

Actually Autistic Educator

Episode 2: Autistic Communication TRANSCRIPT

Jeanne Clifton [00:00:08] Hi, welcome to another episode of Actually Autistic Educator. Today, we're going to be talking about autistic communication, but in trying to edit this together, I realized it's really too big of a topic to do all in one. So for today, we're going to be looking specifically at understanding some different elements of autistic communication and introducing some new studies and concepts that are dramatically shifting the ways the scientific community is beginning to more accurately understand how we communicate. And spoiler alert, the classic deficit model is proving to be pretty wrong. Autistics have historically been defined as being poor communicators. In the American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, shorthand DSM 5, the description starts off by listing, "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction." However, what is incredibly important to understand is that the examples in the DSM are really not signs of an actual inability to communicate in general. More so they show that we communicate differently, "abnormal social approach." The focus on normal here is really important as the evaluation is not about the effectiveness or internal consistency, but rather this concept of normality. "Reduced sharing of interests, emotions or affect, to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions." Now, this one has always struck me as very weird because any autistic I know has always been more than eager to share their interest if given the opportunity. My brother, who is considered non-verbal, loved showing things and sharing, even if it was in a different way than expected. Personally, I will very happily talk your ear off on a wide array of different historical things. But if for most of your life, any time you've attempted to share things you enjoyed, you've been shunned for them or told you are weird or that no one wants to hear about that, that will likely influence your behavior pretty dramatically.

I saw a post recently saying something like, ever notice how the examples of autistic behavior are almost always either things we do as stress responses, like meltdowns, or because of a history of trauma, like

not wanting to engage socially, because of so many negative past experiences or the effort it takes to be understood. Society has caused so much trauma to autistics. There are no untraumatized autistics. We have no concept of autistic behavior and communication removed from this systemic trauma. This is a long quote, but I think it's really important. It's part of the abstract from a recent article that looked at how biases by non-autistics impacted the social communication, titled Neurotypical Peers, are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments, published 2017. It says research with autism "has primarily focused on identifying the cognitive and neurological differences that contribute to these social impairments. But social interaction by definition involves more than one person. And social difficulties may arise not just from people with ASD themselves, but also from the perceptions, judgments and social decisions made by those around them. Here across three studies, we find that the first impressions of individuals with ASD made from thin slices of real world social behavior by typically developing observers are not only far less favorable across a range of trait judgments compared to controls, but also are associated with reduced intentions to pursue social interaction. These patterns are remarkably robust, occur within seconds, do not change with increased exposure and persist across both child and adult age groups. However, these biases disappear when impressions are based on conversational content lacking audio visual cues suggesting that style, not substance, drives negative impressions of ASD." This is huge. Within moments of meeting us, most neurotypical dislike the ways we look, not the content of our communication. It's not that our phrasing is actually wrong, it's simply the ways we move and sound. And yet we're the ones with this supposedly impaired social behavior and who lack empathy.

When we understand this concept of how deeply ableism is entrenched into our society and how we vilify so many types of others and start to look at how we are judging autistic communication and behaviors

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and try to do so more objectively rather than assuming that any difference is a bad thing, we see some very different results. Study from 2019 titled “outcomes of real world social interaction for autistic adults paired with autistic compared to typically developing partners” found that when autistics were paired with non-autistics and asked to converse, there were challenges on both sides to understand and engage. But it found that autistics engaged more deeply and with more enjoyment with fellow autistics saying, “autistic participants trended toward an interaction preference for other autistic adults and reported disclosing more about themselves to autistics compared to typically developing partners. These results suggest that social affiliation may increase for autistic adults when partnered with other autistic people and support reframing social interaction, difficulties and autism as a relational rather than an individual impairment.”

So autistic communication definitely on average has its differences to common non-autistic communication. But everyone communicates and interacts in different ways, sometimes depending on how you are raised, what you have seen other people do, your own personal mood. How often have any of us realize that maybe someone wasn't actually being rude or mean we were just tired or hungry, or maybe they had a headache, but we read into it and assumed that, oh, they don't like us. Miscommunications can happen to anyone, autistic or not. But communication is a two-way street. It can't be the responsibility of just one person. This forms the concept of the double empathy problem, that effective understanding relies on a shared language between two people. If you and I can't interpret each other's actions or emotions, it's not the responsibility of a single person to do. We will be going much more into this topic in a future episode, where we focus more on this specific misunderstanding around autism and empathy. But keep this idea in mind. Effective communication requires compromise sometimes and a willingness to be open to someone who might be different from you.

As a part of narrowing this very large topic of autistic communication, I am joined by only one guest today. Previous guest and disability advocate Morgan Leander Blake, whose omnibus book of poetry written during 2020, *These cold equations*, will be out later this year. Quick terminology, note we use the letters NT as short for neurotypical.

I've talked in the past using as a metaphor that autistic communication is in a lot of ways better understood if you treat it as its own distinct language where it works very effectively, we can communicate with each other very effectively, but it has a lot of false cognates with non-autistic communication. And so if when you and I are talking, we tend to be very direct, we tend to state our intentions and our goals more explicitly. We don't use more passive aggressive or subtle language and it makes it a lot easier for us to communicate. As a result, though, when someone is not used to that, more direct, more truthful, more logical type of communication, those behaviors which can be really helpful for actually understanding what we're saying, can be interpreted as aggressive or as us not picking up on the subtext or purposely ignoring what people are hinting at. And we're over here going, this isn't purposeful. It's just I don't pick up on the things that you're trying to hint at. Why don't you just say them verbally? But there's the whole I think we've talked about this before, not in the podcast, about ask culture versus guess culture. And for anyone listening, not familiar, there's two very common ways of doing communication, especially in America. And some of these are more traditional in certain communities than others. But the idea is ask culture is it's always OK to ask for something, but you have to be cool with the fact that people might say no. And that's considered completely appropriate. So asking, hey, can I come over for dinner? Can I stay at your house? All is OK because you understand that, well, they might say no and that's fine, but it doesn't hurt to ask. Guess culture, on the other hand, relies on the assumption that it would be rude to ask for something that someone might not want to give because they would feel uncomfortable having to say

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no. So you should only ask for things that you are very certain they are already OK with. And this causes a lot of confusion between those two groups, especially around things like alcohol, where you really shouldn't pressure someone to drink alcohol. But someone who's coming from maybe a different perspective is like, oh, no, really, it's no bother. I'm happy to share, but as a result, ends up pushing alcohol on someone who, for a variety of reasons, might not be interested. So there's all of these different miscommunications that frequently happen to non-autistic people that don't end up pathologized. But when autistics have these communication differences, the historic tendency has been to assume that our differences must be flawed or wrong and just pathologized, whereas really, when you look at it, we're very good at communicating with each other.

Morgan [00:11:22] Yeah, I think the thing that most occurs to me about that is we deal with a lot, a lot of people relating motive to things that we do. And that's the biggest issue that I find, is that the 1980s and 1990s model of school and institutionalization led to this very controlling sort of being Skinner's psychological, Pavlovian driven operant conditioning model of dealing with children. I remember when I was a child, people would earnestly say, don't give in to your child when they're crying like that because they hurt their needs, because if you give in to them, then you're teaching them that that they can manipulate you by crying. Like that was the sort of stuff that led to this was like the progenitor of this mentality where, you know, somebody does something that to them is functional or seems completely logical or sensible, but is immediately pathologized as taking control, as establishing dominance over a workplace, as attempting to bull over other people's ideas. Those are all things that I've heard a lot of for people who are autistic is that we don't listen to other people's ideas. I've had people say by the time I showed up, you were already halfway done. I was I to contribute. And I'm like, well, by the time you showed up, I'd already been working on it for a week and a half. What did you want me to do? You know, and I feel

like that's one of the biggest problems that we're running into in regards to behavior and the way that behavior is viewed and has become viewed over time because we've sort of evolved this very operant conditioning model of dealing with people who have different communication models. And that's pretty dehumanizing. And we need to stop.

Jeanne [00:13:12] Oftentimes, I think it's very easy in academia to feel that our perspective as a professional would be that as teaching or in different educational systems or as a mental health professional. Oh, well, I have a degree. I have a license. That means I'm the expert here. And my perspective is going to be the correct perspective. And I think especially for autistics, they've done some interesting studies looking at what parts of our brains light up during different MRI studies. And a lot of times the places that light up during what other people consider social communication are the places traditionally associated with logic and math and science, which again, I mean, sounds like where a great person to go to when you need a logical and well thought out, organized, rational response to something. But we often have a very strong connection to. "But no, this is true." I'm not going to sacrifice my understanding of what is true in the world just to make a social situation improve. And that's very different from the priorities that non-autistics often put on communication. And I remember as a kid frequently being told that it's like, well, why can't you just let that go? That's not important. I'm like, no, it is important. The teacher is teaching us that everyone thought the world was flat, but Columbus thought the world was round. And that is objectively not true. And that's not OK for her to be teaching. And it wasn't that I didn't like the teacher. I loved the teacher. But the concept that, oh, I should just accept this thing that I know was wrong because causing a fuss about it is going to cause an inappropriate social interaction and people might be angry at me. That just straight up doesn't occur to me.

You know, I think I was probably in high school or

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college before I started really making that connection and it impacted my GPA accordingly. Professors either loved me or hated me because of that. Teachers all the way through school, there was nothing in between. But so often it came down to that factor of, OK, were they willing to accept the fact that maybe they got something wrong and we can compare sources? Maybe I was wrong. Usually I wouldn't be, because I don't bring the stuff up unless I'm really sure. But I'm happy to be corrected. And that's something that I find a lot of autistics really are. But if a person in authority insists that their perspective should be treated as the correct one simply because they're an authority that can cause a lot of frustration and problems when it's not about a struggle for authority, it's about these objective truths are important to us because why would anyone want to be wrong? Just doesn't make sense.

Morgan [00:16:06] Among the other things that I run into time and time again, particularly with social organizations like the ones that we share or with jobs, with family, I run into a lot of. Presumption of what the objective truth is. A lot of presumption based on things that are not reality, and when it's challenged, like I end up having this little lump in my throat of being like, I don't understand why you don't want to get this. I don't know why you don't want to hear more about this, because I would love for you to tell me about something I didn't know about. And I came to realize that there are a lot of people out there who just objectively didn't want to hear about things. There was a post that went by on Facebook a couple of days ago that was like helpful tip. When people ask, what are you watching? They're asking, can I sit down and watch with you? When they ask, what are you doing? They're asking, can I participate? They're not asking, please tell me about it. And that's that particular example was a really good one for me of people not asking for what they want and then getting upset. But I don't know the underlying language.

Jeanne [00:17:19] I completely agree, one hundred percent, I've seen that post and it really resonated

strongly because the way that post was framed was, hey, you all are understanding this wrong. Let me teach you how to understand it correctly. And yes, there is frequently a miscommunication there, but I would argue that a far better solution would be for people to get better about verbalizing their own wants and needs and boundaries, rather than trying to get autistic people to memorize this list of, OK, my words technically mean this one thing, but I actually want you to interpret it as this other thing, because it's not just autistics that are going to run into these problems. What's interesting is I work with a lot of non-native English speakers because I do reading and study skills support and we've ended up having so many conversations around them expressing similar frustrations, because when they're not as fluent in the language, it's a lot harder to jump around and do all of the insinuations and the side talking. And so they end up feeling like they're misinterpreted. They're treated as being unintelligent or less capable because they're having to go through and manually translate everything that's being said into the communication style that is natural to them. And I'm just like, hey, similar to how curb cut outs aren't only to help people in wheelchairs, they also help anyone with a stroller or pushing something. Anyone who doesn't want to have to pull something up over a curve. If we convince people to be a little bit more proactive about really thinking about how they use language, it's going to create a much better experience for so many people, autistic and otherwise, who for a variety of reasons may be cultural, maybe being a nonnative English speaker or auditory processing disorders and other issues where if we just got better about trying to say what we mean rather than couching it in these terms, it would probably be really helpful. I love my fiancée, but we're working on this thing where I handle all of the grocery lists and orders. But he often says, I might ask you to put something on. And in my head I go, OK, that's that's fine. And in his head, he asked me to put it on the grocery list. And in my head, he informed me that he might ask me to put it on the grocery list in the future. And we've been working on this because it

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has something to do with just his preferences of not wanting to sound pushy and make me feel like I have to drop everything to take out my phone and add it to the list right then. But in my brain, it just interpreted as, oh, OK, in the future you might ask for this. I don't know why.

Morgan [00:20:21] The second that you said something about doesn't want to make me take out my phone, I immediately started laughing because, like, I would imagine interacting with you and like, you would immediately stop and take out your phone and I would stop and we would just be silent for a moment while you took out your phone and did that. But just like, obviously this is a thing, it should be dealt with right now so that we remember it for later. OK, we dealt with it. Now we can go back to what we were doing.

Jeanne [00:20:44] Exactly.

Morgan [00:20:46] I get it. I really do.

Jeanne [00:20:48] And again, because...

Morgan [00:20:49] I know you and I have had moments like that, we're like one of us is like, I need a moment for something. And I know that we have not even there wasn't even an "I need a moment." It was I know what you're doing. You just said you wanted to look something up. So obviously that's what you're doing. So I will sit and be silent for a moment and then you'll talk to me again.

Jeanne [00:21:07] And this is it's really interesting because I think it's so important to have other autistic people to be able to have these experiences with, because having spent so much of my social time growing up and into high school where I didn't have them, I had autistic family members. But that's not the same thing. When you're sixteen, you don't want to be best friends with your sister who's four years younger than you. I didn't have those relationships as friendships to be able to connect with. And

now as an adult, having a rather wide collection of other autistics and now having my sister when I'm thirty-four and she's thirty, much less of a concern versus being 12 and 16. It's been so reassuring and soothing.

It makes me think of this recent project that was published where they did a test. And autistic communication has historically well, autism has historically been defined as deficits in social communication. That's the literal textbook definition in so many cases. But what's interesting is for a lot of us, we've been saying for years we're very good at communicating with each other. We're actually far less likely to have issues than even putting to non-autistics next to each other, because we often have to work, we know we have to work harder to be explicit, to plan things out and be considerate. And so we often don't have some of the miscommunication issues that others run into. And they did this study where they took several groups of people, some all autistic, some all non-autistic, and some that were a mix of both. And they gave each group a set of information tied to a story and asked them to effectively play telephone and push it through. And if we take the historic understanding of autism, which is that autistic people have deficits and communication, then you would assume that, OK, the best group that had the least loss of information would be the non-autistics. Then it would come the mixed group and then the autistics would be the worse. But big shocker to everyone who's actually been autistic and talk to each other is that the non-autistic group was just as effective as the autistic group when they were only communicating with each other. So when you're only having to speak to other people who speak and think in the same way as you, communication becomes a lot easier. When you're put into a mixed group, it becomes a lot more challenging. But historically, again, coming back to that pathologization when we've said that this dominant form of communication is good and right and proper and the only way of functioning and anything that's different from it is lesser broken and needs to be changed, then, yeah,

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if you look at someone who only speaks a different language from you and treat them as lesser or foolish because, well, they don't speak English, that says a lot more about you than it does about the quality of the languages that they speak.

Morgan [00:24:16] I think having just started getting in people's coding languages and about like 60 percent proficient in Spanish now and having focused a lot on that last year and a half, I've actually started to notice how you think differently when you are perceiving language in a direct way instead of manually translating it. And it has given me more assurance than ever that that whole thing about us and empathy is in fact complete horseshit. Sorry, us and empathy are definitely friends, I just said that again. But I think it has a lot more to do with how we communicate and how we think inside of a language, because I would say that I'm fluent in emotions. In fact, I would say that there are a lot of people perhaps – like in the last month I had probably three conversations where people said, wow, you just said something really emotional and insightful about my state. And that's not because I'm the magic autistic who can do the thing, it's because we don't have any difficulty seeing it. We have difficulty sometimes communicating to you that we do work to them, that we do. And more importantly, sometimes we don't react in a way that they think we should outwardly react like there have been a lot of times that I felt personally crushed. But the only way that you would know that was because my heartbeat started to be visible in my neck and my face got all red. There are some people who have a better handle of the physical expression of NT language than I do. And I've found that the differences between them, it can almost feel like a betrayal when we don't react visually, like with the right facial expressions to something, no matter how much it might have upset on the inside, which is really interesting to me because media is full of strong, silent type. Media is full of people who have a strong upper lip, but particularly for AFAB autists, I've found that there is a lot of emphasis on properly visualizing your sadness or despair or guilt or passion

or whatever it is, or else you're letting someone down. That's what it ends up feeling like.

I would say one of the things that's very true is that the more the more in touch we get with the fact that we are autistic, that we communicate differently and the more that we form friendships with other autistic people, the more we're able to code switch. And I feel like that's very helpful because there are things that I mean, I'm familiar with code switching because I you know, I've been in a workplace where I couldn't be out in the past or I've been in a workplace where I couldn't tell them about any of my medical stuff. So I understand how code switching can be important and the more structure that we're able to establish around our own code and how we switch back and forth with, you know, satisfying the mores of "normal society." Those are big quote figures because those don't show up in audio. The more that we normalize that, the healthier that we're all going to be, because we're going to be able to have honest communication around these steps that are a little more difficult for some of us and a little easier for others. But as you were saying, autistics can talk to other autistics and, you know, that could switch and gets better. As you and I talking to each other or me and another autistic person talking to each other becomes more prevalent and enculturated I'm hopeful that maybe there will be more code switching to our language. Maybe more people will want to talk in the way that we talk. I feel like that that's becoming a little more true with the age of the geek and everything, and it's possible that we can see some good changes there.

Jeanne [00:27:58] I love that.

Morgan [00:27:59] ...went we talk to each other. I tend to think of it as competitive talking because, like, you can tell that I'm still talking because you're seeing my face and I'm making I'm about to make a word facial expressions. And those are ways that I communicate that I'm still trying to find the words. But without that, you would probably presume I was done talking and start to talk again. And we would

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do that because we've been doing that for almost an hour now. And it's great. But I've had so many conversations that I've felt exactly like the one you and I are having right now. And then after another hour of the conversation, they're like, you know, you're really aggressive. You're really, really aggressive. And I don't like that. Like, I feel like I can't get a word in edgewise with you and I'll sit there and think, but I know I only talked X amount or what was wrong. And I've noticed that in autistic communication, there's a lot less emphasis on couching communication behind layers. Like I don't have to have a pretext to ask you about a random trivia of medieval history. I could simply ask you, I don't need to look you up and say, hi, how are you doing? And have a conversation with you first, because you would rather that I just ask you, because you'd like to know. You'd like to know what I want to know.

Jeanne [00:29:15] Yes. I hate that so many people email me and they're like, hey, how have you been? What's up? And I'm like, please, I know you just want me to give you advice on this one project. I'm happy to do it. But dear Lord, please stop making me be social for fifteen minutes before we can get to the question.

Morgan [00:29:31] Yeah. If there's stuff to communicate in those niceties, if there's things to catch up, I get that fairly often though. It's somebody who's been out of touch with me for a really long time and they want to ask for my help with something that they know that I could do. And for some reason, that means that they feel like they have to be nice to me a certain amount first. But to me, that feels incredibly disingenuous. And I would rather you just be like, hi, I would like your help with something. And I could be like, OK, I would like to give you my help with something.

Jeanne [00:29:57] it's one of those communication disconnects that I get that it's not intentional. But actually I think that's a good thing to bring up is a lot of things that I've been taught are politeness read to

me as being very manipulative and inappropriate and downright not good, because if you want my help with something, then, yeah, just ask. You can be honest with me that you would like my help. It feels almost like someone's trying to play me and or manipulate me when they want to have a conversation asking about what I've been up to and doing all of these things. It feels like they're trying to butter me up for me to then help them. And that just feels very gross and weird. And I get that it's not intended to be that way. I one hundred percent understand that this is a social convention that people have been raised to believe is polite and appropriate. But it's just one of the ones that for me I often think of there's some various great satire groups for a variety of marginalization that I have that I follow. But there's a lovely one about autism called Tone It Down Taupe, which pretends that autism is the baseline. And allistics (people who are not autistic) are these tragic individuals, and it pathologizes their behavior in similar ways to how autism is pathologized. And so they had a great one, which was block a doorway for allism, because I just we just don't understand, like hallways are for walking through. I get that you want to be social, but why are you blocking? I have places to go. If you want to talk to me, we can do that, but not in a place where so many people are walking by and making noise. I don't get it.

Morgan [00:31:46] I have like the double whammy for that one because I'm also a part time wheelchair user and people standing in hallways. It just grinds my gears and not the wheelchair gears. Yeah, that people standing in hallways, people blocking doorways. My very, very favorite and the one that I feel like every autistic that I know has at some point had like a homicidal rage scream with me over the last year and a half is. But which way the aisles are supposed to go in the grocery store right now and or staying six feet away from me. Thank you very much. Yeah, there's it's hard. It's hard when there are rules and we follow the rules and then people are like, oh, you're such an asshole for being so hard nosed about the rules. And I'm like, I'm like you guys said...

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Jeanne [00:32:32] You're the one who made the rules. I'm just following them. And if we don't follow them, there will be chaos. And that is stressful. I don't understand it. So again, this all ties back to if we were going to look at a lot of these differences between autistics and non-autistics, and we didn't have the background of considering one group to be superior and one group to be inferior. There's a lot of communication techniques that autistics use that are incredibly useful about setting more direct limits, setting boundaries, know being more honest. And I think we could really benefit from really reconsidering. Hey, there's a lot of standards in society that we're now recognizing have really nasty connotations. I'm an English teacher and when I was younger, was very big into the like, oh, look, I know grammar and that makes me smarter than other people and that's cool. And then I realized that that is racist, ableist and colonialist. And I should stop. And thinking that my way of speaking is somehow inherently superior to any number of other sets of dialects and accents is really problematic and not good. And that's something that we see in education is for years there was this concept that speaking a language other than English was bad or lesser. And obviously this is only if it was seen as a bad language such as Spanish. You spoke some other European language that wasn't funneled through a different population then cool. If you're from Germany, then that's lovely. And the racism is very, very blatant. But there were all sorts of issues of nonnative speakers being shunned, being told their language was bad or dirty, students still being told that their accent is unprofessional or inappropriate. And we're getting better at recognizing just how false and harmful and oppressive that is and the harm it causes to students. Whereas our students who speak multiple languages, that's an incredibly cool thing. You know, we should be valuing that. We should be acknowledging the strengths that they have because of that, rather than seeing it from this lesser thing of, oh, but the only thing that's important is English. And the only thing that specifically is English sounding the way I'm used to having English sound, which is how it's called English. But we're American and we

have a different accent. It's just an extra level of... guys this is very clearly all incredibly fake. Language changes dramatically. I can give you a whole thesis on it. I have my degree in it. I can confirm language is fake and it's what we make it.

Morgan [00:35:17] It really is. Language is all about what you make it from and what you make it into. I had a lot of difficulty over the years with how people use language because every time I think that I've nailed it down, I'm like, OK, I've cracked the code. This is how you talk to people. And then I meet a new person and the code is completely different and it would be so much easier if code switching was just like the NT language and the autistic language. But given that every NT and autistic person are completely different, you kind of end up with shared themes. And that's important. Like finding those shared themes and figuring out how we can relate them is one of the few ways that we can try to have decent dialog around those communication difficulties.

Jeanne [00:36:02] I think it's one of the things I often speak to other people about being an educator. And obviously the podcast is called Actually Autistic Educator. It's a big part of what I really love doing is that being autistic has made me a much better teacher because I go into every interaction with a student assuming that their brain is going to work different from mine. They have a unique backstory, personality and way of communicating. And it's my job as their teacher, as the one who's getting paid, to make sure that I can figure out how best to communicate with them as an individual. And I've had so many students of so many different backgrounds resonate with that incredibly strongly because they're just not used to people willing to put in the extra effort to see from what their perspective is. Like a refugee who's only been speaking English for four years and is a very intelligent but has historically been thought less of because of a strong accent and or my students who are neurodiverse in different ways and struggle with executive dysfunction and have amazing things that they can do but because they didn't fit into this very

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narrow view of what intelligence should be labeled as, they felt lesser put down upon and been labeled as stupid. And all of the trauma that goes along with that, I think that's one of the big advantages, is once if you if, you know, no one else can be guaranteed automatically to think like you. You start trying to be much more open about everyone's perspective, and I really wish non-autistics would spend a little more time trying to think about what are other people's backgrounds, perspectives and reasons and how can I be more supportive and encouraging of them rather than assuming that they have to come and meet me the way I like to communicate.

Thank you so much for everything that you've shared. I really, truly value it. Been a wonderful friend for a very long time as one of the people who you are, one of the early people who I've made that connection. I've had a lot of friends identify as autistic in the last like one to four years. It's been a huge increase. And many of these are people who I've been friends with since college, which was quite a while back for me. And so we've known each other for well over a decade and we always just kind of clicked. But they're finally getting those diagnoses. And it's really interesting to see just how many people in our friends circle that process is going through. But I've always really valued having you as a person who just I didn't have to work to communicate with like we could just chat and it could be relaxing. And I didn't have to work in order to make myself feel heard or valued. And it's not that I don't have a lot of non-autistics in my life who don't make a good faith effort. They do. I've had a lot of those types of people who at least are aware that there are differences and that they're going to try to make a good faith effort. But there still takes a little bit of that effort of communicating. And it's been so wonderful to have you in and now having even more other autistics to have this community where we can really validate each other's experiences, where we don't have to put in all of that extra effort. And I really appreciate you coming on the show and helping with this. And I just also really appreciate you as a human. So thank you very much.

Morgan [00:39:58] Thank you for having me.

Jeanne [00:40:01] The paper I referenced is from 2020 titled Autistic Peer to Peer Information Transfer is highly effective, which is part of a slate of recent studies that are breaking away from this assumption of different equals lesser and when using more quantifiable metrics of information transfer, rather than simply comparing to an established norm of what is expected to be communication, these papers are finding out that these so-called flaws in autistic communication are frequently really more just differences. That non-autistics are just as bad at reading and interpreting our autistic body language and social cues as we are reading theirs. That autistics can communicate very effectively with each other in numerous ways, that many of our previously defined antisocial behaviors actually have valid and important mental health reasons why they are good for us, and more.

I want to circle back to some of the descriptions of autism in the DSM I spoke about at the start of the show. "Abnormalities in eye contact and body language deficits in understanding and use of gestures, a total lack of facial expression and nonverbal communication." And I want you to really think about how clearly non-essential, especially in this time of the Internet, these things actually are to communication. When we interact on social media, you can't hear my tone or see my facial features when someone calls on the phone. We can still communicate even without seeing body language. Many people with various disabilities cannot use these types of signals and are still, in fact, quite capable of communication, even when society assumes otherwise. Autistics who use assistive devices, who type and have it read out loud or who write out their words can be just as smart and capable as Stephen Hawking, who also used assistive tech. But we shouldn't have to be a world famous scientist to be treated as a person. Just because we use tech to speak, or sound or look different to what you'd expect, should not be a valid reason to see

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our mannerisms as wrong. The real issue here isn't autistic communication being flawed. It's that it's easier for most neurotypicals to understand people who speak and think like themselves. And not being willing to put in the effort to learn to understand other ways of communicating, different dialects and languages exist and claiming that mine is the right one and everyone else needs to copy it or else they are deficient, is incredibly harmful and wrong.

I love to travel to different countries in non-Covid times. Of course, usually I can coast as English is very common and I know rudimentary French and a smidge of Spanish and I always try to learn some basic phrases for whatever country I am in at the time and keep a phrasebook on me. And people are always very friendly and happy for us to work something out. But I have seen so many tourists be incredibly indignant that someone in a country with a different native language didn't speak English perfectly on the first try and understand exactly what they meant, because in their minds, their language apparently is the important one and everyone else should cater to their comfort and ease. When we see this as a trope in media, it's usually a way to show that the character is rude or inconsiderate. But thinking about how historically we as a society have treated people with so many differences, communication or otherwise as being lesser, that their language or accent is a deficit, what does that say about us as a society?

Jackson Galaxy, a noted cat behaviorist, had a show that ran for several years on Animal Planet called "My Cat from Hell," and the title sounds very inflammatory. But what was always interesting is that all of these troubles that people had with their cats were never actually treated as the fault of the cat. The problems were always caused by people not bothering to correctly accommodate and understand the needs and communication techniques of the cat. I went to one of his seminars and he did a great bit explaining the reason people think cats are sullen, aloof, don't care about their owners is because we are so used to the way that dogs interact with us. We often try to

interpret cat behavior as if they were a dog instead. The signals used, however, are incredibly different. Most of his work involved explaining that the cat was just being a cat. There was nothing wrong. Problems were caused by humans refusing to accept that or learn how cats actually communicate. I have four cats, trust me. They are incredibly effective communicators if you are willing to listen. There are a lot of weird associations around autistics and animals that often seem to be framed as some like mystical connection, something about us being childlike or close to nature or other vaguely condescending notions when in reality I think on average we are just more willing to listen to how an animal likes to communicate, rather than insisting they should speak in a way that doesn't require us to learn anything or make an effort.

Sometimes people are different to us, but different doesn't mean lesser or broken or wrong. If you are autistic and listening to this, your brain and your ways of communicating are just as valid as anyone else's, and you deserve people in your life who are willing to learn to translate to you just as much as you translate for them. If you're not autistic, especially if you're in a position of authority or control over autistics as a teacher, a therapist, nurse or parent, I'd ask you to really think before you judge someone for their mannerisms, are you just perpetuating trauma and your own biases? Is this person really being aggressive or are they just passionate? Are they uninterested or ignoring you or just not making eye contact because it's uncomfortable for them? Be open to people communicating in ways that are different to you and avoid assuming that it would be helpful to teach them a different way to communicate rather than teaching others to be more inclusive. And we'll be talking a lot more about this and the harms that masking causes in a future episode as part of the series on autistic communication. And of course, multiply marginalized autistics face more oppression and judgment here with autistics of color, autistic women and autistics who are seen as lower class or with less education, getting less acceptance of their differences in behavior compared to more privileged



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autistics. If we can create a society that doesn't keep sidelining people and viewing them as less or deficient simply because of their language, accent or mannerisms, how much better can we make it for everyone?

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