

Dating and relationships

An introduction for adults with autism

A relationship can mean any way in which two or more people are connected. This could be as friends or in an intimate way, like in a couple. This information sheet gives an introduction to dating, from choosing a partner to disclosing your diagnosis.

Many people with autism have difficulty forming and keeping friendships and relationships because there are so many social rules involved. Romantic or intimate relationships also involve a lot of compromise and sometimes doing things you aren't especially interested in, because it makes the other person happy. This can be difficult for people with autism who enjoy routines and may not have very flexible thinking.

Choosing a partner

Before you start a relationship with anyone it helps to have a sense of the kind of person you'd like to be with. You shouldn't have a long and rigid list of things the person must be or have, but some things will be more important than others. For example, if you are very religious, you may need to have a partner who shares that religious belief. Consider your expectations of a romantic relationship. Are they reasonable? You may need to talk to someone you trust about this if you are not sure.

Ways to meet people

Social and support groups: There are lots of ways to meet new people. You could try looking for social groups and activities in your area. This may be groups for other people on the spectrum, or groups based around one or more of your interests. This is a great way to meet people who have similar interests and experiences to you, so you will have something to talk about when you are getting to know each other.

Bars and nightclubs: Lots of people meet in places like bars and nightclubs and this can be fun! However, consider that this is a very difficult place to talk to people properly and so you may not get to know someone very well in this way. Nightclubs and bars can also be very noisy, hot and crowded which may be difficult for people with sensory issues or anxiety. If you would like to go to a bar or club, see if you can get a group of friends together and make sure you go to one that is suitable for your age. If you are in your 40s and go to a bar for 18 year old students, people may find this off-putting.

Dating online

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting through a message board or game, like World of Warcraft, means that you already know you have a shared interest to talk about. • Online dating is a good opportunity to meet a lot of people in a short space of time. • It's a good way to meet different sorts of people to the ones you already know. • You can communicate in an environment where you are comfortable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dating online can take up a lot of time. • You can't be sure the person you are talking to is who they say they are. • Some people use online dating for attention or do not take it seriously.

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Consent, rights and responsibilities

You may have all sorts of expectations from a relationship and from the person that you hope to have a romantic relationship with. But you have to be careful that your expectations are reasonable.

It can be difficult to make sense of dating if you struggle with social rules. Sometimes people with autism may come across as too 'keen' and this can put potential partners off. This may include messaging a person lots of times without them replying, or being too quick to express feelings – such as telling someone you love them on a first date. This can make the other person very uncomfortable and can sometimes make you seem pushy and aggressive.

Other people on the spectrum may struggle with saying no, and be too quick to accept any affection given to them by another person. It is important that you understand that you are allowed to say no to someone and they have no right to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. If you are unsure or worried, always talk to someone you trust.

Abuse

Abuse can happen to anyone, whether they are in a relationship or not. The most important thing to remember is to talk to someone you trust if someone is worrying you or making you uncomfortable or scared. There are lots of types of abuse and you could experience it at different times. If you are meeting new people that you do not know, then you must be careful not to be left alone with them until you know them better.

Disclosure

Whether or not to talk about your diagnosis is a very personal decision. This will depend on your personal situation. However, generally it will be better to let someone know about your autism at some point because the best relationships are honest and open. Great relationships involve being able to help and support your partner when they are having a difficult time. To do this your partner will need to know what your needs are and why. Your partner may also have autism and so this may be something you can discuss and share. If you know this is the case, it may be much easier to decide to disclose your autism.

Useful resources

www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads - Free information sheet on autism, sex and relationships

www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads - Free information sheet on friendships for adults with autism

www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads - Free information sheet on online dating for people with autism