

Relationships and Communication

» **SEAN:** Most autistic people do generally say that we want social connections.

There's part of the autistic population that might prefer to or mainly be non-speaking.

I couldn't really talk for quite a few years of my childhood.

One of the things that I would personally encourage any autistic person to do is...

[REWIND SOUND EFFECT]

» **SEAN:** Welcome back to the fourth video in our Embrace Autism series.

This video is about relationships and communication.

Autism is considered by many people as a social communication and an interaction disability.

Firstly, we'd like to talk about some of the myths and stereotypes about autistic people and relationships and communication.

These include:

"Autistic people don't want or have relationships."

False.

Some of us do, some of us don't, just like the rest of the human population. And both are ok.

"Autistic people don't want or need to socialise."

False.

Some of us do, some of us don't, just like the rest of the human population. And both are ok.

As human beings we are hard wired for social connection.

The National Autistic Society conducted a survey on mental health and a huge number of autistic people reported feeling socially isolated. This has a negative impact on their mental health.

Contrary to the stereotypes, most autistic people do generally say that we want social connections and that we want to feel connected.

For some autistic people, socialising as an autistic person, in a way that is healthy for us, might look a little different to someone that's not autistic. That's ok too.

Part of my own journey post-diagnosis is realising that I actually like socialising...

But there's a caveat here...

That it's done in authentic spaces where I don't have to mask, where everyone is being genuine, where I'm not having to worry about mind games or power games being played here.

Socialising in spaces and with people where I can be my authentic self around other authentic people. In situations like this, I actually really enjoy hanging out and I can do this sober.

One of the ways I used to mask was largely using alcohol, which is a very, very common experience for a lot of autistic people.

Many autistic people, particularly later in life diagnosed people, end up with addiction issues. The root cause of that might be an unhealthy way of attempting to manage anxiety or be a coping mechanism to get through a social situation.

For some autistic people, we enjoy talking in the car to with other people because we don't have to sit opposite each other.

We can still have a really nice, natural flowing conversation. which is still being just as sociable, it just might look a little different to the expectations of a non-autistic person, because we're not sitting staring at each other the whole time.

One of the things I would personally encourage any autistic person to do, it doesn't matter if you're recently diagnosed, if you're self-identified or if you've known that you've been autistic for a long time, is to meet as many autistic people as you can.

I've learned a lot about myself through meeting other autistic people and then redefining my own internal prejudices about what it is to be 'normal'.

For example, I don't need a huge number of friends to feel happy or to feel like I've got a positive and fulfilling social aspect of my life.

It's not feeling that I have some sort of peer pressure or societal pressure to live up to, because my version of what a happy healthy amount of socialisation is within my own life might look very sparse compared to someone else's.

But in reality, that's all I need, that's what makes me happy. That's my sweet spot for not feeling overwhelmed.

Or you could be the complete opposite and you might want tonnes of people in your life but it's completely up to you.

Both are completely ok.

One of the important things to mention here when we're talking about relationships is communication.

We've touched on this a little bit in some of the previous videos where we talked about language choice and use and the impact, both positive and negative that this can have.

Communication and different communication styles have a huge impact on all human relationships.

Now what we mean by that is that it doesn't matter if you're in an autistic only space, if you're in a space with both autistic and non-autistic people... communication is a two-way street.

Following the logic of my own example of describing being autistic as like I was born a native French speaker surrounded by native English speakers...

Well, when I'm with native English speakers, I personally feel I should make as much effort to speak English and understand English as that person should make an effort to speak French and understand French.

And that is the way we have healthy relationships.

Healthy communication is me respecting and having boundaries for my own preferences, my own language choice and my own communication style.

But also, within that same breath, it's realising that I have to have the same degree of respect, understanding, accommodation and willingness to learn.

Willingness to understand the other person's communication styles and needs, through to their own language use, their own language choices.

One isn't right, one isn't wrong.

The way to have a healthy relationship there is for me to come in with the same mindset of understanding and empathy and willingness to want to communicate in a healthy way as I would expect in return for me.

For example, in these videos, we're here, we're talking, it's visual and auditory.

We also have a written transcript for all of these Embrace Autism videos for different people's communication preferences.

There's part of the autistic population that might prefer to or mainly be non-speaking.

When I was younger, pre-diagnosis, I had a severe stutter, to the point that I couldn't really talk for quite a few years of my childhood.

One of the things that used to frustrate me was people trying to finish my sentences for me.

People assuming that I didn't have anything to say, or that I didn't have anything to communicate.

In the work that we do out outside of these videos, much of it is done online but sometimes we meet someone, and we'll just be chatting to each other in text chat.

Sometimes it might be we'll have cameras off, or cameras on.

Sometimes it might be speaking. Sometimes we won't.

Sometimes it might be a combination of all of the above.

All are ok.

It's fine for you to decide what your preference is within the day.

One of the ways that I've have learned a lot about myself is being more mindful of what other people's communication preferences are.

Even though I'm sat here chatting away today, believe it or not, there are some days I prefer not to speak.

Be willing to go slightly out of your comfort zone to make spaces where everyone can feel included.

We're very passionate about creating safe spaces for everyone which requires everyone just to have a little bit of a leap of faith.

[END OF VIDEO]