AUTISM TRAINING
and Technical Assistance Project

When Should I Disclose My Autism?

Disclosure, or the decision to tell someone that you have autism spectrum disorder, is a sensitive process that varies from person to person. Telling someone may allow them to understand you and your behaviors better; however, it may also place you in a position of vulnerability and open you up to prejudice. In both college and work settings, you might disclose to ensure the supports you need are in place, knowing that your diagnosis will remain confidential should you request it. If you choose to pursue academic accommodations in class, you also have the responsibility of notifying your professors.

All of this makes sense and may be easier to decide with respect to academics and work-related supports, but how do you determine whether to disclose your diagnosis in your personal relationships? For example, when, if ever, should you disclose to your roommates, friends, or romantic partners?

Self-advocate Dr. Stephen Shore writes, "Creating a hard and fast rule for whom to disclose to is practically impossible." If you're struggling to decide whether or not you should disclose to someone, there are questions you can ask yourself to help. Consider the following questions:

⇒ **Why do you want this particular person to know about your diagnosis?** This might seem obvious but think about your relationship and how disclosure could positively affect it.
  - Would disclosure help your roommate understand certain behaviors?
  - Will sharing this part of your identity with your friends or romantic partner foster deeper connections?

⇒ **How do you think disclosure will improve your interactions with this person?** This is a good question to explore on your own, and then perhaps share with the person you are disclosing to. For example, if you want to disclose to your romantic partner because you think it will help you be more open within the relationship, you can explain this so your partner can be an active participant in the growth of your relationship.

⇒ **Are you prepared to ask this person to support you in a different way because of this new information?** If so, how are you going to tell this person specifically what you need. If you are hoping disclosure will amend some conflicts within a personal relationship, it is important that you are able to explain how the other person can change his or her attitude or perceptions to help you or otherwise use this information. Specify if you want the person not to treat you differently but to simply be more understanding of your actions.

⇒ **What are the benefits of disclosing to this person?** Hopefully, disclosing will be a positive experience for you. As mentioned earlier, benefits of disclosure include improving your relationship with someone, enabling someone else to understand you better, and allowing you to feel more comfortable within a relationship. Or, perhaps disclosure will lay the foundation for a previously unpleasant relationship to become more positive. Exploring the benefits of disclosure can help you feel more confident in your decision to disclose.

⇒ **What are the risks of disclosing to this person?** It's never easy to predict how someone will react to disclosure, especially if you don't know that person very well. Be prepared to accept that your relationship may change, for better or for worse, a lot or a little, should you decide to disclose your autism. Exploring the risks and reactions associated with disclosing could help you anticipate and plan for the unexpected. Negative reactions may include pity, judgment, or sharing of information with others without your consent. If you are worried about any of these things, be sure to explain how you would like the person to respond.

It is impossible to develop a perfect rule or formula for deciding to whom and when you should disclose your autism. Every situation and relationship is different. But if you're stuck deliberating about whether or not to disclose to someone, these questions above can help you explore your thoughts and guide your decision-making process. If you still feel unsure after answering the questions, consider finding a close friend with whom you have already shared your diagnosis and ask for his or her opinion.

Tip: Successful advocacy begins with a firm foundation of understanding what autism means to you. Steven Shore engages in a three-step process to achieve effective self-advocacy:

1. **Scan the Environment**: Decide where and what challenges are in the environment that need accommodation or greater mutual understanding.
2. **Advocacy Effort**: Develop and implement an advocacy plan for accommodation or greater mutual understanding. Consider telling a work supervisor or a friend about a specific need you may have. For example, someone may need to wear a hat to shield eyes from the bright lights.
3. **Disclosure:** Give a reason for requesting the accommodation to increase understanding.

Also, instead of full disclosure, consider providing a partial disclosure. A partial disclosure focuses only on the specific aspect of ASD that is causing the challenge.

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