What is your definition of any intimate relationship?

AG: For many individuals with ASD, our relationships are chosen for us. We’re told, “This person is your therapist” or “This person is your teacher,” without opportunity for input. In contrast, an intimate relationship is one that we choose ourselves. An intimate relationship can be platonic or romantic, emotional or physical, and at its core is a mutual sense of trust and respect between people who have formed a deep connection to one other.

JM: Look at the non-sexual aspects first. An individual has to be intimate emotionally and physically (non-sexually). This involves listening, reciprocation, giving of yourself and open communication to build tighter bonds and evolve as a couple. Furthermore, it enables you to avoid conflict and really get to know one another. Be genuinely considerate of your partner’s needs, desires and feelings which show priority and appreciation. Without this it will be very hard to have sexual intimacy that is fulfilling.

What do you think is the biggest misconception in the typical world about people on the autism spectrum and romantic relationships?

AG: One misconception is that people with ASD are not interested in romantic relationships. While true for some, problems arise when this dominates the narrative. Another more hurtful misconception is that autistic individuals cannot love. Love and intimacy may look different or be expressed differently by people on the spectrum, but we are no less capable of it. Yet the idea persists that we are emotionless robots who are unable to give or reciprocate the deepest of emotions. The repercussions are catastrophic and encourage further stigmatization and isolation of autistic individuals throughout our adult lives.

JM: Many feel individuals with ASD choose being alone over friendships or relationships. Not true. Just as egregious is the perception that we lack emotion and empathy, two critical elements for a successful romantic relationship. There is a difference between the lack of emotion and not being outwardly emotional. With empathy a distinction needs to be made. Our ability to feel for others is off the chart. In fact, I must change a channel if someone is embarrassed or hurt on TV, even if it’s fictional. However, being able to put themselves in someone else’s shoes is problematic due to neurological differences. We need to learn perspective taking and how to comprehend how others feel.

What might be some accommodations a person on the spectrum might need to be in a successful relationship?

AG: It seems strange to use the word “accommodations” in reference to relationships. When neurotypical people begin a romantic relationship, they naturally make a space for each other; yet when the same is needed to be done for individuals with ASD, it becomes an accommodation. There certainly are challenges than can arise...
for autistic people trying to enter or maintain a relationship, many of which revolve around communication. If a partner can be open to someone with ASD communicating in nontraditional or unexpected ways, and can set aside the tendency to take autistic behavior personally, that can go a long way to helping individuals on the spectrum succeed in a relationship.

**JM:** People must be willing to communicate openly to create the conditions for a relationship to be successful and to evolve and help avoid burgeoning disagreements and arguments. Another important element is to consider their partner’s feelings. This means at times you are going to do things she wants to do you are not keen on doing and vice versa. If she feels you are not listening to her (desires, feelings and needs) she will possibly become alienated and may move away emotionally. People want to feel important in someone’s life and needed. It is also important to be honest and open about one’s autism without making it the defining element in the relationship. Be open in discussing how autism affects you so your partner will understand and be able to be more empathetic in dealing with challenges.

**What might be some accommodations a typical individual might need to be in a successful relationship with someone on the spectrum?**

**AG:** Many neurotypical individuals either don’t have a full understanding of what ASD is, or tend to apply what knowledge they do have in broad strokes. It is entirely too easy for neurotypicals to feel they are dating ASD, rather than an autistic person. While every autistic person shares a common diagnosis, we are all different not only in personality, but in how we experience ASD. The best thing a neurotypical can do is listen to what an autistic person tells them about their experience and feelings without invalidating them by valuing their neurotypical opinion over that of the autistic person.

**JM:** One of the most important considerations is that people with ASD need space and down time, especially after a difficult day. If I don’t get that time I will be in a very bad mood and will have significant difficulty interacting with others. The down time or space allows an individual with ASD to decompress. Another accommodation that would be important for a neurotypical person is to be flexible and understanding of what a person with ASD may deal with socially and environmentally. This allows the person to be themselves and better adapt to challenging or difficult situations. This doesn’t absolve the person with ASD of rude or insensitive behaviors. To be treated like others we need to be held accountable for our behavior and the necessity to adapt.

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**Additional Resources**

PFA Tips: Dating - Romantic Relationships
https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/social/pfa-tips-romantic-relationships/


Romance 101: Dating for Adults with ASD

Romantic Relationships and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Teach Your Family Member About Sexuality and Relationships
https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/social/teach-your-family-member-about-sexuality-and-relationships/

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