

PAMELA BRYSON-WEAVER

# 10 THINGS you should never say to a PERSON WITH AUTISM

*"Most people usually have good intentions. They want to say the right thing, they want to encourage and they want to offer hope. Sometimes the things we say have the opposite effect of our intentions. Find out what they are and what would be better to say."*

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## 10 Things You Should Never Say To a Person with Autism

Most people usually have good intentions. They want to say the right thing, they want to encourage and they want to offer hope. There are countless myths and misconceptions about autism spectrum disorders, and people who have autism are often met with comments from people that are insensitive. Some phrases or questions can be incredibly hurtful. Sometimes the things we say have the opposite effect of our intentions.

1. **What's it like to be Autistic?...**That's like saying what it is like being Black, Asian, or Caucasian? It is just improper and impolite to ask a person what it is like to be who they are. More so especially if you don't know the person! Even if you do know the person you need to make sure they are comfortable with this type of question. Every person on the spectrum of autism is so very different. And it makes no sense to expect that all people with autism share the same experiences.

**Better to say:** "I don't understand autism; can you tell me more about it?" This means you care and would like to learn more about autism. It means you want to understand autism and not the stereotyping of being autistic. Remember that a person is the same person before and after being diagnosed with autism.

2. **There's books and therapists that offer a cure for autism, and say you can grow out of it!...** It can be very difficult receiving the diagnoses of Autism. Saying you can be cured or grow out of autism discounts who the person is and the many good things autism adds to who a person is. A person with autism does not and will not be cured or ever grow out of autism. Being born with or having autism does not mean that you cannot improve in different areas of your life, and improve significantly, just like anybody else you know. Autism is a huge part of which a person is, and it is part of what makes them simply amazing. A person with an autism spectrum disorder can achieved a lot through hard work and through the help and talents of many amazing teachers and therapists, while they continue to be autistic.

**Better to say:**“There are a lot of books and treatments for autism; do you have a favourite book or method of treatment? It’s really good that people care enough to want to talk about autism. It is very nice that some are interested and paying attention to autism in the media and on line.

3. **You don’t seem autistic, you look very normal to me!...** Autism comes in all shapes in sizes. It’s a spectrum of abilities and disabilities. It’s never the same in any two people with the diagnosis of autism. It is impossible to know what an Autistic person’s abilities and skills are or what their needs and challenges are by looking at them. Even though all autistic people share core characteristics in varying degrees such as communication skills, sensory processing, cognitive processing, neurological functioning, these may or may not manifest as a disability. So you may not see their autism diagnosis, whether they act, or look “normal” to you or not. This suggests that because the person doesn't appear to be disabled or doesn't fit the preconceived idea of what Autistic people sound or act like, that person must therefore not have a disability or be Autistic.

**Better to say:** It doesn’t matter whether you have autism or not, I think you’re pretty cool, just the way you are. Autistic people want to be accepted for who they are, not for what they look like or what they can or cannot do. Just like everybody else does.

4. **Your autistic, can you get married and have a family of your own?...** Of course Autistic people can get married, have children and be very successful in business. Some Autistic people can have intimate relationships. Some Autistic people even have Autistic children. However some Autistic people, like some people with developmental disabilities, are at a much higher risk for abuse or victimization in a relationship than the general population. That doesn't mean that Autistic people don't know about or can't have successful loving relationships. Not every Autistic person is going to get married, have a job, or go to college or university. Since marriage is an issue of social commitment and companionship, by the very nature of autism many able people with autism and their families choose not to marry. But plenty of Autistics do.

**Better to say:**How do you feel about getting married and having a family? Then listen to their hopes and dreams. If you can help them reach their goals. The essence of marriage is companionship. It is a union between two consenting adults and it involves adjustment and carrying on day to day responsibilities of life. They may need to acquire skills in finances, employment, family support etc.

5. **I read that autism is caused by...** Current research indicates that anything that could produce structural or functional damage to the central nervous system could possibly also produce the condition of Autism. Even certain conditions are associated with Autism. However at this point

in time there is no inconclusive evidence to the cause or causes of autism. There is new research coming out all the time, and research is a good thing. However, reading about something doesn't always have a research background to back it up and if it does it may not be relational. Meaning that the study may be improperly or inappropriately correlated to Autism. There are many different beliefs of what caused Autism in a child, and parents with children who have autism have strong feelings about this and invariably have feelings of guilt often that somehow they cause it. Just ask any parent of a child with autism about the vaccine debate! It is difficult to tell parents why their child has autism since researchers believe the problem to be caused by different factors, and in most cases, the cause is never known.

**Better to say:** "Is there any current research on the possible causes of Autism?" It is wonderful that you care enough to read articles, journals, or research and want to learn about autism. Telling someone with autism or a parent of a child with autism that you read autism is caused by \_\_\_\_\_, brings up negative feelings. Just don't do it!

6. **Is Autism like being Retarded?...** Pure and simple, the "R" word is rude and hurtful, no matter who the person is or what disability they have. There are people who have disabilities that are intellectual or cognitive and are not Autistic. There are Autistic people who do not have cognitive or intellectual disabilities. This word is demoralizing and cruel and usually said in hate for people with disabilities.

**Better to say:** Nothing! Please never use it!

7. **Are you "high functioning" or "low functioning"?**... Many Autistic people do not like being publicly ranked and classified just like anyone else would not like it. It's like saying you are claimed to have a good or bad outcome. Many Autistic people have a variety of skill levels in different areas of their lives and these often can change during their life time as well. Unless you know the person very well it is impossible to tell by just looking at a person with Autism or just meeting them. They may be nonverbal or struggle socially but be very highly educated, and or gifted, or not! Who gets to decide who is low-functioning and high-functioning?

**Better to ask:** What the persons strengths are or what do they struggle with. Try not to label people with or without Autism. Try to get to know the person in front of you. You may find out you have a lot in common. If I was to tell you I'm 'high-functioning' what does that actually tell you? Also remember all people change over the years.

8. **Oh, you have Autism, you must be great with numbers and computers?**... Do not stereotype people whether they have Autism or not! This is very offensive to an autistic person. Autism comes in all shapes and sizes, abilities and disabilities even with skills in math, computers or

numbers. In fact there are people with Autism that may be savant in these areas yet do not enjoy them at all or they might really enjoy studying and working in these fields. Some people with autism are computer illiterate while others love technology.

**Better to ask:** What the person with Autism likes or dislikes instead of assuming it. That is like asking a Black person if they like rap music or an Italian person if they like pasta!

- 9. Will you please stop flapping your hands/rocking/spinning/or making strange sounds in public? It's so embarrassing...** These types of actions are called stimming and they help an Autistic person feel better. "Flapping of hands, rocking, spinning, or making strange sounds are often a calming behaviour for some Autistic people to help them deal with stressful or unfamiliar situations. There's nothing wrong with stimming. These types of statements communicate that there is something wrong with the Autistic person. You are asking an Autistic person to stop acting like him or herself. That is not ok for them to move or gesture in ways that come naturally and instinctively. This is very offensive, and for some Autistic people, your criticisms could be psychologically and emotionally traumatic.

**Better to say:** Hey, we all have little quirks and they often show themselves during difficult times, can I do something to help you feel more comfortable? Or as simple as, "Do you need a break?" goes a long way and shows you have empathy for the person with Autism.

- 10. One of the worst things you could say to a person with Autism is to say nothing at all...**

Autism can be a very isolating disability, for both the person with autism and the family members. Often we are raised by our parents not to stare and to ignore a person who acts different or strange to us. We believe this is the polite way to handle the situation. However this only leaves the person with a disability feeling ignored, lonely and not accepted. This also affects family members as well and they feel hurt and isolated as well too.

**Better to:** Not be afraid and offer a smile or even a kind word. If you feel comfortable a positive gesture like: "You're doing a great job!" or if needed, "How can I help!" Parents also are just as proud of their child with Autism as you are of your children. Don't be afraid to ask questions. There is nothing you can say if you are well-meaning that could ever be worse than saying nothing at all.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Pamela Bryson-Weaver is married and has three children; two with special needs. Her youngest son John has Autism. She has been in the dental field for over 30 years and is co-owner of a dental practice in Canada. Author, Speaker, and activist; Bryson-Weaver is uniquely qualified to speak on Autism; she is a past president of the Autism Society in her Province. Bryson-Weaver met with government members of parliament and worked hard along with other parents to raise 1.8 million in funding for therapy. Now all children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder in her province receives \$ 20,000 a year for treatment. She is a past president of FTRA (A therapeutic Riding Association), and yearly hosts FTRA most successful fund raiser she founded. Bryson-Weaver also served as director of Pee Wee Active Living, formally called Junior – Special Olympics, (A program she began and directed in her city for over 6 years. This program is now running nationally across Canada.) Bryson-Weaver also produced and promoted through Canada's largest womens' league a resolution on autism that was presented locally, provincially and nationally, and was passed nationally in Canada 2004.

Pamela's vision is to begin a new foundation, the Living Autism Foundation (LAF). A foundation that establishes supports systems at no cost to parents or caregivers caring for loved ones with autism spectrum disorders. Part of her vision as well is to build a large "community hub" website ([www.LivingAutismNow.com](http://www.LivingAutismNow.com)). The site will eventually have an international online presence, full of information and resources for parents, caregivers and professionals. A website that will offer world-wide workshops, online courses, searchable resources to professionals, therapies, treatments, research, educational and learning facilities, that will be rated by the website users. The website will empower parents, caregivers as well as professionals by offering updated information on autism spectrum disorders and access to reliable reviews on pricing and professionalism. So users know they are getting the best service for the best price.



**(John and Pamela now.)**

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Please drop me a line by email, twitter and or on my facebook page and let me know how you like this ebook, how did it affected you, what you learn't or what you did about it. I also invite you to send me pictures of your family and loved ones with ASD that you would like to be considered for future publications, website, book, etc...

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### **ABOUT THE PAMELA'S UPCOMING BOOK:**

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD's) is reaching epidemic proportions throughout the world in families of all racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. Autism is five times more likely to be found in boys than in girls. Autism is a devastating neurological and biological disorder that typically affects children between the ages of 18 months to five years of age. This diagnosis is so heartbreaking to most families that parents and caregivers are desperately seeking answers. The strenuous demands of specialized care and overwhelming strain of information, leave little or no time to absorb the knowledge available.

In her new book, Titled: *Living Autism Day By Day*; Subtitled: *Daily Reflections & Strategies to give you hope and courage*. Pamela Bryson-Weaver shares as a parent on how she learns that her son is Autistic and then spends the next fourteen years working with doctors, Autism

organizations both government and private professionals assembling an wonderfully easily digestible resource book for parents and caregivers.

*Living Autism Day By Day*; helps one identify a child with Autism, guides them through the early years, to decide which is the right course to take when all paths seems equally daunting.

Bryson-Weaver writes a book that provides a comfortable way for parents and caregivers to learn and understand the massive information out there on autism spectrum disorders. With just 5 minutes a day, 365 days of the year you will learn new and hopeful information. Bryson-Weaver's book offers compassionate concise daily readings on autism awareness, self-awareness, practical advice, humor, anecdotes, paradoxes, tips, inspiring quotes, and a way to discover the blessings of autism. The reader will be given researched facts and additional resources to follow up on any information they choose to focus on. From a parent's perspective an indispensable reference on the things you need to know about autism that families will turn to again and again.