

Communication Patterns and Challenges for Adults with High-Functioning Autism (or AuDHD) in Professional and Collaborative Settings

1. Introduction

Adults with high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autism with co-occurring ADHD (AuDHD) face distinct communication patterns and challenges in professional and collaborative environments. Research consistently documents a preference for written over verbal communication, which can help manage social complexity and reduce anxiety (Turna et al., 2025; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021; Nicolaidis et al., 2015). Difficulties often arise in expressing discomfort, uncertainty, or abstract needs, with many autistic adults reporting challenges in knowing what to say, engaging in reciprocal conversation, and interpreting implied meanings (Wilson, 2022; Wadge et al., 2018; Wilson & Bishop, 2020; Wilson & Bishop, 2022; Cummins et al., 2020). These challenges are compounded by social anxiety, slower processing speed, and the need for predictability (Kimura et al., 2020; Haigh et al., 2018; Das et al., 2021). However, studies also highlight that communication difficulties are not solely individual deficits but often result from a mismatch in communication styles between autistic and non-autistic individuals, known as the "double empathy problem" (Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Davis & Crompton, 2021; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019). Autistic-to-autistic interactions can be highly effective, with enhanced rapport and information transfer compared to mixed neurotype groups (Peng et al., 2024; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019). Interventions such as social skills training, communication partner training, and the use of technology (e.g., AI-based tools, written communication platforms) show promise in supporting autistic adults in professional settings (Koegel et al., 2015; Spain & Blainey, 2015; Koegel et al., 2025; Albin et al., 2024). Despite these advances, there remains a need for greater societal awareness, workplace accommodations, and research into gender differences and the unique experiences of those with AuDHD (Hayward et al., 2018; Curnow et al., 2025; Das et al., 2021).

2. Methods

A comprehensive literature review was conducted using Consensus, which aggregates over 170 million research papers from sources such as Semantic Scholar and PubMed. The search strategy included targeted queries on communication patterns, challenges, and interventions for adults with high-functioning Autism or AuDHD in professional and collaborative settings, with a focus on expressing discomfort, uncertainty, and abstract needs. In total, 1,145 papers were identified, 783 were screened, 461 were deemed eligible, and the top 50 most relevant papers were included in this review.

Search Strategy



FIGURE 1 Flow diagram of the literature search and selection process.

Eight unique search strategies were used, focusing on communication challenges, professional settings, theoretical frameworks, and intervention outcomes.

3. Results

3.1 Communication Patterns and Preferences

Adults with high-functioning Autism or AuDHD often prefer written communication (e.g., email, text) over verbal or phone-based interactions, especially in professional contexts. This preference is linked to greater control, reduced sensory overload, and the ability to process information at their own pace (Turna et al., 2025; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021; Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Das et al., 2021). Face-to-face communication is favored only with trusted colleagues or in supportive environments (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021).

3.2 Challenges in Expressing Discomfort, Uncertainty, and Abstract Needs

Autistic adults report significant difficulties in expressing discomfort, uncertainty, or abstract needs at work. These challenges stem from pragmatic language differences, reduced confidence in inference-making, and a need for explicit communication (Wilson, 2022; Wadge et al., 2018; Wilson & Bishop, 2020; Wilson & Bishop, 2022; Cummins et al., 2020; Rudneva, 2023). Social anxiety and slower processing speed further exacerbate these issues, leading to misunderstandings and increased workplace stress (Kimura et al., 2020; Haigh et al., 2018; Das et al., 2021).

3.3 Interpersonal Dynamics and the Double Empathy Problem

Communication breakdowns are often relational rather than individual. Autistic-to-autistic interactions can be highly effective, with enhanced rapport and information transfer, while mixed neurotype interactions (autistic and non-autistic) are more prone to miscommunication and lower rapport (Peng et al., 2024; Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Davis & Crompton, 2021; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019). The "double empathy problem" highlights the bidirectional nature of these challenges.

3.4 Interventions and Support Strategies

Interventions such as social skills training, communication partner training, and the use of technology (e.g., AI-based feedback, virtual environments) have shown efficacy in improving communication skills and confidence among autistic adults (Koegel et al., 2015; Spain & Blainey, 2015; Koegel et al., 2025; Albin et al., 2024). Workplace accommodations, increased awareness, and respect for communication differences are also critical for reducing barriers (Cummins et al., 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Das et al., 2021; Albin et al., 2024).

Key Papers

Paper	Methodology	Sample/Setting	Main Findings	Intervention/Focus
(Turna et al., 2025)	Observational, smartphone-based	Adults with ASD, 4 months	Preference for written over verbal communication	Communication patterns
(Wilson, 2022)	Psychometric development, survey	312 adults (autistic, dyslexic, neurotypical)	Identified two main communication challenge dimensions	Self-reported challenges
(Howard & Sedgewick, 2021)	Survey, mixed methods	245 autistic adults	Written communication preferred, phone calls avoided	Communication preferences
(Crompton et al., 2019)	Experimental, diffusion chain	72 adults (autistic, non-autistic, mixed)	Autistic-to-autistic info transfer as effective as non-autistic	Double empathy problem
(Albin et al., 2024)	Perspective, literature review	N/A	Advocates for communication partner training	Support strategies

FIGURE 2 Comparison of key studies on communication patterns and challenges in autistic adults.

Top Contributors

Type	Name	Papers
Author	Catherine J. Crompton	(Davis & Crompton, 2021; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019)
Author	Alexander C. Wilson	(Wilson, 2022; Wilson & Bishop, 2020; Wilson & Bishop, 2022)
Author	Clare Cummins	(Cummins et al., 2020)
Journal	<i>Autism</i>	(Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021; Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Caruana et al., 2018)
Journal	<i>PeerJ</i>	(Wilson & Bishop, 2020; Wilson & Bishop, 2022; Matthews, 2020)
Journal	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	(Koegel et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2019; Haigh et al., 2018; Grob et al., 2018; Koegel et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2024)

FIGURE 3 Authors & journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers.

4. Discussion

The literature demonstrates that communication challenges for adults with high-functioning Autism or AuDHD in professional settings are both prevalent and multifaceted. While individual factors such as social anxiety, processing speed, and pragmatic language differences contribute to these challenges (Kimura et al., 2020; Haigh et al., 2018; Das et al., 2021), the relational context—especially the neurotype of communication partners—plays a critical role (Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Davis & Crompton, 2021; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019). The "double empathy problem" reframes communication difficulties as a two-way issue, suggesting that interventions should target both autistic and non-autistic individuals (Davis & Crompton, 2021; Crompton et al., 2019; Albin et al., 2024).

Interventions that respect communication preferences (e.g., written communication), provide explicit support for expressing discomfort or uncertainty, and foster inclusive workplace cultures are supported by moderate to strong evidence (Koegel et al., 2015; Spain & Blainey, 2015; Koegel et al., 2025; Albin et al., 2024). However, research on gender differences, the unique experiences of those with AuDHD, and the long-term efficacy of interventions remains limited (Hayward et al., 2018; Curnow et al., 2025; Das et al., 2021). The quality of evidence is generally moderate, with a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and experimental studies, but larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs are needed.

Claims and Evidence Table

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Written communication is preferred by autistic adults in professional settings	 Strong	Multiple large-scale surveys and observational studies confirm this consistent preference	(Turna et al., 2025; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021; Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Das et al., 2021)
Communication challenges are exacerbated in mixed neurotype interactions	 Strong	Experimental and qualitative studies show lower rapport and more miscommunication in mixed groups	(Peng et al., 2024; Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Davis & Crompton, 2021; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019)
Social anxiety and processing speed contribute to communication difficulties	 Moderate	Correlational and structural modeling studies link these factors to communication outcomes	(Kimura et al., 2020; Haigh et al., 2018; Das et al., 2021)
Interventions (social skills, partner training, tech) improve communication skills	 Moderate	Multiple intervention studies show improvements in empathy, confidence, and communication	(Koegel et al., 2015; Spain & Blainey, 2015; Koegel et al., 2025; Albin et al., 2024)
Autistic-to-autistic communication can be highly effective	 Moderate	Experimental studies show equal or better information transfer and rapport	(Peng et al., 2024; Foster et al., 2025; Crompton et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019)
Gender differences and AuDHD-specific challenges are under-researched	 Weak	Systematic reviews highlight a lack of data and call for more research	(Hayward et al., 2018; Curnow et al., 2025; Das et al., 2021)

FIGURE 4 Key claims and support evidence identified in these papers.

5. Conclusion

In summary, adults with high-functioning Autism or AuDHD face significant communication challenges in professional and collaborative settings, particularly in expressing discomfort, uncertainty, or abstract needs. These challenges are shaped by individual, relational, and environmental factors, with strong evidence supporting the need for tailored interventions and inclusive workplace practices.

5.1 Research Gaps

Despite advances, research gaps remain in understanding the experiences of women, those with AuDHD, and the long-term impact of interventions. There is also a need for more studies on organizational and environmental modifications, as well as the role of intersectional identities.

Research Gaps Matrix

Topic/Attribute	Written Communication	Face-to-Face	Intervention Studies	Gender-Specific	AuDHD-Specific
Preferences	7	5	2	1	1
Challenges	8	6	3	1	1
Interventions	4	3	7	GAP	GAP
Workplace Accommodations	3	2	2	GAP	GAP
Longitudinal Outcomes	1	1	1	GAP	GAP

FIGURE 5 Matrix showing research coverage and gaps by topic and study attribute.

5.2 Open Research Questions

Future research should focus on intersectional experiences, the effectiveness of workplace accommodations, and the development of interventions tailored to diverse neurodivergent populations.

Question	Why
How do communication challenges differ for women and gender-diverse adults with high-functioning Autism or AuDHD in professional settings?	Gender differences are underexplored, and understanding them could inform more inclusive workplace supports and interventions.
What are the long-term outcomes of communication partner training and technology-based interventions for autistic adults at work?	Most studies are short-term; long-term efficacy and generalization to real-world settings remain unclear.
How do co-occurring ADHD symptoms (AuDHD) uniquely impact communication patterns and needs in professional environments?	AuDHD is under-researched, and tailored supports may be needed for this subgroup.

FIGURE 6 Open research questions for future investigation.

In conclusion, while significant progress has been made in understanding and supporting the communication needs of autistic adults in professional settings, ongoing research and systemic change are needed to ensure equitable and effective inclusion.

These papers were sourced and synthesized using Consensus, an AI-powered search engine for research. Try it at <https://consensus.app>

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