A fact sheet about

Self-advocacy with family

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Self-advocacy with family

How to ask your family for one thing you need, calmly and your way.



Key points

- Asking your family for what you need is called self-advocacy (definition below). It goes best when you ask for one specific thing.
- Pick a calm time. In the middle of a hard moment, it is harder for everyone to listen and to explain.
- Use the way of communicating that suits you. A message or a note is a fair way to ask.
- Frame it as how you work, not as what they did wrong. Then people know what would help, and they are less likely to feel blamed.

What self-advocacy at home is

Every Sunday the family gets together for lunch. The TV is on, three people are talking at once and someone keeps asking about your plans. By the time dessert comes you have had enough, and you snap "can everyone just stop". Then the afternoon turns into a row about your tone, and the thing you needed never gets talked about.

The need was fair, but what made it a fight was when and how it came out.

‘Self-advocacy’ means telling people what you need so that a place works better for you. At work or in study, it can mean asking for formal changes. At home, it is usually smaller and more personal.

It might be any of these:

- a message before someone drops in, rather than a knock at the door
- the TV off or turned down while people eat
- an hour on your own after you arrive at a family event
- not being asked about your plans at every visit
- eating your safe foods at a shared meal without comments

Autistic adults say that time alone helps them recover from a lot of people and noise, and then they feel ready to join in again. So a need like that hour on your own is often what lets you stay longer. Many ADHD and other neurodivergent people say the same from their own lived experience.

You can read more about protecting your social battery at family events here.

Why the timing and the framing matter

Stress that feels out of your control, even mild stress, can quickly switch off the part of the brain that plans and explains. That is true for your family too. So a request made in a hard moment is harder for you to put clearly and harder for them to hear. A calm time gives both sides more to work with.

People who experience the world differently often misread each other, in both directions. This is called the double empathy problem. Your family may not see why the noise matters to you, and you may not see why they keep asking. Neither side is wrong for that. So "I work best when" tends to land better than "you always", because it tells them how you work instead of what they did wrong.

The way you ask matters as well. Autistic adults have said that good support includes people accepting the way they need to communicate, and that includes writing. A message lets you take your time, and it gives the other person time to think before they answer.

A request also goes better when the other person meets you part of the way. Autistic adults say they can be more themselves with people who ask what they need and take them at their word. You cannot make your family do that, but a clear and calm request makes it easier for them.

Most of this research is about autistic adults, but if you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: one need, one calm time, your way

Choose one need, the one that would make the biggest difference. Then write it as one sentence that starts "I work best when", with one thing they could do:

- "I work best when I know who is coming. Could you text me before you drop in?"
- "I work best at family lunch if the TV is off while we eat. Could we try that this Sunday?"
- "I work best if I can have some time on my own after I arrive. I am not upset, I will come back."

Share it with one person, on a day when nothing else is going on. You can say it, type it, send a message or hand them a note. If they ask questions, it is fine to say you would like to think and come back to them.

You can keep your sentence in the Understanding Zoe app, along with how it went. If something needs changing, you can go back to them on another calm day. It may take a few goes before a new habit sticks for everyone.

This step comes from what neurodivergent adults say helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. Not every family will say yes, and some needs may still lead to a hard talk. If you need a plan for when you are already overwhelmed, you can read more about explaining what helps you here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether things at home are tense every week or only at family events. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you and your family find ways to talk about what you each need. Your GP can help you work out who is right for you, and you can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

All of this assumes you are safe to ask. If someone in your family frightens you, hurts you or controls you, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732. You can call at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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