

Maintaining relationships

Nurturing connections – whether romantic, familial or platonic – requires time, effort and consistency but trying to navigate relationships as an autistic person can present even further challenges

Words Emma Green

Sustaining relationships as an adult can sometimes feel like hard work, especially compared to the heady days of childhood when friendships seemed so effortless. Without the structured settings of school or extracurricular activities in place, our social circles can seem to shrink the older we get. That is, unless we choose to deliberately and consciously tend to them regularly.

For some autistic people, though, navigating the messy world of interpersonal relations can present a range of challenges. Autistic people often communicate, process emotions, and interact socially differently from neurotypical people, resulting in differences in how those with the condition perceive and interact with the world. Worst case scenario, these different ways of communication can lead to misunderstandings, conflict and rejection from others.

In addition to this, common societal myths about autistic people can further hinder them from being able to form relationships with others. Autistic people are often stereotyped negatively as being socially awkward, emotionally distant, or even, at times, antisocial because many people still don't fully understand

the condition or how it can affect social interaction.

And yet the reality couldn't be more different: many autistic people pursue meaningful, fulfilling relationships. While it's important to note that every autistic person is unique and that the following may not apply to everyone, there are some common factors that can make it trickier for them to initiate and maintain relationships. Meanwhile, for neurotypical people, better awareness of autistic communication can help create a more inclusive social experience for everyone.

Differences in communication styles

At the heart of all social interaction is effective communication, and this is an area where many autistic people can face challenges. Some autistic people might struggle to decipher implied meanings from verbal and non-verbal interactions. A preference for direct and literal expression over nuanced forms of communication, such as sarcasm and body language, can sometimes come across to neurotypical people as overly direct if they are not expecting it.

Neurotypical social interactions are governed by unspoken rules, such as knowing when to talk and listen. Neurotypical people usually have an intuitive sense of understanding social dynamics and showing social reciprocity, like knowing when to ask questions, listen attentively, or when it is appropriate to share their own thoughts and feelings. Autistic and neurotypical people often have different expectations around social norms, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. Autistic people might inadvertently dominate conversations, be disinterested in small talk or not directly show an interest in what others have to say.

Many neurotypical interactions rely on reading and responding to non-verbal cues, such as body language, facial expressions or tone of voice. Some autistic individuals



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might not pick up on these cues, which can make it harder for them to understand how someone else might be feeling. For example, they may not recognise that a partner is upset because they are not noticing subtle signs of frustration in their partner's posture. Contrary to negative stereotypes, autistic people can be very empathetic - but they might express this differently, perhaps through actions rather than words or facial expressions. "We don't struggle with empathy," says Sara-Louise Ackrill, a neurodiversity coach and therapist (Zoë Clews & Associates) who herself is diagnosed with AuDHD. "Actually, we are very warm, sensitive, kind people who feel deeply but it doesn't always show up in a way that is intended."

Autistic people experience emotions just like everyone else, but they might not always outwardly express them in the same way that

others do. For example, they may avoid making eye contact, showing physical affection or displaying facial expressions that indicate joy. This can lead to them being perceived as distant or cold, or others feeling neglected and unloved when, in reality, an autistic person might be deeply invested in a relationship but does not convey it in a way society typically mandates.

These communication differences can present a pattern of challenges, particularly in navigating autistic-neurotypical relations. Sociologist Dr Damian Milton proposed the theory of the 'Double Empathy Problem' to describe the mutual difficulties that arise when autistic and non-autistic people try to understand each other. Rather than viewing communication breakdowns as a result of social skill deficiencies in autistic people, his theory suggests that both groups

may struggle to comprehend each other due to differences in their perspectives, experiences and communication styles.

Heightened sensory sensitivities

Another factor that can make relationships challenging for some autistic people is their sensory sensitivities. Autistic people are more prone to being overwhelmed by exposure to everyday stimuli such as bright lights, loud sounds, strong smells and even visual clutter. This can trigger sensory overload, where they may become irritable, struggle to focus or even need to withdraw from the situation altogether.

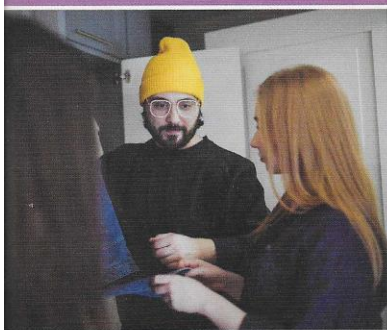
Social situations can be particularly exhausting for autistic people. The mental effort required to manage

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sensory input and to manoeuvre the intricacies of social customs can leave them feeling emotionally drained, and they may require alone time to recover. This pattern of social engagement followed by alone time can leave some uninformed loved ones feeling frustrated or confused. This need for downtime, however, isn't a rejection of the relationship, but rather a way for an autistic person to recharge their social battery.

Strong interests

Many autistic people find comfort in routines and predictability. Unexpected changes - whether in social plans, daily routines, or the behaviour of others - can be unsettling and cause stress and anxiety. This preference for consistency can sometimes cause problems when engaging with neurotypical people, especially when others require flexibility or spontaneity. The other person may feel resentful that the autistic person's preferences and routines have to be taken into consideration in any social interaction that they have with them - such as only sticking to familiar environments - and vice versa.



A classic hallmark of autism are focused interests, which refers to the intense passion that autistic people can often feel for specific topics, hobbies or activities. Special interests are a core part of an autistic person's life and can take up a lot of their time and focus, which can sometimes create challenges if loved ones do not share the same enthusiasm. As autistic people tend to favour bonding through shared interests rather than through unstructured social situations, this can make it difficult for them to connect with others who don't share the same zeal for their pastimes. Open communication is a key solution to bridging these differences.

Untapped benefits

Maintaining a relationship with an autistic person may require extra effort on behalf of neurotypical and autistic people alike, but there are so many wonderful qualities that autistic people can bring to relationships that are often overlooked. "We show up for our loved ones, and that's not something everybody can say," says Ackrill. "We are known for being brave with our bluntness and for going out on a limb because we really care about being truthful and about things being right. We have this deep sense of justice and loyalty. And as a minority, we can be particularly open-minded and accepting."

As society becomes more educated about autism and the different ways it can manifest, we can hopefully be more understanding of how the autistic community approaches and manoeuvres social interactions and hence, their relationships with others. After all, autistic people deserve just as much love, validation, and connection as everybody else.



Servicing your relationship

"Being neurodivergent is like having to be your own PR person," says Ackrill. "You're constantly trying to sell your traits, your diagnosis, your validity to the people who you feel should love you and know you best." Being open with others about your diagnosis and how it can manifest can be a real game-changer, especially with those who don't fully understand autism. "If your loved one is neurodivergent, you need to do a minimum of homework," adds Ackrill. "If you're not prepared to understand how autism affects how a loved one sees, interprets and responds to the world, there isn't much you're going to get about them."

Boundaries are a vital component of any healthy relationship, but they can be especially crucial for those with autism. Being explicit about what you need from a relationship, such as regular alone time, specific ways of showing affection or avoidance of using figurative language, can prevent misunderstandings and frustration at both ends.