

IS THAT CLEAR?

3.1

Non-verbal communication

Not all communication comes from the words we speak. Much of it is non-verbal (eg body language, eye contact, gestures, touch, proximity, posture) and paraverbal (eg pace, pitch, tone, volume and the emphasis we place on certain words, phrases or pauses).

Non-verbal and paraverbal communication often reinforce our message and can even add another layer of meaning.

Autistic people may process this non-verbal information differently to allistic people and may be uncertain – or even unaware of the real message you are trying to get across.

It's most problematic when, for example, a sarcastic eye roll conveys the opposite of what you're saying, or when someone's looking at their watch saying *I've got all the time in the world* when they haven't.

Physical touch such as shaking hands and hugging can be a key part of communication for allistic people. However, some autistic people find this kind of touch uncomfortable or even painful. Likewise, do not insist on making and maintaining eye contact for the same reasons. Autistic people may well be listening even if they're not making eye contact or following conventions of showing that they are.

As allistic people, we can and should learn and validate how autistic people express themselves. There can be mutual misunderstandings. Challenging our unconscious assumptions and biases about people's actions is key. For example, repetitive sounds or movements (stims) such as humming, rocking or bouncing a leg can be indicators of emotion, as well as being used to self-regulate. It's important not to discourage these as they can help autistic people to function, concentrate and process information, as can the use of fidget or sensory gadgets and toys.

Recognising that autistic people may have their own ways of communicating is part of the shared responsibility of communication.



ACTION ITEMS

- Ensure your non-verbal/paraverbal communication (eg facial expressions, gesture, movement and tone) reinforces your spoken message and doesn't contradict what you're saying.
- Watch, learn and validate how your communication partner expresses themselves both verbally and non-verbally.
- Only touch an autistic person if they have expressly said or indicated that it's OK to do so.