

# and the Social Rulebook



Written by Autistic People Living in Scotland

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This eBook has been created and written in partnership with autistic adults, to raise awareness and increase understanding of the differences in communication styles between autistic and non-autistic people.

Whether we realise it or not, we all follow a social rulebook – all those unwritten "rules" that shape our everyday interactions and the way we navigate the world.

Day to day we are often required to read between the lines to truly understand what someone is saying, to interpret body language, to make eye contact and to understand idioms. For non-autistic people, eye contact is seen as an important sign that people are listening and paying attention. Idioms are all those little phrases and sayings people use as shorthand, for example, saying 'it's raining cats and dogs' to mean it's pouring with rain, or 'killing two birds with one stone' to mean 'achieving two aims at once'.

However, not all of our brains are wired the same way, to be able to process and interpret this rulebook. Meanings are often lost, and conversations misinterpreted. Many people are left to navigate a world where everyday interactions are much harder and more overwhelming than they need to be.

Autistic people are often under pressure to change how they communicate and who they are, on a daily basis, to fit in with what society expects and accepts within the social rulebook.

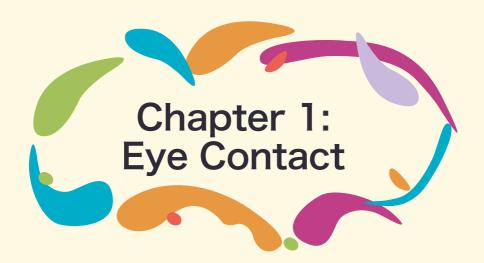
What if we told you there were two social rulebooks, running in parallel, only one side was not aware of the other?

Autistic people also have their own social rulebook. One that is different but of equal standing. There are differences in communication styles and the way in which information is processed.

If we are all aware of these differences and understand and accept them, it could make a positive impact on how easily and effectively autistic and nonautistic people communicate with each other.

We all communicate differently, and that's ok. This eBook will tell you more...





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Look at me when I am talking to you 

Are you paying attention? 

Are you even listening?
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These are all phrases many of us have heard, thought and maybe said before. Eye contact is seen as an indicator for how engaged someone is in a conversation, specifically how closely they are listening. Not giving eye contact is often seen as rude. But for many autistic individuals this is far from the truth.

"For many autistic people eye contact is difficult and may actually be painful, as it can be extremely anxiety-inducing. For some we cannot concentrate on what you are saying if we are giving eye contact. So we trade off being able to engage properly in the conversation for looking like we belong in the conversation."

# **By Theo**

To non-autistics, sustained eye contact during conversation can show good manners or politeness; you look at the person who is talking to show that you are listening, that you are engaged. Not only is it expected that eye contact be consistently held throughout conversation, it is also agreed upon that eye contact denotes certain emotions or additional meanings. For example, if you do not make eye contact with a non-autistic person while they are speaking, they may feel that you do not care about what they are saying. However, if you make prolonged eye contact with them when they are not speaking, they may interpret this as anger or disbelief.

As autistic people, our social "rules" generally gravitate less around the idea of politeness as a specific set of customs or actions because we prefer to do things for more tangible or practical reasons. It does not make sense for us to uphold the same rigid customs non-autistics associate with politeness as they are based on this concept of social nicety. And, as autistic people, the concept of social "nicety" does not make sense because for us, eye contact is not "nice". In fact it can be quite distressing.



The idea that eye contact is attached to how other people will read our emotions is worrying, because we express emotion in different ways than non-autistic people, which often results in us being seen as monotonous (or even apathetic). Our facial expressions may not necessarily mean the same thing as non-autistic people's, or perhaps the way we express emotion may appear (to non-autistic people) more muted. We also tend to be more direct and honest, and generally agree that if we are feeling a certain way then we will simply say so.

The concept of eye contact as a means of expressing emotion therefore seems sort of nonsensical to us, not only because we tend to express our emotions more verbally, but also because it relies so much on interpretation.

It would be helpful for non-autistic people to be aware of our emotional and communication differences, to understand that for autistic people eye contact is not an indicator of politeness or interest, and that if we feel confident you aren't trying to read our emotions or inject meaning where there is none on our part, we will likely be more able to make eye contact with you.



# **By Marion**

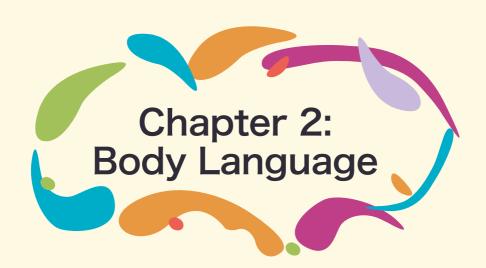
Eye contact and autistics - some of us give lots of eye contact, some give some, and some of us don't give any.

But which eyeball to look at? You've got two of them! How long do I look at it for? What's the golden ratio – how long must I peer into your pupils?

Knowing when to look away can be hard. Giving contact for too long can send the wrong message. People usually associate prolonged eye contact with flirting or being aggressive. I accidentally flirted fairly frequently when I was at university! If that makes you chuckle you're not alone – how silly of me! But it can also put us in danger – accidentally flirting with the wrong person can have serious consequences. Same with coming across as accidentally aggressive. Some folks have told me I came across as aggressive at times when I was just concentrating! Equally dangerous and damaging when trying to build connections with people.

Since finding out that I am autistic I give people less eye contact as I no longer feel obligated to. This can make it easier for me to communicate. It often gets misinterpreted as rude, that I am uninterested or not focused enough, when the reality is that I can either look at your eyeballs, or I can pay more attention to you and be more present in the conversation, and focus on what people say and how I want to respond.

I love when I am talking with other autistic people who similarly avoid eye contact as they have no expectation of eye contact, we can allow our eyes to drift to wherever we are comfortable. And during lockdowns when we could only communicate with people online we were physically unable to give eye contact, so what's so important about it anyway?



### People, like books, can be easy to read – not true!

For non-autistic people, posture, hand gestures, and facial expressions all add to the tone of a conversation and are used to emphasise or convey what they mean - even when their words don't.

Crossed arms can indicate anger or annoyance, exaggerated hand movements can be used to add passion and emphasis. For non-autistic people body language is an important part of the conversation, which means they expect it to be mirrored back to them when they're talking.

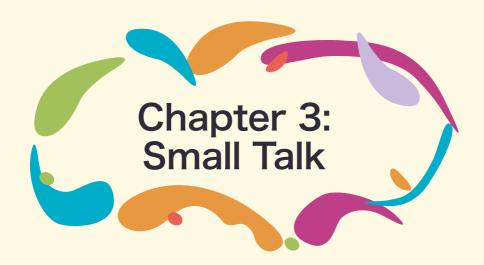
For many autistic people their body language does not mirror their words or reflect their emotions. The thoughtful way in which many autistic people consider their words means there is little, if any, need for their listener to read between the lines or interpret their body language. Instead, listen to what they have to say, hear their words and try not to focus on their body language.





My face never seems to do what other people expect it to.





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How are you? 55

What's the weather like where you are? 55

What did you get up to at the weekend? 55
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Small talk is a non-autistic norm – a quick exchange of niceties to make those engaged in conversation feel more comfortable. However, some autistic people struggle with small talk. If you are autistic it may take longer to put your thoughts into words, so if you add in a whole layer of unnecessary chit chat that you hadn't planned for, it can become all too much to process.

Many autistic people may use up all their energy answering questions that non-autistic people don't place much value on. Next time you speak to an autistic person, **try skipping the small talk and get right to the point**, it will make for a more productive conversation all round.



# **By Leo**

I have tried to avoid, as much as possible, speaking for or on behalf of others. As the cliché goes, "you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person". However, as with all things, there are commonalities, and I hope I have drawn these out, and that they will help, in some small way, to make the world a better place for everyone – autistic and non-autistic alike.

The rules for small talk among most non-autistic people seem from the outside strange. At their core they appear to require the need for indirect communication. Small talk is the "grease" of social interaction. It is full of meaningless additions, and a tendency to circle a topic before broaching it. This is perceived as politeness. But is it? When younger I used to refer to conversation as "the rules of engagement", because I found it akin to a battle, that needed pre-strategising to survive until the end (let alone "win"); in this context "winning" was succeeding in getting to the end of the conversation without being thoroughly exhausted, and having understood the other person sufficiently whilst ensuring they understood me.



Small talk wastes time on meaningless platitudes. When I am asked, "how are you?" by a non-autistic person, most frequently they don't really care. They want me to say, "I am fine, how are you?" They will then say they are fine. We have established a base line and can then move on to whatever it is we really need to talk about. Worst case scenario, comments on the weather will be interjected. This ritual exists to establish a "comfort" level for the non-autistic person. Ironically, autistic people are often cited as having "unnecessary" ritualistic behaviours – and yet non-autistic people have one they engage in whenever they meet.

Small talk is like the opening credits to a film. It passes the time, but is, ultimately, not relevant to the story being told.

Communication for an autistic person, with a non-autistic person, can therefore be exhausting – mentally and physically. Not only do I have to take what is being said to me, extrapolate what is meaningful and necessary to the conversation and what isn't based on contextual assumptions, I must simultaneously translate my natural communication style and make it "acceptable". This is on top of making sure I know what it is we are talking about. The addition of colourful phrases that need on-the-fly deconstructing/reconstructing, so that I can keep track of the conversation, adds extra demands.

My lack of engagement in small talk isn't because I am rude: it is because I genuinely want to understand what you want to say or have something important to tell you, I just don't need the preamble to do that. I also don't need a personal connection, as such, for that to happen. A personal connection is not a prerequisite to rational understanding. Non-autistic people tend to post-rationalise after an emotional response. Autistic people tend to emotionally respond after rational engagement.

My advice to anyone talking to me, or for that matter anyone else, whether they are non-autistic or otherwise is as follows.

- Say what you mean and mean what you say it shows far more respect and offers more opportunity for empathetic connection.
- Keep it simple don't use unnecessary words or phrases. Be factual where possible. Words are wonderful, they each contain a host of meanings, so choose them with care.
- Provide context only if it seems genuinely necessary (or is asked for); otherwise I will become lost in the conversation and not be sure what the important parts are.
- Give room to allow the other person time to respond – and allow yourself time to formulate what you want to say. Communication between individuals is fraught with misunderstandings at the best of times.

Conversation shouldn't be rushed. It should be **meaningful**. Don't speak **to** people. Talk **with** them. Sometimes, the best moment in a conversation is after the words have stopped. I have had some of my most cherished times with individuals where we have just sat and enjoyed the calm of each other's company after talking about, for example, what we liked about a painting. That connection, that warmth, is a thousand times more meaningful in its silence, than the hollow noise of "it was nice to see you".

# **By Marion**

Small talk to me is talking about absolutely nothing for no reason. It can feel really fake when people ask me how I am when the only answer they really want is that I am fine, and that they are highly unlikely to be actually honest about how they are back. If they are only small talking to butter me up for a favour it can feel even worse! I'd rather they got to the point.

When autistic people are communicating naturally with each other, we don't tend to small talk nearly as much! Our shared interests, the things we are passionate about: that's what we usually want to talk about. And we often don't want to waste time and energy following a meaningless script where people say things just for the sake of it. So we may not ask, "how are you, how was your weekend, your week, what is the weather like with you?" This isn't because we don't care about each other, we do very much. We just want to get right into the good bits of the conversation! "Hey, I'm super happy to see you, have you read this article? Have you seen the new episode of Star Trek? How did you enjoy the film you saw last week?" And get stuck into the things we really want to discuss.

Sometimes we will use small talk to end a conversation, just to check there wasn't anything else important the other person wanted to talk about. But mostly I trust that if my friends want to tell me about the usual small talk stuff, they will.



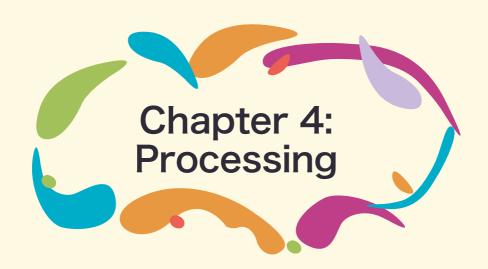
## **Idioms by Jasmine**

I believe non-autistic people use idioms the way they are meant to be used – alluding to their metaphorical meaning rather than their literal one. Now that I am older I am capable of understanding the majority of metaphors used in regular conversation. My brain does not immediately create a "literal" picture (like it did when I was younger). That being said, I do struggle with things like satire and sarcasm– I take things literally often (until I get a "clue" suggesting otherwise).

Rules about idioms are not different for autistic people. Autistic people may be much more literal and have linear answers to questions about non-philosophical or creative concepts, but are definitely capable of using idioms or understanding metaphorical approaches in a creative environment; for example, if you ask me, "what time should we schedule the meeting?", I will answer using language dedicated to time, "12 o'clock, so two hours from now?" (rather than a drawn-out running commentary that fails to specify when). There is a risk of confusion when things are unnecessarily vague. Don't tell me "a couple minutes" when you actually mean half-an-hour, y'know?

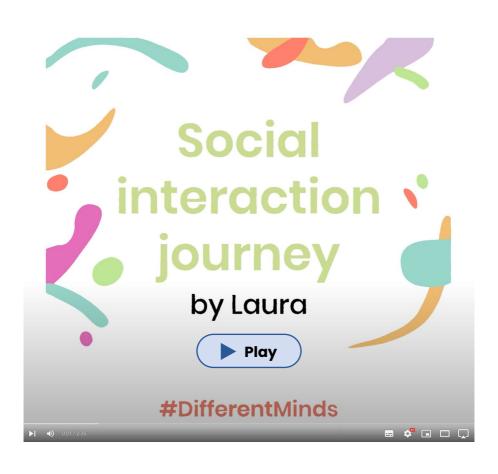
I think it would be easier for everyone if we communicated better. There is merit in being blunt when expressing yourself. Honestly saying how you feel rather than being unnecessarily vague and obtuse. It can cause a lot of issues when you need to make assumptions about what others are thinking. Sometimes idioms and metaphors are the best ways you can express yourself, but they should not be the only way you do so to the people around you.





The autistic mind is working hard when it comes to communication with non-autistic people. Constantly thinking about eye contact, body language and reading between the lines, filtering out potentially overwhelming sensory experiences, and trying to keep within the "unwritten rules" of non-autistic communication.





# **Processing by Lea**

I know that I don't trust my processing of this world, I cannot. My eyes get visual overload whenever there's a light that is coming in too sharp; when it hits me, I cannot move around safely unless there's someone I can fix my eyes on, moving slow enough to follow. Besides this, I cannot read facial expressions properly no matter how long I look at them. When someone's aftershave, perfume or hair spray is too much for my nose, bolts of frustration and a non-cooperative stomach overtake me in seconds, so using public transport is very tricky for me even with help. My ears too: as much as I can enjoy some Mozart operas tremendously, just the repeated sound of an electric kettle in the office used to make me feel as deeply hopeless as one of the protagonists halfway through those operas.

I will share here what I do trust though, in hopes that it will help you embrace autism more – and me myself. I trust my gut feelings. Even if I often struggle with picking up on others' subtle messages, sarcasm and hidden meaning, I know instantly when things are out of the usual, when somebody's falling ill, when something is not functioning.

It could be the many little details my neurons are processing – all the time ... I trust my heart. Of course, that bit of me is corresponding with autism too, thus my compliments would sound something like: "I love you so much it only took me seven months to tell you about it" or "The more time I spend with you, the less I want to mask" and "You mean so much to me, I already memorised all your routines. Let's talk about those!" And still, this heart is resilient, dedicated and transparent as heck, take it or leave it.

I trust my inner compass. My strong tendency to observe a situation from multiple sides, always weighing up pros and cons. Speaking up when justice is being put down. Not letting go of things that I think deserve more faith injected into them, even when others are heading back to base camp.

Most of the time I am lost in this world of vehicles speeding by, various devices beeping and ringing for their lives, online presence demands pressing on, careers developing through a multitude of employments. If I'm lucky, I can maybe process forty per cent of my environment at a time, of what is happening around me. And that would be somewhere in quiet green surroundings with squirrels being my only unexpected sensory intruders. Living by myself with care provided to me in visits, truth is, without this loyal sidekick, Mr Baxter my support dog – and friend, guide, sofawarmer, unfailing tear-dryer – I would probably degrade into passive surrendering, overwhelmed by non-autistic streams and trends. Yet, I am somehow here and growing.

To write for this brave and much-needed awareness campaign, I feel also means mentioning everything else I am too, besides being autistic: a believer, daughter, granddaughter, immigrant, employee, volunteer, student, recently – finally! – friend to some, an activist, a woman, someone's future special.



#### **Ash and Rona**





You have reached the end of this eBook, but it is just the beginning of a journey when it comes to understanding autistic communication. When everyone comes together with an open mind to learn about each other and how we all communicate, accept other people for who they are and treat each other with empathy and understanding, only good things can happen. We will understand each other better, learn from each other and all reap the benefits of better communication.

We all communicate differently, and that's OK. Different minds. One Scotland.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the creation of this eBook and the Different minds campaign. Your time and your words are valued and appreciated.





To find out more about autism visit:

## **Differentminds.scot**

A website created in partnership with autistic adults. Here you will find, amongst other things:

- Myth busting information on autism
- Frequently asked questions on autism answered by autistic people
- Lived experience written pieces
- Details for further information and support including autistic people led charities, local support, one stop shops, national charities and education support information



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