

# 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 (*once they were invented*) home computers.

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 mind 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 are right for you.

### SHARED TASKS

Autistic folk tend to make friends over shared tasks. Some autistic people have found connection with others at groups playing board games, painting, or

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photography. It could be a social group like a local walking club, or a more formal setting like adult education. 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."*

I didn't realise that going for a walk with a friend was an autistic-friendly activity, but you're both facing the same direction so you don't have to look at their face while you're talking.

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.

It's possible you'll meet other autistic people doing task based projects for the same reason as you. I made a very good friend on my coaching diploma, as they were also autistic and struggling with the same issues as me.

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.

## 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.

Some groups and activities – like gaming - will attract more neurodivergent folk without being advertised as such.

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## AUTISTIC SUPPORT GROUPS

Some autistic support organisations run groups and social events, online and in person.

'*Thriving Autistic*', who I work with, has a monthly online peer meet-up. Follow Thriving Autistic on Eventbrite for details of the next one:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/thriving-autistic-clg-33096870621>

## STAYING IN CONTACT WITH PEOPLE YOU ALREADY KNOW

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 using a messaging service (*texts, Slack, Whatsapp etc.*) to stay in touch with friends. 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.

## PERSONAL INTERESTS

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

Or is there 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.

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## FINDING PEOPLE LIKE YOU

Another idea is to follow the hashtag #actuallyautistic on social media (*Instagram, YouTube, Facebook etc.*) where you can find people like you.

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.

## FINDING A PARTNER

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 that 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!

## 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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