A fact sheet about

Conversations that flow

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Conversations that flow

Why some conversations flow and others take work, and how to have more easy ones.



Key points

- A conversation often feels easy when you and the other person communicate in a similar way. That could be the same pace, the same way of saying things, or the same ease with silence.
- Research found that autistic people pass on information to each other as well as non-autistic people do, and that mixed autistic and non-autistic pairs often felt less in tune. There is little research yet with ADHD and other neurodivergent people, but many say they feel the same mismatch.
- So a hard conversation is often a mismatch of styles. It is not proof that you are bad at communicating with people.
- One step to try: notice which conversations flow, and set up more like them.

What makes a conversation flow

With one friend, you can message back and forth about a game for a whole evening and not notice the time. With a neighbour, five minutes of small talk at the letterbox can feel like hard work, and you replay it for an hour after.

You are the same person in both. What changes is the match between how you communicate and how they do.

Everyone has a unique way of communicating. It includes how much you say and how fast, how direct you are, and how much small talk you want. It also includes how you feel about pauses, and whether you like to go deep into one topic.

When two people share a style, much of the work is already done. You do not have to guess what they meant, or check if a pause means something is wrong. You can say the thing plainly and trust it will land the way you meant it.

When styles differ, both people have to translate. A direct answer can sound blunt to one person and helpful to the other. A long talk about one topic can feel good to one person and like too much to the other: neither style is the wrong one, but the gap takes effort on both sides.

This is one part of a wider idea called the double empathy problem. You can read more about the double empathy problem here.

What research has found

In one study, people passed a story along a chain, from one person to the next. Chains where everyone was autistic kept as much of the story as chains where no one was. Mixed chains lost more of the story along the way. People in mixed chains also felt less in tune with the person they spoke to.

In another study, autistic adults talked about time with their friends and family. Many said that time with other autistic people was easier and more comfortable. They felt better understood and felt they could be themselves. With non-autistic friends and family, some said they had to fit in with what others were used to.

These studies sorted people by whether they were autistic or not. In daily life, you may click with someone for other reasons too, such as a shared interest or a shared sense of humour. And someone who shares your neurotype may still not be easy for you to talk with.

If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of 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: notice which conversations flow

This step starts with the easy conversations, not the hard ones. After a conversation that felt easy, note a few things:

- who it was with
- how you were communicating: face to face, side by side, by message, on a call or in a group
- what it was about
- one thing the other person did, such as saying what they meant, not minding pauses, or letting you go deep into a topic

After a few of these, look at what the easy ones share. Then set up one more like them this week. It might mean messaging rather than calling, meeting one person rather than a group, or doing something side by side.

You can keep these notes in the Understanding Zoe app and look back on them at the end of the week. You may find that one way of talking, or one kind of person, keeps coming up.

This step comes from what neurodivergent adults say has helped them. It has not been validated in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

You do not have to stop talking to the people you find harder. What you learn here can help with them too. You can ask them for one thing from your easy list, such as a message instead of a call. You can read more about finding friendships where you do not have to perform 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 communicating with people feels hard every day or only now and then. 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 look at how you communicate and what makes it easier, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

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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