

EATING DISORDERS



NEURODIVERSITY  
AUSTRALIA

# COMMUNICATION ACCESS GUIDE

Bridging Communication Between Clients  
and Health Care Providers





## Why It Matters

Client-centred care relies on clear, two-way communication.

However, communication in healthcare can be challenging for many reasons. Medical words, forms, and procedures – like booking appointments, short appointment times, or how results are explained – can feel confusing or unfamiliar. Clinicians may also not always realise when their language or approach is unclear.

Differences in spoken or preferred language and cultural norms – along with anxiety, stress, or past experiences of being misunderstood, dismissed, or invalidated – can also make it harder to understand each other or build trust.

Neurodivergent people may face extra communication barriers because they often process and understand information differently. When clinicians and clients have different neurotypes (for example, autistic and non-autistic), they may unintentionally misinterpret each other's communication, social cues, or intentions. This is known as the double empathy problem ([Milton, 2012](#)).

When communication needs aren't recognised or supported, it can make it harder to share information, make decisions about care, or even access healthcare in the first place.





## Who Is This Resource For

This guide is for neurodivergent clients who want to identify and explain their communication needs to healthcare providers. It can also help clinicians understand different communication styles and adapt their approach to better meet client needs.

The adjustments in this guide focus on communication differences between neurotypes, particularly autistic and/or ADHD clients and non-neurodivergent clinicians. It does not cover all forms of neurodivergence (for example, dyslexia or dyscalculia, which require different types of support). This guide is a starting point. Many strategies can benefit everyone and be used immediately in most healthcare settings.



## How to Use the Communication Adjustment List

- Read through each section and select the adjustments that would help you.
- You can focus on the adjustments that will make the biggest difference to your healthcare experience, and, if helpful, rank them in order of importance. This can help providers understand what to prioritise if resources are limited.
- Bring your list to your appointment and use it to collaborate with your clinician. If helpful, you can use the last page of this document to create a personal summary
- You can ask for these adjustments to be documented in your file for future visits.



# Communication Adjustment List

**Note:** This list is not exhaustive. Communication preferences vary widely between individuals and are influenced by factors such as culture, language, disability, and personal history. What is supportive for one person may feel overwhelming or unhelpful for another. In addition, communication needs can vary for the same person depending on context or over time.



## Information about my communication

- I communicate differently depending on the situation; just because you've heard me speak does not mean I can do so at all times.
- I write or type better than I speak; please provide ways for me to write or type if I don't have my own device.
- I use AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) to communicate.
- I can take part in decisions about my care, even if I don't speak.
- I understand written instructions better than spoken ones; I prefer written options.
- I often take language literally; please avoid metaphors.
- I tend to be very direct; please don't assume I am rude.
- I have difficulty speaking over the phone; please offer alternatives for scheduling appointments, intake, or other communications.
- I lip-read or find seeing your face helps me process auditory information.
- I find subtitles helpful for processing spoken language in online appointments.

- I may have trouble understanding tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language; please do not rely on these to communicate important messages.
- I do not use a lot of facial expressions or body language to express myself. Please trust my words and don't make assumptions based on my non-verbal cues (e.g. pain level).
- I use echolalia; please don't be alarmed if I make sudden noises or repeat something you said.



### To help appointments go smoothly

- Let me or my support person complete paperwork at home when possible.
- Schedule longer appointments if possible or give me typical questions in advance so I can prepare.
- If possible, let me choose between face-to-face, telehealth, or phone appointments.
- Notify me as soon as possible if there is an unexpected change (e.g. seeing a different provider or needing switch to a telehealth or phone appointment).
- Send me a picture of the waiting room and therapy space before my first visit.
- Warn me if furniture, artwork, or other environmental elements in the clinic have changed, or if you have changed your appearance (e.g. hairstyle or glasses).
- Allow me to bring a support person, service animal, or comfort item.
- Small talk makes me feel uncomfortable. To build rapport, you can ask me about my interests.
- I may need verbal prompts to follow instructions. I can have difficulty controlling my body, including starting, stopping, or combining movements.



## To help me better understand what you are saying

- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Use very precise language, even if sentences are long.
- Don't hesitate to use technical or medical words.
- Avoid medical words or jargon.
- Avoid metaphors to explain concepts.
- Incorporate my interests to explain concepts.
- Use diagrams, pictures, or models to explain things.
- Write down important information when you explain things.
- Give me very detailed information.
- Focus only on the most important information.
- Give me time to process what you have said; don't repeat questions unless I ask you to.
- To check that we understand each other, ask me to repeat what you said in my own words / using my AAC.
- Minimise background noises when you speak (e.g. turn off phones, computer notification)
- I may have trouble processing more than one sense at a time (e.g. hearing while looking at you). If I don't look at you, it does not mean I am not paying attention.



## To help me provide information more effectively

- Be very concrete and specific (e.g. instead of asking "how have you been", try "tell me about one thing you enjoyed doing since I last saw you").
- Give me questionnaires in advance so I can complete them in a supportive environment.
- Read written notes I bring to the visit.
- Ask specific questions rather than very broad ones.
- Ask mostly yes/no questions when possible.

- Offer to reword questions if I seem confused.
- Give examples of symptoms so I can indicate if I experience them.
- Show me lists of options to choose from.
- Help me describe timelines by linking to important events in my life.
- I find it difficult to rate my pain out of 10. Please use alternative ways to describe what I feel (e.g. emoji, colours, pictures, songs).
- I find it difficult to name or describe emotions. Please don't label emotions for me and let me use alternative ways to express them (e.g. poem, music, weather pattern).



### To help me follow your recommendations

- Write out your medical diagnoses, what you think is happening, and what the plan is for next steps in assessments and/or treatments.
- Give one instruction at a time; avoid overlapping verbal instructions.
- Provide written or visual information to support verbal explanations.
- Use pictures or videos to support verbal explanations.
- Write or type your recommendations and provide a printed copy.
- Provide a digital copy of your recommendations.
- Print or email additional information about my health needs.
- Allow a support person to take notes or help me implement your recommendations.
- Allow me to record verbal instructions so I can review to them later.
- Write out detailed step-by-step instructions of how to implement something we agreed on.
- If I need to record symptoms or anything else for our next appointment, give me options on how to do so (e.g. voice memo, pictures, diary, app).



# Personal Summary



Information about my communication



To help appointments go smoothly



To help me better understand what you are saying



To help me provide information more effectively



To help me follow your recommendations