



How to ... include autistic people in online meetings

This guide aims to assist anyone who is leading an online group session via a platform such as Zoom to consider the needs of people with neurodiversity and specifically autistic people.

Introduction

There are no definitive statistics to the number of autistic adults living in the UK. Research in the USA suggests 2-3% and it is unlikely to be very different in the UK. Many autistic people do not know that they have autism because they are able to adapt well but they are likely to be living with high levels of stress because of this. Many other people will have aspects of neuro diversity so by adapting what we do to our on-line meetings to make them autism friendly we are probably improving the experience of the group for most members.

Research has shown that online meetings can be of benefit to autistic people. It allows them to be access meetings from a safe familiar space. Online meetings can enhance communication by allowing autistic people the ability to use the technology to ease their anxiety, reduce their cognitive load, and better manage their sensory sensitivity.

However, there can still be situations that can potentially cause considerable distress to autistic people. Anxiety in social interactions, including online meetings, is a consistent experience for many people living with neurodiversity. This section from a study of the needs of autistic people in video calling may be helpful in understanding this:

‘They described many contributing factors to anxiety, including their role in the conversation, social familiarity, topic familiarity, conversational goals, adhering to social norms, and their current socio-emotional capacity. At a topic level, they expressed that they were more comfortable talking about concrete, familiar “things,” such as games, technology, or work deliverables, more-so than when talking about “people.” Situations that required negotiating, conveying nuance, or being unsure created stressful emotions.’

From: Managing stress: The needs of autistic adults in video calling. Zolyomi et al [Found here](#) . These anxieties are not purely limited to neuro diverse people and so it is worth thinking about how to reduce peoples’ anxiety.

Supporting Sensory Differences:

Many autistic people as well as those with other forms of neurodiversity can find it hard to filter our distractions. For example if someone is eating a packet of crisps or typing on their keyboard Zoom may well pick up those background noises. These can then be so distracting that they inadvertently switch their focus to the noise and lose track of the conversation. One way of reducing this is to ask people to remain on mute unless they are speaking.

Likewise visual distractions such as busy backgrounds, bright lights etc. can have the same affect as auditory ones. Therefore, it is worth thinking about where you are sitting and what is behind you.

Some autistic people, especially also those who also have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) may need to fidget, move around etc. in order to aid their focus. This may come across as not engaging, but the opposite is actually the truth for that person. This is also the case for eye contact and some people may have the need to turn off the camera to avoid being overwhelmed.

Some people will use stim toys or sensory aids such as soft blankets to avoid their being overwhelmed – avoid shaming people by bringing attention to these objects. Some autistic people are unable to use headphones on video calls as they find them distracting and overwhelming or cannot tolerate the feel of them on their heads or ears.

Before the meeting

When setting up the meeting always ask attendees to contact you before the event if they have additional needs so that you can support them during the call and make sure they have all of the relevant information that you need.

Send out as much information before the meeting as you are able to Depending on the type of meeting his might include:

- The purpose, format and timings of the meeting
- Attendees
- Powerpoint slides and any videos that will be used
- Supporting paperwork
- A guide to the technology and how you will use it
- Explain what will happen after the meeting

Joining the meeting

Many people find the first few chaotic minutes of group as people are arriving very stressful. People will be joining in random orders and there maybe a lot of small talk which people can feel pressurized into joining in with. When you join a meeting in a physical room even if you don't know who is going to be there you get a few moments as you enter the room to see people before you have to speak to people. When you enter a Zoom meeting and your camera is on automatically you are thrust into a room of potential strangers and into the middle of a conversation, which can be very difficult to cope with. Some people try to manage this by either being the first to join or joining late.

Setting up the meeting so that the video and microphone are not automatically on as people join allows joiners to see whom is there and adjust to the group before showing themselves.

Contributing to the conversation

You may not know who in your group is struggling. One autistic person said:

‘One of the things that I personally find difficult is the introductions bit at the beginning of a meeting. I’m never quite sure how much to say, how personal to make it etc. If I am asked to speak first this causes me considerable anxiety and I can remember several meetings where my anxiety about whether I had said the right thing completely distracted me for the entire meeting. ‘

One way around this is to ask who would like to go first and let a natural order begin to develop whilst ensuring that no one is left out of the conversation.

In bigger groups people may find it hard if there are individuals who often speak over other individuals. People may also find it difficult to identify when there is an appropriate moment to make their point or alternatively speak over everyone else.

Some things that will help with this are:

- Having a clear structure to the meeting
- Having a clear structure and rules for how and when people will speak
- Giving people time to think before they are asked to contribute
- If you are inviting a contribution from each member be clear about your expectations on time for this.
- If someone speaks for longer than their allotted time gently ask them to wrap up what they are saying.
- Limiting those who speak a lot and gently encouraging the quieter members of the group will help with this.
- You may want to explain that some people can have auditory processing difficulties and sensory differences that may mean that too many people talking at once can cause overwhelm, panic and physical pain. This will also help autistic people to find their voice within the meeting.
- Acknowledging each person’s contribution and thanking them for it - this will also reduce anxiety around having said the wrong thing.

Facial Expressions

It is worth being aware that as most people with neurodiversity struggle to interpret facial and vocal expressions they will need to concentrate on these throughout the meeting much more than a neuro typical person. This is both exhausting but also problematic if group members have poor video or sound quality. This is not something you can do anything about but worth being aware of. It is important however to ask people to keep their faces raised including when reading or praying so that people can read their full facial expression. This is also helpful for people with hearing difficulties.

Be aware that people with neurodiversity are often highly considerate and worried by the message being given by their facial expression. They may well have carefully practiced their smile and keep it resolutely in place during the meeting out of concern that any other expression may cause others to think that they are disliked.

Accessing Meeting Content

Autistic people generally find meetings far more exhausting than most people because of the additional work they need to do to manage their sensory processing. It is helpful to offer transcripts of the meeting and any chat so that they can revisit the meeting later. If you are able to offer this then please let people know at the beginning of the meeting to avoid any unnecessary stress.

Provide a clear meeting plan, any questions that are going to be asked during the meeting and any other documents that will be needed during the meeting at least a few days in advance so that autistic participants can feel prepared and not over anxious about uncertainty/unpredictability.

Make use of the share screen facility to have clear visual aids to comprehension and focus this also allows people to have a break from looking at people's faces. If possible use Easy Read versions of texts as these avoid the use of metaphor and other complex language structures which can be confusing.

Trying to follow chat as well as the meeting conversation can be very overwhelming for autistic people so try to keep to one form of communication. One autistic person said 'I find it excruciatingly hard to use or look at the chat option during the meeting as well as focusing on what is being said.'

If chat is being used to pose questions ensure that the questions and any responses are read out in the meeting and do not assume that everyone is comfortable using chat. If it is essential to use chat allow time out of the conversation to allow people to catch up with the chat conversation.

And finally...

Avoid using language that is demeaning to autistic people. Do not assume you, as the meeting leader knows all there is to know about autism, particularly if you are a neuro typical parent of an autistic child. Autistic people are experts in their experience and that often differs from how a parent views their child's experience. If in doubt, ask graciously and respectfully.

Further Information about this guide

This guide has been created using the following:

- The personal experience of autistic people
- [Making Meetings Accessible for Autistic People](#) by NHS England
- [Managing Stress: The Needs of Autistic Adults in Video Calling](#) a research paper from Washington University
- [Autistica guide to accessible online events](#)

Further information can be found can be found on the above links.

In addition this page from the [National Autistic Society](#) website about communication in the classroom maybe helpful.

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