

# Tips for Women in Relationships with Partners on the Autism Spectrum

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It is a challenge for most couples to find a balance between their needs and expectations, and their partner's needs and expectations. In a relationship where one individual is on the autism spectrum, there are likely many more opportunities for misunderstandings and frustration. Finding a path to a respectful, loving and fulfilling long lasting relationship is every committed couple's desire.

In recent years, it has been helpful that there is more information and resources focused on neuro-diverse relationships. More is available for couples and individuals, including more for women, in relationships with men on the autism spectrum.

This article is a brief summary highlighting information gathered from my experience as well as many women who have shared their stories with me over the years. A listing of resources is available at the end of this article to assist you in locating other information related to this subject.

1. Learn about Autism Spectrum Disorders (and how ASD affects your partner)

Autism is a neurobiological disorder that affects perception, communication, social skills, learning and behavior. Information processed by the senses can easily overstimulate an individual on the autism spectrum. On the other hand, an individual with autism can also have difficulty processing input from their senses and be under-responsive, unresponsive and/or have a unique response to sensory input.

Communication is frequently processed and interpreted differently for someone on the autism spectrum. Verbal communication is often processed more slowly and words interpreted literally. Persons on the autism spectrum often have trouble staying on topic and maintaining a conversation. Social skills are also affected. Eye contact may be difficult and sometimes facial expressions may not reflect an individual's true feelings. Social cues are often missed or misread. Individuals on the autism spectrum are not sure how to connect with others. Each person presents differently with his or her challenges. Many on the autism spectrum suffer from anxiety as well.

Your partner likely has executive function deficits. Executive function tasks include planning, organizing, prioritizing, time management, emotional regulation and impulse control. Inertia, both starting and stopping tasks, can be a challenge for people on the autism spectrum. These executive function deficits may be mistakenly attributed to lack of motivation, and/or behavior or personality problems. Non-spectrum partners are often relied upon to perform many executive function tasks within the relationship.

There is now a variety of books, written about relationships when one partner is on the autism spectrum. There are books written by professionals, as well as those written by women married to men on the autism spectrum. There are also some written by couples

together. Some of these books are listed at the end of this article. Reading stories from others can be very validating of your feelings and experiences. Keep in mind that each relationship is unique. Some of the books are quite negative. Your partner on the autism spectrum will have his own autistic characteristics as well as a unique profile of experiences, personality and possibly other co-occurring diagnoses that are a part of what makes him unique.

If this is a new diagnosis, you and/or your partner may be working on accepting the diagnosis. Getting to acceptance may be hard for one or both of you. As you seek to learn more about ASD and how it effects your partner and your relationship, you will likely be grieving the loss of prior expectations.

As you learn more and work on acknowledging the role an autism spectrum disorder plays in your relationship, it will be helpful to seek out knowledgeable professionals and/or join a support group for women partnered with men on the autism spectrum. These resources are available but may be hard to find. It can also be helpful to make a list, of the positive and desirable qualities, which attracted you to your partner. It is important to keep these in mind, especially when going through a challenging time in the relationship.

It will also be helpful to keep a list of your positive qualities. It can be hard to remember these positive traits about yourself when you are in the middle of very difficult and confusing times. Remembering the positive characteristics of both you and your partner will enhance your self-esteem and help motivate you as you work through your relationship challenges. Over the years, I have appreciated the determination I have seen from both the ASD and non-spectrum partners in pursuing solutions to build a stronger and loving bond.

## 2. Recognize and Address Sensory Needs (and issues with your partner)

Sensory issues very often affect individuals on the autism spectrum. As mentioned before, one or more of the senses may be affected. Senses may be overly sensitive (hypersensitive) and/or under sensitive (hyposensitive). Some people with ASD are hypersensitive to various lighting. For example, they see the blinking and/or hear the buzzing of fluorescent lighting. For some, headaches are triggered. A person on the autism spectrum may be overly sensitive to various smells and/or sounds in the environment. Light touch may feel like pins yet actual pinpricks may not be felt at all.

In some situations, a person on the autism spectrum may appear not to process sensory information from one or more of the familiar five senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. They may seem unaware of what is in plain sight and/or process words as “noise”. These situations can seem very curious. Three other less known sensory systems are also often affected for many on the autism spectrum. There are the vestibular system (balance), the proprioceptive system (muscle/joint movement, coordination, motor planning and sense of your body in space) and the interoceptive system (state of internal body functions). Interoception is often referred to as the eighth sense.

There is some evidence that individuals on the autism spectrum can have both an impaired and an enhanced time perceiving their own bodily functions. This is called atypical interoception or interceptive dysfunction (Shah et. al., 2016). There are accounts of little awareness of needing to use the bathroom, get a drink (due to thirst) and/or eat (due to hunger). Some women report that they need to remind their partner to eat or drink something

especially when they are deeply engaged in an activity that takes all their focus.

Sensory issues can impact just about all aspects of life from the selection of clothes, foods, bedding and furnishings that are comfortable for both partners to what environments and activities may be enjoyable for both partners. There are situations where heightened sensory processing can be an asset, such as an ability to process visual information quickly and/or in unique ways. Designing, carpentry and engineering are skills that persons on the autism, including your partner, may possess as a result of excellent visual processing skills.

Sensory needs/issues can change over time and even vary from day to day. As an adult, your partner has likely learned to either cope with and/or avoid various sensory stimulation in the environment. Some common strategies used to effectively limit environmental sensory overload include tinted glasses, earplugs and hats or specific clothing choices. Some individuals enjoy keeping small “fidgets” which can be calming and help counter the sensory overload.

At home, sleeping in total darkness and using a weighted blanket can be helpful for some. At home, hopefully, it is easier to adjust lighting and control or mask sounds and smells in the environment. Sometimes working with an occupational therapist who is trained in sensory integration can be beneficial.

Sensory issues can also affect intimacy. If there are sensory issues in the bedroom, they can be addressed with better understanding, patience and developing strategies to accommodate the needs of both partners. You and your partner can discuss various sensory differences and consider specific adjustments that will be successful.

In situations where a person on the autism spectrum is stressed, s/he can more easily experience sensory overload and, as a result, shut down or possibly experience a “meltdown”. A self-aware adult on the autism spectrum can usually recognize early warning signs and develop strategies to exit and calm down. Both partners who are aware of this can work together, so that both are accommodated. Many couples develop signals to communicate if the ASD partner is becoming overstimulated and needs a break. A break can take various forms that can be discussed in advance. If need be, this might mean taking two cars to an event so the ASD partner can exit the event and the non-ASD partner does not have to leave.

### 3. Learn and Use Communication Strategies (that work best for you and your partner)

Optimum communication is important in all relationships. Social communication, by definition in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), is a deficit for a person with ASD. Non-verbal communication, such as interpreting facial expressions, gestures and vocal intonation is often extremely difficult. Verbal communication can be difficult for people with autism to initiate. These difficulties are due to a difference in neurology and not a lack of motivation.

It is helpful to your partner if your communication is clear, calm and predictable. The person with ASD will usually want to meet their partner’s needs once s/he understands how to meet those needs. Explicitly communicating your social, emotional, mental, physical, including sexual needs, is important. Together, partners should discuss information about behavioral expectations. Think in terms of explanation instead of correction. Tell your partner your expectations and have him tell you his expectations.

Often you will need to provide very explicit and concrete instructions that your partner can follow. For example, if you need your partner to help with a chore such as doing laundry, give step-by-step directions on what, when and how the clothes need to be washed. If your partner cannot figure out what to wash, perhaps having a system of preparing laundry baskets is needed. For example, circular baskets can be used for dirty laundry and square baskets for clean laundry.

You may need to give your partner with autism explicit information and practice on how to give hugs. This may seem as though your partner does not want to be affectionate with you, but remember not to judge his actions and needs through your non-spectrum lens. Any areas of need are important to address in detail. Communicating very literally and concretely will be important for many aspects of life. Some couples find that texting, emails and/or information written out on paper, sticky notes, calendars or wipe-off boards is very advantageous.

Consider scheduling a time each day to both sit and communicate. Sitting side by side might work best for communication. People with ASD almost universally say it is difficult to process verbal information while maintaining eye contact. This would be especially true when discussing each other's needs. This time together can go a long way to making life more satisfying and keeping your bond as a couple strong.

Again, consider using visual information (notes, email, a white board, even examples from books or other visual media) to convey or supplement verbal messages. Be creative. Visual information is much easier for most individuals on the autism spectrum to process, and it can be used as a permanent resource when anxiety, sensory overload or executive functioning skills are causing challenges for our partners on the autism spectrum.

Realize you might not understand your partner's perspective. Seek to clarify. Recognize your partner may have a hard time asking (initiating) for clarification and/or even knowing that clarification is needed. Non-spectrum partners cannot interpret ASD behavior through their non-spectrum filter and assume that they understand the meaning of a particular behavior of their ASD partner. Likewise, the partner on the autism spectrum may have a hard time understanding their own needs. Each partner should identify their needs and tell their partner. It may not seem genuine if you have to tell your partner every step to meet your needs. Though it can be hard at first, do not think of it as meaning your partner does not care. Think of it as an important step to better appreciate, trust and respect each other.

#### 4. Find Outlets to Unwind (together and individually)

You and your partner likely have different ways of alleviating stress. Everyone is different and has different ways to relax. Being a neuro-diverse couple, there may be more differences you will experience that will, at first, challenge you both. It is important that you both learn your personal ways of de-stressing and express these needs to each other. Partners must also respect each other's needs and means to get rid of tension and anxiety. At times, this will mean separate and/or "parallel" activities. The partner, on the autism spectrum, may need much time to themselves and/or "extra" time to pursue their special interests.

Transitioning from work to home may be stressful for your partner on the autism spectrum. An "alone break" immediately upon arriving home is often described as "critical" by men on the autism spectrum. Without understanding and then planning for this important transition break, a roadblock in the relationship can take place.

Your need to communicate and connect with your partner may have to wait and that can be very frustrating. Couples might use a visual system, such as a wipe off board to communicate their stress level at this time of day. Plan for your partner's initial time alone when he gets home. Set a designated 30 minutes or whatever is reasonable and possible in your situation. Afterwards time together or with the children can be scheduled. If needed, more alone time can be scheduled for later in the evening. Chores and other tasks and activities can also be scheduled. Predictable evenings can help alleviate stress and go a long way to ensure more relaxing and enjoyable times together as a couple.

Leisure time together can be an important bonding opportunity. Encourage humor in your life together. This will help enhance the relationship and help relieve some of the "extra" stress. It can be wonderful if you can find the right activities to enjoy together. This can include each of you exploring special interests together. This might take extra patience at first especially if some boundaries are important to establish. Parallel activities can also be explored. You are both in the same room or space, but may be engaging in different activities for a period of time. It can be helpful to decide on the designated period of time in advance. A timer or other concrete reminder can be set. Be creative!

Social events are often difficult for a person with ASD and you will likely be the one arranging the social events. You may be the one with the most interest in these events and have the better "neurological" abilities (i.e. executive function capabilities) to make the arrangements. Your partner may be going along with your ideas because he wants to please you and/or will enjoy most things if you are there. They will also usually enjoy themselves once they know what to expect. It can be beneficial if a "role" can be established for your partner at various social functions. This role could be any task(s) that would contribute to the event, such

as helping with setting up or checking drinks or food. Discuss and plan what this would involve. Also, discuss options for a quiet space or place to retreat to take a break during social activities.

Your partner may need an actual “escape” plan when socializing gets too overwhelming or over stimulating. As mentioned before, one plan couples often use is to drive two cars so that the ASD partner can leave before his stress level gets too high as to result in a shutdown or meltdown.

You may have found your partner is very content to spend a lot of time pursuing a special interest. This can be an important calming technique. It is important that this time is balanced with other life activities and couple time together. If possible, this time can be scheduled but flexible. In times of greater stress for your ASD partner, he may need more time pursuing his interests and/or time alone.

At the same time, you may need to schedule time for your individual interests. If this includes additional socializing, you may need to look for scheduling time with friends, joining clubs, volunteering and/or pursuing other interests that involve other people. You may find you will need these outside activities and social opportunities to connect with others in addition to your emotional fulfillment with your partner.

## 5. Find Professional Support (for ASD and any secondary mental health needs)

It may be important and necessary to find professional support for the communication and sensory issues you encounter as a couple. It might also be helpful to address executive function issues with a professional. As mentioned before, executive function skills can be very weak for someone on the autism

spectrum. A professional who can address executive function issues may be hard to find but worth the effort. The book by Dawson and Guare (2016) listed under resources at the end of this article may also be helpful in understanding and addressing executive function deficits.

Be aware that individuals with an autism spectrum disorder are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder and/or other mental health disorders (Roy et. al., 2015; Croen et. al., 2015). Low self-esteem due to negative social interactions and experiences can also affect your partner's mental health.

You can also experience your own mental health issues. Approximately 40% of the general population meets the criteria for a mental health diagnosis at least once in their life. For people on the autism spectrum, the rate of co-occurring mental health symptoms is thought to be at least 69% (Lever & Geurts, 2016). You may also be at greater risk to experience anxiety and or depression as an effect of your relationship with your partner, especially if he was undiagnosed and/or untreated until recently.

The person with ASD may need dependable periods of social isolation. This may be difficult to understand and not take personally. Your partner may also have developed a pattern of retreating to his special interests, in part as a coping mechanism and not knowing what to do to make you happy. This can be due to communication differences and difficulties such that he does not have the information needed to carry out your wishes. He then decides it is better to do nothing than to do the wrong thing.

Over time and when sharing a home, misunderstandings and problems will occur. Because of the nature of ASD, you may feel a lack of communication and emotional contact with your partner.

As you try to work on your relationship, it is likely that contact with others will become more limited causing further loneliness. This can lead to depression, and maybe even, feelings of despair. For various reasons, it could be important for you and your partner to be assessed and treated for any mental health conditions.

It is very important to work with a professional who has knowledge and experience working with adults on the autism spectrum. If a therapist with knowledge and experience about ASD is not available, you will want to find someone who has an interest in supporting neuro-diverse relationships and who has qualities that are a good fit for someone with autism.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an evidence based-practice used with typically developing adults as well as those on the autism spectrum. Research has shown that adaptations of CBT such as a more structured, concrete and visual approach and possibly shortening or lengthening sessions can be important to meet the needs of someone on the autism spectrum (Cooper, et.al., 2018; Spain et.al. (2015). Dania Jekel, Executive Director of AANE (Asperger/Autism Network) has a blog post, on the AANE, website, which describes what to look for in a therapist: <https://www.aane.org/finding-the-right-therapist/>.

You are most likely reading this article because you are frustrated, unhappy and/or confused about the behavior of your partner on the autism spectrum. It may be a new diagnosis for your partner. You are seeking information and support. It may be very hard, at this time, to think of things your partner does well and appreciate his gifts. There were gifts you saw that led you to make a lifelong commitment to your partner. Remind yourself to remember, observe and acknowledge your strengths and the strengths of your partner at every opportunity.

This article is meant to offer you basic information, tips and tools for strengthening your relationship with your partner on the autism spectrum. Everyone's journey is unique. Some issues such as parenting, family vacations and employment related issues have not been addressed within this article. Included below are some resources you may wish to pursue for further information. With the right tools, commitment and support, you and your partner can experience a lasting, positive, rewarding and loving relationship.

## Resources

Ariel, C. (2012). *Loving someone with Asperger's syndrome: Understanding and connecting with your partner*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Aston, M. (2009). *The Asperger couple's workbook: practical advice and activities for couples and counsellors*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Aston, M. (2014). *The other half of Asperger syndrome (autism spectrum disorder): A guide to living in an intimate relationship with a partner who is on the autism spectrum (2nd ed.)*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Attwood, T., Evans, C. R., & Lesko, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Been there, done that--try this!: An Aspie's guide to life on earth*. London; Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bentley, K. (2007). *Alone together: Making an Asperger marriage work*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Dawson, P., and Guare, R. (2016). *Smart but scattered guide to success*. New York: Guilford Press.

Finch, D. (2012). *The journal of best practices: A memoir of marriage, Asperger syndrome, and one man's quest to be a better husband*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Hendrickx, S. (2008). *Love, sex and long-term relationships: What people with Asperger syndrome really really want*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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Mahler, K. (2017). *Interoception the eighth sensory system: Practical solutions for improving self-regulation, self-awareness and social understanding*. Lenexa, KS: AAPC Publishing.

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## Indiana Resource Center for Autism

<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/articles/tips-for-women-in-relationships.html>