

Engagement and Communication Practices with Persons who are Neurodivergent



Disability engagement and communication requires some planning and thought, especially when you are working toward being a church where everyone feels welcome and a sense of belonging. Many people have not thought about ways to make interactions with those of us who are disabled easier and more relaxed. To start with, remember that each person is unique and all of us are made in the image of God. If you encounter a disabled person who may need assistance, ask if help is wanted and exactly how you can help.

Who is considered neurodivergent?

This is a new term coined by an autistic writer which encompasses not only autism but also attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, Tourette's Syndrome, and mental health conditions. Most of these conditions are on a spectrum and how they affect each individual will vary tremendously. The term neurodiversity includes all of us including those whose brains work more typically.

When you are with a person who is neurodivergent:

- Do not expect or insist on eye contact.
- Accept alternate forms of communication such as pointing, writing, texting, or use of a communication device.
- Recognize that different types of sensory experiences, such as sound, light, scents, or touch may be experienced as intensely magnified or be perceived as painful.
- Respect sensory differences. Do not insist on hugs or handshakes if touch is uncomfortable.
- Use direct communication that does not involve nonverbal communication, the use of social cues, or sarcasm. Understand that what you say may be taken literally.
- As relationships are formed, ask what is needed for persons to participate more fully.
- Stay calm and avoid sudden movement or loud noises.
- Do not react to actions such as stimming or flapping which are often used as calming strategies by autistic people.
- Offer a break in a safe, quiet place if the person is getting overwhelmed.
- Make it clear that you want to support them. Learn best practices for being an ally.
- Do not judge. Seek understanding and educate yourself about neurodivergence.
- While family or friends may provide you with some insight, whenever possible, communicate directly with the person who is neurodivergent.

For more information:

Disability Etiquette Guide: Tips on Interacting Respectfully with People with Disabilities

[\[https://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf\]](https://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf)

The #ActuallyAutistic Guide to Advocacy: Step by Step Advice on How to Ally and Speak Up with Autistic People and the Autistic Community. 2022. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Understanding Sensory Processing Differences [NEED DMC LINK]

March 2024, Rev. Debbie Hills, Deaconess Lynn Swedberg, & Tim Vermande