

How I Experience Policing as an Autistic Adult

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Neurodiversity: Navigating the criminal justice system at the
intersect of policing and health

About Me

- My name is Natalie, and I am Autistic with other disabilities, and I live in Glasgow.
- I wear a rucksack that has communication cards to help me when I'm out in the community. [show cards]
- I work as an ambassador at get2gether, which is a member led charity that works with adults with disabilities to create and cohost their own social events.
- Being a part of the community is so important, especially for people with disabilities, because we often live isolating lives.

About Me

- Get2gether has helped me become part of the community. I wish everyone with a learning disability could experience a community like get2gether gives people.
- Before I joined get2gether I lived a very isolated life, I didn't leave my home and if I did, I often didn't go very far.
- Like many other people with Autism, I have a difficult time understanding social cues and interactions, which often leads to me getting in dangerous situations that I had no idea I was getting into.

Disability and the Community

- People with disabilities, such as neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities need to feel supported and safe in their communities.
- Our social behaviours may be different to people without disabilities, and this confuses people about how to understand our behaviours or actions.
- For example, sometimes we may laugh when we feel nervous or overstimulated in a stressful situation. To the nondisabled person this may feel like our behaviour is inappropriate, but to the person with a disability we may be trying to self regulate.
- We all play a role in helping people with disabilities be part of the community in a meaningful way, and it is the responsibility of society to learn how to make communities inclusive and safe for us.

Policing and Autism

- I would like to take some time to speak to you about my experience with policing as an Autistic adult.
- My sister is a police officer in Glasgow and works with the Dog Branch.
- Even though my sister is a police officer, I don't feel safe when police are around.

Policing and Autism

- Sometimes police knock on my door to ask questions about what is going on in my neighbourhood and I hate opening the door.
- Because of my disability I am not good with people, and I don't like unexpected visitors. This makes me feel very anxious .

When a police officer is at my door some thoughts that go through my head are:

- No one told me that someone was going to be at my door, and it confuses my brain about my plans.
- When I see police right away, I think I have done something wrong.
- I worry about understanding and answering their questions, and if I don't understand or answer I worry about getting arrested.
- I am really bad at eye contact, so I worry they will think I am guilty of something I didn't do.

When a police officer is at my door some thoughts that go through my head are:

- I don't like people touching me so I get upset at the thought they might grab me.
- Sounds and touch make me anxious and makes me feel like my brain can't think.
- When I get anxious, I start to move or pace on the spot and they may think that I am getting ready to run, but really, I am just trying to self regulate my body.

Things I want police officers to know about people with Autism or other disabilities:

- Respect personal space.
- Speak clearly without using jargon or big words.
- Give me time to process what you are asking.
- Explain what you are doing in simple steps.
- Please don't touch. Even if you think you are giving a comforting pat.

Things I want police officers to know about people with Autism or other disabilities:

- Don't talk down to us. Don't be intimidating. We are just trying to understand what is going on.
- If I am not making eye contact its not because I have done something wrong.
- If I am fidgeting or pacing, I haven't done anything wrong. I am just trying to regulate my body. Sometimes people with autism or other disabilities may stim to self regulate. This is normal for us.

Things I want police officers to know about people with Autism or other disabilities:

- If you are coming to speak to me, please don't come unannounced.
- Come back when my support worker is around so we can have a better conversation, as I tend to forget easily and need help understanding.

Learnings From Natalie's Experience to Support an Inclusive Criminal Justice System

Societal Views of People with Disabilities

- People with disabilities are seen as being isolated, alone, dependent, they are the outsiders of society (Carlson, 2010).
- Although disabled people experience oppression, it is said there is a hierarchy of disability, where physical and visual disabilities are at the top of the hierarchy and learning disability is at the bottom (Charlton, 1998).
- For example:
 - Use of everyday terms such as idiot, stupid, dumb.
 - Difference between Paralympic and Special Olympics.
 - Distancing of disability groups from people with learning disability.
 - Distancing of people with learning disabilities from each other.

Meaningful Inclusion in the Justice System

- Avoid open-ended questions and abstract thinking can be difficult.
 - Some people do like open-ended questions.
- Yes/no questions are helpful however not to be overused.
- For comprehension you can ask the person for their understanding of the question asked.
 - Rephrasing questions is a good way to ensure comprehension.
- Create a safe environment where the person can say they do not understand the question and ask for it to be rephrased.
- Avoid jargon and long complex sentences. Break down concepts and questions.
- Careful of acquiescence.

Meaningful Inclusion in the Justice System

- Actively listen when people with learning disabilities/neurodivergent people are speaking.
- People with disabilities are humans not less than.
 - They have opinions, feelings, life goals, they want to live fulfilling lives.
 - Don't allow your own ablest attitudes about disability influence your behaviour when interacting with them.
- Ask the person with a learning disability/ neurodivergent person what their triggers are so you can support them better.
- Figure out what supports they need to make the process more inclusive and accessible to their needs.

Meaningful Inclusion in the Justice System

- Become educated on inclusive and accessible practices.
- Reflect on your own practice.
 - Are you validating and supporting the liberties of people with a disability or are you playing an active role in the deprivation of their liberties?
- Understanding how your own externalized and internalized ableism influences how you interact with people with learning disabilities/neurodivergent people.
 - People with learning disabilities are human.