

Eye Contact

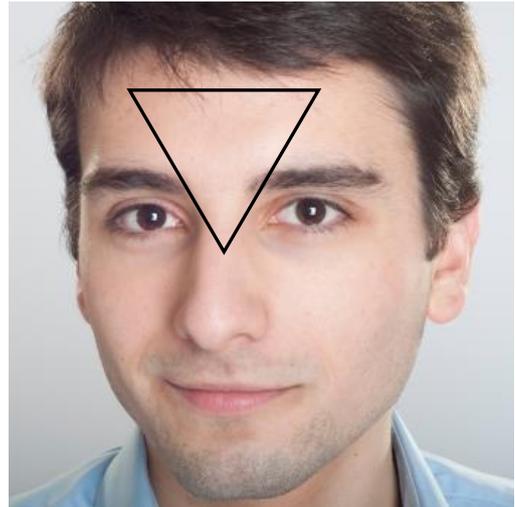


Many people with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism struggle with eye contact. They may find it confusing, over-stimulating or even painful, and some research has shown that some people on the autistic spectrum find eye contact threatening.

Some people on the autistic spectrum find that they can only process information effectively through one sense at a time. For example, they may be able to understand audible information, only if there are no visual, tactile or olfactory (smell) distractions. This can cause problems with them giving eye contact, as they may find that they can either listen to someone or look them in the eye, but struggle to do both at the same time.

In most of non-autistic or “neuro-typical” culture, eye contact is very important, and failure to give eye contact is considered rude. Non-autistic people may not understand the difficulties you face and, if you don’t give eye contact, may think you are uninterested, aloof or very shy. Eye contact is also useful as it enables people to see each other’s facial expressions, which can give clues as to how each person is feeling. This culture poses problems for individuals with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism, as it clashes with their need to be able to concentrate and feel comfortable and safe.

If you find direct eye contact difficult, try looking at the person's eyebrows or the top part of their nose. If this still feels too intense, try letting your eyes go out of focus a little as you gaze. These are good compromises as they give the illusion of eye contact, but will hopefully be more comfortable for you.



While eye contact is very important, too much eye contact can be perceived as staring, aggressive or even flirtatious. Studies have shown that two people in a healthy conversation use 30%-60% eye contact. A good way to achieve this is to break eye contact every 5 or 6 seconds or so, look slightly to the side (you don't need to move your head, just your eyes) of the person you are speaking with for a couple of seconds, and then return to looking at their eyes, eyebrows or the top of their nose for another 5 or 6 seconds, and so on.

This might seem very difficult and unnatural at first, but if you practice with people you know, and focus on what they are talking about, you will soon find that it starts to feel easier and more comfortable.