

Decoding Non-Verbal Communication

Autistic adults are honest, direct communicators and prefer literal or straightforward communication. Some can struggle to decode social cues conveyed through body language, vocal tone or vocal pacing when interacting with neurotypical people.

However, many neurotypical adults prefer indirect communication that conveys an implied meaning, and may drop verbal hints using vocal tone, humor, or body language to add context to what is said.

Often these communication strategies are used to uphold unspoken standards of politeness or evade responsibility for conveying uncomfortable or unpleasant messages. This can be very confusing for autistic clients, but also more straightforward neurotypical people. The following steps can help your client learn some decoding strategies when dealing with indirect communication.

Step 1: Normalize decoding problems

Psychoeducation is an important first step when teaching your clients new skills. Autistic adults struggle with self efficacy often due to a lifetime of social exclusion, criticism and invalidation.

It is important to normalize the struggle all adults can experience interpreting non-verbal communication in a range of situations to help reduce anxiety.

Step 2: Encourage assertiveness skills

When communication is not clear, your client can ask others clarifying questions.

If somebody is being sincere they will be happy to explain what they mean.

If somebody is not being straightforward then they may find requests for clarification provocative. This may mean your client is dealing with a manipulative or abusive individual.

You can design some clarification questions with your client, in their own words, so that they can keep them in mind. Such as

'I'm not sure I understand what you're saying.... Is it that?'

'Can you please explain what you mean by.... I'm not sure I understand you correctly. Thanks.'

'I think you're saying.... Is that right?'

Step 3: Follow up communication

If your client is dealing with somebody at work or college in a more formal capacity, yet they are not sure they've understood something correctly, they can follow up by writing an email requesting clarification.

They can use the scripted responses you have crafted with them, or design some other clarification questions for written communication.

This can be especially important if your client is dealing with bullying or manipulation, as they will then have a written record of the incident and their attempts to resolve confusion.

Step 4: Many neurotypical people are unclear communicators

Encourage your client to resist apologizing if they can't understand somebody's communication. Many people are unclear communicators and anyone can ask them what they mean if there is uncertainty about what they are trying to convey.

Neurotypical communication style is often indirect, includes dropping hints, using sarcasm or humor, and involves reading and implying hidden meanings into others' statements.

Decoding such indirect communication is not the responsibility of your autistic client, and they should refrain from apologizing for others' lack of directness. This is essential for maintaining healthy boundaries.

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