

National Autistic Society

# Know yourself series



**A guide to  
understanding  
others**

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# Welcome

Welcome to the **understanding others** guide from our **Know yourself series**. This guide will help you explore how to navigate relationships with other people and offer some tips for **understanding others**.

All the videos and guides in the Know yourself series are written and led by autistic people. We know it's so important for young autistic people to see and hear information from other autistic people, as this can help you learn from other people's experiences.

If you haven't already seen our first four episodes in the series, you can watch them all and access more resources at [autism.org.uk/Knowyourself](https://autism.org.uk/Knowyourself)

To go with this guide, here is a short **video** of five young autistic people giving their perspectives on **understanding others**:



**[Watch our 'Understanding others' video](#)**

## Introduction

Within this series so far, we have explored:

- 1. Understanding yourself.**
- 2. Energy accounting.**
- 3. Exploring your identity.**
- 4. Setting yourself up for success.**

These are all available at [autism.org.uk/knowyourself](https://autism.org.uk/knowyourself)

This guide is here to help you understand other people and learn some important things you might need to know about building and maintaining friendships or relationships. It goes beyond your teen years and into what you can begin to expect and need to consider as you become a young adult.

**Remember:** understanding others is important, but understanding yourself is often the first step, so don't forget to also take a look at our companion guide:

**[A guide to understanding yourself](#)**

# Non-autistic ways of life

Let's be honest, there are lots of non-autistic people in the world. So as you explore your autistic identity, it is important to have a look at how non-autistic people experience the world too.

This doesn't mean you should try to be like non-autistic people or that one way of being is the 'right' way.

Thinking about how non-autistic people's minds work can help you understand the differences in the way different people behave and make sure it's not just on you to behave a certain way. Your non-autistic friends can change their behaviour in helpful ways too.

We will also look at how people can have different perspectives on things later in this guide.



## Non-autistic communication styles

It might appear that non-autistic people have an automatic ability to know how to act in different social situations or can work it out quite easily. It seems to be instinctive.

From a young age, many non-autistic children just seem to know or can easily learn how to interact with other people. It is like an automatic process - no one sits down and teaches these norms, yet they seem to understand it.

Non-autistic people often engage in lots of social chit-chat and social niceties. They use eye contact naturally when having a conversation and will use varying facial expressions to show different emotions. These are often referred to as social norms because the majority of the population does them. Social norms can change across different cultures and communities, though.

Many autistic people struggle with these social norms. It can be hard to understand them, or they have to be learned by watching other people intently and practising instead of just automatically knowing. It doesn't seem to be instinctive.



**Guess what?** Some studies have shown that autistic people use their brain differently when socialising to figure out what's going on, rather than this just being automatic. This means it can take more brain power to socialise - which helps explain why you might feel more exhausted afterwards.

Some of these non-autistic social norms may seem pointless to you, and that's okay, but they may make sense and feel okay for non-autistic people.

Both autistic and non-autistic people can struggle to understand each other, but what is important is that we are respectful of each other's way of being.



**“Why don't people need to know a time-stamp on everything. I need to know about how long things will take, what the order of everything is – I just don't understand how the non-autistic people around me just seem happy with going with the flow.”**

Connor Ward, 2024

Non-autistic communication is often full of indirect language, phrases and sayings. Some examples are:

**“It's a piece of cake”**

**It's easy**



**“I'm all ears”**

**I'm listening or waiting for an explanation**



**“Back to the drawing board”**

**Starting again as it didn't work out**



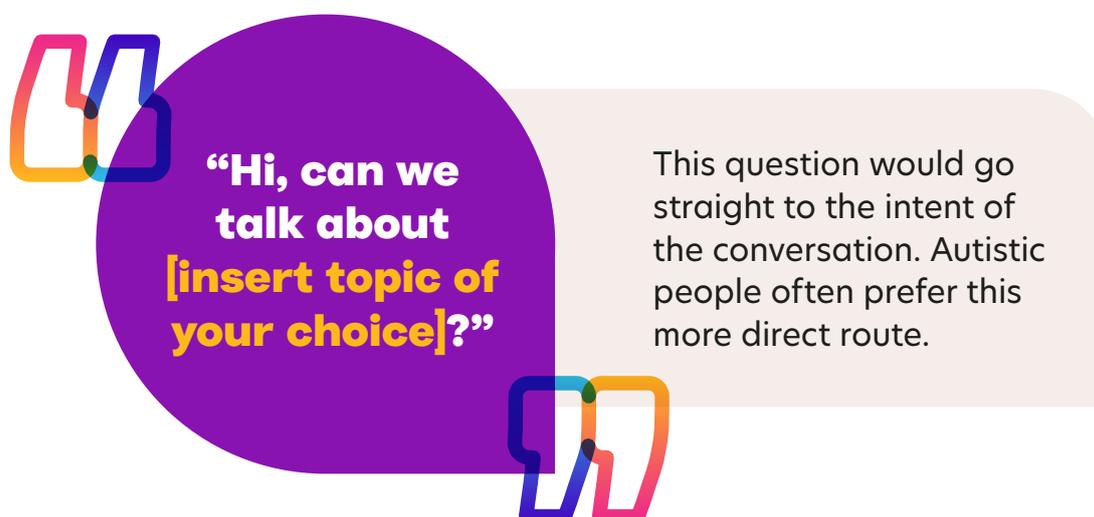
This can be problematic when autistic and non-autistic people are communicating with each other, as autistic communication is often more direct and factual.

The more we understand each other's communication styles, the more we can talk with each other and understand when to ask for clarity. Some autistic people have said that when they are communicating with non-autistic people, it can feel like being on holiday in another country and trying to make sense of a different language and culture.

For instance, people might say they are "good" or "fine" or use phrases like "Can't complain" when casually asked: "How are you?" Often, the question is just used to start a wider conversation or asked in passing but isn't really intended to start an in-depth discussion about how you feel.

This way of communicating is very common, but it is often just people being polite and not really about how the person feels.

A more direct way to communicate might be:



## Sharing your autistic experience

Although awareness and understanding of autism are increasing, there is still a lot of incorrect information shared, especially on social media. That's not to say you can't enjoy your favourite autistic creators, but some misinformation can be harmful to autistic people's health and wellbeing.

So it's important to understand that not everyone has the same level of knowledge or awareness of autism as you do.

Even if somebody knows a lot about autism, it doesn't mean they will automatically understand your autistic identity and needs. They might assume your needs will be the same as another autistic person they know. Their desire to help is usually out of genuine kindness, but you can feel like you are not being understood or accepted. To help, you could try communicating your own unique perspective and needs to the person.

# Every autistic person is different and has their own unique needs and strengths.



**“In my household there are four of us who are neurodivergent, and we all have very different needs. This can be problematic, as it means that sometimes everyone’s needs can’t be met – say for example getting the lighting or the temperature right for everyone. However, having different needs can sometimes be really helpful – I need a very specific routine, but my partner likes the routine being flexible – so he can support me when I’m struggling and vice versa.”**

**Autistic/ADHD mother and wife**

## Why is sharing your autistic experience important?

You can’t assume that others will have a detailed understanding of you, your needs and preferences, even if they have a good understanding of autism.

Each autistic person is unique, and sharing with trusted people what your needs are can help you get the best outcomes.

To help others understand your needs, adjustments and preferences, you can use a one-page profile to capture what you want to share in a way that’s easy for others to understand and implement.

# One-page profile

A one-page profile is a way of presenting important information about yourself. It can be used to give people a summary of your needs, likes and preferences.

They can be useful in a range of settings:



By creating a one-page profile to have ready at any time, you can use it to share the information that you feel is vital for others to know.

For instance, you might create one for medical settings. If you struggle to process or communicate information at the doctors, you can give them your one-page profile. This could help them understand your needs quickly and then change how they communicate to help you understand.

**“It means people don’t have to re-tell their story over and over and can help you to build the trust of the person you are working with. The conversation becomes person to person, rather than clinician to client.”**

Ben Begg

**“I often lose my words when I am stressed, so having a one-page profile with me when I go to the hospital is really important. It has all the information on it that I maybe can’t say at that moment.”**

Autistic adult, 2024

You can create your own one-page profile in a style that suits you or find a template you prefer. If you want to find some, try searching for 'autism one-page profile' and then see which one you like.

Here is an example of one that we created at the National Autistic Society, which you might want to use: [Fill out a one-page profile](#).

The image shows a 'One-page profile' template. It has a dark blue header with the title 'One-page profile' in white. Below the header is a grid of nine white boxes with rounded corners, set against a background with a vertical orange-to-red gradient and a diagonal yellow-to-pink gradient at the bottom right. The boxes are arranged as follows:

- Top row: Skills/strengths, Sensory differences, Communication
- Middle row: Challenges /dislikes, One-page profile (with 'Name:' below it), Signs of stress and anxiety
- Bottom row: Ways to relax, Favourite things/ interests, How to support

# Navigating relationships

Life is full of different relationships. These could be with family, friends, people at school, workmates, romantic partners or people you know online.

Understanding other people can be complicated because each person is unique – they have their own beliefs, personalities and motivations.

As we've discussed, autistic and non-autistic people have differences in the way they perceive the world. This can make it extra hard for autistic people to understand relationships with non-autistic people.



**“I hate the social fluff. I wish people would just start with hi, and then straight into what they want to tell me – the deep dive into communication is something I enjoy with autistic peers that I don’t get straight away with non-autistic friends.”**

Rachel, 2024

## Why are relationships complicated?

Because there are many different types of relationships, it can be hard to understand what type of relationship you have with a person and, therefore, how to interact with them.

In healthy relationships, everyone needs to feel valued and accepted. Boundaries are important, so understanding and accepting each other's boundaries can lead to better relationships. This is not always easy to achieve because people's boundaries can be confusing to interpret, are usually not explicitly communicated and can also change and vary depending on the type of relationship. For example, the boundaries in a friendship might be different compared to romantic relationships.

## What are personal boundaries?

Personal boundaries are the guidelines or limits a person sets to define what they consider acceptable and safe ways for others to behave around them.

Your boundaries may be different to someone else's, so it's useful to set clear boundaries about what you and they consider acceptable.

You can think about setting a boundary by saying or writing down the things you like or don't like. These can be general things you enjoy in a friendship or relationship, eg I enjoy a friendship when I am able to share some of my interests with the other person.

It can also be more specific things, for example, I would like you to give me notice for social events that you would like me to come to.

If you feel like someone is not respecting your boundaries, it may be good to talk to someone else about this, preferably an adult you trust - a parent, guardian, teacher or carer.

## Relationships can change

Relationships can last different lengths of time. Some might be short-term (while you're a particular age or in a particular place), whereas others might last longer.

The type of relationship you have with a person can also change over time (eg you might become closer with them or not spend as much time with them as you used to).

For example, if a friend stops talking to you as much, this is not automatically anyone's fault. Sometimes, friendships can change and even end. This is a normal part of life, especially as you get older. It's natural to be sad at first and wonder what happened, but blaming people, especially yourself, never helps. Over time, you will feel less sad and find other friends who are more likely to understand you. We will talk more about this later in this guide.



# Friendship

## What is a friend?

Working out who your friends are can be difficult.

A friend is someone that you like and enjoy being around. You may have some common beliefs and interests. A friend is also someone you trust and respects you for who you are.

Some people have lots of friends, and others have just one or a few.

A friend is someone you know well and can be a person that you see in real life or someone you know online. You might have a neighbour who's a friend, a friend hundreds of miles away, someone you never meet in person or someone you only see occasionally.

A friend is not just someone who 'asks to be your friend' online, at school or at an event straight away – a friend is someone you have a good social connection with, where you both share joy and mutual respect.

As an autistic person, you might find that you spend lots of time trying to work out who is and isn't your friend, and you might get confused about this. You may also plan what things you will talk about with them, and you may worry about whether you are doing enough as a friend.

Many non-autistic people will not think about friendship as much as this. It doesn't mean they don't care about your friendship – it might just seem to come a bit more naturally to them, so they don't need to spend so much time analysing.



**“I find it difficult to know for sure what other people are thinking, and sometimes I get really worried about something they have said – or something I have said to them. I have learned that the best way to deal with this is to tell them what I am worrying about. Most of the time they say that isn't what they meant or thought, and they reassure me that I'm just catastrophising. But on the odd occasion where I have been right, it has given us the opportunity to talk about it and for my friend to reassure me that they still want to be friends.”**

Phil Wroe, 2024



**“When I told my friend that I am autistic, she asked me what she could do to support me. I explained that I sometimes say things that upset people because I have not realised that what I said could be understood in a different way. I asked my friend to promise to tell me if I say something that upsets her, so that I get the chance to explain myself properly. This has really helped because it stops me worrying about saying the wrong thing.”**

**Phil Wroe, 2024**

It can take a lot of energy to maintain friendships. Sharing time, processing the emotions of another person, communicating and any other demands can be exhausting.

It is okay if you feel tired from being with friends. This just means you have used some social energy, and you need to do some energy accounting to rebalance your energy levels. It does not mean you cannot be with your friends.

You can learn more about this using our [Energy accounting guide](#).

## **What is the difference between a friend and an acquaintance?**

This information is to give you some ideas around the complexities of relationships, but there are no set rules, and variations from these descriptions are possible.

There might be people you are friendly with, but this doesn't always make them a friend. This could include people who are in a paid or official position, eg you might be friendly with a teacher, childminder, babysitter, or activity leader (eg at Scouts, Cadets or a sports club), but they are more likely to be acquaintances.

You may have limited interactions with an acquaintance, eg you only see them at school, work or shared activities, but you are likely to see friends more regularly, eg after school, on weekends or during the holidays. Over time, your acquaintances may become friends as you see them more often and share more about your interests with each other.

However, a friend is someone who you choose to be friends with and who chooses to be your friend too. If one of you doesn't want to be friends with the other, then you are not friends. If you're unsure if someone is your friend, it's okay simply to ask them: "Would you say we're friends?" - a real friend will always say "yes".

## Making friends

You might make friends at school or during other activities or groups, such as football, dancing, Scouts, Guides or Cadets. You also might make friends through shared interests, like playing Fortnite, Animal Crossing, Warhammer 40K or LEGO.

As you get older, friendships change, and you tend to not only find people who like similar things to you but also share beliefs and values similar to yours.

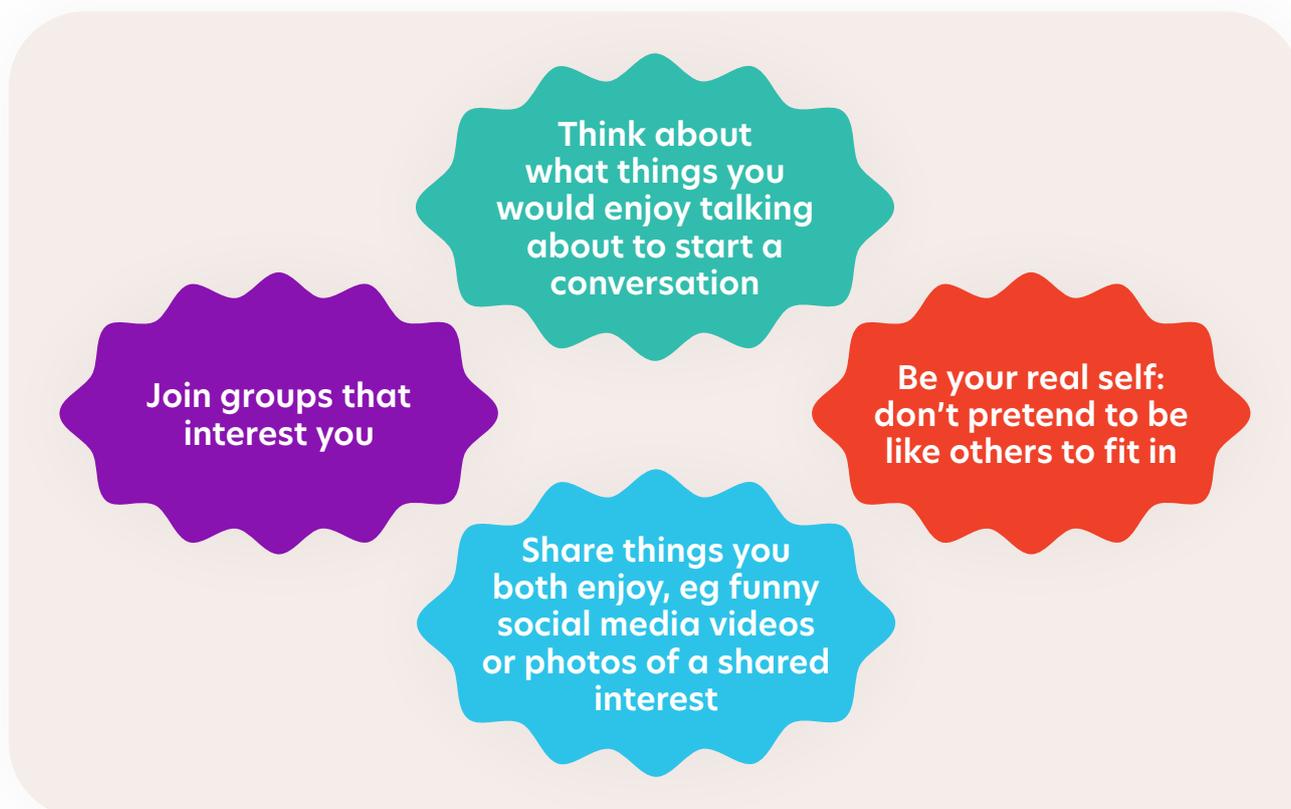
Just because someone has the same interests as you doesn't automatically make them someone you want to be friends with.

### Tips

If you want to become friends with someone, then spending time together doing an activity you both enjoy might lead to a friendship developing.

Here are some ideas of things you might want to try.

#### Tips to help make more friends:



## Good vs bad friends:

### Good friend

- there for you consistently - through good moments and harder moments in life
- listens to you and your wishes
- you feel good when you are with them
- they care about you and your feelings
- they are willing to apologise and forgive
- they don't make fun of you
- you both share your worries and problems and try to help each other with them
- you both stick up for each other if someone isn't being nice to them/you.



### Someone who is not a friend

- they are only around when they want or need something from you
- they may force you to do things you are not comfortable with and do not want to do
- they make fun of you
- they lie to you
- they deliberately upset you
- they make unwanted physical contact - they may hurt you or bully you
- they tell other people your secrets or personal information
- you feel like they don't actually know you
- they don't act like your friend when other people are around.



If you think someone (either another teenager or an adult) might be trying to take advantage of or exploit you, there is lots of good information on the Health for Teens website - [healthforteens.co.uk/relationships/exploitation](https://healthforteens.co.uk/relationships/exploitation).

Always talk to a trusted adult if you are unsure about someone or a situation they are putting you in.

## Falling out with friends

Sometimes, friends can argue or become distanced. This isn't nice, but it is important to understand that this is natural in life.

It is better to remain honest about what you like and dislike than to pretend to be someone you are not or try to please others.

Sometimes, people are so scared of an argument that they will accept the other person's point of view or plans - even if it's harmful or against what they want.

It is understandable that people want to do this, as conflict is never nice. Instead, it's important to try to talk to your friend and explain how you feel (but also listen to their feelings and perspective).

Sometimes, talking is enough to resolve the situation. At other times, you might need to agree that you disagree on this one thing, but you can continue to be friends and accept that you have different opinions on some things.

Other times, it might be a more challenging disagreement - for example, over something harmful or against your values. If it is about something more harmful, you need to consider whether this friendship is healthy and distance yourself from the relationship. Always tell an adult you trust if you feel like you're unable to resolve some of your differences or conflicts with a friend or any other person you know.

## Ending a friendship

Sometimes friends just grow apart - your interests change, you move to different schools, or you have different values.

Other times, you might need to distance or remove yourself from a friendship, such as when it is no longer healthy.

This could be done just by being less available to meet up with them, not joining them online or trying to avoid or reduce conversations with them. Some people call this phase of a friendship 'fizzling out', where your interactions with your friend reduce until you no longer talk to them.

At times, if a friendship is very negative, it might need a more sudden stop. If this is the case, then you might need some help navigating this, and you should tell a parent, guardian or trusted adult so that they can support you through it, especially if you're worried about things escalating.



# Telling others that you're autistic

Choosing to tell other people that you are autistic is your personal choice.

It is a decision you should think about based on who the person is and why you want them to know.

Let's consider some of the pros and cons of telling someone that you are autistic:

## Pros

- the person may understand you more and be able to support your needs more
- you might feel more accepted and might not feel the need to mask as much or at all when around this person
- it can make it easier to communicate and ask for support if they already know you're autistic and what your needs are.

## Cons

- not everyone has a good understanding of autism, and they may treat you differently from the way you want to be treated
- people might assume they understand autism, but their understanding might be based on stereotypes, and it might not fit with your autistic experience
- there can be bad people and bullies who want to pick on people's differences.

If you do create your one-page profile, you could use this to help tell people you're autistic.

## Who to tell?

### Family

Most likely, your immediate family at home will know you are autistic, but this isn't always the case. Wider family members, like cousins, aunts and uncles, might also know that you're autistic. These family members should be safe to talk to about your needs and your process of learning about yourself, but again, every family is different, so this might not always be the case.

Ultimately, you and the adults you do tell will be learning about autism at the same time, so adults might not have all the answers to your questions - this gives you a chance to explore and grow in your understanding together.

### **School or activity leaders**

Letting school (or other adults who regularly spend time with you) know you are autistic can be beneficial. It means they can work alongside you to explore how best to support your needs.

They may also be able to help you understand yourself or navigate relationships with peers and friends. If you tell a school or activity leader that you are autistic and they don't believe you or don't put in place the support you or your parents ask for, tell a trusted adult to help you with this.

### **Your peers and friends**

If your classmates or friends don't already know that you're autistic, you might want to think through the pros and cons above and consider if you want them to know or not.

**No matter who you choose to tell (or if you choose to tell no one at all), it is a personal choice – and there is no pressure or rush to do it.**

It could be helpful to speak to a trusted adult or family at home about deciding whether or not to tell other people that you are autistic.

If someone you have chosen to tell about being autistic has a different view and understanding about autism that doesn't fit with your autistic experience, try not to let this affect your wellbeing.

If you have a disagreement with someone about their understanding of autism, then remember you're both on a journey with your knowledge.



# Summary

Understanding others can be confusing. It is an ongoing and lifelong process, which we don't always get right. We don't need to understand everyone - no one understands everyone, but it's about trying to understand those who happen to be around us.

Hopefully, this guide can help you navigate some of it. Everyone's experience of life is different, but every experience is valid.

If you want to find more videos, books, blogs and more from autistic people, please look at our [Know yourself other resources](#).





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