

PFA Tips

Romantic Relationships

While romance comes with excitement, navigating the dating game can be challenging. For anyone. Period. But are there additional complexities experienced by people with ASD that make dating and relationship building even more overwhelming? Rebecca Shapiro and Dylan Greene share their insights on their own relationship.

What is your definition of any intimate relationship?

RS: An intimate relationship is any relationship in which the partners care about and love one another. They are best friends, but also family.

DG: Any intimate relationship, as I would define it, is one in which there is a deep enough connection to be vulnerable and personal. While friendships can be in their own ways deep and connected, there are still some layers that I only show to my girlfriend because I only trust someone like her with that level of understanding.

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

RS: A lot of people seem to believe that those like us on the spectrum don't have any form of empathy, nor the ability to love. When an autistic person tells them that they do have these abilities, neurotypicals will often accuse them of not being autistic.

DG: In my experience, the biggest

misconception stems from the assumption that autistic people either can't or shouldn't have relationships. I never had any sort of model growing up for what being on the spectrum and in a relationship was even going to look like. There is so little material for helping autistic people navigate romantic and sexual relationships, and it has damaging consequences. Autistic people need access to resources that treat them like adults who can have the same wants and needs for love as anyone else.

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

RS: In my experience, the biggest accommodation I've needed in my relationship is time and space to de-stimulate from overwhelming situations. I am also subject to a lot of stimulation overloads from touch, therefore my boyfriend Dylan has made accommodations not to touch me in specific areas on my body and to stop if I am too overwhelmed.

DG: Finding an understanding partner is extremely difficult, and



any accommodations someone on the spectrum will need are going to have to come from a place of understanding. Too often when I was dating, I'd assume that disclosing my diagnosis was sufficient to getting that understanding, but this was wrong on so many occasions. Every autistic person has different needs and one cannot assume that they can be handled in a blanket fashion. But we still need to be treated with understanding instead of what we often get which is skepticism, paternalism and endless questioning about the most basic things.

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

RS: I believe that a neurotypical

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would need to be able to respect an autistic person's overstimulation and accommodate their need to stim in order to come down from certain situations. The typical individual should also be flexible in how much they do in a day, so as not to overwhelm their partner on the spectrum. Many of us lose energy when we do too much in too little time, or when duties are stacked up.

DG: Because I am in a relationship with an autistic woman, I make sure to respect her sensory needs. I also try to pitch in with some of the domestic work because I understand that there's a lot of emotional labor that she has to expend to do it. It is easier for me as a fellow autistic person to understand that. In my experience with dating neurotypicals, they frequently expect a very asymmetrical amount of work. The autistic partner is expected to invest far more than the neurotypical partner is willing to give in exchange. When autism stops

being a cute quirk and something that actually has an impact, this often results in the neurotypical partner bailing. I do believe that understanding neurotypical partners exist, I've seen them. But most neurotypical people aren't interested in spending the time and effort to do this. Part of that is due to the fact that information on autism is still inaccessible, you have to go through dry, clinical writing that doesn't necessarily match the autistic experience. But as much as I hate to say it, some of that is just the fact that many neurotypicals are unable or unwilling to listen to us. We have to acknowledge the presence of ableism, otherwise we aren't going to get anywhere.

How do sex and intimacy relate to one another? Is sex necessary to have an intimate relationship? Is intimacy necessary to have a sexual relationship?

RS: Sex can be a very intimate

experience, but it isn't the only intimate experience you can have with your partner. There are asexual partners who have very intimate relationships without sex. As for a sexual relationship, I believe that if the partners want to stay together, intimacy is most likely needed.

DG: Due to the diverse nature of relationships, it's difficult to give a blanket statement about this. Some people are asexual but still want a romantic connection. But, friends-with-benefits arrangements frequently fall apart because someone starts feeling for their partner. I know this because I was that one who got attached. I think we're still developing a cultural vocabulary that allows all sorts of people the ability to define their own wants and needs so that they can find partners. My experience with casual sex was perhaps temporarily amusing but ultimately unfulfilling in comparison to being with a partner that I love with all my heart. I'm also a very sexual person, and I don't believe that I can get rid of that. I'm glad that I have a loving relationship.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Dating - He Said/She Said

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/social/pfa-tips-dating-he-said-she-said/>

"Decoding Dating: A Guide to the Unwritten Social Rules of Dating for Men With Asperger Syndrome" by John Miller. Available on Amazon

Romance 101: Dating for Adults with ASD

<https://www.carautismroadmap.org/romance-101-dating-for-adults-with-asd/>

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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