

Information Sheet:

Romantic Relationships and Autism

Relationships and dating is an exciting and, at times, overwhelming time for everyone - including autistic people. This information sheet is for older autistic teens and autistic adults.

Autistic people have a lot to offer

Autistic people often have a desire for intimacy and companionship. However, difficulties in interacting socially are a key feature of autism, which makes finding a partner and making a relationship work more difficult.

But many autistic people do have successful relationships. Chris and Gisela Slater- Walker (authors of 'An Asperger Marriage') or Jerry and Mary Newport (subjects of the movie 'Mozart and the Whale') are just a couple of examples.

Autistic people have a lot to offer in a relationship, including loyalty, reliability, commitment, and honesty. People in relationships with an autistic person will often say they were attracted to their quirky sense of humour or their different way of seeing the world.

Autistic people may also have specific difficulties which impact on a romantic relationship, such as:

Sensory difficulties with grooming or tolerating physical affection (like touching).

- Understanding what behaviours are appropriate in various settings, such as when on a date.
- Understanding other's intentions, which can leave an autistic person vulnerable to misinterpreting friendliness as romantic attention, for example.
- Understanding other's reactions to their own behaviour e.g. how to tell when someone is offended by your behaviour, as opposed to being interested in you.
- Having the confidence and managing anxiety in new and unfamiliar situations in order to meet new people.
- Knowing how to identify desire in themselves (or understand desire in others).
- Rigidity and inflexibility, for example regarding others being on time for things or about behaviour when living together.

Romantic Relationships and Autism

What can an autistic person do to increase the chances of a successful romantic relationship?

First the individual has to attract a potential partner. Jerry Newport, an adult with Asperger Syndrome, has the following tips on improving grooming in order to “present the best you” (1):

- Bathe every day (or every second day if an adult and not doing a lot of physical activity □ try a sponge bath if baths or showers are unpleasant)
- Apply deodorant under your arms every day after you bathe (but don't use too much. Ask a trusted friend or family member if you're not sure)
- Groom facial and body hair
- Clean teeth daily - find your preference for soft or hard toothbrush, electric brush for soothing massage, firm or light pressure when brushing, and a tolerable taste in toothpaste (you can buy unflavoured toothpastes online)
- Wear clean clothes (choose old but neat clothing if softer clothes are preferred)
- If you're not sure what to wear, or how to style yourself, observe and copy the hairstyles and clothes of people your age

Choosing a potential partner

The next step is selecting a potential partner and getting to know them better.

Sometimes it's easy to tell when you like someone - your heart may race and you feel tingly when you see, or even think about, the person you like.

Being autistic, you might have difficulty recognising when you are attracted to another person romantically. It's okay to ask a trusted person for guidance when you think you might like someone, but you're not sure.

Another thing to consider is whether the person is a good match for you. What kind of a person do you want to date? It is helpful to think about what you know about the person already and whether you and they will be a good match.

Do they like me too?

When you have identified a potential partner, it's important to think about whether they might be interested in you as well. Picking up on other people's emotional states through their facial expression, tone of voice, and body language is difficult for autistic people - you may need to ask someone you trust to help 'read the situation'. It is not difficult to misinterpret signs of friendliness as romantic interest, especially if you are interested in the other person.

Romantic Relationships and Autism

Do they like me too? continued

If a person smiles at you, or talks to you, it may not mean they are romantically interested. Determine whether a person is expected to be kind and friendly because that is their job¹, or because they are an acquaintance at work or classmate at school. Use the person's level of contact with you and their friendliness in the past as a guide¹. Look for multiple signs of interest (see table on page 3).

Understanding signals of disinterest

It is important to understand the signals another person may give out when they are *not* interested in spending time with you. It is important to remember some things when you're trying to get someone to date you:

- Generally prolonged staring at others or repeated watching from a distance makes others uncomfortable¹ or unsafe.
- Making suggestive or sexual comments offends other people. "Suggestive" comments are comments suggesting another person should engage in intimate behaviour with you or something sexual about them. An autistic person may need examples of such comments listed so they know exactly which comments to avoid.
- Continuing to pursue another person when their interest is not reciprocated is unacceptable. A strategy for avoiding this situation is the 'three strikes rule', whereby if a person has not accepted the offer of a date after the third time of being asked, this person is not to be pursued any further. This allows for a potential partner refusing a date initially because they genuinely are not available for an activity, rather than being disinterested¹.

This list may help distinguish between interested and not interested behaviours or responses.

Interested

- giving strong eye- contact
- leaning forward to hear what is said
- smiling
- 'flipping' or touching their hair
- laughing at your jokes
- the other person initiating conversation the other person touching you in a friendly way (e.g. patting you on the back, touching your arm)
- the other person inviting you to do an activity with them outside of school or work

Not interested

- looking away
- turning away

Romantic Relationships and Autism

Not interested continued

- moving away
- looking unhappy
- having arms folded - not responding when you talk to them telling you to go away

Going on a date

When you have found someone you like and who likes you, the next step is choosing a place to go on date. Jerry Newport (1) suggests you think of the following when choosing:

Pick an activity you enjoy enough to do alone. (You can share your enjoyment with your date!); or

Pick an activity that is a shared interest of the person being asked on the date. (This will be something you can both enjoy and bond over.)

And!

Pick an activity that is not very expensive.

It helps to have advance preparation for the unexpected aspects of a date, such as how to get there on public transport, where to park if driving a car, etc. When you are on your date, you will be busy thinking about the other person - you don't want to be distracted by worrying about other things if you can avoid it.

When you're on a date, the social rules are a bit like when you're out with friends, but with a few key differences.

Just like with friends, being on a date is about having fun and enjoying spending time with another person. Being on a date is also about finding out more about the person you're dating and making them feel a little bit special. You may want to do some research on the kinds of things people talk about on dates.

Since you want to get to know the other person, asking them questions and listening to the answers is a good strategy. They will want to find out more about you too, but remember not to monopolise the conversation if you find yourself talking about something you enjoy.

What now?

When you have had several happy dates with someone, it might be time to talk about the future with this person. Sometimes people will say they "want to know where this relationship is going". That can sound a bit scary, but it just means they want to get an idea of what you plan for the future.

You have a lot of options at this stage. You might want to initiate a sexual relationship with this person, if you haven't done so already - or you might not.

Romantic Relationships and Autism

What now? continued

You might want to make the relationship “exclusive” (which means you don’t go on dates with anyone else) and call each other “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” - or you might not.

What is important is that you think about what you want, then you ask the other person what they want, and you come to an agreement together.

Additional reading

22 Things a Woman Must Know if She Loves a Man with Asperger's Syndrome by Rudy Simone (2009)

Alone Together - Making an Asperger Marriage Last by Katrin Bentley (2007)

An Asperger Marriage by Gisela & Christopher Slater-Walker (2002)

Asperger Syndrome and Long-Term Relationships by Ashley Stanford (2003)

Asperger Syndrome and Sexuality by Isabelle Henault (2006)

Asperger's in Love by Maxine C Aston (2003)

Sex, Sexuality and the Autism Spectrum by Wen Lawson (2005)

The Asperger Love Guide: A Practical Guide for Adults with Asperger's Syndrome to Seeking, Establishing and Maintaining Successful Relationships by Genevieve Edmonds and Dean Worton (2005)

The Hidden Curriculum by Brenda Smith-Myles, Melissa Trautman & Ronda I Schelvan (2002)

The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome by Maxine C Aston (2002)

You and Me Equals We by Rosemary Tilley (2007)

Reference

1. *Autism-Asperger's and Sexuality: Puberty and Beyond* (2002) by Jerry and Mary Newport, Future Horizons

©2019 Amaze.

Permission is granted for the content of this information sheet to be reproduced in its entirety, provided Amaze is acknowledge as the source. Content is provided for educational and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional.