

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Telling Someone You're Autistic

(Many of the tips in this post also work for other forms of neurodivergence)

First of all, congratulations on working this out! The more you discover about yourself the more you can change the world to fit around you, rather than you having to mask who you are to fit in with the world.

Next: there's no deadline on telling anyone. You don't have to rush. You're allowed to take as much time as you need. It should be in your control who you tell, how you tell and when you tell.

Once you have made sure you are safe, here are some strategies that other people have used. Sharing them only in case they are helpful. Please take anything that's useful and ignore the rest:

WAITING TO FIND OUT YOUR NEEDS

Every autistic person has different needs. Some of us might react badly to sudden loud noises, and would like to wear noise cancelling headphones at times. Some struggle when interrupted in a task, and like prior warning before moving from one activity to another. Another person may put a limit on the number of people they can socialise with at the same time.

A common response to *"I'm autistic"* from empathetic people is *"how can we help?"*

It might be worth waiting until you have some answers to that next question before you disclose.

If you're not sure what kind of adaptations you need *Thriving Autistic* has a workbook you can complete on your own as a place to start:

<https://www.thrivingautistic.org/workplace-resources/>

<https://www.johnpendal.com>

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DEALING WITH PREJUDICE

Telling people *"I'm autistic"* on its own doesn't give any useful information and leaves you dealing with any misconceptions or prejudice the other person has.

I often hear that autistic people have been told *"You can't be autistic – you're making eye contact with me/ you have a job/ you're in a happy relationship..."*

If I'm having a conversation with them I might reply with *"that's because you're seeing me on a good day. Come find me on a bad day and then tell me I'm not autistic."*

Another prejudice I've had to face is from people who work with autistic people with higher support needs, and say *"you're not autistic. I work with autistic people and you're nothing like them!"*

Then I reply: *"do you know someone else blonde, because I'm probably nothing like them?"*

One person I know told others in an email and included resource links from people who were #actuallyautistic. That is a great idea because the email links do the advocacy work without you having to be there. It didn't cost anything in emotional energy.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

When I first started to disclose I was terrified of someone getting upset or angry in response. Now I realise that people who are neurotypical don't get upset or emotional when I tell them – it's tends to be people who don't know they are autistic who have an emotional response.

It's as if something deep within them is saying *"why did someone tell you that? You're just like me!"*

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Now when someone has an emotional response I see it as a sign that they have things to work out too. If they are willing to go on the same journey of discovery then at some point in the future they'll come back and say: *"you'll never guess what I've just find out about myself!"*

DISCLOSING TO FAMILY MEMBERS

This can be tricky because you may be stuck in a lifetime of communication patterns where your voice isn't heard by parents or siblings. They might also be worried that if they agree that you are autistic – what does that mean about themselves?

One way around this is to frame your discovery as an answer to a family mystery: *"do you remember when that thing happened and no-one knew why? I have an answer: it's because I'm autistic."*

The relief at having the family mystery solved can be a useful way to back up your statement.

Another strategy is to look for the family member who is friendliest towards you and tell them first. They can be a useful ally and give support when you tell others.

If there's a lot of denial in your family, remember that you don't have to disclose that you are autistic when you ask for accommodations. For example, if I wear Loop Earbuds (<https://www.loopearplugs.com/>) at a family gathering and anyone asks what they are, I just say *"they help me to hear you."*

DISCLOSING TO YOUR WORKPLACE

I have heard good and bad stories from people who disclosed to their workplace.

One person was sent for an occupational health assessment, who recommended accommodations my client hadn't heard about before.

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Another client decided not to tell, saying *"I know my workplace will offer me every accommodation I'm legally entitled too ... but I will no longer make Senior Partner."*

It might be worth doing a little bit of research first:

- *Does your workplace have a disability or diversity network?*
- *Are any other members of staff autistic?*
- *Does your workplace have a good history of providing accommodations to those that need it?*

Look for the person who might give you the most support. Is it a co-worker, line manager, or member of HR?

You might be referred by your HR department for an assessment at the request of their insurance company.

You may need to disclose to your employer if you want to request any workplace accommodations or move to a different position within the company. It can also protect you from negative evaluations of your work if the company don't know that you struggle with certain situations.

CONSIDER FINDING OTHER AUTISTIC PEOPLE

It can be tricky telling non-autistic folk, so why not seek out some autistic folk to tell first?

There are lots of places online where we can meet each other (*perhaps by searching for the hashtag #actuallyautistic*). When you meet other autistic people you realise that you are normal, and other people share the traits that you've always thought marked you out as different.

If it's too much to connect with strangers why not send me a message? I'm happy to set up a call and be the first person that you tell.

Hugs, John

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