



Finding, Building and Maintaining Healthy Relationships

For many people finding someone to have a close personal relationship with that includes sexual intimacy is a very positive and important part of their lives or even a life goal. However for some people a physically intimate relationship is not important to them and may even be detrimental to their well-being. Everyone is unique, so it is important that each individual decides for themselves whether or not they want / need an intimate relationship.

For the person with ASD, building relationships can be challenging, particularly when some of societies unwritten rules of engaging with others can mean that they can feel confused and may lead to misinterpretation of other people's wishes and intentions. As much as it may appear desirable to be in an intimate relationship, if the individual with ASD has additional difficulties (e.g. hyper-sensitivity to touch, taste and smell) then the reality of such a relationship may cause distress and unhappiness for both partners.

Finding a Partner

Often we start searching for partners in our early to late teens. For someone with ASD this can be delayed due to a lack of confidence, social awareness and opportunity. Increasingly it is becoming more popular to seek friendship and intimate relationships online via Social Media and specific dating / interest sites. Many successful relationships have started out via the internet. However it is important to approach this with caution – making sure that you keep yourself and your personal information safe. (See fact sheet at end).

When looking for a partner it is important that you start by knowing yourself better:

- What do you like / enjoy e.g. hobbies and interests
- What sort of adult age group do you feel comfortable with / attracted to?
- How would others describe you? (Ask a friend or family member to help you)
- Are you clear about your gender preference for an intimate relationship? (If you are unsure then you may wish to speak with a Relate counsellor).
- Are there any particular physical traits that you are / are not attracted to?

It may help to think of the opportunity to find a partner in a similar way as one would look to fill a job vacancy. So based upon what you know about yourself, you create a partner

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“specification” – someone who is going to complement/match you. This process can particularly help if you are seeking a partner via an online dating site as this information will then help to inform your search profile. You can also use this information when meeting new people in a range of settings. It is important to realise that people rarely are able / want to change their fundamental qualities / attributes – to this end finding the right person for you is important to get a good match.

It is often the case that “opposites” do attract. Whilst in the early stages of a relationship this can be exciting, refreshing and intriguing – when you need to sustain and live in each others company many of the things that you perhaps “disowned” or rejected about yourself may start to irritate, frustrate and annoy you, when mirrored by them. Couple counselling can often help in this type of situation.

Building relationships

When starting a new relationship it is important to start slowly giving both of you the opportunity to get to know each other. It is important that you are honest with each other, so that you are not giving a false impression of a person that you are not and that you cannot sustain. Each person in the relationship needs to proceed at a pace that is mutually agreeable to both of you. If your new partner wants an intimate relationship and you do not feel ready, you must say so and wait until you feel ready. The same is true if you want a sexual relationship but your partner does not – it is important to respect them and not proceed until they have confirmed that they are ready to do so.

Part of being open and honest with your partner is talking about what the person with ASD needs in order to manage. For example how to avoid stimuli overload or what is best to do should this occur. It is also important that your NT partner can tell you what they want and need within the relationship. As you build your relationship together you need to discuss life events and possible changes, so that together you can look to plan these in a way that both of your needs are still met. E.g. moving in together / marriage – or not / what would having children mean, job changes etc.

Maintaining

For both partners it is important that you continue to create talking time throughout the relationship, to ensure that you keep informed of the others needs, feelings etc. For the NT partner this helps them to feel emotionally close, whilst the ASD partner can feel reassured that the talk is part of their catch up routine and so may feel less anxious that they are going to be criticised or forced into something. As mentioned in previous fact sheets, finding time away from busy family life, or not too early before work and not too late at night can make the communication more efficient and empowering; always remember to check out what has been heard and understood. Respecting each other’s differences is key to harmony and sustainability.

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Openness and honesty are key to maintaining trust and supporting growth and strength of ongoing relationships. As much as you may feel that you have shared interests, life goals etc., this can be very different in reality; especially, if the AS partner is affected by lack of imagination/insight and so cannot begin to comprehend the impact certain change can have on their sense of well being, for example, moving in together, having children, a partner's illness, job loss etc. These are key times when Relate can offer help to support each partners needs and to help each to feel heard, to find solutions.

*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 ounsellor. Also available is our LiveChat dropin on Wednesday 2pm – 5pm. Visit our website for further information www.relatederby.org.uk

Link – Child Exploitation and Online Protection <https://ceop.police.uk/>

Maxine Aston – Asperger's Couples workbook <http://www.maxineaston.co.uk/books/>