

YOU

Non-Verbal Cues Are Crucial to Understanding Consent



BY: LOLA PHOENIX 15 FEB 2018



She walked up to my door and knocked faintly. I turned to see her shy smile.

“Hi, my name’s Bonne. I’m new. I just moved in across the hall.”

I nodded and smiled, turning away from her. After a few seconds of waiting for anything more, Bonne retreated back to her room, wondering if every student in her new university would be as unwelcoming as I had been.

Bonne, who eventually became a colleague at the college newspaper and a good friend, would tell me this story later, and it would become one of many situations I play and replay in my head, trying to understand the unwritten rules of allistic (or non-autistic) communication.

Even though I’ve just reached my thirties, I have a mountain of these stories. I wonder how many times I have appeared cold and aloof to people around me without meaning to. I study these moments, trying to understand why, despite my “high functioning” status, the simplest of non-verbal communication continues to elude me.

As an autistic person, my life publicly is 90% pretending as though I am allistic. I count the seconds of eye contact. I am extremely conscious of my handshake grip and position. During conversations, I am actively doing my best to understand when it is my turn to speak and when it is time to let someone else speak. So often when people ask me how I am, I forget to ask it back. I miss those awkward pauses until they’ve already passed.

Growing up, I was hated for reasons I could never understand. Despite wanting people to like me, many people just didn’t. Something seemed to annoy them. I grated on peers and teachers. When I discovered the autism spectrum, a lot clicked. I felt relieved. But that still doesn’t free me from having to pretend to catch onto these social cues; things that come naturally to most others.

Allistic people might believe that 95% of communication is non-verbal, and that’s precisely the type of communication I barely understand. This is another reason why, in my love life, I have always been explicit about my feelings and always felt the need to get an explicit answer from otherseventhen when this doesn’t follow the television and film endorsed script of romance.

Imagine my surprise when reading the reactions to the story [one woman told about her date with Aziz Ansari](#) and how, after frequently giving him both verbal and non-verbal cues, like physically pushing his hands away or frequently leaving the room, of her lack of disinterest in sex, Aziz continued to push her into having sex. Particularly, I was left gobsmacked by those reactions devoid of any understanding of what she could be going through and insisting that all communication regarding consent had to be explicit and verbal. It felt like an incredible hypocrisy.

Despite being told constantly that I must or should work on understanding non-verbal communication when the issue of sexual consent shows up, all of a sudden people become incapable of reading or understanding body language. Explicit answers and instructions aren’t just desired, they become required.

I get that these conversations can be difficult. I’d absolutely love it if I lived in a world that was solely literal, but I also feel like if the result is what’s essentially sexual harassment or sexual assault, we need to move into a place of not making excuses and accepting responsibility.

Even if you are unable to read non-verbal communication very well, it doesn’t excuse you from the damage you may cause. I have apologised to Bonne so many times for increasing the anxiety she felt. While I am proud to be an autistic person and while I don’t necessarily think I should have to pretend to be allistic in the way I do every day, I never use my inability to understand non-verbal communication well as an excuse for hurting anybody.

You would think that, if verbal communication was so required for consent to be given, that autistic people would be overrepresented in populations of sexual abusers, when actually sexual abuse for children with developmental disabilities (which includes autism) [are two times greater than for children without disabilities](#) and that, in the case of autistic children, signs of sexual abuse are often misattributed to autism.

Furthermore, [a study of 95 autistic adults conducted in Canada](#) found incidents of past sexual abuse more likely (78%) in autistic adults than in the general population (47%). That’s not to say an autistic person has never violated someone or been a sexual abuser, but, like many disabled people, I would bet on the fact that most autistic people are victims, not perpetrators.

There isn’t much allistic people can do to change my ability to read between the lines, but the hypocritical goalpost shifting has got to stop.

A lot of communication is non-verbal and I understand that better than anyone. And even if you’re not so great at understanding non-verbal communication, there is no excuse, even the complete inability to read that communication, to not check, especially when it comes to something like sex.

I haven’t quite figured out how to tell people that I’m autistic and have them understand what that means in my case. The autism spectrum is vast. Though, now I have the tools to be able to tell allistic people that, for example, it’s okay if they don’t want to hear random facts about Daniel Radcliffe. I am always willing to apologise if I hurt someone, even if I didn’t mean to.

Over time, there are things I know to look out for in people, even if reading them doesn’t come second nature to me. I pay special attention to facial expressions and have learned more about how to identify them and what they mean. I know the meaning of crossing your arms in front of you vs. holding them open. I see these as guidelines, but I still ask when it comes to physical contact, especially sexual contact. Even with my domestic partner who I sleep in the same bed with every night, I will still ask him if he is flirting with me and make it clear when I am flirting with him. Maybe it is slightly tiring for me and not the picturesque story of romance you find in films, but it all comes down to valuing other people’s boundaries just as much as my own.

I still think the scales are tipped heavily in favour of allistic people culturally. It’s not really socially acceptable for me to decline to shake someone’s hand or avoid eye contact when I don’t want to, but I’m hoping more understanding about autism will change this. If I manage to find the tools to ‘read’ non-verbal communication and ask to be sure, there is no excuse for anyone else.

And, if I hurt someone unintentionally, I apologise because not being able to read non-verbal communication isn’t a license to be an asshole.

No one is going to be perfect navigating communication in general, but what I’ve at least found useful is working from a place of asking when I need an explicit answer and also being more than willing to apologize when I get it wrong.

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Lola Phoenix

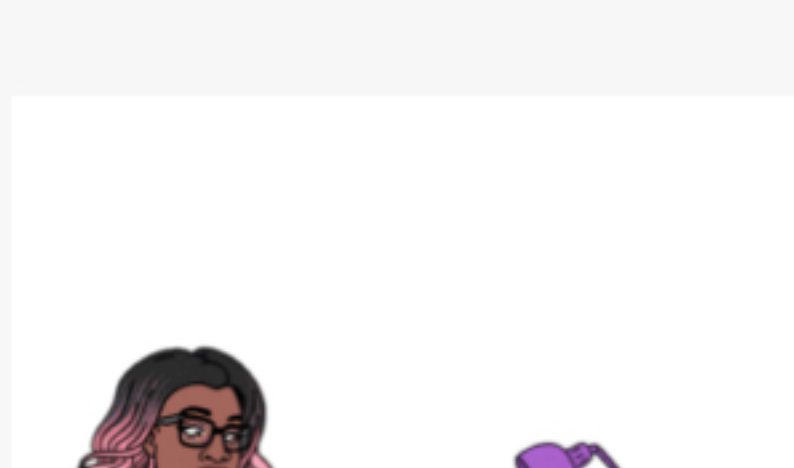
Lola is an agender, identified fiction writer working within the charity sector until they find an agent. Lola writes science fiction novels as well as a weekly advice column for people in non-monogamous relationships.

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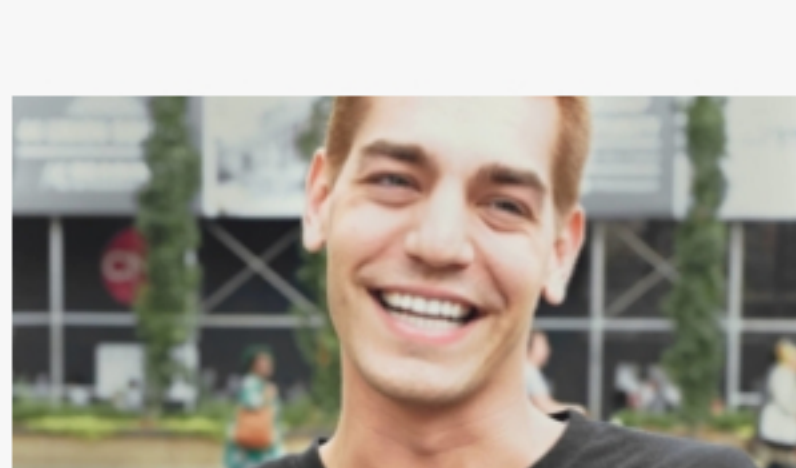
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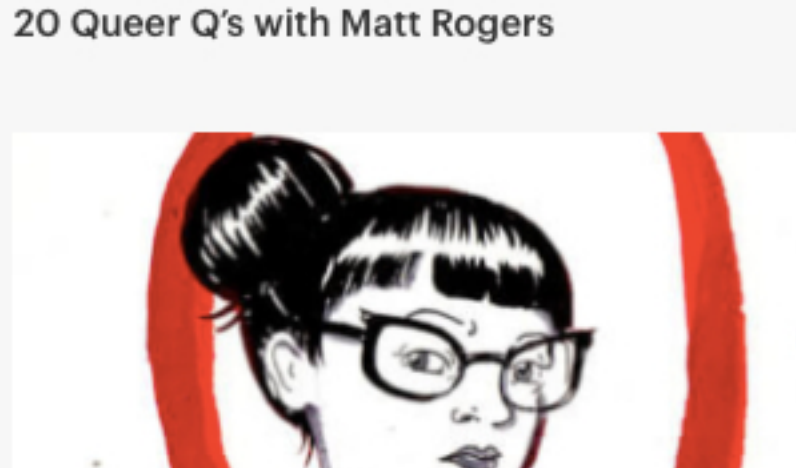
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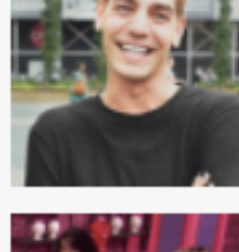


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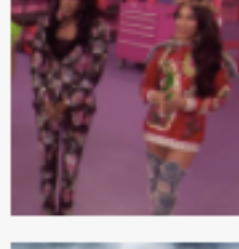


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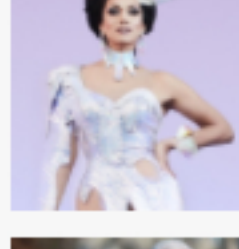
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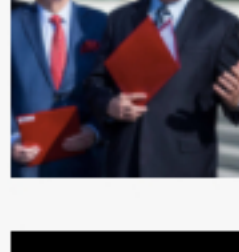
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