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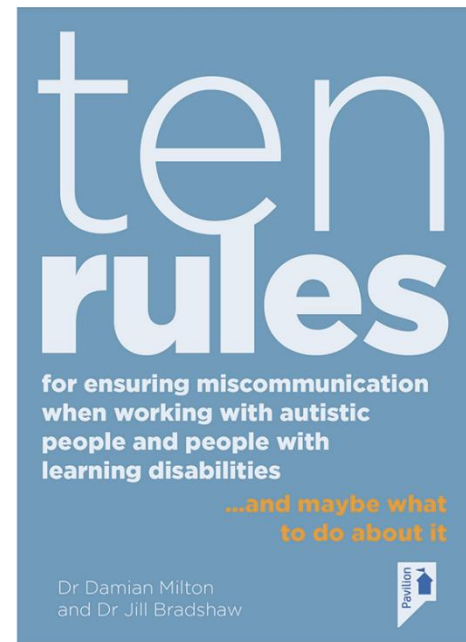
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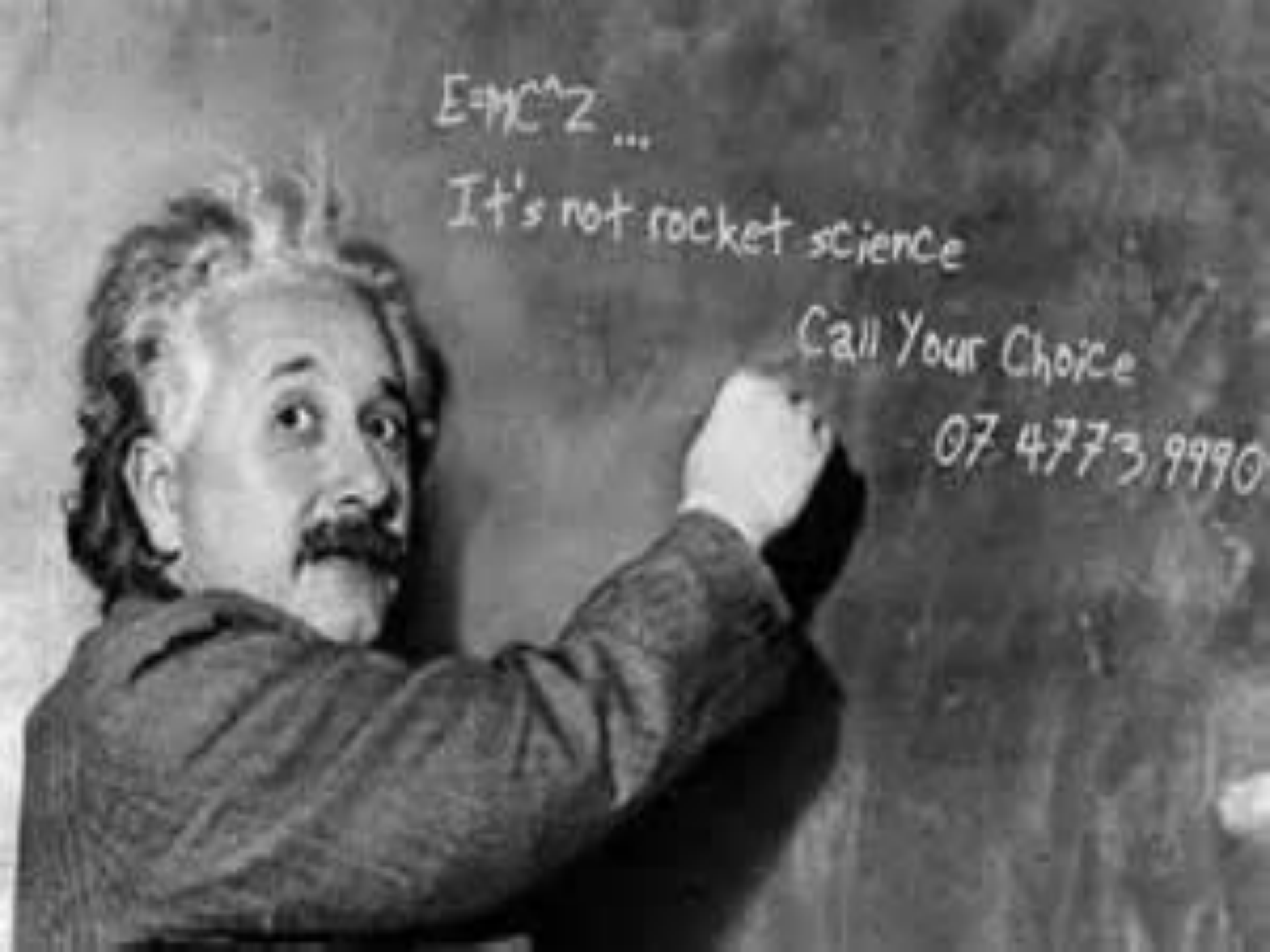
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Ten Rules for Ensuring Miscommunication when Working with Autistic People with Learning Disabilities

Dr. Damian E M Milton





$E=MC^2 \dots$

It's not rocket science

Call Your Choice

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The ten rules series

- *The 'ten rules' concept sets out to be gently provocative. Sadly, the 'rules' in this booklet are reflective of many of the practices we have come across that cause so many problems for people with learning disabilities who are on the autism spectrum, and those who care for and support them, often leading to miscommunication on both sides of the conversation. We hope it will be a useful starting point for discussion and a catalyst for action.*

Rule 1: Assume you know best

- After all, you have a lot of experience of communicating, you do it all the time. You are bound to know what is going to work best for me.
- Make sure you don't talk to my family or other people who know me well. After all, what would they know!

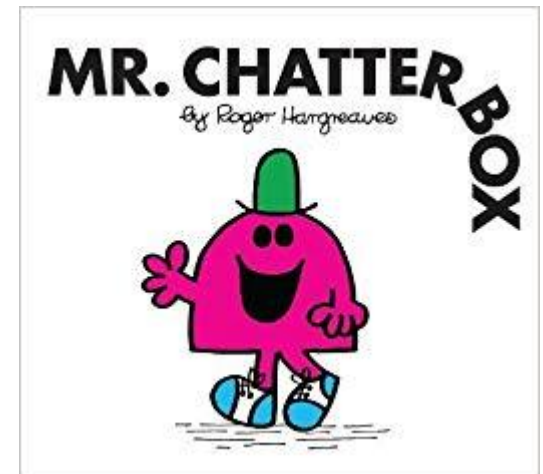
Don't assume
you know what
I'm thinking
{ 'cause you're wrong

- Try to put yourself in my shoes and yet do not rely on assumptions from your own experience, as this is likely to be very different to mine.
- Talk to family and other people who know me well.
- Find out *what* I like to communicate about.
- Find out *how* I like to communicate.
- Find out *who* I like to communicate with. What do successful communication partners seem to do well?

- Think about the environment – it might make a big difference. It might make a big difference if I find the lighting uncomfortable or if it is noisy or crowded. I might not be able to focus on communication and interaction at all.
- Take time to notice when communication is really successful (who, what, where, when, how?).
- Be open and flexible, prepared to make mistakes and learn from them.

Rule 2: Just use verbal communication with me at all the times

- After all, that's what most people use to communicate and it works just fine.
- If verbal communication doesn't seem to work the first time, say it again, louder, use more words, move closer to me (and just keep going).



- Find out from me or from people who know me well what the best forms of communication are.
- Many autistic people who have learning disabilities find it hard to understand speech and using other forms of communication (e.g. signs, symbols or objects) can help people to understand.
- Additional visual forms of communication can be really helpful as I can take my time to understand what is being communicated.

- Using signed communication, symbols, photos and objects of reference can help to remind me what we are communicating about.
- Verbal communication on its own might be ok for me for some of the time but will be harder when I am feeling stressed or upset or cross.
- Using signed communication, symbols, photos and objects of reference can help to show me that *you* value different ways of communicating.

Rule 3: Use as many words as you can when you communicate with me

- It is always better to provide lots of details all the time and just keep speaking.
- If I look confused, then just keep going using more words as your message will get through to me in the end.
- Keep speaking and keep rephrasing things in as many different ways as possible.



- Less is often more! It is good idea to think about the key idea/s that you want to express and think about how to do that clearly.
- Start with the key idea and use simple language
- You might want to start by communicating about what I am doing now rather than something I am going to be doing later.
- Give me time to process each piece of information before you give me more information to deal with.

- Silences are good. Too much verbal communication can just become 'noise' and instead of giving information, makes it even harder for me to process and understand.
- Give me time to ask questions.
- If it is something very important, make sure I have all the information I need in another form too (written or symbols for example).

Rule 4: Always insist on eye contact

- After all if I am not looking at you, then I can't possibly be listening to you can I!



- Find other ways to work out whether or not I am ready to have a conversation with you.
- Make taking part in communication as easy as possible. Ask me (or other people who know me well) about what you can do to help me feel comfortable.
- Don't impose your views about what good eye contact might be and think about my individual preferences.
- Did you know that I sometimes find it easier to listen when I am not looking at you?

- Eye contact is sometimes uncomfortable or painful and stops me from listening to what is being said.
- Think about where you position yourself in relation to me. Can I easily make and break eye contact when I need to? Is it easier if we are side by side or diagonal rather than directly opposite one another?
- Perhaps provide something visual too so that we both have something to focus on.

Rule 5: Try to get a mismatch between your verbal and non-verbal communication

- Make sure I can't decide whether I need to pay attention to what you say or what you are communicating with your non-verbal communication.



- Think about things from my perspective. I might have as much difficulty in reading your communication as you do reading mine!
- Other non-verbal communication (facial expression, tone of voice, body posture etc.) might be something I find hard to read. The clearer you can make your communication, the easier I will find it.

- I might need you to tell me how you are feeling rather than you relying on me reading your facial expression or tone of voice.
- Gestures are vague and difficult to understand.
- Don't make assumptions about my non-verbal communication. I might not look to you like I am upset or angry or happy or cross. You might find it hard to read my expressions.

Rule 6: Always be vague and obscure

- Never mean what you say or do as you say – be as confusing as possible.
- Even better, do this at the same time as strategies 3, 4, 5 and 7.



- Say what you mean and mean what you say. You might need to check with other people how best to present information clearly.
- Acknowledge a miscommunication when it happens.

- Be as predictable as you can. I will find it easier to take part if you provide clear information.
- Find a way to tell me how much information you need from me. Do you want a yes/no answer or more than that?
- Remember, you might not be able to tell from my facial expression what I am thinking.

Rule 7: Insist on interacting with me whenever you want to and pay no attention to my actions or wishes

- We all like to chat don't we and it is 'good for me' to socialise.



- Ask me (or other people who know me well) when communication is likely to be easier or more difficult.
- Do you like to be around noisy, bouncy, bubbly people? Perhaps I do too or maybe I find that quite difficult. Ask me (or other people who know me well) what my preferred interaction style is.
- There might be topics I really enjoy talking about. Perhaps you could help me find people who share my interests?

- I probably find it easier to interact when I feel more in control.
- If I look like I am not interested in talking to you at the moment, see if you can find a better time.
- You might need to give me time to finish what I am doing before I am ready to talk to you. You could try asking me if you can come back in five minutes.

Rule 8: Ignore me

- I know it is difficult following all these rules, so you could just ignore me.
- If you find me hard to interact with me, much easier, especially if you think the way I am communicating is 'inappropriate'.
- After all, autistic people don't like to chat do they, so best to leave me on my own.

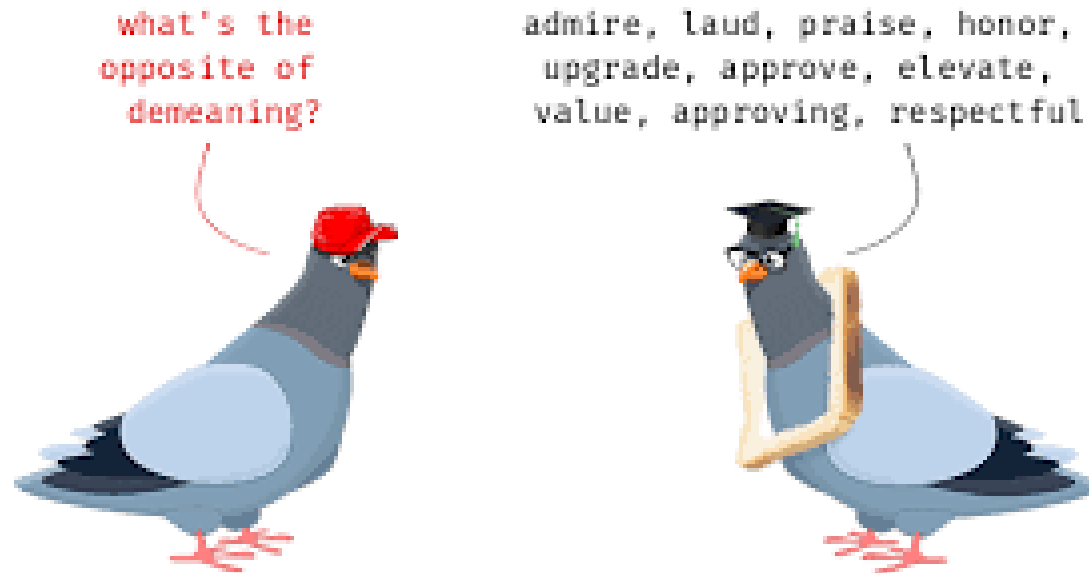


- I might be just as confused about your way of communicating as you are about mine. Ask me (or other people who know me well) what helps.
- I can probably interact better with people who have taken the time to build a relationship with me.
- Be predictable in your interactions with me.
- Think about times when I seem to prefer interaction and use those times to build the relationship.

- Think about what I might want and need. There might be times when I really do want to be on my own. This doesn't mean that I never want to interact with anyone.
- It is probably easier for you to change your behaviour than it is for me to change mine (although I do wonder sometimes).

Rule 9: Demean me

- Be derogatory to me, especially in your ways of communicating/acting socially. Make fun of the things that are important to me and laugh at any errors I make.



 Thesaurus.plus

- Think about it from my point of view. I might have had many experiences of trying and getting things ‘wrong’.
- Accept that I might have ways of interacting or behaving that are really important to me but that make no sense to you. (Guess what? Some of the ways you interact and behave make no sense to me either!)
- Find out what my strengths are and help me to use those.

- Don't make judgements about what I can do and what I can't do. I might be really skilled at some aspects of communication even though I find other parts much more difficult.
- Be careful about the language you use to talk about the things I find difficult.
- Recognise that communication and interaction always involves more than one person and we share responsibility for successful communication.

Rule 10: Don't make any adaptations – just treat me the same as you treat everyone else

- After all, I need to learn to fit in and be just the same as everyone else.



- Use communication strategies that work best with me. If you don't know what those strategies are, ask me or other people who know me well.

If in doubt, follow these rules:

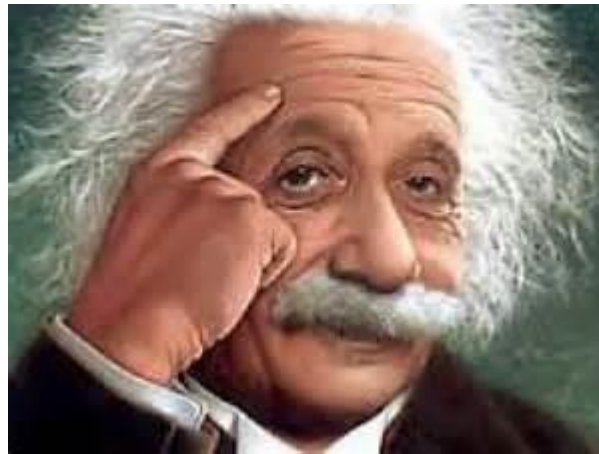
- Keep it clear and simple.
- Back up verbal communication with something visual (written words or symbols for example).
- Give me time.
- Make communication predictable.
- Learn from your mistakes.
- Share responsibility for communication.
- Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Henry James

“Three things in life are important, the first is to be kind, the second is to be kind and the third is to be kind”



It is not rocket science...anyone can do it...why don't you?



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