through the store myself, I will find many objects and tools that are actually meant for something else but that I can use to solve my

issue. Like many other autistic people, I'm a good "out of the box" or "lateral" thinker. Lateral thinking is closely related to our associative way of thinking. It makes us able to solve problems from an indirect and creative approach, and with an unobvious way of reasoning. A 2009 study published in *Human Brain Mapping* and led by researchers from Harvard University and the University of Montreal showed that autistic people are up to 40 percent faster at problem-solving because they tend to have a more highly developed perception than neurotypical people. I once bought a brain-teaser puzzle called "the Brain." The store clerks told me to contact them when I had solved it because nobody had solved it before. When I was back home, I played with it for 20 minutes and solved it. The solution was very straightforward to me. I called the store clerks and they couldn't believe that I solved it already. More recently I bought another supposedly intellectually challenging puzzle, which I solved in two minutes. It was a puzzle advertised to be on the most difficult, "grueling" level. The only thing grueling about it, in my opinion, was that I was looking forward to a lot more time to have fun with it than just two minutes!

Temple Grandin's Three Types of Thinkers

Anyone who's ever searched for information on the internet about autism has probably read about Temple Grandin. Dr. Temple Grandin is an American professor who specializes in animal science. She is also an autism advocate and one of the first autistic people who used her own experiences to teach the world about autism. She has written acclaimed books and journal articles about autism and gives presentations all over the world. There's a beautiful HBO

biopic titled *Temple Grandin*, starring Claire Danes. Watching this movie helped me understand more about myself, and it made my mother cry.

Dr. Grandin describes autism as a behavioral profile with strengths and weaknesses. According to her, the way autistic people think can be divided into three categories: visual thinkers, mathematical thinkers, and verbal thinkers. While most people don't fall solely into one category, they tend to lean toward one of these three.

Visual

Many autistic people are visual thinkers, meaning they think in pictures. This is the category of thinking I fall into. When I was still in school and teachers explained things to me in words, I couldn't understand them. I needed to see how to do something to be able to process the information. It was nearly impossible for me to process words, or to translate my own thoughts into words. Visual thinkers might also have a photographic memory. My mind takes a picture of things I see, and the pictures stay there forever in my "archive."

Mathematical/Musical

Mathematical/musical thinkers are pattern thinkers. They think in patterns and they notice patterns in numbers and music. They are often great composers, computer programmers, or chess players. One good example is Daniel Tammet, who wrote the book *Born on a Blue Day*, in which he describes a lot about the way he thinks and sees the world. Another is Alan Turing, who cracked the German Enigma code in World War II.

Verbal

Verbal thinkers tend to be very good at learning languages and are interested in words and literature. They often have an extensive knowledge and memory of movies, history, or geography, and they enjoy making lists about facts in alphabetical order. I once met an autistic man who had learned everything there was to know about Russia. In the past, I liked to learn different languages, and I was pretty good at memorizing words. I learned the Russian alphabet in less than 20 minutes, but this was mostly due to my photographic memory.



CHAPTER TWO

NEURODIVERSITY, ABLEISM, AND SOCIETY

Even though I'm 42 years old now, I still feel like a kid. On one hand this is a positive thing, as I will never lose the childlike view I have of the world and I easily get very enthusiastic about small things in life. It's worth reiterating that this is my individual experience. Although some adults on the spectrum feel like they possess a beginner's mind that experiences a constant sense of novelty in the world, others may have spent their childhoods feeling like adults stuck in a place that constantly denied their right to self-determination. Neurotypical people should not assume, based on my experience and perspective, that all autistic adults are childlike. In fact, this can be a very harmful stereotype for adults on the spectrum.

I sometimes feel like I have to play a role that doesn't fit me and get stressed by the fact that I can't meet certain social expectations people have for an adult. For autistic kids, transitioning into adulthood can come with many hardships. These are compounded by the biases we face, especially in the workplace. This chapter will examine some of these hardships, common biases that affect neurodiverse people, and the advocacy work being done. It will help you understand why a book like this is important, and what kind of difference it can make for you to recognize and work to resolve these issues in your own life.

A Difficult Transition

When I was in the second year of middle school, it was the first time we had to start thinking seriously about what kind of work we wanted to do. Starting in the third year, we were to be divided into different sections, depending on what kind of work we chose. I found this situation extremely stressful. It was impossible for me to decide to work in either healthcare, the metal industry, electronics, administration, or sales. Any job seemed just too frightening. Besides that, I was too busy trying to survive the present to even attempt to think about my future. With all the issues I had communicating and socializing, I couldn't imagine myself working anywhere.

In the '80s and '90s, when I grew up, there was a lot of attention and resources devoted to schools and education, but not as much to job training. Nowadays it isn't much different. There's a huge gap between being in school, where you can to some extent rely on help from a teacher, and being in a workplace, where you are expected to be able to do your job independently.

The sad fact is that many autistic adults do not have a job or have never worked for pay. Many autistic people do volunteer work while living on disability payments because they encounter too many issues at a workplace. Even though volunteer work also comes with responsibilities, there's less pressure regarding expectations and deadlines. Of course, a volunteer job can be good if an autistic person is happy and satisfied with it, but it's not uncommon for autistic people with great intellectual skills to end up doing volunteer work that's way below their potential. This can eventually lead to frustration and even depression. The sad truth is that no matter how skilled or intelligent we are,

autistic people are more likely to end up depending on other people or on a public system for care.

Why It's Complicated

While many autistic people face great challenges as children, things become even harder once they reach adulthood. Suddenly, society expects you to be “an adult” and behave and function as such. It is such a shame that exactly at the point in their lives when they need it the most, the support they receive from organizations and resources often stops.

Because I was diagnosed at 21, I never received any support as a child. After I received my diagnosis, my mother tried to find all kinds of resources, but she soon realized that I was too old for much of anything. I remember having an intake conversation at the Leo Kanner House in Oosterbeek, the Netherlands; it is a clinic where autistic people can get training in socializing and communication as well as independent living skills. At the end of the conversation with the two psychologists, one of them said that, unfortunately, I was too old to receive services because they only took in people between the ages of 12 and 21, and I was almost 22. I remember my mom in tears, telling them how frustrating it was that after years and years of difficulties and misdiagnoses, we finally received the correct diagnosis, and now her son was too old to receive any help. Eventually, the doctors realized how frustrating and unfair this was and took me in, but the fact remains that globally, many organizations and resources are unwilling or unable to provide support for autistic people older than 18.

Many autistic people are capable of doing most things independently, some more than others. But almost all of us

need help with certain tasks in our daily lives. We tend to be highly skilled in a specific area but lacking in others. Some of us can live alone, while others have great trouble developing daily living skills like cooking or doing household chores. A person can be an amazingly talented software programmer but might need help using public transportation to get to work. Public transportation is something many autistic people struggle with. On a bus, train, or subway, we encounter all of our challenges at once—social and communication difficulties plus the bombardment of all kinds of sensory input all at the same time.

The more independent we become, the more we have to self-advocate. In order to succeed at work, we have to be able to explain when and why we need certain accommodations. Understanding yourself, your limitations, and your difficulties is one thing; explaining them to others requires a whole different set of skills. For many autistic people, it is crucial to keep getting support with certain tasks in order to live independently, and it can be frustrating when there is nothing available.

Ableism

Every autistic person, or anyone with any disability, has likely encountered ableism or will at some point in their lives. Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities. It is the harboring of beliefs that devalue and limit the potential of people with physical, intellectual, or mental disorders and disabilities. For instance, people might believe that autistic people will never be an asset to society, and that they need to be “fixed” or “cured.” Often people who are ableist don’t have bad intentions—they are simply

misinformed. They may have grown up believing that having a disability is “wrong.”

My Experience with Ableism

Years ago, I entered a histopathology (the study of changes in tissues caused by disease) education program. I did extremely well, got straight As, and was at the top of my class. The third year was an internship year, and I was assigned to a laboratory in a small hospital. Everyone there was aware of my autism. While some coworkers were nice, others shunned and bullied me and told me repeatedly that I had a “serious defect.” Still, I was determined to stay positive and make my internship a success. I did all my tasks flawlessly and with great perfection, I was told. But after three months, I was still being assigned only the simplest tasks. I asked the head of the lab about this, as it was crucial for my education to learn the more advanced tasks. She said it was against the hospital’s policy for third-year interns to perform those tasks, but I had seen other students doing them. They also refused to provide me with reasonable accommodations, like wearing earplugs to cancel out the noises of the machines, talking, and the loud radio. They said it was against hospital policy as well.

Eventually they fired me. According to them, I was a very slow learner and didn’t do my tasks properly, but that wasn’t true. They lied to all my coworkers and said that it was my own decision to quit. During the last meeting, the head of the lab told me that before I worked there, an autistic coworker had made a lot of crucial mistakes, so that’s why they had been afraid to let me do the more advanced tasks. The reason they had given me before was a lie. My internship fell through, and with it my whole education,

since passing the internship year was necessary to proceed. At that time, I didn't even know what my rights were and if what they were doing was illegal or not. Even though many countries have legal protections against this kind of discrimination, unfortunately it still happens, so it is important to learn what ableism is and how to prevent it.

Avoiding Stereotypes

Once I read a response from a viewer of my autism YouTube videos who said that I'm not autistic because if I was, I wouldn't be able to realize it. This is an example of a common stereotype about autism. An even more common misconception is that autistic people don't have feelings or emotions, or that all autistic people are like Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rain Man*. The worst misconception is that autism is a disease that needs to be cured.

When I hear people say something like this, I always try to explain to them in a polite way that it's not true. I find this difficult, though, because it often turns into a heated discussion, and I'm unable to change their opinion. Even though there are many people who are open to learning from an autistic person, others tend to get agitated and are not willing to change their mind. I find it important to pick my battles, so once I realize they are not open to learning, I usually bow out before it turns into an argument. I'm not sure if we will ever be able to avoid stereotypes completely. I think people will always feel the need to categorize and put people in boxes, and with that comes stereotypes. I do think that we can minimize this by educating ourselves and others, listening, and letting autistic people speak more instead of always letting neurotypical people speak for them.

Am I Biased?

It is not always easy to tell if you are biased. Many people have biases and don't even realize it. It can be because of the way they grew up or what they learned from the media. Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to help identify your ableist biases:

- ▶ Do you feel that people with disabilities need to be cured?
- ▶ Do you think that all disabled people have intellectual challenges?
- ▶ Do you think that people with disabilities can't be full members of society?
- ▶ Do you feel pity for people with disabilities?
- ▶ Do you think that all disabilities are visible?
- ▶ Do you think that all people with disabilities rely on other people their whole lives?
- ▶ Do you believe that a person's disability is the most important thing about them?

If you found out that you have an ableist bias, it's important to know that this is most likely not your own fault. The media is full of stereotypes and misconceptions about all kinds of disabilities. The best way to educate yourself is to learn from people with disabilities themselves. You can follow blogs or YouTube videos made by people with all kinds of disabilities to learn about their daily lives and experiences. They often share the ableist biases they encounter and explain how they would like to be seen and treated instead.

WHAT IS NEUROTYPICAL?

Neurotypical, a word that spell-check has yet to recognize as of this typing, means not having an autism diagnosis or any other neurological or developmental difference. It is a new term used by autistic people, therapists, and others in the autism community to describe non-autistics, or people who respond and behave in a way that's considered "normal." Neurotypical people don't have the challenges with social interactions or communication that autistic people do. Odds are most of you reading this are neurotypical.

Using terms like "neurotypical" and "neurodiversity" is a way to recognize autism as a difference, rather than a disorder that needs to be cured or fixed. The term "neurodiversity" is used to denote a positive attitude toward learning and thinking differences. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism can be viewed as differences rather than deficits in a human brain. Many autistic people, myself included, believe that our brains are wired to process information in a unique way.

This is not necessarily a negative thing. On the contrary, our different way of processing information makes us capable of excelling at certain things neurotypical people find difficult. We might have challenges with communicating and interacting, but, in turn, we may excel at focusing intensely on a problem, performing music, or acing a math test. Looking at any learning and thinking difference as simply a variation of the human brain is very important for children who have ADHD, autism, or any learning or thinking difference. Rather than growing up believing there's something wrong with them, which can have a negative effect on their self-esteem and motivation, they can focus on their strengths and discover the things at which they excel.

Neurodiversity Movement

The neurodiversity movement is a social justice movement that pursues equality and respect for neurodivergent people. There are individuals and groups all over the world who believe that we should view all brain differences as normal, rather than seeing them as disorders. I support this way of thinking. Even though I encounter difficulties in certain aspects of my life, I have many strengths as well, and if there was ever a pill to “cure” autism, I wouldn’t take it. Being autistic is an important part of who I am. Every person, autistic or not, can be a valuable asset to society. Unfortunately, there are also criticisms of the concept of neurodiversity, and controversial therapies like applied behavior analysis (ABA) that work against the goals of the neurodiversity movement.

Neurodiversity isn’t simply about making things more accessible in the classroom or workplace, though. Adults and children on the autism spectrum are at greater risk for violence as well. Tragically, autistic children are more likely to be abused or even murdered by their caretakers, and adults are more likely to be killed or injured in interactions with law enforcement (especially true for persons of color). A greater understanding of neurodiverse behavior in the world at large would surely save lives.

Neurotypical Assumptions

I always find it very difficult to make eye contact, and people sometimes get angry at me for looking away. They think I’m not interested in what they are saying or that I am just being rude. This is an example of a neurotypical assumption. When I look at someone, I see so many details in a person’s face that it’s just too much to process along with the words

that are being spoken. I am usually very interested in what others are saying, but in order to be able to follow their story, I have to look away, or else I'll be distracted by all the little details I see.

Another assumption is to think that when someone doesn't speak much, or at all, that means they're stupid. Neurotypical people also often assume that we are crazy when we are stimming, when actually, stimming is a natural and necessary way for us to calm down in a stressful situation. During breaks at the histopathology internship lab, I used to stim a lot. I would play with plastic cups and tear them into tiny pieces. Those breaks were such a stressful situation for me that it helped me to fidget with something. Unfortunately, my stimming in public resulted in cruel abuse from coworkers who went on and on about my "defect."

Most of these assumptions are based on ignorance and can be solved with a little more awareness and understanding. But this requires people to be open to learning, and some are just not. Before I left the histopathology lab, I gave everybody two pages of writing in which I explained more about autism. Some read it and were happy that I did it, but most didn't take the time to read it at all. Before I even started working there, they had already made up their minds.

The Problem with ABA

ABA, or applied behavior analysis, is a therapy, supposedly based on the science of learning and behavior, that was once considered a "treatment" for autistic people. Nowadays many autistic people, as well as neurotypical people, are adamantly against ABA, noting that autism shouldn't be "treated" in the first place. Instead of helping autistic people,

treatments like ABA can harm them greatly. It also shouldn't be confused with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which is completely different and can be a valuable tool for dealing with anxiety and affective disorders that may exist in combination with an autism spectrum diagnosis.

The goal of ABA is to change undesirable behaviors of an autistic person by reinforcing desired behaviors, often considered "normal" behaviors. If a person shows a valued behavior, a reward is given, but the reward is withheld if a person responds with an unwanted behavior. Because autistic people respond in a manner that helps them cope, this kind of therapy can be harmful—and so is withholding rewards. For example, in ABA, a toy an autistic child needs to stay calm may be withheld until they display the desired behavior. This therapy is more designed to make autistic children look "normal," but it just suppresses their natural responses.

The backlash against ABA started when Michelle Dawson, an autism researcher who is herself autistic, published her paper *The Misbehaviour of Behaviourists*. She criticized ABA as being an incredibly harmful treatment that focuses on normalizing autistic people. Normalizing is a dubious concept at best, and it comes at the expense of useful behaviors like stimming. Dawson wrote that "most scientists tend to focus on determining how autistic brains are broken, while they should be focusing on determining how an autistic brain works instead." Her paper caused an academic battle between people who agreed with her and others who attacked her ideas. Since then, many autistic children and adults have spoken out about their experiences with ABA, stating that the treatments were painful, abusive, and traumatic. Dawson's work has contributed greatly to

how autism is perceived. Because of her, more people now understand that autistic people deserve the same rights as everyone else.

Criticisms of the Neurodiversity Movement

The neurodiversity movement is promoted by many people, but there is also considerable criticism against it. Some say that the movement has good intentions, but that it disregards and ignores those who struggle with the most severe symptoms of autism. Among the people who are against it are parents of children with severe autism. They believe that the movement tries to silence the voices of more severely autistic people who can't speak for themselves. They also believe the neurodiversity movement has skewed research to focus more on autistic people who are considered "high functioning," while those who are "low functioning" (again—problematic terms) are overlooked. They do not feel that autism should be celebrated to the degree that the neurodiversity movement suggests.

I personally don't think it is necessary to celebrate autism itself. What I do think, and how I personally see the idea of neurodiversity, is that we should look at every person as an individual and focus on discovering their own strengths and weaknesses. It's important that our strengths are recognized. We can build on those strengths and work on the weaknesses. I don't go around celebrating my meltdowns and my struggles that are caused by being autistic in a society that wasn't designed for those who think like me, but I do celebrate my strengths and skills.

Autism Advocacy

The biggest nonprofit autism organization is Autism Speaks. There is a lot of controversy surrounding this organization, because it was founded on the goal of preventing and curing autism rather than accepting autism and creating an inclusive society. Like many other people, I strongly disagree with the purpose it was founded on, but I don't believe that everybody working for Autism Speaks has that goal in mind. I've had quite a few very positive experiences co-presenting at schools with a person from Autism Speaks Canada in Montreal. In the last few years, the organization has changed its mission statement and now claims to represent "the infinite diversity of perspectives and experiences of people with autism." They've also started hiring autistic people. Many people feel that these changes are too late, since for many years they promoted stigma and misunderstanding. Personally, I believe it's better late than never.

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) is an organization run by and for autistic people. Their slogan is "Nothing About Us Without Us." They advocate for the rights of autistic people so that their voices are heard.

The Organization for Autism Research is a popular autism charity because they are careful with how they use funds. They support research that examines the challenges autistic children and adults and their families face. One of their goals is to ensure that autistic adults reach their potential, and they have programs like scholarships for autistic adults and resources for autistic self-advocates. They also have an online portal called "Hire Autism" for employers who are interested in hiring autistic adults.

The Autism Society of America is an organization that offers support, insight, and advocacy. Their goal is to improve the lives of autistic kids and adults. They have an

online database where parents and caregivers can find a lot of information about therapists, schools, healthcare providers, and other resources.

Autism Canada is another nonprofit organization that is respectful and supportive of autistic people. Their mission statement is "to increase the quality of life and independence for persons on the spectrum."



CHAPTER THREE

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

For most autistic people, communicating is one of the most challenging aspects of life. Many of us are picture thinkers, so words don't come naturally. We can also take language very literally, so sarcasm and idioms are often confusing. Add in trouble with interpreting facial cues and other nonverbal communication, and you'll begin to understand the scope of our communication challenges.

I've always had a lot of trouble with communication. For many years, well into my teens, it felt like I was locked up inside my own head. I couldn't translate my thoughts, which were pictures, into words. When I did speak, I mostly repeated what I had heard other people saying, using sentences I often didn't even understand. The things I echoed sometimes didn't have much to do with the topic at hand, and this left people either confused or laughing at me.

Adults on the autism spectrum often encounter a lot of misunderstandings during conversations because we don't always understand what people mean. This is not just because of the words; a huge part of communication is nonverbal. And nonverbal communication can be complicated to understand.

Nonverbal Communication

Social communication is a lot more than just the words that are spoken. People often express their thoughts and feelings through nonverbal communication, such as body language and facial expressions. Because cues like these are abstract, it is difficult for people on the autism spectrum to pick up on them and understand what they mean. It's also hard for neurotypical people to "turn off" nonverbal cues, so good communication requires extra effort from both parties.

Body Language

People often use their body to express their feelings and opinions. Body language is not straightforward, and it varies from person to person. A gesture can have different meanings depending on the situation. Body language is anything but concrete, so I, and many other autistic people, find it extremely difficult to understand. Not long ago I had a meeting with a man about a project. When I walked in, he reached out his hand, and I shook it. But instead of reaching out his hand for me to shake, he was actually pointing to a chair and welcoming me to sit down. This is a misunderstanding that can happen to many people, but it happens more often to autistic people. When communicating with an autistic person, it's best to try to limit the use of body language and gestures, or at least remember that they will probably go unnoticed or be misunderstood.

Facial Cues

Science has shown that facial cues are hardwired to our brains; even infants understand (and use) smiles and frowns to communicate. This likely began as a survival tool, a way for humans to communicate without spoken words

when danger was near. These subtle changes to our eyes, mouths, and cheeks were meant to make communication easier, but for people on the autism spectrum, they represent a significant challenge.

After receiving my autism diagnosis, I attended a social skills training where they showed us pictures of a woman's face with different facial expressions. Even though the emotion was written under each photo, I couldn't put the details together to create an understanding of that facial expression. The details were so different to me that I hardly even noticed it was the same person in each photo. In addition, everybody's facial expressions are different, so even if I recognize, for example, my mother's confused facial expression, somebody else's confused facial expression is totally different. This inability to decipher facial cues is common among those on the autism spectrum. When an autistic person is not responding to you, try to determine if you were using facial expressions to express what you meant to say. If you were, then say what you wanted to convey using clear and direct words instead.

Prosody

When most people talk, they vary their pitch, tempo, volume, or intonation, depending on what they are saying. This is called prosody. Many autistic people have difficulties understanding and using prosody. Not understanding prosody can cause confusion since the meaning of a word or sentence can change depending on how a person says it. Not using prosody can cause problems as well. When I was a child, I used to speak in a monotone, like a robot. After speech therapy I did get better at it, but I still have difficulties

controlling my voice, and often sentences come out with a different feeling than what I meant. It's important not to judge an autistic person for speaking with a different tone of voice than what you expect. It is better to ask questions to clarify any confusions or misunderstandings rather than making assumptions.

Concrete Thinking

Concrete thinking is another common characteristic of many (but not all) autistic people. It is a kind of thinking that is literal and is based on facts, not abstractions. It often causes problems when neurotypical people use things like metaphors in their speech because we're unable to discern at first that what's being discussed isn't literally real. Again, this isn't true of all people on the spectrum, but it's worth thinking about if you're trying to improve your communication style. Try to develop an ear for abstract speech so you'll know how to avoid it if you need to. You'll soon realize that abstract language is everywhere.

I once saw a TV newscaster say something like "the New Year will start with a great wind at our back." I was quite amazed by this, and told a colleague they already knew what kind of weather it would be in the New Year. My colleague was very confused, so I told him what I heard on the news. He started laughing and explained that it was meant to be taken metaphorically. These types of misunderstandings are common for autistic people because of our tendency toward concrete thinking, so it's helpful if neurotypical people avoid the following types of abstract language.

Homophones

There are many words that sound the same but have different meanings, like cereal/serial and right/write. This can be confusing. For me, a sentence is like a puzzle, and the words are the puzzle pieces. After hearing all the words, I have to put it together into a picture that is meaningful to me. It might sound strange to you, but this is how I process information. So, when words sound the same but mean different things, it can be challenging for me to get the picture right. If you're communicating with someone on the spectrum and they seem confused, you might consider whether you have used any homophones and offer some clarification as needed.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is like other kinds of prosody in that it can be hard for someone on the autism spectrum to decipher meaning based on tone. I understand obvious sarcasm, like when it's raining really hard and somebody says, "The weather is really wonderful out there," but subtle sarcasm is harder for me. You can often recognize sarcasm by the tone of somebody's voice, but those of us with autism often find it very difficult to pick up. Avoid using sarcasm if you can, and be patient about misunderstandings when you do.

Nonspecific Instructions

After a while. A little later. Sometimes. Every now and then. A little bit. Some of this. These are all examples of nonspecific language. They actually say absolutely nothing and can cause a lot of confusion for autistic people. It leaves us not knowing what to do or what to expect, because it's too

abstract. Especially at school or a workplace, it is important to get specific instructions. Try saying “five minutes” instead of “shortly,” or “I’ll contact you whenever I have questions” instead of “I’ll send an email every now and then to see how it’s going.”

Inferences

Making inferences and drawing the correct conclusions are important parts of socializing, but like other abstractions, this can be difficult for autistic people. An example of making an inference is when we look outside and see people wearing shorts and T-shirts. We infer that it must be warm outside. It’s tricky to learn this skill as every situation and person is different. It’s not something you can memorize. But I can’t “read between the lines” because there are several aspects to making inferences, like understanding body language and facial expressions, which are huge challenges by themselves.

Echolalia

Echolalia is repeating words or sounds from people, movies, TV shows, or even books. This is very common in autistic people, and I used to do this a lot when I was younger. It’s not like quoting something memorable. It’s more like using a line of dialogue out of context to try to fit your current conversation. I wasn’t good at expressing myself with words when I was young, so I memorized other people’s words and used them in the similar situations, often without knowing what they really meant. Echolalia is a common masking technique used to hide difficulties with communication, but

it doesn't result in real communication because the person saying it has attached no real meaning to the words.

Irregular Speech

Like many other autistic people, irregular speech can be an issue for me. Irregular speech can include talking with an uncontrolled volume, using a strange-sounding tone of voice, or repeating the same words over and over. Finding the correct words is a challenge by itself, and finding and using the correct tone of voice then adds to the challenge. Conversations can totally drain me, and the longer they continue, the more monotone my voice becomes and the more effort it takes to come up with words. I often start to repeat the same words, like responding with "yes" or "yeah" after every sentence. Irregular speech can read like disinterest or rudeness to a neurotypical person, so it's important to attempt to recognize it, and not to take offense if you encounter it.

Sensory Issues

Many autistic people have sensory issues related to obvious things like sights, sounds, and smells, but issues can also develop around taste or balance. We don't have a filter to shut out sensory input that isn't important, so all sounds, sights, smells, touches, and other sensory inputs feel "loud" and often occur all at once. This sensory overload can be extremely overwhelming. When I was little, my mom thought I was deaf because I often didn't respond when she called me. But a hearing test showed that my hearing was fine; in fact, my hearing was above average. I can

hear sounds of high and low frequencies that most people can't hear. My hearing is so sensitive that many sounds are painful for me, and I get overstimulated very easily. Being bombarded with all kinds of sensory input makes it difficult to focus on a conversation. It's almost impossible to filter out a person's voice in a noisy place, and it makes me incapable of translating my own thoughts into words as well. Too much sensory input can totally exhaust me to the extent that I lose my capability to communicate altogether.

Visual

Like many other autistic people, I'm painfully sensitive to lighting, color, and the sight of people and crowds. Autistic people tend to see the world in lots of tiny little details, and all those details can become overwhelming in certain situations. This sensory issue can manifest in the workplace or in classrooms when fluorescent lighting becomes too intense and distracting, or in large crowds. Installing softer lighting options or allowing people to use lamps can provide some relief. Many autistic people also avoid large crowds.

Auditory

Many autistic people have such sensitive hearing that they hear things others often don't, especially in busy or loud environments. For example, when I'm on the bus, I don't hear just one sound coming from the engine, but about 10 different sounds in both high and low frequencies. I also hear the wind outside, people talking, coughing, shuffling their feet, and even breathing. Noise-canceling headphones can be a huge help for autistic people with auditory sensory issues, because they eliminate the overwhelming range of sounds in public spaces.

Tactile

Wearing a woolen sweater can feel very scratchy and irritating for anybody, but a shirt that feels soft for neurotypical people can feel like barbed wire to autistic people. The touch from other people, or wearing certain clothes, can actually be painful. The seams in socks can totally strip the skin off my toes. When a hairdresser rubs my hair against the direction it's growing, it feels like pins and needles. A combination of different kinds of sensory input can often cause tremendous discomfort. For example, I can't stand to be touched while I'm eating. Even something as simple as a light back rub will make me feel extremely uncomfortable.

Olfactory

Like with other sensory issues, problems with smells arise when there is too much going on at once. For instance, when I'm walking around in a mall, I often get overwhelmed by the strong smells of perfume, food, and cleansers. I don't mind the smell of most food, thankfully, but the chemical smells of cleansers and perfumes can give me the feeling that I'm going to pass out. This obviously makes it hard for me to have a conversation with someone while in that environment!

Gustatory

Many autistic people are picky eaters. When I was little, I had a lot of trouble with eating. The strong taste of the food in combination with the overwhelming smells made it feel somehow wrong. In contrast to the extreme aversion we have toward certain foods, we tend to get extremely excited over food we like. For me, this includes french fries, candies,

and ice cream. Some autistic people also have trouble with food textures. Researchers believe that this can possibly lead some girls with autism to be diagnosed with an eating disorder, when really it is a sensory issue. If you are eating with an autistic person and they seem to be a very picky eater, try to be understanding that this might be a sensory issue for them and don't demand that they try something or eat something if they refuse it.

Vestibular

Years ago, when I lived in the Netherlands, I practiced karate. Even though I was very good at it, I always had a lot of trouble with keeping my balance. Like many other autistic people, I have vestibular sensory issues, which has to do with our sense of balance and is related to the inner ear. Besides having issues with balance, I'm also breathtakingly sensitive to motion sickness.

Proprioceptive

Proprioception has to do with the sense of self-movement and body position, which autistic people can have issues with. I have always been kind of clumsy. When I'm walking around in my apartment, I often bump into the sides of doorways or trip over things. It's not as intense as some sensory issues, but still a common one. Some autistic people will step on toes or knock things over accidentally. This can be hard to deal with, but it's helpful if you try not to get offended or assume they are just rude. Some stimming behaviors such as spinning or jumping are related to this sensory difference.

Advice for Communicating with People on the Autism Spectrum

It's important to acknowledge that every autistic person is different, and that the range of communication issues detailed in this chapter doesn't cover everything. However, understanding some common issues is a good foundation for what comes next: improving the way you communicate.

Communicating is something I've always found exhausting and difficult. Translating my thoughts into words comes very unnaturally to me. Often a conversation feels as unnatural to me as holding my breath. People often tell me they don't notice I'm autistic, but as they get to know me better, they become more and more irritated with me because my "responses are always the same" or I "don't make enough eye contact" and "look disinterested." This is frustrating, especially when I'm putting so much effort into trying.

For most autistic people, having a conversation is a huge challenge. Some of us are pretty good at it, and for others it only looks easy because we tend to be very good at hiding the fact that it's difficult. If an autistic person is having a conversation with you, understand it requires more effort on their part than it does on yours. You're doing something that, to you, comes naturally. But the way a neurotypical person communicates isn't natural to someone on the autism spectrum. Here are some tips to help make it easier for everyone.

Active Listening

Some autistic people honestly don't know how to start a conversation. People tend to think that if we don't take the initiative to start a conversation, this means that we don't

want to talk. That is not the case for most of us. It can really help us out if others start the conversation, say, by asking us a question.

I'm always insecure about whether or not a person is interested in what I'm saying. It helps when people acknowledge that they heard me by saying "Hmmm," "Yes," or "I understand," and it encourages me to talk more if a person asks me follow-up questions. Like many autistic people, I find it a herculean task to find the correct words. When people notice that we can't find a certain word, they can help us find it by asking, "Is this what you mean?" But it is important that they don't just finish all our sentences. Most of us also find it excruciating to make eye contact. We might look at your eyebrows or your mouth, or even look right past you. It helps if people are aware of this and understand that it doesn't mean we are rude or not interested in having a conversation. Be an active listener and encourage us in the conversation, but be aware that some active listening, like nodding your head, may go unnoticed. When communicating with an autistic person, it is better to avoid body language and use words instead.

Things You Should Never Say

Years ago, a counselor who had just finished a course about autism told me that I was more like a robot than a human being because I was very analytical, and I lacked, according to him, feelings and emotions. Back then I didn't have much self-knowledge, nor did I know much about autism, so I believed him. Even if I had known he was wrong, I wouldn't have had the communication skills to convince him. Although many autistic people have trouble expressing or even recognizing their feelings and emotions, it doesn't mean they don't have them.

Through the years, I've come across all kinds of similar misconceptions about autism. These can lead to incorrect and even offensive questions or statements. I'm not offended easily, and I always keep in mind that most people don't mean any harm. I do find it important, though, that people are open to changing their minds and learning from autistic people. The following is a list of statements that people might think are kind or helpful, but actually reveal deep misunderstandings about autism.

“You probably don’t have many issues.”

When people see me in public, they get to see the absolute very best of me, which is often just an act. So, saying this makes too big an assumption. Many autistic people mask their difficulties in order to pass for “normal.” When they are back home, they feel safe enough to drop their mask and be themselves.

“We’re all a little autistic.”

“A little autistic” doesn’t even exist, in my opinion. You’re either autistic or you’re not. When I hear this, I feel like people don’t have a clue about the struggles and challenges we go through every single day. It feels dismissive.

“You must be very high functioning.”

Overall, the term “high functioning” is inaccurate and, as we discussed previously, problematic. Being able to have a conversation, which is a lot more challenging for me than anybody will ever be aware of, doesn’t mean I don’t have other major struggles. This term only describes how people see me, not my reality.

“You don’t look autistic.”

I have the feeling that “looking autistic” means sitting in a corner, rocking back and forth and flapping your arms and hands. When a person does this, there’s definitely a chance that they’re autistic, but this isn’t the “look” that describes all autism. Autism affects so many people in so many different ways, it’s an oversimplification to assume it can even be spotted at all.

“I’m autistic, too, sometimes.”

When you’re autistic, you’re autistic all the time, not just sometimes. On some days I do feel “more autistic” than on other days. This actually doesn’t mean I’m less autistic on those days; I just feel stronger and more able to face my obstacles.

COMING OUT AS AUTISTIC

“Coming out” as autistic means sharing the fact that we’re autistic with others. After being diagnosed with autism, it’s not easy to decide with whom, or even if, we want to share it. It can be scary because it’s completely unpredictable how someone will respond. People might be shocked and suddenly treat us differently; they might dismiss it or even deny it. It’s a sign of trust when we share our diagnosis with another person, and it’s important that it be taken seriously. When an autistic person confides that they’re autistic, the listener shouldn’t respond with any of the previous statements. A better way to respond would be to ask how they feel about being autistic, or how you can help and perhaps offer assistance. An autistic person might need help with getting groceries, packing for a vacation,



or making important phone calls. Just to know there's a person we can go to for advice every now and then can help a lot.

When I confide in people about being autistic, I get all kinds of responses. Some dismiss it with a comment like "Oh, we're all a little odd," or they even try to tell me it's not true. I've also encountered people who suddenly treated me like I have a contagious disease. I've always confided in teachers, because it was important they were aware of my autism, since it affects the way I learn. Sometimes teachers responded by saying things like "Oh, that's okay," or "The important thing is that you like what you're doing." I know they meant well, but these responses weren't helpful. They were dismissive, and it felt like they weren't taking it seriously. Sharing with them that I'm autistic was extremely difficult for me. Responding to their dismissiveness was something I was incapable of. If someone confides in you about their autism diagnosis, they are showing you a lot of trust. Respect them and take it seriously.



The page features a light beige background with abstract, colorful curved lines and shapes in the corners. These shapes are in various colors including pink, orange, green, blue, and teal, and they overlap each other, creating a layered effect. The lines are thick and have rounded ends, resembling stylized brushstrokes or geometric elements.

CHAPTER FOUR

AUTISM AT SCHOOL

When I think about my time in school, from elementary school and middle school and all the way through secondary school, I literally get the shivers. As a little kid, I found school much too frightening, and even when I was older in middle school and secondary school, it still made me beyond anxious. Each day was all about trying to get through the day. I was actually an exceptionally smart kid, but due to the chaotic and loud environment and the way we were taught, I wasn't able to learn.

This experience is all too common for young people on the autism spectrum. School can be a perfect storm of communication challenges ranging from sensory issues in overcrowded classrooms to impatient teachers who don't understand to students who bully and ostracize because someone seems "weird." This chapter will examine some of the common issues that occur in classroom settings and offer advice for how to resolve them, whether you're a teacher or a fellow student of someone on the autism spectrum.

My Time in School

I didn't get anything out of attending classes in school other than just being marked present. When I was sitting in a classroom, I was bombarded with sensory input—sounds from other students whispering, sounds from the hallway, cars and bicycles outside, the wind and the rain, the voice of the teacher from the adjacent classroom—and it all came in equally loud. It was impossible for me to filter out my own teacher's voice from all those other noises. I missed practically everything that was said. Even reading was nearly impossible. At school this was because there were so many distractions, but reading at home in a quiet space was a challenge, too. I had trouble understanding the abstract language used in a lot of the textbooks, and by the time I got home, I was usually too exhausted to absorb any information.

In order to avoid failing, I developed a whole set of tricks. In elementary school, I would cheat by looking at my classmates' work—dropping my pencil close to their desk to quickly get a glimpse while picking it up or asking the teacher if I could go to the bathroom and looking at what the other kids were doing as I walked out. Once I brought a drawing home with me and my mom asked me what it was. I told her I didn't know. I had literally just copied it from the kid next to me because I had missed what we were supposed to draw. My whole strategy for getting through school was based on one thing: cheating. I got away with these tricks pretty easily in elementary school, but as we got older, teachers were more vigilant about cheating, and it no longer helped.

Luckily, I was born with a photographic memory and I used this to pass tests. For tests and quizzes we often had to study many chapters from a book. My strategy was to memorize every page. I memorized the layout, the page numbers,

the pictures, the columns, and every word and its location on the page without even understanding one single word. During the test, when a certain term or number came up, I could go through the archive of pictures in my mind and know exactly on which page that term was located. I knew the page number, the location of the term on the page, the adjacent words, the pictures, everything. This strategy only worked with fact-based questions that could literally be taken from the book. If we had to explain something in our own words, I was in trouble.

My academic struggles were accompanied by severe bullying. This was worst in the four years of what's called middle school in the Netherlands. It wasn't just one or two bullies or even a group of them—it was almost the whole school. I couldn't set one foot on the school grounds without being called names, being spat at, being pushed down the stairs, or being beaten up. Every now and then a teacher who got a glimpse of what was happening would try to intervene, but this actually made it worse. In addition to beating me up at the school grounds, the bullies now waited for me on my way home.

After middle school, during my graphic design education, I wasn't beaten up anymore, but I was still shunned socially and called names. Even though I was relieved that I wasn't beaten up anymore, I was very lonely. It wasn't until many years later, during my histopathology education, that other students were nice to me. They even waited for me after class to walk to the train station together! I was a bit suspicious of it at first, since this was a totally new experience for me. As soon as I realized it was genuine, I felt overcome with joy and happiness. Their compassion and maturity can serve as a model for your own interactions with students on the autism spectrum.

Common Conflicts

No matter what the subject is, school is all about processing words and language, and with most autistic people, this will bring challenges, misunderstandings, and conflicts. Noisy classrooms, abstract language, and nonverbal social cues all contribute to these issues. Sometimes misunderstandings can be funny. Often after people explain something to me that I misunderstood, I can even laugh about it myself. But unfortunately, misunderstandings can also lead to painful or embarrassing situations, even when there was no intention from either side to do harm. Many hardships could be avoided if neurotypical people were aware of the way autistic people process information and the challenges we often have expressing ourselves.

Common Conflict #1: “Show Your Work”

Like many other autistic people, I find it very difficult to explain my thought processes. Being a visual thinker, I think in pictures, patterns, and numbers, not words. Translating my thoughts into words has always been one of my most difficult challenges. This is also one of the reasons why working with other students is so challenging. When working alone, there's no need to explain yourself, but when working with others, you constantly have to discuss things and explain your thoughts. When I try to explain myself, it often takes too long to find the correct words, or the right words just don't come out at all. It can be frustrating when your thoughts are accurate, but the words that come out are totally different than what you wanted to say.

I've always been very good with math, but unfortunately math does not involve only numbers. Even though the instructions are easier to understand since there usually isn't

as much abstract language, the explanations are still done with words. I often encountered issues trying to explain my thought process. Even though my answers were technically correct, I often had a failing grade because I couldn't explain how I got my calculations. My thoughts went with a certain detour that made the calculations faster from A to D, rather than from A to B to C to D. Teachers of students on the autism spectrum should reconsider requiring them to explain or "show" their work, or at the very least allow different explanations to count.

Common Conflict #2: Prosody Problems

As I discussed in chapter 3, prosody (tone of voice) is a major challenge for autistic people. I often practice quietly to myself what I want to say before I know I am going to have a conversation. I even do this with the simplest things, like saying "good morning." I practice not only the specific words I want to say, but also my tone of voice. Despite our best efforts, many autistic people can sound angry or impolite when we try to speak to others. So, it helps a lot when the person we're speaking to understands why we sound the way we do and focuses on our words and meaning instead of reacting to our tone alone.

I remember an incident that occurred while I was doing my graphic design program. I didn't fit in at all and spent most of my time alone. Once, one of the most popular girls in my class sat next to me in art history. I really liked that; in most classes, there was nobody sitting next to me at all. Halfway through the class, she started wiggling her leg against our desk. The desk was trembling really hard and I couldn't write because of it. I wanted to ask her to stop. I practiced many times in my head to ask her as nicely as possible and debated if I even should ask at all.

When I finally said something, in my nicest tone of voice possible, she got really angry at me. She shouted that there was no reason for me to get irritated with her. She stood up and sat down somewhere else. I tried to explain to her that I didn't mean it in an irritating way, but she just didn't believe it. I found it very frustrating that after trying so hard to ask nicely, my voice still didn't sound like I wanted it to.

Common Conflict #3: A Literal Problem

Abstract language can be challenging for autistic people to navigate, especially in a stressful classroom setting. I've lost count of how many times in my past I've taken something somebody said too literally and left other people confused with my response. Neurotypical people often don't realize they've used an abstraction because they are so common in speech, and this just deepens the confusion.

Once a teacher was angry with me for some reason and after a long lecture he said, "Do you understand me?" I was very embarrassed because all the students were looking at me, and they seemed to be very amused by it all. I wanted the situation to be over as fast as possible. I answered the teacher by nodding my head. Then the teacher said, "I didn't hear you!" To which I answered, "I didn't say anything." "Are you just kidding me?" the teacher asked, even more agitated. "No, I really didn't say anything," I replied. He was red-faced and furious, and said that he didn't appreciate me making fun of him.

I truly had no idea what he was talking about. He sent me to the hallway where he told me to think about my manners. I was completely confused and had no idea what I had done wrong. Many years later, I understand what he meant by "I didn't hear you!" and I understand that I took it too literally. This is just one example where things got out of hand

because of misunderstandings based on literal interpretation of language. I've spent quite some time in the hallway not understanding at all why a teacher sent me there.

Common Conflict #4: Instructions

I was always relieved when I understood an assignment after hearing a teacher's explanation. Most of the time this wasn't the case, though, and I had to ask the teacher to repeat the instructions. They would often become greatly annoyed, believing I hadn't paid attention the first time. Every now and then I understood the instructions immediately, and I would pray that the teacher would stop talking because I knew more words would only confuse me. Many autistic people have challenges with instructions. The more words, the more it can confuse us. We need clear, specific, and short instructions. The shorter the better. If there's a complicated task that requires a lot of instructions, it's better to give these instructions in writing.

Common Conflict #5: Attention Is Not the Same as Focus

As with social interactions, there's also a great deal of non-verbal communication that happens in the classroom. For people on the autism spectrum this can be especially challenging. Teachers often watch for nonverbal cues, such as looking at the teacher, to show that students are paying attention. But many autistic students, myself included, learn better when they can look away from the teacher.

In school, I often chose a seat right next to the window in the front of the class in order to minimize the distracting sounds between myself and the teacher. Sitting next to the windows also diminished the amount of visual sensory

input, but only if there was a calm, serene view from the window. I could look at the sky or the tops of the trees while the teacher was talking. Unfortunately, even though I did this in order to focus on what the teacher was saying, my looking out of the window was interpreted as not being interested. Teachers expected me to face them instead. At that time, I didn't yet understand why I needed to look out the window; it was just something I did instinctively, so I wasn't able to explain it to my teachers, either.

Strengths on the Spectrum

Autism comes with serious challenges, but in exchange autistic people have a lot of strengths and skills to offer. These strengths can often compensate for our difficulties and add a lot of value in a variety of settings. Even though it's good for us to work on our weaknesses, it's important to recognize our strengths and skills so we can build on them. Instead of stagnating while focusing on something we can't do, we can focus on developing our skills and thrive at what we're good at. There are several strengths many autistic people have in common that can make them especially good students and classmates.

Strength #1: Memory

Many autistic people tend to have an excellent memory, which can be very helpful in school. Like many other autistic people, I excelled in STEM classes—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. We tend to be above average with systemizing, analyzing, understanding rule-based systems, and memorizing facts. It can be a huge advantage to have a good or even photographic memory in school.

Without my well-developed memory, I would never even have made it through elementary school and middle school. I was adept at memorizing facts, like capitals of countries or the location of cities during geography, or words in different languages.

If you're collaborating with someone on the autism spectrum for a project, it's worth keeping their memory skills in mind as you decide who does what in the group. If we're given tasks that suit our strengths, we thrive. If we're working against what comes naturally to us, it can make things difficult for everyone. For example, other students knew I was good at drawing, so they let me do all the drawing for the project. Or they let me do the calculations, which was also something I was very good at and enjoyed as well. And if your classmate has a very good memory, they can keep track of what needs to be done when and make sure no details of the project are forgotten.

Strength #2: Kindness and Empathy

As mentioned before, many autistic people are associative thinkers. We don't tend to categorize or put people in boxes. Because of this we are less likely to judge others. We often see people exactly as we see everything else around us, in tiny little details. I've always seen every other person as an individual, believing everybody is just too different to be categorized. I've never had the motivation to bully someone for being different because, to me, everybody is different.

Unfortunately, many autistic people have been bullied so they know what it feels like to be an outsider and to be shunned. So, in a classroom setting, we are much less likely to bully another student. Autistic people tend to be very analytical and make decisions on what seems logical. To me it feels illogical to make another person feel bad. It just doesn't

make any sense. These features can make us very good and loyal friends.

Strength #3: Insatiable Curiosity

Many autistic people can focus extensively during certain classes that relate to our special interests. Teachers understand how valuable it is to have even one student in the room engaged and asking questions. When we are involved with a subject that falls within our special interest, we don't hold back. We want to learn everything we can.

My histopathology program was the first education that I really chose for myself. I have always been interested in, and almost obsessed with, medical sciences and research. I enjoyed and was highly motivated to learn in classes like immunology, molecular biology, biochemistry, and pathology. Unlike with other classes, I was capable of absorbing huge amounts of information about these topics. After a teacher explained a certain topic, I often wanted to know more about it, and searched the internet on my own for more details.

Some autistic people really enjoy sharing their passion for their special interests, too. If you're a student who is struggling with a subject that an autistic classmate is interested in, they might make for an excellent tutor.

Strength #4: Work Effort

Autistic people tend to be very goal oriented, which can make us hard-working and self-motivated. We also tend to have a lot of stamina and understand that if we're going to achieve the same opportunities as our neurotypical peers, we have to overcome many challenges.

When I was in school, I couldn't accept getting a failing grade or not comprehending a certain topic. I put all my effort and time into studying and making sure I understood by getting books from the library or researching the topic online. I typically won't stop until I get it right or reach my goal. My mom could tell you that as a young child I would not allow myself to take a break, and I would continue trying until I succeeded. This often came with major melt-downs, and my mom had to force me to take breaks. It can be an advantage to have such a strong drive to succeed, but it can also come at a cost. It can be unhealthy not to recognize your boundaries and to push yourself to a breaking point. As long as an autistic person can keep this under control, their drive can be a positive characteristic in the classroom. We have the tendency to never give up.

Strength #5: Respect

During middle school, many of the students often came late, were rude to the teachers, or didn't do their homework. I felt extremely uncomfortable breaking any rules. Life itself was chaotic enough for me, and rules like showing up on time and getting homework done gave me a sense of structure. I have this in common with many other autistic people. Following the rules comes down to our strong desire for logic. It just didn't make sense to me not to do the work assigned or not to put my very best effort into it, because this would only have a negative effect on my own grade and academics. The rule-following tendency of autistic students can be beneficial for a teacher, as we tend not to be troublemakers, and for other students we can set a good example, although in my case it was often just another reason to get bullied.

WAS ALBERT EINSTEIN ON THE SPECTRUM?

Reading articles and books about scientists like Albert Einstein, Henry Cavendish, Isaac Newton, and Alan Turing has been a passionate pastime of mine for years. Each of these geniuses had signs of autism: trouble communicating, poor social skills, and an obsessive focus on a certain topic. Einstein did not speak until he was three years old. He didn't play with other kids and was mostly focused on his special interests of solving puzzles, doing math problems, playing the violin, and reading books. He was always a loner and found it difficult to make friends.

Even though we can't be sure, since it's impossible to diagnose Einstein or anyone else after they have passed away, it does encourage me because most of them seemed to struggle with the same aspects in life that autistic people do. I like to think of it this way: You can't be good at everything; something has to give. If a person is extremely talented at something, it's normal that there are other things they're not good at. It doesn't help or encourage anybody to think there's something wrong with them.

A 2017 Yale study published in *PLOS Genetics* looked at the genetic link between autism and enhanced cognitive abilities. It states, "The idea is that during evolution these variants that have positive effects on cognitive function were selected, but at a cost—in this case an increased risk of autism spectrum disorders." The conclusion is sound, but the words "risk" and "disorder" I find problematic. I believe that the positive selection of gene variants that contribute to enhanced cognition is simply part of what autism is. This comes with positive attributes, for example



enhanced cognition, but also with social challenges autistic people face that are easier for neurotypical people.

People call it a disorder because it's not considered "normal" to have these challenges. If gene variants of trees that are positively selected to improve the chance of survival would cause oaks to have leaves of a different color, this does not necessarily mean that those new trees have a disorder. They might have stronger trunks and bark, things that are necessary to survive longer, or be less susceptible to harmful bacteria. People tend to call everything that's not considered normal a disorder, but "normal" is only what the majority of people are like. Most problems occur because of social expectations, not the conditions themselves.

Evolution will positively select genes that will raise the chance of survival of human beings. Yes, autistic people are not always good at chitchatting. Do we need chitchatting in order to survive? Maybe autistic people are a step further in evolution, and we tend to struggle because we live in a society designed for neurotypical people. Some call autism an epidemic, but maybe it should be called evolution instead. Just because you give something a name and call it a disorder doesn't mean that it is one.

How Autism Affects Tests and Assignments

Autistic people who have failing grades in school rarely lack intelligence or effort. Because our brains are wired differently, we process information in a different way, so often the methods used to teach classes in schools don't work for us. This can be frustrating. Even though we're intelligent, we get

failing grades anyway, and this affects our future endeavors. The most common issues with tests, homework, and group projects are related to the communication challenges we face just about everywhere.

The Trouble with Tests

When a classroom seems quiet for a neurotypical person, it's often anything but for an autistic person. The sounds of coughs, rubbing clothes, shuffling feet, a dog barking, cars outside, the ventilation system, the wind or rain, or noises from the adjacent classrooms or hallways assault the autistic ear in an unfiltered way. This dissonance can make it impossible to concentrate. Think about the last time you had a really bad headache, or a bout of insomnia, and you'll have some idea of how a seemingly calm environment like a quiet room can overwhelm your senses.

In general, processing words takes longer for autistic people. When I'm reading a sentence, the sound of a cough can break my concentration and I have to start reading all over again. This becomes an issue with tests, as there are often time limits. The phrasing of questions on tests can be problematic as well. Teachers tend to be neurotypical and think in neurotypical ways, so while I might have understood something perfectly from a book, the way the teacher asks questions about it on a test might be confusing.

Some easy solutions are to allow autistic people to wear earplugs or noise-canceling headphones, or to take a test in a separate room. It also helps us to have more time for tests, or to get rid of the time limits altogether. Being able to ask questions during a test can also help.

The Trouble with Homework

One of the most common issues autistic students have with homework is exhaustion. When I came home after a day of school, I was so tired. The whole day I'd given the absolute best of myself, or even gone way beyond my limits, doing what was expected of me while being totally overstimulated. Just being on the school grounds took everything out of me, just holding it together and trying to pass for "normal." Coming home only to do even more work was nearly impossible. This was a huge problem, because I was struggling in classrooms, too. What autistic students need most when it comes to homework and assignments is a teacher who understands.

During my histopathology education, one teacher was aware that school wasn't the right environment for me to learn. He allowed me to study at home instead of being present in his class. I only had to go to his class to take tests and attend practicums, and he allowed me to wear earplugs so I could concentrate.

The same teacher also waived a certain amount of the assignments I actually had to do. We had to make drawings of human tissues studied under a microscope, and my drawings were so photorealistically detailed that they took me much longer. He was so pleased with the details of my drawings that he understood why they took much longer, and he didn't care if I could only do half of the assigned drawings. These kinds of accommodations from teachers make a big difference.

Unfortunately, most teachers I've encountered were not like that. Even though I had straight As with most of the other classes as well, being in school gradually caused me to develop burnout. It would have helped tremendously to

study from home whenever possible. I have not been able to finish any education, mostly because of this.

The Trouble with Group Projects

Autistic students tend to be very goal oriented, and for students like me, grades are a big deal and a source of stress. I always preferred to work alone. I didn't mind it very much if I had to work together with only one student who was just as serious as I was and willing to put the same amount of effort into schoolwork. In those cases, it went fine. But often I was placed in a group with two or more other students who totally lacked effort and interest and procrastinated. This caused me a great amount of distress.

It made me very anxious that the grade I was going to get for this project or assignment relied on these students. It felt like a total loss of control. Communication is also a huge issue when working in a group. Communicating with just one person is already a challenge, let alone with three or four people. It can be chaotic, especially when everybody talks at the same time. In situations like these, I often get totally overwhelmed and unable to communicate at all. I will just disappear into the background completely and let everybody else make the decisions.

If you're on a group project with an autistic student, keep this information in mind. When doing a group project and you notice that an autistic student is overwhelmed or starts to isolate, it's helpful to suggest a break, or to remind everybody to let only one person speak at the same time. You can also ask the autistic student about their thoughts to make sure their voice gets heard.

9 Tips for Teachers

During most of my years in school I was still undiagnosed, so teachers didn't know I was autistic. I'm sure that if they had, my experiences would have been quite different. It's a pity that during all those years of doing my absolute best, teachers often thought I was misbehaving or not paying attention, or they categorized me as "stupid" because they thought I was unable to learn. This was a huge missed opportunity, and it still makes me angry sometimes knowing that I could have achieved much more on an academic level if only people had seen my potential.

There are many other autistic people like me who were diagnosed in adulthood and missed out on many things other people take for granted. Teachers play an important role in a person's development, so, it is crucial that they know as much about autism as possible, including how to guide an autistic person toward a successful future. I hope that the following tips will be helpful.

Tip #1

It can be helpful for autistic students to have a seat in the front of the room, and preferably next to a wall, so they don't sit right in the middle of the sources of sensory input. As mentioned before, I always chose a seat at the front of the classroom. This way I could minimize the distractions and sensory input between me and the teacher.

Tip #2

When explaining an assignment or anything else, it's best to give clear, short instructions. Using too many words and long sentences can be confusing for autistic students.

I remember during my graphic design education with practicum classes that I often didn't know what to do after a teacher explained something. The long stories the teachers used formed pictures in my mind that didn't make sense to me at all. Every time, I had to go to the teacher to ask for another explanation, without much success. For me, it would have helped a great deal more to get instructions in writing or in pictures, or to have a teacher show me how instead of using words.

Tip #3

Don't force eye contact. Many autistic people are much better at focusing on what you are saying when they look away. If I make eye contact when a person is talking, I tend to miss every word, because their eyes and facial expressions confuse and distract me. There are so many details in a person's eyes and face that, along with the words being spoken, it's just too much information to process all at the same time. In order to follow what a person is saying, I have to look away.

Tip #4

When an assignment consists of multiple steps, it's better to provide the instructions for each step only after the previous step has been finished. When I was still in school, too much information was given at once about big assignments. By the time the teacher was done explaining the last step, I was completely confused about how to begin with the first one. Another good way is to provide concise, orderly instructions in writing, step by step.

Tip #5

If possible, let autistic students wear earplugs or headphones during tests or allow them to take the test in a separate, quiet room. Many autistic people are so excruciatingly sensitive to sound that it can have a great effect on being able to concentrate on a test. It's frustrating for autistic students to fail a test only because they were not able to concentrate. When I failed a test, teachers often thought I hadn't studied. This was completely inaccurate. I always put a lot of effort into studying, but I simply wasn't able to concentrate during the test itself due to too many distractions.

Tip #6

Don't just assume a child doesn't understand something. They might understand perfectly but are unable to explain it using their own words. When I was in school, teachers would often ask students to explain something in their own words after reading about it in a book. I wasn't able to do this, so the teachers thought that I didn't understand it. Sometimes I didn't, but even if I did, I often wasn't able to find different words to explain the same thing I had just read.

Tip #7

Provide a quiet place for breaks. For autistic people, school can take a tremendous amount of energy. During lunchtime or at a break, it can help to sit in a quiet place by themselves rather than being forced to be in a crowded schoolyard or cafeteria. They might need this time to recuperate and recharge their batteries. Some might want to be completely by themselves, while others may prefer to have a friend with them.

Tip #8

Don't make autistic students take notes while you're explaining something. This was always impossible for me. I couldn't listen to a teacher and write notes at the same time. By the time I wrote down the first sentence, I missed the next six. Better to provide autistic students with a summary of what you are talking about. You can also pause every now and then so that students have the time to write down what you said, or assign a volunteer student to take notes for the autistic student. This is often a common accommodation in college classes.

Tip #9

Remember to be kind. Don't get angry when a student gets a failing grade or has difficulties. This alone would have made my school time much less traumatic.





CHAPTER FIVE

AUTISM AT WORK

Getting and keeping a job is one of the most difficult challenges faced by adults on the autism spectrum. A 2015 Drexel University study found that less than half of autistic adults will work at *all* within four years of graduating high school, and 80 percent of those who do will work only part-time. Even though many autistic people are totally capable of succeeding at work, employment opportunities often fall through because of the communication challenges we face. In too many cases, bosses and colleagues pay attention only to an autistic employee's shortcomings and weaknesses rather than changing perspective to see their strengths. This is a pity, as many autistic people can be positive assets for any company.

This chapter offers insights on some of the most common workplace conflicts for people on the autism spectrum, some of the strengths that neurodiversity can bring to the workplace, how to manage and collaborate with someone on the autism spectrum, and tips for employers on how to accommodate for neurodiversity in their hiring processes and human resources departments.

My Time at Work

Many people assume that working became easier for me after being diagnosed with autism because I could now make people aware of my challenges. This was unfortunately not the case. Many times, even when people were aware of my autism, things didn't work out because they still lacked understanding of what that meant. Many of the companies I worked for were just not willing or able to provide reasonable accommodations to allow me to succeed.

For many years, I tried numerous kinds of jobs and worked hard to hold them down. My job titles included dishwasher, assembly line worker, animal ambulance assistant, graphic designer, janitor, and mail carrier. I enjoyed aspects of each of these jobs, but I encountered so many issues and misunderstandings that eventually I decided to become completely self-employed as an artist and autism advocate, working from home.

Holding down a job is a huge challenge in itself, but often we don't make it that far. Getting hired presents many obstacles. In order to even be considered for a job, a potential employee has to pass a job interview. A job interview is nerve-racking for anybody, but for an autistic person it's even more so. An interview is all about communication and social skills, which is basically everything autistic people struggle with. Even if an autistic person would be a great fit for the job, poor communication during a job interview can prevent them from getting hired.

There's a huge gap in between being in school, where you can to some extent fall back on a teacher, and being at a workplace, where you are expected to do your job independently. I've encountered many situations at a workplace when I didn't understand a task. As I mentioned, I'm a

picture thinker, so I learn much faster if somebody shows something to me rather than explaining it with words. But at most jobs, communications are often very fast-paced or unstructured, or they take place in a group setting where everybody talks at the same time. After a meeting like that, I'm often confused about what I'm supposed to do.

This is why I decided it was necessary to become a self-employed artist. I now specialize in realistic pencil drawings, mainly of animals. Because I am so detail oriented, the very act of drawing helps me manage the challenges I face as an autistic person. When I'm working on a drawing, I only have to focus on one thing: the details of my drawing. It helps me feel grounded and charges my batteries. It enables me to face the challenging outside world again. Unfortunately, most people on the autism spectrum are not able to be self-employed, which is why it is so important to examine the many ways neurodiversity can thrive in the workplace.

Common Conflicts

These are some of the issues that occur most often for people on the autism spectrum when navigating the workplace. While my workplace experiences and challenges are unique to me, many of the communication issues I encountered are not. Deadlines, explanations, and instructions were too rushed, and while I was no longer being punched or spat on by school bullies, my anxiety was worse than ever. Everyone at work expected me to function like the other adults around me, but on the inside, I didn't feel like an adult at all. It's crucial for adults on the autism spectrum to have coworkers who understand their challenges and are willing

to be flexible. The experiences I describe below highlight some of the common conflicts people on the autism spectrum are likely to experience at work. I then offer advice on how neurotypical coworkers can help make things better for everyone.

Common Conflict #1: Doing What You're Told

One of the ways that literal thinking can impact an autistic person's job is when it clashes with a coworker's tasks. Because many people on the autism spectrum adhere to instructions no matter the context, this can create conflict with other employees who may make quick decisions without understanding our way of thinking.

In my late teens, I had a job in a Japanese restaurant as a dishwasher. When I arrived there for the first time, the manager showed me around and clearly explained to me that "everything you find on this counter has to be washed." It was fast-paced, stressful work, but I did it well. Then during one of my shifts, I found a huge pot full of cooked rice on my counter. I was confused but remembered what the manager had told me to do. So, I threw all the rice away and cleaned the pot. A few minutes later one of the cooks came to my counter and started to look around frantically. He asked me where the rice had gone, in a profoundly stressed way. I immediately realized that I had done something wrong. I told him, while being extremely embarrassed, that I had thrown it out and cleaned the pot. He was very agitated and quickly ran back to the basement to get more rice and cook it.

This is a classic example of the fact that instructions have to be extremely clear and that autistic people take everything you say very literally. If somebody tells me to do

something, I will do it exactly as I was told. It helps us in a workplace if management understands that we think differently and communicates this to our coworkers as well. It also helps if an employer emphasizes to an autistic employee that it is okay to ask for clarification. I often hesitated to ask because I was afraid an employer would get angry or annoyed with me.

Common Conflict #2: Clarifications Can Be Contradictions

One of the nice things about a healthy workplace is that people help each other. In some cases, this means coworkers will spot you doing something a certain way and then intervene to tell you how to do it their way or explain shortcuts to make it easier. The problem for autistic people like myself is that getting a second set of instructions can do more harm than good.

During my internship at the histopathology lab, many tasks had to be done with great accuracy. One of those tasks was putting glass slides on a tray that were about to be examined by a histopathologist. I was told to put the slides in correct order and in a neat, organized way. So, I put the slides down perfectly parallel to each other. But then the head of the lab told me that this would take too long and it didn't have to be "that perfect." First, I was told that it had to look very neat and organized, but then I seemed to do it too perfectly. I was confused. If you're working alongside an autistic person, resist the urge to jump in and show them "your" way to do something, even if you think it's easier. Oftentimes our way is our way for a reason.

Common Conflict #3: We Don't Always "Learn by Doing"

One of the mistakes managers often make in dealing with employees on the spectrum is assuming we learn the same way neurotypical people do. In many workplaces it's common to embrace a "learn by doing" mentality, where workers are left to figure things out on their own in the hopes that something clicks. Because of our concrete thinking, many autistic people cannot get past the overwhelming confusion that occurs when this happens.

In my late teens, I worked as a mail carrier for one summer. On the first day, the manager explained to me how to sort all the mail by street name and to match the house numbers on the envelopes to their correct slots at the sorting station. It looked pretty easy to me, and I liked the work because I have always enjoyed sorting objects into the correct order. But the next day when I arrived at my station, the signs were in a different position. I was very confused because it didn't match with the picture I had in my mind and what I remembered. I thought I was accidentally at the wrong sorting station. It turned out that I had been assigned to a different neighborhood from the day before. I didn't know how to reorganize my sorting station to accommodate this. It totally confused me, so I asked a colleague who was working at the station next to me. He was just about to explain it to me when the manager who had described everything the day before suddenly got annoyed. He told me he just explained it to me the day before, so there was no need to explain it again. I had no idea what to do or how to start my work. It's important to keep in mind that an autistic employee might get confused when certain details of a task are suddenly different, and they might need to have things clarified again.

Common Conflict #4: We're Not Ignoring You

As I've mentioned, a room can seem nice and quiet to a neurotypical person, but for an autistic person there are always many sources of sensory input. This means that even if we appear to be sitting quietly working, we may be doing a lot internally to shut out the surrounding environment in order to focus. In the workplace, this creates an issue when people talk *at* us and get frustrated when we don't respond.

Once I was an intern at a graphic design studio in a large insurance company building. Our office was a shared space with about five other people, but people from other departments walked in and out on a regular basis. This was difficult for me to follow. Once while I was just getting some things together to start working, a man who often came by our department suddenly threw an eraser in my face and started shouting at me. He was talking to me and angry that I didn't respond. He kept throwing things, and I was totally in shock because I hadn't even noticed that he was talking to me.

If he had only tapped my shoulder or said my name first to get my attention, this would have helped a lot. Don't take offense if you feel an autistic coworker is ignoring you. Remember they are trying to shut out distractions and may accidentally shut you out, too. Instead, be direct and make sure you have their attention with a friendly introduction—and not an eraser to the face!

Common Conflict #5: Mind Blindness

Many autistic people have difficulties forming an awareness of other people's thoughts and knowledge. We have trouble realizing that they do not have the same knowledge as we do. This is called mind blindness.

For example, once I saw these really cool shoes, but they didn't have them in my size. So, I bought them a size smaller and thought I would be able to break them in. During my walk to work the next morning, the skin on the back of my heel was completely stripped off by my shoe. It was very painful to walk around all day at work. I was walking to the meeting room with a colleague, but I couldn't walk very fast because of the pain in my foot. She was walking very fast and I could hardly keep up with her. I was completely convinced that she knew about the pain in my foot, and I was so confused that she was walking fast. It always takes me a while to realize that other people do not necessarily have the same knowledge I do, and that I have to tell people things to make them aware. Even though I usually realize it sooner or later, it doesn't come naturally.

Unfortunately, we can't read each other's minds, so there is no way of knowing when a coworker on the autism spectrum has some information that would provide important context. This is where the skills of active listening detailed in chapter 3 become important. Starting the conversation and asking us questions will help us share a lot of information. Being engaged and aware will help you notice things like, for example, a limp from ill-fitting shoes.

Strengths on the Spectrum

Every now and then I read or hear that a certain company is especially interested in hiring autistic people. Many more employers should see the advantages of neurodiversity within their company. It's a shame that there are still many autistic people who don't have jobs although they are skilled and talented enough to work. It is possible that an autistic

employee will need some reasonable accommodations to be able to do their work, but the strengths they will bring to the workplace will make it worth the effort.

Strength #1: Punctual Performers

Many autistic people need a lot of structure. The world around us is chaotic enough, so a clear schedule and a daily routine can help us maintain our health and well-being. The good thing about having a job is that the workday often starts and ends at the same time every day, unlike in higher education where classes often start at different times.

The fact that we need routine and structure makes us very reliable employees. Most of us like to show up on time, and we call in sick only when it's absolutely necessary. I've always hated to show up late somewhere, and it has only happened a few times in my life. Calling in sick, no matter how sick I am, always makes me feel extremely guilty. We are also less likely to take long breaks and get involved in chitchatting, since for most of us socializing is harder than the work itself. All of this makes autistic people very punctual and reliable additions to the workplace.

Strength #2: Our Productivity Can Be Impressive

When I'm working on a drawing, I get totally lost in the details. I forget everything else around me and can focus on it for an extended period of time. Sometimes I even forget to eat or drink. While the latter might be a bit unhealthy, the ability to intensely focus for a length of time is a valuable skill. A lot of people understand that autistic people can be hyper-focused and detail oriented, but few understand what a huge advantage this can be on the job. It enables us to get

a lot of work done and often without any errors. Companies like Microsoft, SAP, and HP have recognized that hiring autistic people has raised their productivity.

Once I attended a workshop for people with any kind of disability. During this workshop we had to assemble as many door locks as we could in an hour. Even though this was very repetitive work, I enjoyed it because it required focus and precision. When the hour was over, I had assembled the most locks of anyone—not just at that particular workshop but of all the workshops they'd ever had!

Strength #3: We're All-In

Many autistic people are very passionate about what they do. Especially when they find a job that lies within their special interest, they will have a lot of stamina and determination to succeed. During my internship at the histopathology lab, I was ultra-enthusiastic and eager to work and learn about everything because it was closely related to my special interest in medical science.

For autistic people like me, a job that is related to our special interest can feel more like a hobby than work. We enjoy putting effort and time into reaching our goals. We tend to go way beyond neurotypical people in this regard. Like having the ability to focus, our passion for our work can often lead to enhanced productivity for companies as well.

Strength #4: Visual Thinking

It bears repeating that autistic brains are wired differently, and we tend to be visually oriented. Autistic people often outperform others with tasks that require visual thinking and pattern recognition such as photo and video editing, computer programming, automobile repair, or assembling

component parts of machines and devices. Because of these visual thinking skills, many autistic people are exceptionally creative, out-of-the-box thinkers and have the ability to come up with innovative solutions to solve problems. This can be a huge advantage for employers. Autistic employees can often provide great ideas for new products or concepts in addition to creative solutions.

Strength #5: Pattern Obsessed

Many autistic people have a highly developed ability to recognize patterns. This makes us very good at recognizing changes and spotting deviations in data and information. This can be an asset in jobs like quality control, computer programming, and finance. Or even cracking codes as Alan Turing did with the Enigma code, which helped save the world from Nazis during World War II.

As a little kid, I was always looking at the sidewalk near our home because I loved the pattern of light gray tiles with strips of moss in between them and how it kept repeating along the whole sidewalk. But even slight, barely perceptible differences would annoy me, like if a tile had a darker shade of gray or if the moss was suddenly a bit wider here and there. It made me want to stop and fix the whole sidewalk. Imagine this same association with pages of computer code or financial records and you can begin to get the picture of how an autistic person's pattern obsession can be an asset for a business.

ON THE SPECTRUM: BILL GROSS, THE BOND KING

A great example of the fact that autistic people can achieve tremendous things is Bill Gross, aka the Bond King. Bill Gross is a billionaire investor and philanthropist, and co-founder of Pacific Investment Management Company (PIMCO), who self-diagnosed his own autism when he was in his 70s, after reading *The Big Short* by Michael Lewis. One of the main characters had Asperger's syndrome, and after reading a list of symptoms in the book, Bill recognized it in himself. His self-diagnosis was later confirmed by a psychologist.

In a 2019 interview with Bloomberg TV, Gross said that much of his success in life was due to the positive characteristics of his autism. It made him able to focus intensively on his work and to compartmentalize. When he was at work, he could completely switch off thoughts, worries, and distractions that didn't have anything to do with business. It also helped him recognize patterns in the business world that others were not able to see. In the list of signs in the book, he recognized his social awkwardness, like not being able to look people in the eyes and not understanding sarcasm and humor. Although he had a short fuse, he said that people often thought he was angry or cranky when he was not. He said that he is proud of his autism, and that without it, he wouldn't have been able to achieve so much and accomplish everything he has in life.

How to Manage an Employee on the Autism Spectrum

Even though autistic people can be a positive asset in the workplace, managers need to be aware of the obstacles and difficulties their employees might encounter. Most of these obstacles have to do with communication. Avoiding misunderstandings, confusion, and conflicts as much as possible is crucial. Stress is one of the top reasons autistic employees are unable to continue working.

Be Direct

Say exactly what you mean and exactly what you want, and give specific details. I remember managers at my job asking me something like “Can you start working on this project later today?” For a big part of the day, while working on something else, I wondered when I was supposed to start working on that specific project. It is important to give specific times as much as possible when working with autistic employees. Avoid words and phrases like “later,” “a little bit,” “soon,” or “in a while.”

Put Instructions in Writing

Follow up verbal instructions with written ones. Verbal instructions can be okay as long as they are direct and specific, but following up verbal instructions with written ones is even better. Email, text, or paper instructions will all work. Often verbal instructions can feel like too much information at once and can even sometimes be interrupted by phone calls or questions from other employees. Retention is an issue in an overstimulating environment, so having instructions in writing to refer back to later is really helpful.

Filter Abstractions Out of Business Language

“Blue-sky thinking.” “Outside the box.” “Cold call.” These are examples of common terms used in the workplace, often in presentations or strategy meetings. Abstract language can be challenging for people on the autism spectrum if they are concrete thinkers. Indirect and figurative speech like idioms and sarcasm can lead to big misunderstandings. I’ve attended many meetings in which managers and employees used a lot of figurative speech and said things that were meant metaphorically. I was completely confused and wasn’t able to follow the conversation at all.

If you’re working with someone on the autism spectrum who struggles with this, give your written instructions and emails a second read to try to identify abstractions and remove them. A lot of business jargon tends to be superfluous anyway, and developing a clear and concise communication style benefits everyone.

Be Consistent

Many workplaces have both official and unofficial ways of getting things done. This is only natural, as human beings are inventive and someone who has to do a job 40 hours a week is inevitably going to find ways of making it a little easier or more efficient. The problem for workers on the autism spectrum is that we often lack the capacity to synthesize multiple sets of instructions into one process. If we’re told by a manager on day one to do a task a certain way, and then later an employee says, “Oh here, do it this way, it’s easier,” it can be incredibly confusing. It might be difficult for everyone, but especially for autistic employees it is crucial to get the correct instructions the first time. It will avoid a lot of frustration.

Don't Rely on Nonverbal Communication

During my work at a graphic design studio many years ago, a manager approached me about a project. After he spoke to me about it, he turned around and walked away, and I continued with what I was doing. A few minutes later he appeared at my desk again. He seemed irritated and asked why I hadn't followed him. It turned out that he wanted to talk more about the project in his office, and he had given me a signal with his hand to follow him, which I had totally missed.

Of course, this can happen to anybody, but nonverbal communication is specifically very difficult to pick up for autistic people. It is best to say exactly what you want or mean with words. Avoid winking, hand gestures, or heavy nods.

Provide Details on Deadlines and Project Specifics

A lot of managers don't like to micromanage employees. This is understandable, as it can add stress to the relationship and because, just like autistic people, neurotypical people are all different and prefer to work in their own way. However, this often results in the use of broad deadlines that allow people to manage their time on their own. This doesn't work well for autistic people. We must be managed differently.

It is better to give specific instructions and details for deadlines and times. An instruction like "This has to be finished this afternoon" or "I need this by Friday" can still leave a lot of guessing. It's better to say something like "This has to be finished by 2 p.m. this afternoon" or "I need this as a PDF file on Friday by 5 p.m."

Avoid Assumptions

For me and many other autistic people, it's a challenge to receive instructions and understand someone's words. Managers always assumed I understood everything correctly, while this often wasn't the case. Sometimes even I didn't realize I'd misunderstood. It's very helpful if a manager asks confirming questions like "What are you going to start with?" and "What will you do when that is finished?" to make sure that everything is understood correctly.

Explain Our Mistakes, Don't Just Fix Them

One of the tasks I used to do at histopathology lab was organize the archive of tissues that were processed. A coworker explained to me how to do this, and I did it exactly as she taught me. One day, the manager told me I had made a total mess out of it and started to fix it. I asked him what I had done wrong, but he wouldn't answer me. It made me feel very bad, because I was sure I had done it correctly, the way my coworker had explained it to me, yet because the manager wouldn't tell me what I had done wrong, I couldn't fix it. It is important to tell an autistic employee what they have done wrong, explain in detail how it can be fixed, and give them a chance to make it right.

Establish Both Long- and Short-Term Goals to Help Employees Prioritize

As mentioned before, many autistic people are very detail oriented, but we tend to see all details as being equally important. For example, when designing a brochure, I might see a lot of imperfections in the images and believe that fixing these would be equally important to fixing errors in

the text. However, the manager might feel it's not necessary to fix the images since others probably won't notice these small imperfections. This can make it challenging to plan and to prioritize tasks and goals. It can be very helpful if a manager explains what the short-term and long-term goals are and which tasks have higher priority.

WHEN YOUR BOSS IS ON THE SPECTRUM

Just as managing an employee on the spectrum brings unique challenges, so too does working for someone on the spectrum or being part of a workplace that is very neurodiverse (this is particularly common in the tech industry). You should begin by reexamining what you need from a manager. Because you likely won't be able to rely on social cues and small talk to engage your boss, you need to instead begin to communicate more directly; conversely, you shouldn't read into things like tone and eye contact as signs of disapproval. Think about workplace structure and project management techniques with an aim for universal designs that work for everyone on and off the spectrum. Follow their lead on rules and procedures and learn (or even better, ask) their preferred method of communication. Respect their expertise and experience and understand that they offer a tremendous asset to your organization, even if it might not be apparent to you at first. They are the boss for a reason.

How to Collaborate with a Coworker on the Autism Spectrum

I have always enjoyed the idea of being part of a team, but the communication challenges were too difficult to overcome. My limited verbal responses, lack of eye contact, and monotone speech often caused my coworkers to assume I was stuck-up or aloof, but in reality I was the exact opposite. Gradually, because of these misunderstandings, bullying, and social shunning, I became anxious and secluded. It didn't matter how hard I tried. With every job, I had exactly the same issues.

The first thing neurotypical coworkers need to realize is that we want to be there. We want to work. Most of us will never use our autism as an excuse to not do a task unless something is really not possible for us. It's frustrating when our difficulties are dismissed. We might need more patience when a colleague explains something to us. Most of us also need specific and concrete details since we take language so literally. In a bigger group, it is better if one person speaks at a time to avoid chaos. We might get anxious when things don't go according to plan. All we need in situations like this is patience and understanding, some support, and clear directions on how to proceed.

We like to be part of a team, but we might choose to sit alone during a break. Breaks are often much more challenging than the work itself. During a break, there are suddenly no guides about what to do or what to say. Many of us are not very good at socializing, especially in groups. Often, we do better with one-on-one conversations. Most of us will appreciate it if you invite us to come sit with you, but remember, no autistic person is the same. Some like to talk

and interact, and some prefer to be a bit more in the background or even completely by themselves.

Most important, focus on our strengths instead of our weaknesses. We might not excel at certain things neurotypical people excel at, but we often have other skills that they might struggle with, like the ability to focus extensively on details or perform a repetitive task that many people would find monotonous. It's a good thing we're different. If we were all good at the same things, we wouldn't be able to complement each other. Differences should be embraced. This is how we can make great teams together.

Tips for Employers to Create a Neurodiverse Workplace

I can't express enough how crucial it is that employers, managers, and coworkers are understanding and willing to make adjustments and accommodations when needed for an autistic employee. Just because autism is often not visible, it doesn't mean it's not there. Just as we would provide braille books for a blind person and a ramp for a person in a wheelchair, certain adjustments need to be made for autistic employees.

The reason I never had a long-term job didn't have anything to do with the work itself. I was always able to do the tasks, but the communication challenges and unfriendly work environments inevitably led to me getting fired or quitting. Employers should understand that, while we may require some specific accommodations, in return you will get a very loyal, hardworking, and passionate employee for many years to come.

Tip #1: Aces in Their Places

A common workplace idiom is the phrase “aces in their places,” which means having the right people assigned to the tasks that best suit their abilities. This also holds true for workers on the autism spectrum.

Focus on the strengths of autistic employees rather than their weaknesses. Many autistic people have incredible skills, and they can even outperform neurotypical people when it comes to certain tasks. Employers should make sure that autistic employees are assigned to tasks and positions that allow them to use their talents. This will keep an autistic employee highly motivated and productive.

Tip #2: Recognize Limits

Accept that an autistic employee will not be able to do certain tasks, and take the time to learn what those might be. In my case, talking on the phone can cause a tremendous amount of stress. Because of my anxiety, the fear and anticipation of the phone ringing could ruin an entire workday. Just as you should understand what an employee on the spectrum does well, you should learn where they struggle and offer whatever help you can.

Tip #3: Step-by-Step Instructions

Although many autistic people thrive with routines and schedules, there can still be difficulties with organizing, planning, and sequencing tasks. The more steps a certain task has, the more difficult it can be to find the correct order of the steps. In a workplace this can be very tricky, so it can be helpful if an employer has the steps written down in the

exact order. Always be as specific as possible with times, amounts, or file types.

Tip #4: Location, Location, Location

As mentioned before, many autistic people are painfully sensitive to all kinds of sensory input. Sounds can be distracting and even painful. While I was working at a design studio, my desk was right next to the printer. Although I did enjoy the warmth it provided, it also made a lot of noise, and a bright light came from it every time somebody used it. Whenever it was activated, I automatically looked at it, and the noise distracted me and broke my concentration, negatively affecting my work.

Employers should make sure not to place an autistic person next to a printer or another machine that makes loud noises or has bright lights or other distractions. A place next to a door where people constantly walk in and out can also be too distracting. Many autistic people are also super sensitive to temperature, so a seat away from an open window, or a door that leads outside, is also better. When in doubt, just ask us the best place for us to sit, and try to be as accommodating as possible.

Tip #5: We're Not Rude

Socializing involves a lot of unwritten rules, such as knowing when to shake someone's hand or when and how to greet another person. When an autistic person doesn't do this, it doesn't mean they are rude. When I was still an employee at a company, I used to say hi every time I saw a person. This included the same person every time. Eventually this irritated him and he would ignore me, and it confused me. I did this because I learned that it was polite

to greet people at a workplace. Even though I know it's polite to greet people, it doesn't come naturally to me to know how, when, and how often, or how to greet my boss, say, versus a coworker. It's important not to take offense when an autistic employee greets you either too often, or not at all, or speaks to you in a way that may sound inappropriate. Of course, this does not excuse racist or sexually harassing speech.



The page features a light beige background with abstract, colorful curved lines and shapes in the corners. These shapes are in shades of pink, teal, orange, and dark blue, creating a modern, artistic frame around the central text.

CHAPTER SIX

AUTISM IN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Some people think autistic people aren't interested in socializing or that they don't want any friends. Even though many autistic people can entertain themselves perfectly well, we do have the need to have friends and relationships just like everybody else. Making friends and maintaining friendships comes with a lot of expectations, common conflicts, confusions, and misunderstandings that can be challenging for autistic people. It's unfortunately quite common for an autistic person not to have any friends at all, or to have a very small social network. Even though I've always been kind of a loner, for many years I was excruciatingly lonely. Being alone and feeling lonely are two different things. One can be alone and be completely happy, but one can also be in a classroom, a group, or a crowd and feel extremely lonely. When a person doesn't fit in and doesn't have the feeling of belonging anywhere, it can have a huge effect on their well-being. This is something many autistic people struggle with, and this chapter explores the different ways neurotypical people can help us develop those social relationships.

My Friends and Relationships

For many years of my life, I didn't have any friends. I grew up with a twin brother, and we often had mutual friends when we were little because he took all the initiative for the social interactions. My brother was my best friend growing up, and I got along very well with the stepsiblings we saw every six weeks when visiting our dad. Every now and then I would have a friend of my own, but it never lasted long. Especially during puberty, everybody seemed to change while I seemed to stay more like a little kid. I no longer felt safe around kids of my own age. I tried to fit in and make friends at school and in sports, but I was bullied and shunned everywhere I went.

When I was younger, I gravitated toward the teachers who were nice to me. Every now and then, when I really felt that I was connecting with a teacher, I would invite them to do something fun together. This always turned into a disappointment, because their response was that they wanted to keep work life and private life separate. Once I invited a doctor, with whom I shared the same interests, to play chess sometime. I received the same response. This may be obviously inappropriate to other people, but it wasn't to me. To me, everybody is a person who could be a potential friend. Good friends are hard enough to find, so why would you limit your chances? It just doesn't make sense to me.

For many years, the only friend I had was my parrot, Pilaf. For me it has always been easier to connect with animals because they don't use words to communicate and they don't judge, like people tend to do. Pilaf was registered as my therapy animal. He helped me a lot with the challenges I face as an autistic person.

It was years later, in my early 30s, that I had my first romantic relationship. We met online, and in 2013 Pilaf

and I immigrated to Montreal, Canada, to live with this person. I was very excited to leave the Netherlands, where I'd been unhappy most of my life. Before immigrating to Montreal, I was extremely diffident, but finally having a person in my life who understood me and appreciated me was a huge step toward restoring my self-esteem. I found it was a lot easier to connect with people in Montreal. People are more friendly and open-minded here than in the small city in the Netherlands where I'd always lived. I haven't been bullied once since immigrating, and I've made several friends. I'm not in that romantic relationship anymore, but we have stayed very good friends and consider each other family. We live in the same building in different apartments and enjoy spending time together.

My parrot Pilaf passed away in 2017 when he was 18 years old. This was a hard time for me, as I would never have made it through those tough years in the Netherlands without him. I've always been and always will be kind of a loner. I enjoy and am capable of entertaining myself with all kinds of activities, like watching movies, taking walks, playing the piano, playing chess online, and making pencil drawings. This doesn't mean that I don't need friends, though. I have several friends now, and I like choosing either to hang out with one of them or to do something by myself.

Even though I still encounter issues and obstacles on a regular basis with communication and social interaction, I'm extremely thankful for what I have now. When I still lived my isolated existence in the Netherlands, I could never even have dreamed about the life I'm leading today. I count my blessings every single day.

Common Conflicts

When people see a little child having a tantrum in a supermarket, they are not usually surprised. They might even think it's cute or funny. But when an adult on the spectrum has a meltdown or begins stimming (for either positive or negative reasons), it's a completely different story. Stimming and meltdowns are both natural autistic responses, but like other aspects of autism, they can make friendships hard.

People tend to be afraid of or judge what's different. My experience has shown me it's harder in small towns than in big cities, where being different is not as obvious. But even in a big city, making connections can be very challenging when you don't fit in with the norm. Unfortunately, we're not able to suppress all of our autistic responses, and I don't want to. I'd feel like I was just acting all the time and not really being myself. Friends can react to autistic responses as they would to responses of neurotypical friends. If it's a reply of joy, they can say something confirming, like "Yeah, I knew you would like that!" If it's a response of stress or anxiety, they can ask what their friend needs or take them away from a stressful situation. Outside of stimming and other autistic responses, there are a few other common conflicts that can occur when it comes to making friends on the spectrum.

Common Conflict #1: Guest or Pest?

Autistic people usually only understand what is literally being said, but many people don't say what they really mean. Social cues that may seem obvious to others can be vague and confusing. For me, and for many other autistic people, it can help a great deal if people say exactly what they mean, and understand that we take what they say literally.

For example, in the past people got irritated with me because they thought I visited them too often. I didn't realize that until a friend finally told me, "You don't have to visit me every day." After that, I stopped visiting him altogether because "not visiting every day" was not specific enough for me to understand, so I stuck with not visiting.

A friendship or relationship with an autistic person might be different in this way. Your autistic friend might need to know specific times to visit you, and they likely do not want you coming by unannounced. Clear communication is key, and text messages are best.

Common Conflict #2: Can't Treat Everyone Differently

For neurotypical people, distinguishing different kinds of relationships might be an easy thing to do, but for many autistic people, this is nearly impossible. When I enter the doctor's room and ask him how he is doing, I'm behaving the same way I would when I'm with a good friend. Unwritten social rules are hard to understand, and they can be even harder when they are different depending on the relationship.

I only distinguish people I feel comfortable with from people I do not feel comfortable with. How the conversation will go mostly depends on their initiatives and questions. I often tend to just wait and "see which way the wind blows," rather than taking the initiative myself in order to avoid the disappointments and painful situations I've encountered in the past.

Common Conflict #3: First Impressions

People often tend to judge others before they even know them. This is a huge missed opportunity, because a first impression is often misleading. When people meet someone who doesn't say much, or says nothing at all, they tend to assume that the person is boring or that he or she has nothing to say. People didn't want to be friends with me because they thought I was boring. I know I'm not the only autistic person who has experienced this, and I know that if people had initiated conversations with us, they would have discovered that we weren't stupid or boring at all. So, if your first encounter with a person on the spectrum isn't fun or interesting, take the time to give them another chance; the next one could be.

Common Conflict #4: Don't Criticize Us for Being Ourselves

Most, if not all, people on the autism spectrum use masking when they go out in public. When I'm in public or around others, they get to experience the very best of me as I tend to hide my autistic traits. Often this means when a person gets to know me better and we become friends, sooner or later they get annoyed with the way I communicate. They tell me my responses are too limited, that I keep using the same words over and over, or that it sounds like I'm not interested.

The first two can be true. A conversation can take a tremendous amount of energy, and the longer it continues, the more unnatural my responses become. The last reason is incorrect, though. I am always interested, and even though my responses are limited or I may repeat the

same word, I am listening. Of course, we are always trying to improve our communication skills, but there are limits to what our friends should expect. Understanding that we communicate a little differently makes things much easier for us.

Common Conflict #5: Parties

On a few occasions—at art exhibitions, for instance—I’ve had multiple friends or acquaintances with me at the same time. I know it’s the polite thing to do to introduce them to each other, but this is very challenging for me. When the surroundings are quiet or not too chaotic it can work fine, even though I still find it difficult and might look very unnatural. At an art exhibition or other event where there are many people trying to communicate with me, I have no idea how to divide my attention, let alone how to introduce friends and acquaintances to each other.

I’m sure I’m not the only autistic person who finds this difficult. A friend of an autistic person shouldn’t take it personally or feel left out if they are not introduced to others. If you experience that awkward moment, try to take the initiative and introduce yourself to the others in the group. I also find it difficult in a group to divide my attention, especially when I’m the host. I usually won’t even invite two people over at the same time for this reason. It’s better for me to be with one friend at a time. I don’t mind being invited to a small party or gathering when the host does the initiating. I hardly attend parties, but when I do, I tend to just sit back and observe rather than initiate and talk, even when it’s a small group of three or four people.

Strengths on the Spectrum

Too many people think that autistic people are not interested in making friends because we don't initiate conversations or connections. Actually, just the opposite is true, and the fact that many of us communicate and respond in different ways than people are used to can actually be a positive thing. Because our brains are wired differently, we have a unique way of thinking, and we possess positive characteristics that can make us valuable and interesting friends.

Strength #1: Imaginative

Sometimes I wish I could turn my brain off for a while, so I could get some peace. My mind often goes a thousand miles per hour, from topic to topic and all over the place. It can drive me totally insane and feel chaotic, but it also means that my mind is eager to learn, and I'm always wondering about the weirdest things. I get many ideas and thoughts that are creative, funny, and abnormal in a good and often hilarious way. In middle school, I sometimes helped the janitor. Once when I was looking at the mop bucket with the wringer on it, I thought that it looked as if the hole of the wringer was big enough to put your head through, but that you wouldn't be able to get your head back out again. I wondered what would happen then and how you would ever be able to get your head out of the bucket. I shared this with the janitor, and he was just amazed that a thought like that would even pop up in my mind. It made him laugh.

It's never boring in my mind. I don't always share what's going on in there with others because I'm afraid of their responses. But when I really feel comfortable with a person, I will speak my mind and share my funny ideas, jokes, and thoughts. Many autistic people's minds work this way as well.

If you become good friends with an autistic person, there's a good chance the ideas they share will almost never be boring.

Strength #2: Nonjudgmental

Because many autistic people are associative thinkers, we are less likely to judge others. We don't tend to categorize or put people into boxes. Even though in public many of us tend to hide our autistic traits and try to fit in, we prefer to be ourselves, and when we feel comfortable enough around a person to be ourselves, we don't care about what others might think of us.

Strength #3: Honest

If you've seen *Star Trek*, you've probably heard Spock say, "Vulcans cannot lie." Even though most autistic people are actually able to tell a lie, they usually will not. We are often naturally honest, almost to a fault, and sometimes even brutally honest. When a friend has a new haircut that we think is hideous, we will say so if they ask us. When you have a piece of spinach in between your teeth, we will let you know. I've come home after lunch with a friend to find that I have been walking around with a piece of parsley or cilantro between my teeth, and it always annoys me that somebody didn't let me know. I realize that people don't always find it easy to let someone know about this sort of thing, but personally, I'd prefer to be embarrassed for a short while than to make a fool of myself without realizing it for hours. With an autistic friend, there's a good chance you don't have to worry about embarrassing yourself like this in public, because your friend will let you know if your haircut is screwed up, your fly is down, you have a booger under your nose, or any leftovers are stuck between your teeth.

Strength #4: Loyal

Autistic people often tend not to have many friends, but we are fiercely loyal to the friends we have. We are inclined to be very black-and-white thinkers—a gray area just doesn't exist—so with a friend, it's all or nothing. We form either a strong and deep connection or no connection at all. I am the same with hobbies as well. When I do something like playing the piano or chess, I want to do it with all my effort and at my absolute best. I can't really have something on the side that I do just a little bit. If I notice that I'm not able or I don't have the time to put 100 percent effort into something, then I prefer to quit. If I tried to do everything, my life would be too difficult to manage and too chaotic. With personal connections, I'm the same. I will put 100 percent effort into creating a strong, long-lasting connection and being a very good and helpful friend as much as possible.

Strength #5: Authentic

Chitchatting is something I've never understood. I do sometimes try to start a conversation by saying something about the weather, but I do that only because I've heard other people do it. I prefer not to, because it doesn't make sense to me to just state the obvious as a conversation topic. Like many other autistic people, I prefer to talk about subjects like movies, science, music, life experiences, and how a person is really doing, rather than telling each other quickly we're both doing great, while the exact opposite might be the case. I don't see the point in that. Many autistic people are logical thinkers, and time spent talking about all-too-obvious things, or practically lying to each other about how we're doing, just doesn't seem very logical. We prefer conversations about topics that are meaningful and interesting rather than superficial.

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION

There are some autistic people who like to chat and who will initiate conversations, but this will often involve their special interests and can quickly turn into a one-way street. There are many autistic people who find it difficult to start a conversation or to keep one going. They might greet others and ask them how they are doing, but going on from there can be very challenging. There are some autistic people who won't start a conversation at all, or who are completely nonverbal. When autistic people are nonverbal, it doesn't mean they have nothing to say or that they do not understand words. When an autistic person doesn't start a conversation, it doesn't mean they are not interested in having a conversation. It might just be too difficult to initiate. Personally, I don't find it easy to start conversations. Often, I don't know what to say at all, but even if I do, I find that I still have a lot of uncertainties. I hope I'm not interrupting somebody for instance, or that I'll look or sound weird.

When having a conversation with an autistic person, you might have to put more effort into keeping the conversation going. You might be the one who keeps asking questions while receiving no questions back at all. This doesn't mean that the autistic person is not interested in learning more about you, so feel welcome to share your experiences and stories anyway. Autistic people can be very shy, like me, and the more we are encouraged and get the feeling that a person is interested in knowing us, the more we will open up. Just keep in mind that conversations might be a bit different than what you're used to, or not, depending on the autistic person's communication skills.

The Friendship Spectrum

For most people, having friends is something they take for granted. When I confide in others that for many years of my life I didn't have any friends at all, they find it hard to believe. They assume I'm exaggerating, but for many autistic people, having friends is not all that common. There are autistic people who lead very isolated lives. That is okay if it is a choice, but many autistic people really want to have friends; they just can't seem to connect. It's a good thing that times are changing, that people are more open-minded, and that societies are becoming more inclusive. Unfortunately, that still doesn't mean making friends is easy. Even though autistic people can and will work to improve our social skills, we will always need others to be open-minded and somewhat adaptable to our needs for us to be able to make and maintain friendships.

When trying to establish a friendship with an autistic person, be open-minded and leave your expectations behind. Sometimes new friends will tell me that they don't even notice I'm autistic, but pretty soon they start complaining about the way I communicate. Even when a person doesn't *seem* autistic at first, it's important to remember that you may have received the best version of that person the first time you met them. Sooner or later, you will notice their autistic characteristics. Just remember to be nonjudgmental and look beyond things you are not used to, like stimming or poor eye contact.

Many autistic people tend to talk only about their special interests, like movies or Minecraft, but you can make this more of a two-way conversation by asking questions and sharing your own interests. If you notice you have similar interests, of course this can be the perfect way to connect. You can offer to talk about some of your special interests,

too. Even though I enjoy my own hobbies and like to share them with a friend, I also like it when a friend has totally different hobbies than I do. I enjoy learning about new things and trying new activities, even though this can be a little scary.

Many autistic people have a sense of humor and like to joke around. It is possible, though, that they won't understand your jokes. When I'm at a movie theater, it happens on a regular basis that everybody is laughing about something in the movie except me. But it's also not uncommon for me to find myself the only one laughing at something that didn't seem very funny to others. It's okay for a friend to give advice about how to improve communication skills, but it's important not to get annoyed if an autistic person doesn't automatically understand or change.

Most autistic people enjoy going on trips, especially if it includes something related to their special interest. It's crucial to have the trip planned ahead, and to make sure it doesn't come as a surprise. Anything that comes up suddenly and unexpectedly can cause anxiety, even if it's something we like. Unannounced visits or surprise parties are not recommended. Canceling a trip or event that was planned can also be difficult to deal with for an autistic person. In this case, explain the reason why it's canceled, and also, if possible, give a date on which the trip will eventually happen instead. An autistic person might also need help organizing and packing for a trip.

What I enjoy most is being with a friend who encourages me to be myself and who doesn't criticize me. I also really appreciate a friend who will offer some advice, help, or support every now and then. When it comes to befriending an autistic person, keep an open mind and do not judge. Be patient and take the time to get to know an autistic person.

Conclusion

Even though writing this book has not been easy because, as I have emphasized, words don't come naturally to me, it has been a great opportunity and honor for me to share my life experiences as an autistic person. It's good that people are increasingly willing to learn from autistic people themselves, rather than only from neurotypical people speaking on their behalf. No matter how well-educated a neurotypical person is about autism, they will never be able to really feel or express what it's like to be autistic and to go through certain challenges autistic people face. The chaos and overwhelming feelings we often experience in life are so intense that it's almost impossible to express them with words.

To the reader, I just want to say that it means a lot to me, and probably to many other autistic people, that you took the step to learn more about autism by reading this book. I hope it will help you as a teacher, an employer, a coworker, or as a friend of an autistic person. Every person on the spectrum is unique, so not everything in this book applies to every single one of us, but don't be discouraged if you make a mistake. It doesn't really matter what kind of relationship we're aiming for; the key to any kind of real connection is taking the time and patience to get to know a person, without judgement, without disrespect, and without fear of the unknown.

Autistic or not, everybody has their own story. We all want the same things in life: to be happy, to feel appreciated and loved, and to take part in this roller coaster we call life. Everybody deserves a chance, and the best way to make this happen is to cross out the word "normal" in your dictionary and to be open-minded. Embrace difference. Celebrate the strengths and skills everyone has been given. That's the key for everyone to succeed and to thrive.

Resources

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How Autism Is Diagnosed in Children:

Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, 2nd edition (ADOS-2): [WPSPublish.com/ados-2-autism-diagnostic-observation-schedule-second-edition](https://www.wpspublish.com/ados-2-autism-diagnostic-observation-schedule-second-edition)

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About the Author



Casey Vormer, aka Remrov, is a self-taught artist and autism advocate. As an artist, he specializes in realistic pencil drawings of everything he finds interesting, mainly animals. Because of his autism, he sees the whole world in tiny

little details. His drawings tend to be this way, too, very precise and detailed. In 2017 Casey won an INAP (International Naturally Autistic People) award representing Canada as an artist.

Casey grew up in the Netherlands and immigrated to Montreal in 2013. While he lived in the Netherlands, he gave presentations about autism that were very well received by teachers, parents, and caregivers of autistic kids and adults. Casey decided to continue giving presentations in Montreal, which he now does on a regular basis. Besides presenting in person, he also makes YouTube videos about autism and shares his life story with people interested in learning more about autism.

To see more of Casey's drawings, visit RemrovsArtwork.com.

You can also see Casey's videos about autism on YouTube: [YouTube.com/c/RemrovsWorldofAutismVideos](https://www.youtube.com/c/RemrovsWorldofAutismVideos).

The complete guide to connecting with adults on the autism spectrum

For a friend, family member, or coworker with autism, communication can be challenging. *Connecting with the Autism Spectrum* can help you find common ground with expert tips and helpful insights about talking (and listening) to neurodiverse adults so you can make your interactions more transparent, meaningful, and rewarding for all.

Written by Casey Vormer, a self-taught artist and autism advocate, this comprehensive guide is a trusted source to understanding neurodiversity, a brief introduction to the autism spectrum, and a primer on easy communication strategies. This book also helps you avoid misunderstandings by teaching you to recognize and resolve your own biases.

Simple approach—Discover the best ways to communicate with those living with autism.

Situational success—Find the right information for various situations and settings, including school, work, and friendships.

Sensitive tone—Learn valuable information from a clear, honest point of view that does not seek to “cure” or manipulate people.

Casey “Remrov” Vormer is a self-taught artist and autism advocate who grew up in the Netherlands and immigrated to Montreal, Canada, in 2013. He enjoys giving presentations about autism to teachers, parents, and caregivers of kids and adults with autism. He also makes YouTube videos about autism and shares his life story with audiences interested in learning more. Find Casey’s drawings at RemrovsArtwork.com and watch Casey’s videos on YouTube: [YouTube.com/c/RemrovsWorldofAutismVideos](https://www.youtube.com/c/RemrovsWorldofAutismVideos).

