

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

How Autistic People Make Friends

I'm often asked in coaching conversations how autistic people make friends. It's a subject that I relate to very strongly. For the first fifteen years of my life I struggled to make any friends at all. My friends were *Doctor Who* novels from the local library or home computers, once they were invented.

When I was fifteen I discovered evangelical Christianity, (*the "happy clappy" kind*), and spent the next seven years joining multiple churches trying to find human connections. I realise with hindsight that I was put through gay conversation therapy during this time, but I didn't object because I got to meet people who seemed to be interested in me – and the alternative was loneliness.

It can be a very autistic experience to feel lonely in a busy world. I've spent my life looking for ways to meet other people that has some structure to it and without any small talk. My biggest nightmare is being given a name badge and being told to "*work a room*".

If I look back over my professional career I often choose work that would help me connect with people in an autistic way. I've been a master of ceremonies, workshop leader, stand-up comedian and online coach, which are all ways of having conversations with a point and a time limit – after which I'm allowed to leave without making idle chatter.

Here are some tips and strategies that I've learned along the way – sharing in case they help you. Remember, we are all different so what helps one autistic person might be encouraging somebody else to mask. Please only stick with the things that feel right for you.

MAKING HUMAN CONNECTIONS ONLINE

You might like to start by following some autistic content creators online. For example TikTok has a large autistic community, YouTube and other social media.

I began by following some general hashtags like #actuallyautistic – before finding specific people that I related to and wanted to follow.

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I've learned a great deal about myself from other autistic folk. It is very useful meeting people like you to combat doubts that you're not autistic after all, despite the evidence.

There are also ways of connecting actively to people online. This might be sending messages to people who share your interests, chatting to other players in an online multiplayer game, or attending an online support group.

'*Thriving Autistic*', who I work with, has a monthly online peer meet-up. They use Eventbrite for details of the next one: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/thriving-autistic-clg-33096870621>

MAKING HUMAN CONNECTIONS IN PERSON

Several clients have mentioned the *Meetup* app (<https://www.meetup.com/apps/>) as a place where they find activities they want to try out without any commitment. Another recommended *Bumble for Friends* (<https://bumble.com/en/bff>)

Some groups and activities will attract more neurodivergent folk without being advertised as such. One of my clients does geocaching for a hobby, and says that in their experience everyone they've met who likes geocaching is neurodivergent. If you have a games shop in town that has gaming evenings that is also likely to attract a lot of neurodivergent people.

If you don't know where to start looking, how about considering the following four categories:

- Places where people share your interests
- Places that match your sensory profile (*e.g. some prefer Heavy Metal concerts, others like reading books in silence*)
- People who share your values (*I'm drawn to people who are gentle and kind*)
- Places that attract neurodivergent folk (*it doesn't have to be only autism*)

Do you have a deep interest in a subject? You might find connections with other people who share your passion, and your deep interest might be of great value to the group.

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Maybe there is an activity that you find restores your energy, like being in nature or listening to particular music. If you join other people who are doing the things that restore you it can be part of your self-care as well.

REDUCING THE COST OF MEETING IN PERSON

A lot of social events revolve around small talk: meeting in a pub or a coffee shop for a chat, going to mixers and 'meet and greets', speed dating, networking events ...all of which can create dread if you struggle with unstructured conversations. Here are some tips for reducing the cost of in person activities:

EAR DEVICES – I often think you can tell how long someone has known they are autistic by how many different devices they have for their ears: noise cancelling headphones, *Loop Engage* or *Flare Calmer* earbuds are popular – I find that *Loop Engage* earbuds help if there are multiple conversations happening and I only want to hear one.

FACE THE SAME WAY – I find it easier to talk if we're facing the same direction rather than looking at each other. That might be going for a walk with a friend, or one person drives and one is in the passenger seat. It's harder in a restaurant to both sit on the same side, so then I like to sit on a corner, where we can be at 90 degrees rather than facing each other.

GAMES - Gaming can be a popular way for autistic people to make friends – whether that's an online game where you can chat to other people inside the game, or at a games shop where you can play trading cards/ role playing/ board games on the premises. We now have a few games at home we play when guests visit, (*Qwirkle is my favourite*), as that's an easier way for me to be social. One of my clients has existing friends who only like to meet at the pub, and he's reduced the cost by taking a pack of cards to play with them.

HAVE AN EXIT STRATEGY – I find it costs me a lot of energy if I feel trapped somewhere and don't know when I can leave. I prefer events where I know the end time, or I can let people know in advance when I'll be leaving. My partner and I also have a "*social safe word*" to communicate when we've had enough and would like to go.

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LEARN SOMETHING – educational courses are popular because they tend to have a structure (*start and end times*), the students are facing the same way, and small talk is limited to before and after the class. Also you don't necessarily need to keep seeing the people you meet beyond the end of the activity. I've done a few educational courses which helped me feel like I was meeting people - but I didn't see them outside of the course. I made a very good friend on my coaching diploma, as they were also autistic and struggling with the same issues as me.

PARTIES – I do try to avoid these, but at the last two I attended I looked for the person or couple away from everyone else, looking as miserable as I felt. I asked if I could introduce myself, let them know I was autistic and in both cases it turned out one of the couple was autistic too.

RECOVERY TIME – you might need time to recover from masking or restore social batteries. I use an online calendar to block out time after a group event, or make sure I haven't said yes to two social things back to back.

SHARED TASKS – Autistic folk may find it easier to make friends over shared tasks. Some people have found connection with others at groups playing board games, painting, or photography. It could be a social group like a local walking club, or a class at the gym. Movie nights or book clubs might be another option. One person went to a painting class because they said *"even if I don't talk to someone, I still come home with a painting."*

KEEPING IN CONTACT

It can be an effort keeping up with messages once you've made friends. On days you don't feel like talking you might not be able to reply, and then when too many days have passed you might be too embarrassed to reconnect and decide it's easier to let the friendship go.

One strategy is changing how you reply according to the social energy you have available. On days with lots of energy I can reply with words. On medium days I'll send a meme or a cat photo, and on days when I have no words I can send three heart emoji's as a reply (*meaning "I'm here and I love you, but I have no words today."*) That works with my energy levels and means I have a way to respond even when I can't think of words.

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FINDING A PARTNER

If you find the idea of going on a date challenging, can you arrange it around a shared interest or where something else is happening? It's harder if the pressure is all on you to keep a conversation going.

Don't assume that you can only be with someone else who is autistic. I've seen some really amazing relationships between two people of different neurodivergences. For instance, in a couple where one person is ADHD and the other is autistic, the ADHD person can supply enough social energy for both of you, and the autistic person can supply structure and routine that the ADHDer needs.

I've also seen relationships between someone autistic and someone neurotypical who grew up with an autistic person in their family. That way the advocacy work has already been done before the relationship started, and the autistic person reminds the neurotypical person of someone else they love.

It's also possible you are sure you are going out with someone neurotypical but, as a result of going out with you, they realise they are neurodivergent after all!

SOME GOOD NEWS

The pressure isn't all on you. Once you've made your first connection that can lead to you being introduced to some of their friends and so the network grows.

Also in the current circle of people you know there's probably a higher chance that those people are autistic or neurodivergent. There's a reason why you've been drawn to them.

MAKING SOCIAL EVENTS MORE INCLUSIVE

If you're running a social event, please provide options for people who struggle with informal conversation. It could be running a game or a quiz to help people get to know each other, or providing a quieter room away from the main space for anyone who is overwhelmed.

I hope that helps. Please get in touch if you have any comments or questions.

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