

Relationships, Empathy and Communication

Welcome to Thriving Autistics Discovery Programme, and welcome to this short introduction to our theme: relationships, empathy, and communication.

Relationships are something that come up often in our programme, and they're something that many autistic adults have complex feelings about.

Relationships of all kinds—friendships, family relationships, romantic relationships, work relationships, relationships with pets, and maybe other things too—can all be sources of connection, care, and joy, but also of confusion, hurt, exhaustion, and misunderstanding.

According to diagnostic manuals like the DSM-5, we're described as having persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction.

Alongside this, there are widespread stereotypes that we lack empathy, don't understand others, or behave inappropriately in social situations.

Rather than a lack of empathy or a deficit in relating, many of us are actually working extremely hard to understand and adapt to non-autistic communication styles, often without that effort that we've put in being recognised or reciprocated. And many of us might be hyper-empathetic but may be misunderstood.

This is where the double empathy problem, coined by Dr Damian Milton, can be really helpful. It suggests that communication breakdowns between autistic and non-autistic people are not due to a one-sided deficit, but to a mutual mismatch in communication styles, expectations, and ways of making sense of the world.

It is not exclusive to autistic and non-autistic people. It can also be useful in explaining the many problems of intersectionality discussed earlier in our programme.

When autistic and non-autistic people communicate, misunderstandings are more likely to arise because everyone is using different social languages, assumptions, and cues. This means that many of us grow up feeling that we are getting it wrong, even when we're communicating in our own way.

Over time, repeated experiences of being misunderstood, corrected, or judged can lead to deep relational trauma. Many late-identified autistic adults describe feeling that they had tried incredibly hard in relationships, yet they still felt unseen, unheard, or too much or not enough.

We may struggle with small talk, unspoken social rules, or reading indirect cues. We may communicate more directly, more honestly, or more intensely. We may miss some neurotypical social signals while being very highly attuned to others.

But none of this means that we lack empathy or care. Often it means we care very, very deeply, but we express it differently. Not always being able to use verbal speech or being reliant on other communication methods can intensify this.

Once people discover that they are autistic, it can be such a relief to realise that these patterns are not personal failures, but reflections of different neurotypes meeting in a world that's largely designed around non-autistic norms.

Many of us often notice that we feel more at ease with other neurodivergent people. This isn't about labelling or diagnosing other people, but simply about recognising shared rhythms of communication, shared sensory needs, and shared ways of connecting.

Conversations may feel easier. Silence is more comfortable. Interests are more welcome, and misunderstandings may be a bit less frequent.

Being late-identified can bring changes to existing relationships as people embrace their autistic identity. Boundaries may need to be renegotiated. Needs around communication, sensory safety, energy, and rest may become clearer.

This can require difficult but important conversations and a shift towards more honest, needs-led relating with our colleagues when it feels safe to do so.

New relationships and being in autistic-led spaces can sometimes offer opportunities to practise being more openly ourselves from the beginning—communicating our preferences, pacing, boundaries, and needs, and building connections around shared interests rather than social performance.

Building community can be supported by spaces that centre shared passions and parallel activity.

Often, neurodivergent spaces, such as our monthly meetups at Thriving Autistic, allow connection to grow for people without the pressure of constant small talk or rapid social switching, and create a sense of safety from being with others who get it and who accept differences more readily.

Many autistic adults carry people-pleasing patterns, fawning responses, or fear of conflict, shaped by years of needing to adapt to survive socially, and may have a high sense of justice and rejection sensitivity.

It can be deeply supportive to learn about boundaries, consent, and communication.

Throughout this module, we'll give space to reflect on relationships in your own life. You might ask yourself:

Where and with whom do I feel most understood?

Do I feel most safe to be myself?

What support do I need to communicate my needs and my boundaries?

How might understanding the double empathy problem help me reframe past misunderstandings with non-autistic people with more compassion for myself?

We hope that through this session, you will discover a deeper understanding of yourself and gain clarification about your ways of being, your strengths, your challenges, and how relationships, the double empathy problem, and communication differences between neurotypes may have impacted your own sense of autistic identity.

Our aim is that by creating a safe space to share our experiences and stories, you'll feel more empowered and better able to advocate for your needs, knowing that you're not alone.

Take care for now.