

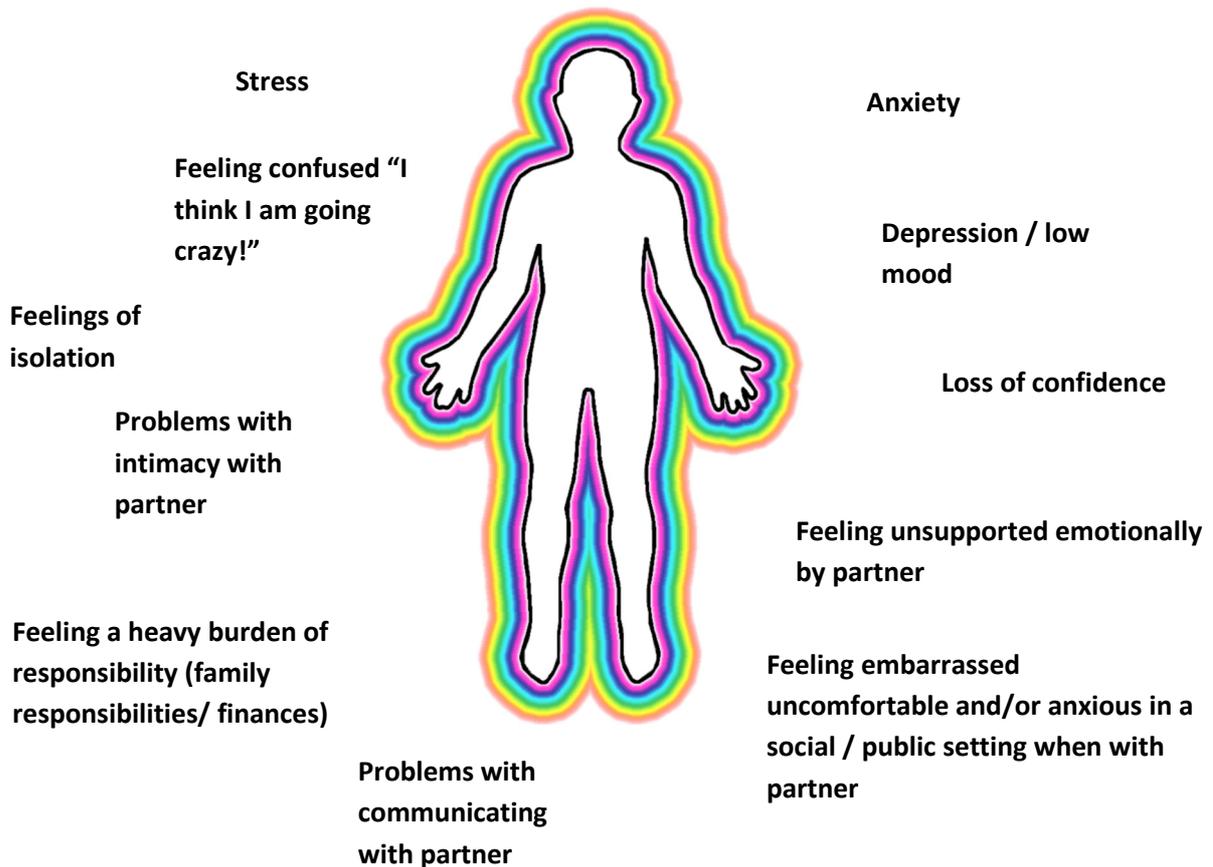
relate

the relationship people

COMMUNICATION

Partners of people with ASD (neuro-typical “NT”)

At our Relate Centre in Derby we see many individuals and couples that come for counselling where one partner has been diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Sometimes people come to us for relationship counselling and are struggling to work out why they have real difficulties communicating. When ASD may be a factor some of the common issues we hear about are:



If these are the difficulties you are experiencing it could be because your partner or you are on the Autistic Spectrum (ASD)*.

FACT SHEET

ASD affects people in different ways and to different degrees. Sometimes the impact of the condition is not obvious but changes in situations and routine can trigger reactions that can be challenging for partners and others. Small changes in communication and how you plan can often make a significant improvement to self-esteem and your couple relationship. These tips and ideas may be useful for you and your partner if you are experiencing relationship difficulties (these can be useful for everyone even if ASD is not present).

- Sometimes the fact that you just ask to talk to your partner could trigger a “fight or flight response” in them. This may be because they feel worried that they may be criticised or feel panic because they don’t know what you are going to say. Perhaps they are in the middle of thinking about something else and cannot focus on hearing you until they have concluded their thought process? Communication with a partner or family member may create anxiety for someone that is on the autistic spectrum. This is because being on the spectrum affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Part of the issue is that they often have difficulties with understanding and processing language. It is hard managing this with anyone but much more anxiety provoking when it is with someone that is as important as your partner. There is plenty of opportunity for misunderstanding to occur in any conversation – those that are not on the spectrum will talk in a way that the other person will automatically understand any hidden meanings or how they are feeling because of their tone or what is or isn’t being said. Those on the spectrum do not have these abilities. Unless it is explicit there is often a tendency to interpret that the other person is “angry” or “upset” when asking about something. Another common problem is that the person on the spectrum does not offer help or sympathy after they have been told about a difficult situation but unless they have been asked to help or have been told it was upsetting they are likely to believe you are OK and don’t need any help. So conversations with partners can be anxiety provoking and the reaction in the person on the spectrum is that the normal defensive reaction to any perceived threat is the “fight or flight” response.
- ✓ Language and tone when having a conversation is really important, so that your partner does hear what you have to say. The language you use is best if it is phrased in the positive, with short specific points.

Rather than this.....



Try this.....

**“You don’t ever
decide where we are
going.”**

FACT SHEET



“I would like you to choose where we go next weekend. It would be lovely for you to choose and you get a turn on deciding for a change.”

- ✓ Check out if it is a good time to speak with them; you may get further in your communication if it takes place at a more convenient time. Perhaps give your partner warning and say in advance “I would like to speak with you in 15 minutes time.”
- ✓ Some people on the spectrum find it hard to initiate and engage in emotional face to face conversations and they can quickly find these emotionally overwhelming and anxiety provoking. Sometimes the use of the written word (letter or email) when talking about emotional topics can help couples communicate better. Face to face interactions can be fast, unpredictable and as such do not give the person on the spectrum the chance to process what is happening. Also, in the emotional heat they can find it hard to remember what has been said – the written word can help here. This also gives time and space to think things through at ones’ own pace.
- ✓ Sometimes your partner may need to have it made really clear that you are talking to them. Start with their name so they know you are addressing them.
- ✓ When talking with your partner regularly check out what they have HEARD you say and what they have understood by it. Sometimes it may be helpful to ask your partner to write down or put on their phone with an alert reminder, important information, agreements or tasks so that they can remember them. Common issues may be: household chores, when to put bins out, placing orders at a restaurant, buying household items etc.
- ✓ When possible try to plan what you are going to say in your head first - so as to avoid mis-communication. Do try and keep your sentences short.
- ✓ Learning from past experiences can be hard as people on the spectrum often struggle to see patterns in previous interactions. Often, they see interactions as a separate event. This can be very frustrating for the partner who can suffer hurt in what seems to them like a similar situation. Discussing simple rules to do with certain situations can be helpful.
- ✓ People on the spectrum often find it hard to see how their behaviour causes hurtful emotional consequences for their partner/other people and they also struggle to understand how a sequence of difficult interactions can lead to a building up of difficult emotions. Because they find it hard to see their part in what has gone wrong – giving simple and clear emotional information can be of help e.g. “it makes me sad when..... “, “it makes me happy when.....”

FACT SHEET

- ✓ Often people on the spectrum think in “black and white” terms and so compromise can be difficult. Sometimes focusing on the logical aspects of the compromise i.e. in what ways the compromise will benefit each person, can assist.
- ✓ It may appear that your partner is being wilfully difficult. However when they are in “fight or flight” mode there is a good chance that they cannot think properly and this may mean they cannot remember later what may have been said or even agreed. To reduce the likelihood of this happening it helps to approach situations and communications as calmly as possible.
- ✓ Make sure you leave enough time for your talk and it is not just before one of you is rushing out of the house, or having just got in. It is never a good time to have emotional discussions when driving or just before bedtime.
- ✓ Talking about feelings for many people is difficult. For someone on the spectrum they will often find it hard to understand their own feelings as well as their partners’. Sometimes using a 0-10 ranking system or colour system to talk about feelings can be useful.
- ✓ It can be helpful to pre diary your couple “talk time” – perhaps half an hour a day or whatever seems appropriate to your circumstance.
- ✓ Think how you first communicated when you met. Using some of those techniques can help to hear each other more effectively. For example letter writing, instant messaging etc. Remember keeping things short, positive and precise can really assist communication.

Being “grounded” when you have discussions can be helpful as it helps keep both parties calm. Why not give it a try? Here is how to “ground” yourself:

- Have your feet firmly positioned on the floor.
- Place your thumb prints together in front of you – putting one hand on the other, with finger tips pointing towards the opposite wrist (making a cradle in front of you).
- Bring inner palm in to rest above your belly button to find the solar plexus. This is where “flight and fight” chemicals start from.
- Breathe out through your mouth (because you will probably have been holding your breath).
- Take a gentle breath in through your nose and then release back out through your mouth; find your concentration, memory, confidence and rational positive thinking.

*The National Autistic Society website has helpful information on ASD www.autism.org.uk

*The Relate Derby telephone helpline is open every Tuesday 10.30am – 4.30pm and Thursday 1.30pm – 4.30pm. Call **0808 178 9363** and speak directly with a Relate trained counsellor. Also available is our LiveChat drop in on Wednesday 2pm – 5pm. Visit our website for further information www.relatederby.org.uk

* <http://www.wired.com/2001/12/aqtest/> Simon Baron-Cohen and colleagues at Cambridge's Autism Research Centre have created the Autism-Spectrum Quotient, or AQ, as a measure of the extent of autistic traits in adults.