



AUTISM ALLIANCE OF MICHIGAN PRESENTS

# MiNavigator

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Help. Hope. Answers. Today

## MY STORY AND LEARNING TO TELL IT

*Contributed by Lara Lewis, BFA*

In my middle school, there were posters in the nurse's office and hallway that said that the spoken word made up only a portion of face-to-face communication. I remember seeing a pie chart on one of them that assigned the other portions to tone and body language, and my younger self finding that remarkably unfair. I communicated solely through my words, or so I believed, because words were easy to understand. Was it so hard for everyone else to be so direct?

Looking back, I know what I thought then to be patently untrue, but I still understand where my younger self was coming from. The struggle with communication for me has always been one of interpretation; I know what I want to say, and how to say it, and I recognize now that the hand gestures I occasionally make to illustrate my point count as body language. Gauging the meaning of others is more difficult; I'm not in their head, so the only way I can truly know what they mean is to try and respond in kind, and interpret their reaction in turn. I realize this is the basic foundation of most communication, but when filtered through my ASD it can be much easier said than done. An eyebrow raise can be intrigue or irritation, a tilt of the head confusion or interest, folded arms either a casual pose or a sign of frustration. I've had 23 years to study and I still don't always get it right.

The greatest struggle with communicating these days is knowing when to trust my instincts. While I am a person of high empathy, meaning that I can easily detect the emotional cues from others and feel them in turn, determining what drives those emotions can be trickier. I often find myself focusing on word choice more than tone or body language in high emotionally-charged situations, because otherwise I can't focus on what's being communicated at all beyond *I am distressed* or *I am angry*. In these situations it can be hard to pick up the more nuanced aspects of the conversation, and I have to focus on what I'm best at: hearing and understanding words at face value. Sometimes even that isn't enough.

One roadblock I face during these situations is that I deal with going nonverbal: when I'm too upset or distressed, my voice stops responding to any attempts I make at speaking, leaving me completely silent.

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The main ways I have to deal with this are to either write what I want to say, or to remove myself from the situation until I've calmed down enough to speak again. This can take up to several minutes, depending on what caused it in the first place and how upset I am. This isn't the only difficulty I deal with trying to communicate, but it is the one I have had the most difficulty working around, partially because it doesn't happen enough for me to be prepared or accustomed to it.

That being said, I'm quite lucky. I was raised by parents who encouraged me to communicate, to express my thoughts, wants and concerns. They recognized that I had difficulties in communication and worked to help me develop the skills I needed, both at home and through various forms of teaching and counseling. The guidance of my family and teachers helped me cultivate an understanding of body language, figurative speech, and understanding cues such as voice tone and subtext.

One of the most important lessons I was taught early on was the value behind communicating effectively - not only that it would help me express what I wanted or thought, but that by understanding the communication of others, I could understand what they wanted and why they wanted it. I was taught that hearing somebody wasn't the same thing as listening to them, and that by listening - not just taking in the words, but trying to understand the thoughts behind them - I gave others the respect they deserved, and that I deserved in kind. I was taught that my words, thoughts and ideas had value, that I deserved to have them be heard, and that the best way for that to happen was through effective communication.

Of course, that's much easier said than implemented. I was lucky because I had support and found effective means of communication, particularly in my writing and how I choose to speak and behave. That doesn't mean they came to me quickly. I struggled with understanding figurative language for years, particularly euphemisms and cues to change a subject. My troubles with being literal-minded were particularly frustrating because of my passion for writing: metaphors, non-literal comparisons, and extended allegory were apt to go right over my head even when I was reading far ahead of my grade level.

I distinctly remember a class when I was young where we all read a story in silence, then had to talk about it. At first, I simply read it as a recollection of a neighborhood teacher, one who did communal homeschooling on tasks such as collecting eggs and reading. As the discussion began, however, small details I had picked up but not connected were intertwined together - the woman's slow aging, the increasing focus on learning to do work instead of academics, and gradual disappearance of expensive books in her home - and they all pointed toward a common theme.

What I had accepted as just a memory of an old teacher was in fact a reflection of that teacher losing all of her money as she aged and having to sell off her possessions, and relying on her students to do the things she couldn't anymore. That discussion left me blindsided, and had me wondering for hours afterwards how I hadn't even thought to connect those details together in such a way.

The way I approached reading was the way I approached people: expecting things to be their face value, without ulterior motives, without hidden meanings or motivations. Coming to realize that was almost never the case, and that I would have to work to interpret words in ways that often felt counter-intuitive, was one of the longest and trickiest parts of becoming a better communicator.

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Despite the difficulties I've had, past and present, I still consider myself to be in a good spot. My struggles were largely approached with patience and compassion, my questions and opinions treated as legitimate, and my voice valued. I was taught that what I had to say was worth hearing, just as much as anyone else. I was taught to listen, to observe, to value details and think about why they were important. I was taught that how I said something - be it through written or spoken word - wouldn't change the fact that so long as I spoke, so long as I found a way to express myself, somebody would hear it, and would listen.

I was taught to listen.

Lara Lewis is a Cum laude graduate from the prestigious Savannah College of Art & Design. In 2016 she had the opportunity to work on a collaborative project with Ford Motor Company. She is an aspiring editor and copywriter, and connected to AAoM's Employment Program "Upbound at Work." You can read more of Lara's writing at [awetisticwriting.wordpress.com](http://awetisticwriting.wordpress.com) Lara's self-proclaimed 'cheesy blog title' aside, one will be in 'awe' of the value of her shared insights.



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## Communication Quick Tips

Contributed by Tammy Morris, Chief Program Officer, AAoM

It is ironic that in the world of communication, we make the recommendation or use the phrase "Say what you mean and mean what you say" and then do not explicitly teach what clear and direct communication entails. Below are universal communication strategies, which apply whether you are the individual on the autism spectrum, or the individual who is not.

1. If you are uncomfortable with silence, do not assume others are as well. Some feel a pressing need to fill all silence or delays in conversation. Others do not.
2. If you need to discuss something at a later time, state what you need to discuss and at what time or forum. Vague indications, such as "I need to see you later" or "Let's touch base" can lead to anxiety. If you can provide a written meeting note, calendar invite, or agenda in advance, even better!
3. If you need time to process an idea or information, just state that you need time to think about it. Some require more processing time to formulate responses to information presented aurally. Others may need time to react to a creative idea that they have never encountered before.
4. Avoid the 'nod and smile.' If someone does not provide the background information that you need to follow the conversation, or instructions, then simply tell the speaker that you need more context.
5. If it would benefit you to see something in writing, if the idea or details are not clear, ask for it in written form, even a simple sketch or drawing.
6. We use metaphors, sarcasm, and humor. Recognize that you may be using figurative language to make the delivery 'easier,' and that it may not facilitate understanding for the listener. If you use a figure of speech, try to follow with an explicit instruction. For example, a supervisor might say "If you have time to lean, then you have time to clean." followed by "You need to clean your area before break. Look busy."





# JULY AT A GLANCE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<b>1</b> <u>Camp Sunshine at Camp Henry</u> (Newaygo)	<b>2</b> <u>Pine Ridge Bible Camp- Freddy's Friends</u> (Cedar Springs)	<b>3</b> <u>2018 Camp A.B.L.E.</u> (Canton)	<b>4</b>  <b>HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY</b>	<b>5</b> <u>Camp Sunshine at Camp Henry</u> (Newaygo)	<b>6</b> <u>Sensory Storytime for Special Needs Adults</u> (Boyer City)	<b>7</b> <u>Kik Pool Summer Saturdays!</u> (Kalamazoo)
<b>8</b> <u>Forever Friendship Drop-In Annual Picnic</u> (Iron Mountain)	<b>9</b> <u>Advocacy Summer Workshop 2018</u> (Grand Rapids) <u>Ready For Life (RFL) Summer Camp</u> (Holland)	<b>10</b> <u>Creating Confident Caregivers</u> (Escanaba)	<b>11</b> <u>Drop In Art Days!</u> (Traverse City) <u>Employment First Conference</u> (East Lansing)	<b>12</b> <u>Advocacy and the IEP</u> (East Lansing) <u>4-H Adaptive Day</u> (Davidsburg)	<b>13</b> <u>Community Collaboration Public Forum</u> (Detroit)	<b>14</b> <u>Books, Bubbles and Balls at the Park!</u> (Roseville)
<b>15</b> <u>Abrams Planetarium Sensory Friendly Show</u> (East Lansing) <u>The Fowler Center Summer Camp</u> (Mayville)	<b>16</b> <u>OUCARES Summer Day Camp</u> (Rochester)	<b>17</b> <u>BWCIL Cooking Class</u> (Port Huron)	<b>18</b> <u>Summer Fun Kayaking &amp; Paddle Boarding</u> (Midland)	<b>19</b> <u>Summer Dance Luau</u> (Novi) <u>MSU Autism Family-Professional Day!</u> (Lansing)	<b>20</b> <u>ADA Day Celebration</u> (Flint)	<b>21</b> <u>Sensory-Friendly Performance: Disney's THE LION KING</u> (East Lansing) <u>AAoM FREE Autism Caregiver Bootcamp Series</u> (Plymouth)
<b>22</b> <u>Autism Awareness Weekend</u> (Northport)	<b>23</b> <u>ADA Celebration</u> (Kentwood) <u>Aim High School Summer Semester and Tech Camp</u> (Farmington Hills)	<b>24</b> <u>Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder for Academic, Communication, and Social Skills</u> (Bad Axe)	<b>25</b> <u>Oaks Victory Village Outreach</u> (Monroe)	<b>26</b> <u>Benefits to Work Coach Training</u> (Muskegon)	<b>27</b> <u>ADA Anniversary Celebration</u> (Kalamazoo)	<b>28</b> <u>Autism 101</u> (Southfield) <u>The Arc Livingston Dance</u> (Howell)
<b>29</b> <u>Autism Hero Walk</u> (Royal Oak) <u>St. Francis Camp on the Lake-Summer Camp</u> (Jerome)	<b>30</b> <u>Camp Sunshine at Camp Blodgett</u> (West Olive)	<b>31</b> <u>Financial Planning for a Special Future</u> (Clinton Township)				

\*\* For more information on any of these events please contact MiNavigator line at 877-463-AAOM

## 4TH ANNUAL AUTISM HERO WALK



Sunday July 29th, 2018  
The Detroit Zoo

Register today at  
[www.AAoMWALK.com](http://www.AAoMWALK.com)



Questions? Interested in Sponsorship? Contact: [Info@aaomi.org](mailto:Info@aaomi.org) | 877.463.2266

