



## ROMANCE 101: DATING FOR AUTISTIC ADULTS

Navigating the singles' scene is not easy for anyone, whether or not you are on the autism spectrum. Nevertheless, autistic adults may need to hurdle far more obstacles than their neurotypical peers to thrive in a world of dating. Some autistic adults go through their entire adult life without having much interest in romance or dating, while others are very interested and actively pursue romantic relationships. If you are interested, this article contains some tips on getting started. If you are a parent or a friend of an autistic adult, your job is to make sure that the person knows that you are open and available for support.

### *Where to meet people?*

Some people (including neurotypical people) say that meeting people is the hardest part of dating. Singles often go to bars to meet each other, but in reality, very few couples actually meet at a bar "singles scene." If you are autistic, going up to someone new in a bar and striking up a conversation may seem particularly difficult or ineffective. Rest assured, there are many other ways to meet someone.

The best place to start is to look at what you do each day. Where do you go? How do you get there? Take the time to really notice the people you encounter on public transportation and at your favorite places to visit. Be careful of your workplace, however, as romantic relationships at work are often discouraged, and sometimes even forbidden. One reason for this is that it can create an awkward work environment if one person is not romantically interested in the other or if the relationship doesn't work out for another reason.

Don't despair if you don't see any dating prospects while on your everyday routines. However, you may need to get out of your comfort zone in order to meet someone new. Online dating and joining a new social group may be better options for you.

Online dating websites can make it easier to get familiar with a person before meeting them. Information about another person's likes and dislikes are available so that you can plan ahead for what to do with that person or what to talk about. Some sites claim to match people based on personality and behavior traits, including how much time the individual wants to spend alone and how important a physical relationship is. Although there are some great benefits to online dating websites, always practice caution and safety when planning to meet someone in person. While it is reasonable to assume that most people who post a profile on a dating website are there to meet someone to date, not all people are interested in a committed relationship, and unfortunately, sometimes people use these websites for deceptive purposes (for example, sexual predators, financial scams).

If meeting someone one-on-one seems like a big first step, participation in a social group or club activities is a great way to meet people with similar interests. Group activities are often less stressful than one-on-one situations because the focus is on the activity, not on making small talk. Social groups also provide the opportunity to observe typical socialization among others. MeetUp.com offers many options of social groups centered around activities and hobbies and is a way to meet people with common interests. You might also consider looking into events at a local museum or restaurant. Depending on your interests, you might find something right for you (Quizzo, karaoke, sports trivia, for example). The Resource Directory of the CAR Autism Roadmap™ contains a list of social groups for people on the autism spectrum, where you can meet other autistic adults.

*Will you go out with me?*

There is more to asking someone out on a date than finding a person and asking them to go out with you. In particular, before asking someone on a date, it is a good idea to try to figure out if they have any interest in going on a date with you. It is also a good idea to think about good activities to do on the date - ones that both you and your potential date will enjoy.

Detecting interest depends on reading verbal and nonverbal cues, which can be difficult for an autistic individual. Body language is an important way to judge interest, whether it is through eye contact, body orientation, or a touch on the shoulder. It is just as important to be able to detect *disinterest* as it is to sense interest, but picking up on a sarcastic tone of voice or avoidance is often challenging.

Similarly it is important that you know how to appropriately show your interest in someone. You can use the cues for detecting interest to show interest as well. It is really important to understand what is and is not appropriate. For example, if it is difficult to distinguish between making a harmless, flirty joke and making a hurtful or offensive joke, try another strategy to show interest, like asking about things the person is interested in or even volunteering to help the person with a project.

Watching television shows flooded with romantic relationships can be a great educational tool. Movies that include romantic relationships will also work. Watch these with a trusted friend or family member so that you can discuss what is happening and make sure you are interpreting all the cues. However, whether it is *The Bachelor* or *The Notebook*, make sure you understand that much of what is depicted is likely not an accurate depiction of dating in the real world.

In addition to behavior, appearances count! It is important to pay attention to personal hygiene, for example, remembering to shower and wearing deodorant and clean clothes every day.

Once you find someone that you enjoy spending time with and are attracted to, there is only so much that you can learn from body language and verbal cues. To test whether the feelings are mutual, you will eventually have to ask your special someone on a date. This isn't easy for anyone, whether they are autistic or not! Take a deep breath and try to relax. Confidence is key, so remember that everyone is special and has unique qualities that others will find attractive.

Look for examples of "asking people out" from movies or age-related TV shows. Consider role-playing with a friend. If you are not comfortable with asking someone out in person, know that there are alternatives, such as e-mail, instant messaging, texting, or writing an old-fashioned note. In the age of electronic communication, it becomes even more important that you assess interest and character before sending an electronic message, however. Emails and text messages are easily mass-disseminated, which can cause embarrassment when sent or forwarded to unintended recipients.

When choosing what to do for a date, don't forget to consider what the other person is interested in. Pick something that you both will have fun doing. Traditional activities might include going out to dinner, to the movies, or to a concert. But make sure whatever you choose works for you. For example, if you

have sensitivity to loud noises or crowded places, a typical concert venue might not be the best choice. If you both really like live music, maybe a coffee house with an acoustic guitar is a better option. For a first date, you may want to keep it short or at least have a defined time for it. This helps reduce the anxiety over when it is time to end the date.

### *Dating Concerns Specific to Autistic Individuals*

- *Sensory issues* may be a concern for an autistic adult, especially when dating can involve physical contact. If hugging is too much, consider hand-holding as an alternative. If the date takes place somewhere subject to loud noises and/or visual stimulation, pre-plan how you might take breaks with your date. Knowing a thing or two about self-advocacy can be a major benefit in these circumstances.
- *Small talk* can cover a wide range of topics, such as movies, TV shows, music, sports, theatre, or other extracurricular activities. Practice how to express engagement in what the other person is saying and also how to tell if someone else is bored or waiting for a chance to chime in. Also be aware of sensitive vs. casual topics. For example informal conversations about likes and dislikes are usually worry-free, whereas topics like politics and religion may be problematic. Although these subjects are acceptable to discuss, be sure not to perseverate on a personal belief or opinion. Focus on asking questions about the other person by thinking about what makes you who you are. Some examples include: What do you do for work? What kind of vacations do you like to go on? Do you play any sports or are you involved in any social groups? The book *4,000 Questions for Getting to Know Anyone and Everyone* also may provide more ideas.
- *Intimacy* goes hand in hand with dating, and it is essential to be careful about physical contact when meeting someone new. Before pursuing a physical relationship, make sure that both people involved have explicitly expressed that they are comfortable with that kind of interaction and that it is what they both desire.
- *Watch out for love fixations.* Autistic individuals sometimes can become easily preoccupied with a subject of interest. This attribute, combined with a tendency to be steadfastly loyal, may make some autistic individuals more likely to become fixated with a particular love interest. Think about how your actions may be perceived by the receiving party and make sure

your advances are not overwhelming. Sometimes good intentions and interest can be misconstrued as stalking.

### *Unrequited Love... How to handle rejection?*

Facing rejection can be embarrassing and painful, regardless of if you are neurotypical or on the spectrum. This is why it is important to realize the possibility of rejection when asking someone out. If you're asking someone out face-to-face, think about what you might say in reaction to a negative response, like "Alright, no problem. Maybe I'll see you around," and walking away. No matter what, never get down on yourself, don't take it personally, and always remember the age-old saying, "There are hundreds of fish in the sea!"

### *Safety*

Whenever meeting someone new, safety should be a top priority. Getting together in public spaces, like a restaurant or museum is a good idea when getting to know someone and developing a trusting bond. Given that sexuality is a pertinent component of romantic relationships in adulthood, physical and emotional safety must be considered. For more on sexuality and how to stay protected when the topic of sex arises, visit the Public Safety section of the CAR Autism Roadmap™.

### *Marriage*

Many autistic individuals do get married and have children, whether their partner is autistic or neurotypical. Plenty of neurotypical people and autistic people also choose not to get married. Remember that marriage is a personal preference, not a rule. Like any relationship, it requires hard work, honesty, and openness. Similar expectations, lifestyles, and needs all contribute to a successful relationship, regardless of neurology.

### *The Bottom Line*

Dating should be something that contributes to the happiness in your life. Although it can be very challenging and confusing at times, try to use all experiences with dating as opportunities to grow and learn about yourself and the people you are interested in. The very last line: Be yourself, have fun, and stay safe!

Related Articles:

- [Self-Advocacy](#)
- [Sensory Processing and Sensory Integration in Individuals with ASD](#)
- [Being Social as an Adult with ASD](#)
- [Misinterpreted Behaviors](#)

#### Additional Resources:

- [Asperger Marriage: Viewing Partnerships thru a Different Lens](#)
- [Dating on the Autism Spectrum: What it's like to look for romance when "a big smile can be frightening"](#)
- [Loving Someone with Asperger's Syndrome](#)
- [How to Meet New People Without Being Creepy](#)

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