Sexuality and the Spectrum: Lessons on Sex, Dating, and Love, Autism Style

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Overview
- Introduction
- Firsthand perspective of a woman with ASD
- Helping individuals on the spectrum learn dating skills
- Strategies for parents and professionals
- Questions

Who Do You Talk to About Sex and Dating?
- Family
- Therapist or Counselor
- Religious leader
- Friends
- Don’t have anyone to talk to/Don’t feel comfortable talking about it

Let’s Talk About Sex!
- Sex and sexuality, as serious topics for discussion, are ones that many of us would rather avoid than address. This may be even more true when the issue is sexuality and individuals with ASD.

Myths vs. Truths About Autism and Relationships
- **MYTH:** Autistic people are asexual/don’t have sex
- **TRUTH:** Autistic people do have sex!
- **MYTH:** Individuals with autism are all straight
- **TRUTH:** Individuals with autism identify with many different sexual orientations
- **MYTH:** Autistic people only date other autistic people
- **TRUTH:** Autistic people can and do date all kinds of people
- **MYTH:** Dating an autistic guy is exactly the same as dating an autistic girl
- **TRUTH:** Not all autistic people are the same

Myths vs. Truths About Autism and Relationships
- **MYTH:** If an autistic person dates a neurotypical person, they have to listen to everything the NT person says
- **TRUTH:** You know yourself best
- **MYTH:** Individuals with autism can’t love
- **TRUTH:** Individuals with autism are FULL of love!
A Whole New Language

So Why Is It Important?

- Because communication is key
- Because sexuality isn’t assumed to be part of the human experience for individuals with autism
- Because our bodies don’t care if we have autism
- Because sex begins long before sex begins

So what better way to understand the unique sexual experiences of individuals on the spectrum...

...Than with a real life Naughty Autie to tell you all about it!

About Me

- Diagnosed with AS at age 11; Masters degree at 27
- Founder and president of A.S.C.O.T Consulting, LLC and Certified Autism Specialist (IBCCES)
- International public speaker (“Dr. Ruth of the Autism World”)  
- Two TEDx talks / Spoke at United Nations for WAAD 2011 and 2018  
- Featured as a Guest Expert on Slate.com’s “How To Do It” sex advice column  
- Writing published on the Spectrum-news website, Exceptional Child textbook, and more  
- Serves on Board of Specialisterne, Yes She Can, Inc., Golden Door International Film Festival of Jersey City, and co-facilitator of ASPEN group.
- Author of The Naughty Autie

But in 1996, like most any 13-year-old girl...

HOWEVER...

Age of First Interest ≠ Age of First Experience

- There was a disconnect between what I was curious about and learning opportunities that I had to explore it.
Puberty Predicaments
- Feeling disconnected from my body
- Misunderstandings about how puberty affected me
- Emotional impact of adolescence on growing individuals with autism
- No time to “talk”

Puberty and Autism

Social Difficulties Lead To...
- Finding friendships online
- Learning about sex from peers and online
- Reading erotica
- Vulnerability to predators

The disappointment of real life opposite sex experiences...
- Falling for the boy next door (or across the street)
- First French kiss
- Senior prom

Age 19: First Boyfriend, Finally!
- Learning how to be a “girlfriend”
- What was expected vs. what I was able to do
- Perils and pitfalls of a first relationship
- The night on the stoop

Beginnings of Body Awareness and Self-Discovery
- Pubic hair
- Becoming “connected” to my body
- Seeing myself as a sexual being for the first time
- Relationships as learning experiences
Self-Discovery Continues Through College...

- Masturbation (Yes, girls can do it, too!)
- Lack of “shame” – perception-based
- Getting to know my own body - my “buttons”

Stalking

- Man (who had autism) saw me at a conference and became obsessed
- Met in person
- Drove to friend’s workplace (MA to PA)
- Aftermath
  - Understanding that this actually was stalking

Love, Autism Style

- Age 22: Fell in love for the first time
- The process of saying “I’m in love with you”
- Preparing to lose my virginity

So here we have a young woman with autism in love, getting ready to have sex, with no idea of what to expect or do...

Sexual Intercourse Comment Card

Thank You For Having Sexual Intercourse with Me! If you could, please take a moment to fill out this comment card so that I may better serve your needs in the future. Thank You Very Much, and Please Come Again Soon!

...And the questions on the back:

1. What did you enjoy most about the sex session?
2. What do you think could have been better?
3. What happened that you would like to have happen again?
4. What didn’t happen that you would like to have happen in the future?

5. Please rate the following from 1 (extremely) to 5 (not at all):
   - The overall intensity of the sex session...
   - My physical responsiveness during intercourse...
   - My overall satisfaction with the level of intimacy...
   - My physical arousal during intercourse (e.g., thrusting, moaning, etc.)...
   - My ability to get you off...

6. Is there anything I can do in the future to get you aroused quickly and maintain your pleasure during our encounter?

7. Any other comments, thoughts, suggestions?

8. Finally, please rate the sex session on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 10 is the absolute worst, and 1 is the absolute best):
   - Before: 10
   - During: 10
   - After: 10

Thank You for Filling Out This Card!
Heartbreak Hotel

- My first heartbreak, a.k.a. “The worst pain ever”
- Being a “target” and keeping my head held high
- Learning how to move on

The Era of Empowerment

- Finding inner strength
- Learning how to move on, part 2

Seattle Saga: Epilogue

- New beginnings in New Orleans
- A different kind of closure

The British Evasion

- Met online, then in person
- Convention tension
- Spilling the “tea”

Truth and Consequences

- Difficulty trusting my judgment
- Difficulty trusting guys
- What does it all mean?

So, how can we help individuals with autism learn dating and sexuality skills?
Using ABA to Teach Dating Skills

**Purpose of Study**
- To use didactic instruction, in vivo roleplaying, and video modeling to teach adult men diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome how to ask someone out on a date.

**Method**
- **Participants**
  - Diagnosis
- **Setting**
  - Treatment vs. Generalization
- **Dependent Variables**
  - Eye contact
  - Vocal tone (monotone)
  - Physical proximity
  - Number of utterances

**Treatment Package**
- Didactic instruction
- Checklist
- In vivo roleplaying
- Actor
- Video modeling
- Target video
- Generalization

**Limitations of Study/Problems with Using ABA to Teach Dating Skills**
- Difficulty obtaining participants/limited participant pool
- Participants differ from expected criteria
- Lack of change in data from baseline to generalization
- Cannot control outcome in the real world

**Strategies for Professionals**
- Acknowledge sexual needs and desires of individuals with ASD
- Recognize that the effects of puberty and sexuality on autistic individuals may be greater than you know
- Life skills vs. academic skills
- Recognize that dating is not one skill, but multiple series of skill sets
- Address the issue of consent
Strategies for Parents

- Be a safe space for your child.
- Discuss issues at an age/maturity-appropriate level.
- Don’t take it personally!

Strategies for Parents

- Create/respect boundaries with children that will carry over into the real world.
- “NO” is a complete sentence.
- Talk about abuse:
  - How to recognize it
  - How to report it

Sexual Abuse and Autism

- Sexual abuse occurs at higher rates among autistic people than neurotypical, but is reported much less frequently. Why?
  - Brown-Lavoie, Viecili, & Weiss (2014) - Individuals with ASD reported higher levels of sexual victimization than did typical controls.
  - Mandell et al (2005) - 18.5% of their sample (156 children) had been physically abused while 16.6% had been sexually abused.

- Double stigma

- Teaching what abuse looks like, how to report it
- Stranger Danger

Resources

- Sex Ed. for Self-Advocates (Organization for Autism Research)
- Sexuality & Disability: A Guide for Parents (Alberta Health Services)

Resources
Resources

- *Asperger's Syndrome and Sexuality* (Isabelle Henault)
- *Making Sense of Sex* (Sarah Attwood)
- *Sexuality & Relationship Education for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Davida Hartman)
- *Aspergirls* (Rudy Simone)

Remember...

- You can’t stop life from happening.

“Al final del día podemos soportar más de lo que creemos.”  
- Frida Kahlo

Contact Information

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Questions