

## Adults with Asperger's: How to Manage Eye Contact

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One of the key signs of Asperger's Syndrome in people is a difference in their use of eye contact in communication. This seemingly trivial variation can cause huge conflicts and misunderstandings when trying to deal with the neurotypical world.

When to look someone in the eye, when to look away, does lack of eye contact indicate unfriendliness or dishonesty, does eye contact that too lengthy indicate a threat or a seduction? A lot gets expressed and read into a seemingly simple gaze. The confusion gets compounded by the fact that different cultures have different rules for eye contact, and the rules within families can be different than those for friends, acquaintances or strangers. What's praised as "paying attention" for some cultures is then criticized in others as "not being respectful."

There are reasons the neurotypical world uses eye contact: as an indication of openness, interest, paying attention, as well as to convey less friendly messages such as boredom or dominance. Checking in with the listener's eye contact is a way to verify that you're still getting your point across and not confusing, boring, or offending the listener. While it may be considered impolite to interrupt when confused, a simple squint conveys the message clearly.

For those with Asperger's Syndrome or other autism spectrum disorders, eye contact may be very uncomfortable. Just go online and read some of the blogs from adults with Asperger's syndrome and you'll find great discussions about how eye contact can feel threatening, distracting, or overwhelming.

So, what can be done about problems with eye contact? It would be great if everyone acknowledged that eye contact is a trivial matter, and people were judged by their words and actions instead. Unfortunately, I don't think that's going to happen any time soon. Unless they're clearly affected by Asperger's or autism, most people probably don't even know what it is. (When I tell acquaintances that I specialize in coaching and therapy for people with Asperger's, the first question is usually, "What's Asperger's?") I don't think neurotypicals are being deliberately bigoted or judgmental, but reading nonverbal messages is an instinctive and lifelong, although mostly unconscious, behavior.

I think the solution comes down to compromise and careful consideration of the situation. In *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, Tony Attwood suggests that adults find a way to explain to others why their eye contact is different. (p. 89) He suggests stating that looking away helps the speaker concentrate, or asking the listener to let them know if they're getting bored. These direct methods are probably most useful for those people you know fairly well and those you're going to be interacting with a lot.

Some online sites suggest faking eye contact by looking just above the eyes, at the forehead, or the eyebrows. I think this is an intriguing idea, but you'd need to practice first. Find a neurotypical friend and see how this works. (Not your mom! She's used to the way you behave.) Most neurotypicals get an uncomfortable feeling when body language is different, even though they may not be able to explain precisely what is wrong. Don't try faking eye contact for the first time on a job interview or a first date.

A final option is to try to learn neurotypical eye gaze behaviors. This is a big, time consuming project and will probably require training from some sort of professional and lots of practice. I'd suggest finding a qualified therapist, speech professional, or coach to figure out all the technical details and then a close neurotypical friend to practice.

Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to the matter of eye contact, just a lot of compromises. In the end, the people who matter most to you will probably get your message, whether or not you look them in the eye.