

When my Aspie sounds rude, mocking, laughing and uses an inappropriate tone of voice...

What is this all about?

Let's read, learn and share

Neurotypicals: Listen to Our Words, Not Our Tone

By: Autistic Science Person

"In one form or another, I see this question from parents a lot: (And we see it from NT spouses a lot, including myself with Cooper).

"Why does my child (or spouse) have to be so rude all the time?"

The assumptions about autistic adults when it comes to tone of voice doesn't get any better either. In extreme cases, it can even result in the loss of a job.

There are a few assumptions neurotypical people have when it comes to tone of voice when anyone talks:

1. Everyone who speaks or vocalizes is trying to "send a message" based on how their voice sounds. This includes timbre, pitch, loudness etc.

2. Everyone who speaks or vocalizes can control their voice with ease – i.e., can change their timbre/pitch/loudness very easily.

3. Everyone who speaks or vocalizes knows exactly what their voice is actually doing while they're speaking (whether it "sounds defensive" or sounds loud or quiet, etc.).

I literally do not know what my "tone of voice" is doing when other people say I'm being defensive/argumentative/rude/etc.

Let me say that again:

I do not know what my "tone of voice" is doing when I talk.

I do not know how quiet I am talking (for other autistic people, how loud).

I do not know what signal I am sending with my "tone."

I do not know what my "tone of voice" represents to neurotypical people.

I do not know what emotion or intention neurotypical people think I am sending to them.

I literally didn't know what "tone of voice" meant until I was 17 years old. And I didn't truly understand it until I found out I was autistic. I thought it meant "how loud you talk" and "how you structure sentences when you talk." That's it.

A Short Story

I once tried to mock a family member because I was so mad that they were telling me “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” I wasn’t trying to say anything mean, I was simply stating factual information. I knew when they said that phrase, it meant I couldn’t say anything because I would be interpreted as “rude.”

I tried to mock them by, from my standards, tilting my voice ridiculously, as if my vocal cords were on a roller coaster going really high to really low to really high again in pitch. I was trying to be condescendingly nice and therefore patronizing.

To my shock, their response was to be polite to me!!! Are you serious?! I felt like a clown with that much pitch change in my voice, but apparently it’s how I should be talking all the time! I can’t make sense of this, and it makes me wonder if I actually notice smaller changes in pitch in people’s voices compared to neurotypical people, which could be one explanation as to why our vocal range “sounds monotone” or less expressive to neurotypical people.

Societal Pressure and High Expectations

It doesn’t help that society puts on the layers of constraint if you’re an autistic person who’s raised as a girl and/or a person of color. The gendered notion that kids raised as girls must be polite at all times is absolutely infuriating, and I witnessed this double standard growing up with two older brothers. I’m sure it’s even more constricting for people of color raised as girls and women of color.

Knowing what my “tone of voice” sounds like to NTs emotionally is literally something I don’t have the ability to do. I’ve tried my whole life to figure out this “tone of voice” thing, and while I can somewhat figure out other people’s tone of voice and what they mean, I do not know what my tone of voice is doing at any moment in time.

Just today my husband had to warn me that I was speaking “defensively” to someone else and so I stopped talking for a few minutes. He wasn’t telling me to stop talking, he was just letting me know because I literally did not know how my voice sounded to that person. It sucks when you know you may be making someone feel a certain way without intending to, and not knowing how to fix it.

Depending on the context, sometimes I will stop talking to kind of “reset” my voice, though honestly sometimes this doesn’t work and

that's just how my voice will sound for the rest of the night and I can't do a thing about it. And I never really know which one will happen unless someone else tells me, because to me it all sounds the same. Similarly, many of us autistic people may laugh nervously in stressful moments and will be seen as rude, when the laughter has nothing to do with the situation. Instead, it's due to our own anxiety and stress of not knowing what to say or do. This makes neurotypical people think we are intentionally making fun of a sad or stressful event, or not taking them seriously, when the reason behind our laughter is the opposite of that assumption. We are trying to think of the "correct" neurotypical response to say, have a difficult time thinking of something, and so may laugh in the interim due to stress or confusion.

Neurotypicals Need to Learn to Empathize

Imagine being expected to figure out how a brick wall "feels." That's impossible, right? Well it's the same way when NTs just assume that I am emitting some hidden message with how my voice sounds. I'm not! Listen to the words! I don't have any "intention" or "emotion" behind my actual voice. I just want you to hear the words. It is so hard to explain this to neurotypicals because this subconscious social processing is so automatic for them. They don't even realize how they're interpreting my tone. I could say the same exact thing as a neurotypical person does (in fact I have) and get chided for it for "arguing" when I was simply stating a fact. Interpreting our "tone of voice" like a neurotypical person just doesn't make sense. It's like yelling at someone to stand up who literally can't stand (which actually does happen unfortunately when it really shouldn't, because ableism is everywhere). I really wish I didn't have to use an analogy to a physical disability, but so many people do not see anything wrong with "disciplining" their autistic kid over "sounding rude," when it's literally punishing them for being disabled. I've learned that I have to be very heavy-handed to get this message across to neurotypical people. It seems like a very hard concept to understand if you have the ability to modulate your tone of voice in the way you want. I guess it's hard to imagine not having this extra

layer of automatic processing occurring constantly in the background.

Please Learn This for Us

We're not trying to sound X way or have Y intentions. We are just using our words. Focus on the words!

We don't understand your neurotypical tone of voice rules and literally do not know what we sound like to you.

We don't know.

Please sit with that. Think about not understanding tone of voice. Try to empathize with that.

Remember that neurotypical people make judgments and assumptions based on autistic people's tone of voice. So basically, we're constantly getting judged and told off for something we don't/didn't know about.

Imagine getting told off your whole life for doing nothing wrong.

Neurotypical people: When you feel yourself getting defensive about someone's tone of voice, try to focus on the words if you can. When you know someone is autistic and you're interacting with them, remember that many of us cannot modulate our tone of voice and are not trying to send you any social signals with our timbre or pitch. And remember, not everyone you interact with will be openly autistic or know they are autistic. Please, please learn this. Don't rush to judgment and make assumptions – try to ask for clarification. Try to give them the benefit of the doubt. And try to recognize that some people you meet may not be sending any kind of signal with the tone of their voice.

Thank you for reading.”