



## Introduction

Friendships can be extremely positive in life as they provide us with people to talk to about our interests and feelings. They can also provide us with support in difficult times as well as guidance and advice to help us enjoy life more fully and safely. However, friendships take work and this can be made difficult by social issues often seen in autism.

Many people with autism would really like to form genuine friendships but struggle to do so because of the difficulty of understanding social nuances and non-verbal communication as well as issues associated with social anxiety.

However, some people with autism may not be interested in forming social relationships and this is not something to be overly concerned about. **It is only necessary to pursue friendships if they are desirable to you.**

It is not uncommon for a person with autism to lack friends and this can make you feel quite lonely. You could also find that, because you don't have a group of your own friends, you are heavily dependent on your family for social interaction and for support through life. This can become more and more difficult as parents and siblings age and increasingly have more of their own needs to attend to, such as old age or new families.

## What is friendship?

Friends are people who are interested in us and our lives and who we are happy to share information about ourselves with and enjoy spending time with. These people have a lot of personality traits that we like and we enjoy their company. Understanding the traits that we appreciate in others is useful because it helps us to see what we like about ourselves and what we might need to work on to be a better friend. Friendships are always equal and balanced, a person who always takes help and support from you but does not return those things is **not** a friend.

However, friendships do require some effort. It is important to get to know a friend properly and not just catalogue a series of facts about them, this helps us to understand and appreciate them as a person. It is important to always be willing to contribute to the relationship in whatever ways we can. A good friend can help a person with autism to understand your triggers and your anxieties and support you to cope with these things. They can also help you to learn to expand your social skill-set by providing an example that can be mirrored and copied as well as guiding you through socially complex situations.

Friends usually have at least one shared interest and they enjoy talking about that interest or performing that activity together. It may be difficult to find someone who shares your interests if you have a narrow set of hobbies. However, you can attend social groups and community events to meet people who share your passions. The internet is also a valuable tool as this allows people to find others who have similar past times. It also provides a space to meet new people where there are reduced social stresses and more straightforward social rules - often these rules are explicitly detailed on a forum or chat room. There is also a strong community of bloggers and writers with autism who discuss their lives on their own websites or leave comments and questions on the websites of others, this provides a good space for meeting other people who may have had similar past experiences.

It may be the case that you only develop relationships based on a single, circumscribed activity. This is absolutely fine; if that suits you then there is no reason to worry about deepening this friendship.

## Why is friendship important?

It may be difficult for you to initiate social interactions and this can make it extremely difficult for you to form bonds with others. It is also common for people with autism to lack understanding of what others may be thinking and have difficulty interpreting the verbal and non-verbal communication of others. It can sometimes be difficult for people with Autism to follow unstated social rules, particularly those that don't make sense to them as they are unlikely to follow a rule if it doesn't seem useful.

However, it is more than possible for you to form friendships and take great pleasure and interest in them. It is generally more common for women with autism to form significant friendships than men with autism but this does not mean that men do not, or cannot, form friendships. Nor does it mean that all women will want to develop relationships or seek out social interaction. You are an individual and you should only attend to your own needs, and not seek out relationships that do not interest you or make you uncomfortable.

## What issues may arise?

It is of vital importance that a friendship does not begin to have a negative impact on your life. Some people will take advantage of the relative social naivety of someone with social deficits. A true friend will guide you away from harmful situations and will support you through times of stress and overload. This would make a person a good friend but it is important to remember that a friend is **not** a carer, they are not your friend purely to look after you and you should not rely too heavily on them. It is important to self-advocate, in the sense of looking after one's own wellbeing and only accepting help from others as a favour, and not expecting it at all times.

It is also important to take responsibility for explaining any sensitivities and anxieties to help people to understand you and any behaviours and attitudes that they may not be used to. Good friends will accept these things and do their best to help you with your worries; they should not make you feel uncomfortable about the behaviours that help you to feel calm.

All people have characteristics that they could improve upon: some people may be easily offended, while others may be selfish or rude. It is therefore obvious that you may also have traits that you may wish to work on to improve your performance in social situations. However, it is vital that you never feel like you need to change who you are in order to make friends. People who expect a person to change in order to be their friend are not good friends. You should also remember that people are likely to have a group of friends and just because someone is considered a friend does not mean that they will only be friends with you. It is unwise to overdo communication and pester friends. It is often commented upon that people with autism need time alone to recharge but this is also true for neuro-typical people and they should be allowed time to themselves.

## Strategies

### Starting a Conversation

- It is important to stand reasonably close to a person if you want to start a conversation with them, this helps them to know it is them you are talking to. However, getting too close can make the person uncomfortable, it is usually best to stand about an arm's length away from them. It is also helpful to face them but you do not need to make eye contact if this makes you uncomfortable.
- Conversations normally begin by saying 'Hello' or, if you need to attract the person's attention, you can say 'excuse me'
- You can continue the conversation if they say a greeting back to you, such as 'hello' or 'hi', they may also ask you a question, such as 'hello, how are you?'
- It is considered rude to make critical comments of others, even if they are true, so try not to do this in conversation

### What to Say

- It may be helpful to write down some topics that you feel comfortable talking about as well as some questions that you can ask people.

- It is usual for people to make conversation about the weather, their work or what activities they have done recently. For one example, if you know that someone went to the theatre in the past few days, you might ask them if they enjoyed it.

## Things to Remember

- Ask the other person questions about them (e.g. age, where they live, what they enjoy doing etc.).
- Find out whether you have any similar hobbies to each other (e.g. music / history), and talk about these. If you don't have any similar hobbies, ask them questions about their hobbies.
- Take it in turns to arrange to meet up on a regular basis (once or twice a month) to do something you both enjoy and have agreed on.
- Give each other your phone number / email address, and ask how they prefer to arrange things - use the preferred method (texting / calling / email) to arrange meeting up.
- Only ask the other person questions you wouldn't feel awkward / anxious answering if they asked you the question.
- Social Rules can change depending on the situation. This means that what is right in one situation may not be right in another. If you are unsure about what to do or receive a reaction you were not expecting, it is fine to ask for clarification.
- Sometimes there are things that may be true but are not good things to say to someone. For example, telling someone that they are fat may well be true but is not considered a nice thing to say and may upset that person.
- Saying 'please' when you ask for something and 'thank you' when somebody gives you something or helps you with something shows that you are a polite person and that you are grateful for their help.
- If you make a mistake or upset somebody it is usually a good idea to apologise for hurting their feelings. However, it is also a great idea to ask them what you did wrong and explain to them that you did not mean to upset them.

## Social Groups

There are lots of social groups run by charities and organisations, specifically designed for people with autism. These are often based around a specific activity but may also just be general groups where you can meet other people with Autism. These are very useful for developing your social skills because they give you a chance to practice with people who have similar experiences of social interaction.

However, you should also see if there are social groups in your area that are open to everyone. These groups tend to have some focus on a shared interest so if you choose a group about something that interests you, you know you will have something in common with all of the other people who attend. This will remove a lot of the pressure to think of things to say as it is likely that you will at least begin by discussing the interest you share.

You can also find lots of people online who share either your interests or your diagnosis of autism. This means that you will have something in common that you can discuss which means it will be easier to think of things to say. The nature of the internet means that you will not have to interact directly with people and this may make you feel better about talking to them as you will only have to interpret their words, not their facial expressions and body language. Most online forums have a page of site rules and this will help you to know what is and isn't acceptable on the forum, which takes away another layer of pressure from you.

## Social Stories

Social stories are a way of modelling situations so that you can practice your responses to different possibilities. This will help you to script conversations and understand the appropriate things to say and do in response to the actions and words of others. You should try to do this with another person that you trust and who understands you and also knows more about social rules and conventions.

## Social Autopsies

Social autopsies work in conjunction with social stories. They are a way of understanding events and picking out the things that went well and the things you might do differently in the future. You can discuss events and situations with someone you trust and talk about the things that went right which will help you to

learn the appropriate behaviours you have picked up or that you have naturally and help you to understand them better.

You can also discuss the things that went badly or just not quite how you expected them to go. This will help you to see which aspects of your behaviour were not appropriate for your aims and help you to work on those things to find more useful ways to handle the situation in the future.

## **Autism and Friendship**

If these things are considered there is no reason why you can't make friends and enjoy spending time with them. The key to good friendships is that you understand that you do not need to change who you are; good friends will accept stereotyped behaviour and anxiety as well as limited social understanding, as long as they understand why these things happen and that no offence is intended. It should also be considered, however, that many people - those with Autism and neuro-typicals alike - are simply not interested in these social relationships and you should not feel forced into them just for the sake of looking "normal" to others.

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Thanks to the Autism West Midlands for the above information! The original article can be found at:  
[https://connect.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/upload/pdf\\_files/1401435760\\_DP-Friendships.pdf](https://connect.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/upload/pdf_files/1401435760_DP-Friendships.pdf)