



The Functional Purpose of Autistic Questions

(And Why It's So Important to Answer Them)

by **Jaime A. Heidel - The Articulate Autistic**

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The most common source of confusion I've run into with my neurotypical (non-autistic) consulting clients who have autistic loved ones is questions.

"Why do they ask so many questions? What is the purpose of all these questions? Are they trying to challenge me? Annoy me? Put an emotional wall up between us?"

Not at all! They're trying to learn and connect with you!

In addition to being a primary way autistic people learn, questions are an attempt to understand social mistakes, repair emotional rifts, and build trust with those around them.

Unfortunately, since the purpose of neurotypical questions varies so much from the purpose of autistic questions, frequent and painful communication misunderstandings result.

Why Your Autistic Loved One Asks So Many Questions

As I explained in my book, [*"What Did I Do Wrong?": An Accessible Guide to Preventing Traumatic Misunderstandings Between You and Your Autistic Loved One*](#), autistic people ask questions like a detective looking for clues.

You see, unlike our neurotypical counterparts who are primarily top-down processors, autistic folks are primarily bottom-up processors, so we need explicit details to form a picture of what's being said to us.

For each answer (or "clue") we receive, we get closer and closer to forming the complete picture, thereby knowing what we're meant to do or what we're meant to understand. This can be anything from learning neurotypical social rules, understanding how a miscommunication occurred, learning how to do something, and so much more.

Furthermore, those with a brain that processes from the bottom up instead of the top down can miss context clues in their environment that the majority of those around them grasp easily.

On the surface, asking questions to learn instead of “reading the room” can look like laziness when, in reality, those clues are invisible to the autistic brain until they’re explicitly pointed out!

The Hidden Risk of the “Figure it out yourself” Approach

In moments of frustration, you may want to respond to a question with, “*Figure it out yourself!*” You may believe that answering these many questions will ensure your autistic loved one’s dependence on you or others for the rest of their lives.

However, answering questions and giving explicit information is crucial for a bottom-up processor to learn; not answering them is what increases the likelihood of dependence.

Remember, you’re not ‘doing it for them’; you’re teaching how they learn, and, over time, what you’re teaching them will stick.* When that happens, they can do it on their own.

* In the case of learning disabilities, some information may take longer to ‘stick’, or it may not stick at all, in which case, they may need additional support.

And that’s the goal, right?

The Vast Difference Between Autistic and Neurotypical Questions

If you're neurotypical, you may not realize that the way you ask and respond to questions is not at all the way your autistic loved one does.

Allow me to explain:

Neurotypical people do ask questions to get answers. However, they also use questions as a means of mocking others, undermining authority, making others second-guess themselves, or subtly implying the speaker doesn't know what they're talking about. Questions are just as much a part of the complicated neurotypical social arsenal as flirting—sometimes it's sincere, but, just as often, it's a means to an end.



And only other neurotypical people can tell the difference! (This is why you may find your autistic loved one not only asking many questions but responding literally to rhetorical and sarcastic questions).

Autistic people, on the other hand, ask questions to get answers. That's it.

Note: This doesn't mean an autistic person can't learn to ask questions the way a neurotypical person does, but it's like a "second language", so to speak. This is called 'masking', and it's a social survival skill many autistic people use to avoid being mistreated by others who misunderstand their "first language", or, their natural autistic way of communicating.

This is why it's so jarring when an autistic person asks a sincere question only to be immediately met with hostility and suspicion!

Questions to Take at Face Value When Autistic People Ask Them

Below, I break down some common questions you may hear from your autistic loved one and what they mean.

Outings

Outings, even planned outings with caring and understanding others, can be a huge source of anxiety for the autistic person in your life.

Here are some questions you may receive before a social event:

1) “When are we leaving?”

Your autistic loved one asks this question to find out the exact time they’ll be expected to be ready to walk out the door to go to the event. This helps manage anxiety around the transition between being at home and being out, and it gives them time to mentally and emotionally prepare for social activity. (It is not, as many neurotypical people may interpret it, a subtle way of rushing you or bossing you around.)

2) “Who is going to be there?”

The autistic person asks this question not because they think they might be ‘too good’ for one or more of the people on the guest list, but because they need time to internally prepare their scripts according to each individual’s social expectations.

Note: If your first instinct is to respond with, “Why would they need a social script? They can just be themselves!” They can’t. Something in their interactions with one or more of the people who will be in attendance has sounded alarm bells in their nervous system that tell them not to drop the mask.

Masking and scripting equals autistic safety in many social situations. Let them do what they must do to protect themselves from a confusing and embarrassing argument with Aunt Bea over ‘dirty looks’ or ‘inappropriate dinner conversation’.

3) **“What kind of food will they have?”**

Food and the preparation, serving, and eating of food at a gathering are closely tied to the forming and preservation of neurotypical social bonds. Therefore, anyone who questions, comments on, or refuses food at an event can be considered purposefully rude to the host.

Many an unknowing autistic person, myself included, has felt the full emotional brunt of having an innocent question or comment about food responded to with the vitriol one would expect if the autistic person had slapped the host across the face!

Those of us who have experienced this have intimate knowledge of the meltdown-inducing shame, confusion, and fear this sudden (and seemingly-unprovoked) change in the mood can be.

Therefore, any event involving food (and let's face it, few events, especially family events don't involve food) can cause an autistic person with food allergies or ARFID (avoidant-restrictive food intake disorder) to feel triply anxious before the event.

Thoughts going through your autistic loved one's mind may include:

“There won't be anything safe to eat for hours!”

“I'll offend the host if I don't eat!”

“They'll ask me why I'm not eating, and I'll be the center of attention I don't want!”

Knowing what types of food will be available and having a plan to bring something from home if those foods are not a good fit is a constructive way to relieve some of that anxiety, hence the questions about food ahead of time.

4) **“When will we come home?”**

When your autistic loved one asks this question, it can feel like they’re ungrateful, stuck up, or ‘too good’ for the people at the event.

I can say from experience that even if an autistic person is having a great time with people they love and who love and understand them, being social is exhausting for many of us.

Knowing how long we’ll be at an outing can help us mentally calculate the amount of rest and decompression we’ll need afterward (and whether or not we’ll have the energy to make and carry out other plans in the immediate future).



Learning

Due to the differences in top-down versus bottom-up processing, learning can be an anxiety-ridden experience for autistic people and a frustrating one for their neurotypical teachers.

Here are some common questions you may hear while teaching an autistic person:

1) **“How do I do that?”**

“How do I do that?” means exactly that. You’ve explained it to me, I understand the basic gist, but I need more information.

This may mean doing the task step by step in front of the autistic learner while also verbally explaining each step aloud, providing visual supports, or allowing the autistic pupil to write each step down so they can process it and put it all together later in a sequence that makes sense for them.

Asking for step-by-step instructions or needing things repeated isn't laziness or the person pretending not to understand to get out of doing it; it's caused by a different way of learning.

2) **"Why do you do it that way?"**

This is another slap-the-host-across-the-face question for many neurotypical people. In other words, it can come across as highly offensive and trigger a rage response.

When an autistic person asks, "*Why do you do it that way?*", they are **not** questioning your authority, knowledge, or intelligence; they are asking because they need to know the mechanics and reason behind why something is done to be able to understand and reproduce it themselves.

When I know 'why', I understand the other person's thought process and the deeper meaning behind their actions, which helps me form a complete picture in my head of what's expected of me and greatly increases my chances of remembering what to do and being able to do it independently.

3) **"What do you need me to do?"**

This question is one that often irritates supervisors who oversee autistic employees as, on the surface, it can make it seem as though the autistic worker is lazy or doesn't care about their job.

This question is also down to bottom-up processing.

In my own experience, especially when I was younger and still in the working world, I could not pick up context clues from my environment or by watching other employees. I wouldn't 'just know' what was expected of me, so I began to ask, "*What do you need me to do?*"

However, instead of being seen as taking initiative and attempting to solve a problem, my question was met with looks of disbelief that I had even to ask!

I wanted to be helpful and do the job right, but to do that, I needed to have all my questions answered. I needed someone to tell me what was expected of me explicitly—and, oftentimes, that vital information was held back as they scoffed at my lack of awareness.

I think it's also important to note that even if I did see something that needed doing, and I did take the initiative, I was almost always wrong. I'd be 'stepping on someone's toes' or 'doing something above my pay grade' or even 'doing something suspicious' (because I was just guessing, and I'm sure I looked nervous). Still, it wasn't right, so I got into trouble, and was often fired—all because I needed, but was unable to access, explicit instructions.



4) “Will you help me with this?”

This question can come across as laziness, attention-seeking behavior, and even as an excuse to spend more time with the question's recipient.

Note: For autistic folks reading this, yes, asking for help can come across as flirting. Imagine my shock when I discovered my chronic cluelessness was often viewed as, *“Come hither, my knight in shining armor”*. Oof!

If the autistic person in your life is asking you to help them with something, it's because they need help with something. Providing it without searching for hidden meaning is the best way to accommodate their needs (and to avoid awkward and embarrassing moments).

Conversations

Conversations between neurotypical and autistic people can be fraught with conflict, confusion, and hurt feelings. Oftentimes, the autistic person in the relationship will try to solve and prevent these communication problems by asking questions. Unfortunately, those questions often backfire due to a misunderstanding of intent.

Here are some common questions you may hear while having a conversation with an autistic person:

1) **“What do you mean?”**

This is probably one of the most frequent questions I ask, and while I think my intentions are crystal clear, the question often gets misconstrued. In tense moments, neurotypical conversation partners thought I was asking this question rhetorically when I wasn't.

As though my question had the energy of, *“What's THAT supposed to mean?”* or *“What do you mean BY THAT??”*

As though I was trying to bait them into an even *worse* argument!

When I ask someone what they mean, it's a genuine question. I don't understand, and I need more information. You're angry or accusing me of something, and you're talking to me as though I not only know what's wrong but did the wrong thing on purpose. I didn't, and I need clarification if I'm to keep up with the conversation and be able to apologize and fix the problem sincerely.

2) **“Why are you upset?”**

This question comes when there's been a sudden shift in mood during a social interaction, but I can't figure out what happened. Asking why

someone is upset is my way of being empathetic, shutting everything else down, and focusing only on the other person.

I use the blanket word ‘upset’ because while I may sense the other person is distressed, I don’t know why or what caused it, so I can’t decipher if it’s sadness, anger, hurt, confusion, etc., and I need those context clues to put it all together.

Remember, autistic people ask questions like a detective looking for clues.

I’ve had people think I’m asking why they’re upset in a sarcastic way; as though they’re overreacting to something I said or did, and I’m mocking them for it.

Also, since they don’t know I’m not connecting my behavior to their response, they perceive my question as a lack of empathy rather than a show of it because, again, it comes across as mockery.

When this question receives a literal and direct answer from someone who knows I don’t know that something I said or did was offensive, I’m able to apologize, course-correct, and begin repairs.

3) **“What’s going on?”**

This question can be an annoying one for neurotypical people because, on the face of it, it looks like purposeful obtuseness; as though the autistic person is adding insult to injury by expecting others to do the emotional labor of explaining something that should be obvious.

When the autistic person in your life asks this question, even if they were present for the upsetting event—even if they were the unintentional cause of it, explain it to them. This helps them catch up socially and fills in gaps in their awareness, so they can process what’s happening in real time and have the chance to respond from a more informed position.

4) “What did I do wrong?”

This question was so common for me that it became the title of my book. When an autistic person asks this question, it’s not a challenge, an attempt to shift blame, or a sneaky way to wiggle out of responsibility. It’s a genuine show of empathy.

It says, “I see you’re in distress, and it seems to be from something I said or did. I’d like to take the time to listen to you and understand what’s wrong, so I can correct it, and avoid doing it in the future.”

Important Notes:

This question may also be asked as an act of self-preservation if the autistic person is in fight-or-flight mode. Suddenly, “out of nowhere”, their conversation partner becomes angry, the autistic person doesn’t know why, and the sudden change of emotion is confusing and scaring them. Only when the autistic person has been given an explanation of what they said or did that the other found offensive can they get out of fight-or-flight mode and empathize with the other person.

Also, and this is so, so important: Acknowledge that you know they didn’t mean to cause offense, and that they will not be emotionally or physically hurt as a result.

Many autistic people have post-traumatic stress disorder from a lifetime of social misunderstandings, and a traumatized person cannot meet anyone’s emotional needs in that state, not even their own.

Furthermore, you’re going to get a lot of questions and comments at this stage.

“What does that mean?” “Why is that offensive?” “That’s not what I meant!” “I don’t understand.” “What dirty look?” “What tone of voice?”

Again, this is not a lack of empathy; it’s a lack of information coupled with fear and confusion.

Answer their questions and acknowledge their intentions. Your autistic loved one *needs to* get back to an emotional baseline *before* being expected to proceed with apologies and repairs, and answering and acknowledging can give them the tools they need to return to that baseline.



The Takeaway

If there's only one thing you take away from this guide, it's this: ***Your autistic loved one needs more information.***

I challenge you, for the next week, to treat every single question your autistic loved one puts to you as a *genuine request for information* (with no hidden meaning or social agenda), and answer those questions calmly and directly.

You may be amazed by how much your communication improves and your bond grows, and how much more natural it is to continue treating their questions as genuine and giving them the answers they need.



Learn more about your autistic loved one's feelings, intentions, and communication style by picking up your copy of my book,

[“What Did I Do Wrong?: An Accessible Guide to Preventing Traumatic Misunderstandings Between You and Your Autistic Loved One”.](#)

You can also receive personalized support through private Zoom sessions by booking an appointment with [Divergence Decoded](#), a neurodivergent consulting team that consists of myself, Jaime A. Heidel - The Articulate Autistic, and my colleague, Katherine T. Lorelli, a former special education paraprofessional with a Bachelor's Degree in Child Development and Family Relations.

We look forward to helping you!