

## How One Can Report a Missing Autistic Person Respectfully

By Nicole Corrado

It's everyone's worst nightmare; a loved one goes missing, and we fear for their safety. The stakes are even higher when the person has autism or a developmental difference. When dealing with people with special needs, these unique sets of challenges open up an ethical debate over how to report the person. How much, if at all, do you reveal the challenges while maintaining the privacy rights of the person? Here are some tips on how to balance safety with respect.

**Photos.** Use as mature a photo as possible. Crop only the person's face in the photo. Items in the photo are distracting and should be cropped out. Government-issued ID is preferred.

**Disclosing disability.** How to disclose special needs is a constant debate. How a person's needs are disclosed is a personal matter, potentially affecting employment and other aspects of personal life. In many cases, autism can be left out of a description.

In some cases, it can be deemed beneficial to disclose autism. Identity first language, "person is autistic" is preferred by most of the autistic community. Many people use autism first language to self-identify. Some prefer person-first language, "person has autism". The best way to disclose is under the physical description of the person, as autism is always a natural-born part of the person.

Either way, the emphasis should be on the missing person as a whole, not the autism. Therefore "missing person" not "missing autistic person" should be the headline. Some individuals may prefer gender-neutral language as well.

**Functioning levels.** Phrases like "high functioning", "low functioning", and functioning age comparisons (comparing an adult to a child or teenager, or a teenager to a child), are problematic. Adults and teens with disabilities who may need some support do not identify this way. Many developmentally and/or cognitively different people find age comparisons offensive since it implies that because some adults and teens do not lead a life similar to their neurotypical peers that they must be like infants, children, or younger teenagers. No one would compare a physically challenged adult requiring assistance with an infant, child or young teenager.

Functioning levels can fluctuate depending on stress levels, the task at hand, and physical or mental health. No one functions at their best when stressed. A more positive way to describe the person could be "may not respond/speak at their best under stress."

Some people have significant learning disabilities, or other conditions, and may appear to act younger, or require a lot of personal care. However, these individuals likely have mature thoughts, feelings, and desires. One way to describe highly challenged people could be "requires personal care support".

Verbal, low-verbal, or non-verbal descriptors are needed. (Some prefer the term non-speaking). Keep in mind some autistic individuals may prefer to write down information as to their form of communication when under stress.

"Scared of uniform presence" sounds rather young. This kind of information, while important, needs to be written in a clear, respectful way that describes possible behaviour. Information about how a person responds to police is best shared with officers privately.

Sensory issues are common for people with autism or other neurological disabilities. One can write about these challenges in a mature way. An example: "Hates bright lights" could be more accurately be described as "is light-sensitive", "wears sunglasses", "Please turn off flashing lights. This person has light sensitivity".

It might be helpful to add a disclaimer on a missing persons news release stating "This report describes a person under unusual circumstances. It may not describe or reflect the person's usual state."

Suggest that people who are prone to going missing write their own sample missing persons news release and give it to a trusted family member or caregiver. Set up an online missing person news reporting form for the family to fill out. Options could include a box to tick off if one doesn't want disability disclosed in the news release. This would be separate from police registries such as vulnerable person registries.\*

In the found persons news release, thank the public for helping locate the missing person. Ask the public to remove posts and tweets of people who are found alive.

Consider posting only the name, photo description, photo, and year of birth on social media. Add a link for more details.

The hashtag #MissingPerson (city acronym) would make obsolete missing social media posts easier to locate for deletion. Delete the link and post in cases where the person is found alive.

One could also add the hashtag #SensitiveInfo on all tweets and posts. The sensitive info settings can also be used.

The Police's role in helping an individual move on with their life once they've been safely found is important and appreciated. It shows understanding and compassion. Thank you for that. It means more than you know.

\*A word on vulnerable persons registries. Vulnerable Persons Registries are not missing persons registries, nor are they fill out forms to report a missing person. They are online forms that are filled out by an individual and/or caregiver to register the profiles of persons at higher risk of going missing. These registries are controversial. Some people find them liberating, while others feel they are a form of police profiling. There is a very dark history involving the police and neurodivergent people. The "fill out by a caregiver" portion is especially controversial.

If municipal police or fire service has a vulnerable persons registry, they must be voluntary, open to everybody (neurodivergent or neurotypical), have a sample registry form to read before choosing if one wants to fill it out, and it must have a default fill out yourself mode for teens and adults. They also must be temporary, renewable after each year, and have an opt-out option at any time.

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## About the Author

Nicole Corrado is an autistic self-advocate and a visual artist based in Toronto.