



## **Autistic Access Needs: Notes on Accessibility**

Looking for ways to meet the access needs of Autistic individuals? Do you wish to avoid dropping the ball at your function, get-together, or meeting? The autistic spectrum includes a wide variety of persons with a wide variety of support needs. Planning ahead for your Autistic guests will help establish equal participation.

### **Important points to consider**

- The lists below consist of access needs, and are not conveniences or luxuries.
- Misunderstanding and unnecessary obstacles have often limited Autistic participation in the national self-advocacy movement. This causes frustration and discourages Autistic individuals from learning about and engaging in self-advocacy activities—both personally and in larger society. Our subset of the Developmental Disability (DD) population is decades behind the Intellectual Disability (ID) community in terms of development of a self-advocacy movement, and more accommodation from others is necessary to support our growth.

- Unfortunately, there is widespread critical misunderstanding of the needs and abilities of DD individuals who achieve socially or culturally recognized competency in a publicly visible way.

## **Common Support Needs**

### **GROUPS**

- Large groups can be over-stimulating and overwhelming for Autistic people. For example, large groups can pose difficulty for Autistic people who struggle to time responses or understand other social nuances of large groups.
- Many Autistic people often share that “the right words” do not always come easily. And for some, words can be non-native to their individual mode of thinking. (Some Autistic people describe words as flattened translated inaccurate versions of what they truly wish to express.)
- For Autistic people who struggle with communication issues, and/or sensory overload, small groups can provide a much better option for meaningful participation.
- Separate rooms for small group discussions can help prevent an Autistic person from experiencing undue sensory overload.

## AGENDAS

- Providing agendas and materials in advance, in addition to sticking closely to agendas can go a long way in terms of accommodating an Autistic person.
- Changing agendas pre or mid-meeting can throw Autistic people off, as well as cause access issues.

## SENSORY NEEDS (PART 1)

- Avoid holding conferences in hotels with large waterfalls or other similar types of background noise.
- Due to Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD), many Autistic people report difficulty understanding auditory information, and especially so when background noise is present—separating foreground from background noise is taxing (and also poses issues for blind and/or deaf individuals who are Autistic).
- Closing doors (to shut out background noise) can be helpful.
- Designated sensory retreat rooms provide a safe space to manage overload and give people a place to go if they need to retreat from an over-stimulating and/or overwhelming situation.
- Sensory retreat rooms should be easily accessible, but free of outside stimulation (e.g. away from elevators and escalators)
- Offering disposable earplugs is another way to accommodate Autistic people with sensory sensitivities to sound.

## SENSORY NEEDS (PART 2)

- Request attendees to avoid wearing perfumes or using strongly scented toiletries (e.g. shampoos, lotions, etc.) Doing so can Autistic people avoid sensory overload.
- Use non-florescent lighting, or other accommodations for reducing visual stimulus. Natural lighting is best. If unavailable, incandescent lighting would be the next appropriate option as it is much more tolerable. As for compact florescent lighting, it can cause severe sensory issues with balance, dizziness, and communication.
- Be mindful that flash photography can cause seizures in Autistic people who have seizures and/or epilepsy.
- Sound systems should also be taken into consideration. Monitor volume levels and feedback. Noisome sounds like feedback have the potential to cause some Autistic people to completely shut down.

## SOCIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

- Autistic Network International (ANI, <http://www.autreat.com/>) created color-coded interaction signal badges consisting of plastic name badge holders with a piece of red paper on one side, and a piece of yellow paper on the other. People needing to restrict interaction could wear a badge with the red side facing out to signify, "Please do not interact with me," or with the yellow side facing out to signify, "Only people I already know should interact with me, not strangers." Another color option could be used to signify, "I am fine with interaction." These badges have been used for over 10 years at Autreat, the Autistic community's annual conference.

## RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

- Identify-first language verses person-first language should also be taken into consideration.
- The Autistic community prefers to be referred to as Autistic, in much the same way the Blind and Deaf communities prefer to be referred to as Blind or Deaf. To drive the point home, the terms hearing impaired and visually impaired are often offensive to the Blind and Deaf communities. Referring to an Autistic person as a person *with* autism is often offensive in the Autistic community.

## ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE + FACILITATION

- Has the meeting facilitator been trained on the needs of Autistic self-advocates?
- Semantic and pragmatic understanding of oral and written language used should be maximized.
- Pre-writing questions that will be asked to the group (and making them large and visible) helps facilitate Autistic communication and participation.
- Ensure Autistic people have enough time to process what is being asked before moving forward.
- Conduct meetings online when possible (via an Instant Message chat service, such as Skype--no phone or video, text only). Phone conversations and/or meetings can pose a problem for Autistics who have Auditory Processing Disorder and who might struggle with voice as opposed to text. IM chats also often provide a workable solution to address social anxiety issues.

**Further specific meeting accommodations to consider  
(copied from an article written by Dora Raymaker on  
Change.org):**

- Make it possible for someone else to register and/or pick up registration information for people on the spectrum who are easily overwhelmed by crowds, noise, communication, and massive (usually early morning) overstimulation.
- Provide conference schedule information in advance. This should include information about who is presenting when and about what, which in turn helps in the planning of necessary breaks and downtime, as well as helps make the event more predictable and less stressful.
- Note bathrooms, exits, and retreat rooms in bold.
- Are there power outlets, flat surfaces, or any other items needed to operate necessary assistive technology throughout the duration of the event?
- Provide alternative modes of participation to real-time face-to-face. For example, group conference IM chat via Internet.
- Offer sensory friendly areas. Even though large meeting locations typically come under the strobe-and-buzz of florescent lights, there is usually some room or area that can be set aside to be bright light & florescent free, and quiet, for people to retreat to as needed. Better yet, use meeting sites that offer incandescent or natural lighting, neutral walls and carpeting, a quiet setting, and otherwise are just sensory friendly in general.

- Slow down! It can be really, really hard or impossible to process the amount of information that is typically thrown out in a conference or workshop. It's better to fully understand a smaller amount of ideas than to not understand any ideas at all.
- Have a clearly stated protocol for how to participate-- how will everyone who wants to get a turn to speak communicate during the meeting?
- Give information in more than one way. Don't just present with the blah blah blah--use images, movements, demonstrations, provide written information.
- Communication is an active dynamic process between two or more people. It is not something a single person does or does not do; it is something people do together. Yes, those of us who communicate in non-standard ways should make an effort to make communication easy for others--if only because it in turn will make the exchange easier for us since there will be less confusion and resistance from our communication partners. But also, others need to make that same (and sometimes a bit extra) effort for us. We like things to be easy too. And sometimes it's not even a question of ease--we may *need* others to make that extra effort to communicate with us on our own terms because otherwise we can't find our way to the common ground where communication can occur at all. Communication is a two way street.