

# Adult Autism and Relationships

By [Sheldon Reid](#)



## How does autism affect relationships?

Whether you're an autistic adult or are in a romantic, familial, or platonic relationship with an autistic adult, you've probably run into your share of frustrations.

If you're autistic, you may feel perplexed and annoyed by the seemingly convoluted ways your loved ones communicate. Or perhaps you feel misunderstood by a close friend or

micro-managed by a spouse. If your loved one is autistic, you might be frustrated by their fixations or rigid habits. Maybe your feelings have been hurt by their blunt remarks.

In a relationship like this, it's not uncommon for both people to question whether things will last. In some cases, the partners react in ways that only inflame insecurities or escalate conflicts. For example, after an argument, the neurotypical partner might feel stressed out and unheard, while the autistic partner grows distant and resentful. As problems reoccur, the relationship becomes more and more strained.

It's important to remember that unhealthy relationship dynamics aren't set in stone. It's entirely possible for an autistic person and a neurotypical person to enjoy a satisfying romance or friendship. The key is to build a relationship that's centered on mutual understanding and a willingness to compromise and adapt.

## Challenges of autism in adult relationships

Autism affects the way an individual processes experiences and interacts with the world around them. Autistic individuals sometimes approach relationships and social interactions in ways that neurotypical people don't completely understand. This has led to all sorts of myths and misconceptions. Some common myths about autistic individuals include:

- They don't crave social interaction.
- They lack empathy.
- They don't experience "normal" emotions.

All of these ideas are false. By nature, humans **crave social support** and strong relationships. Autistic people are no exception, and they're capable of connecting with others at an empathic level. Their emotions can run deep, even if they have different ways of expressing themselves. In fact, studies show that autistic adults tend to experience higher levels of loneliness than their peers.

Despite the myths and misconceptions, there are some autistic traits that can complicate relationship dynamics.

**Reading social cues.** If you're autistic, you might have a hard time reading social cues that neurotypical people consider commonplace. This can lead to misunderstandings. Perhaps you overlook your loved one's irritated facial expression or tone of voice and misread their mood.

**Desire for consistency.** If you dislike when schedules and plans change, your need for consistency might come into conflict with your partner's sense of spontaneity. Maybe your spouse wants to liven up the relationship with surprises, but unscheduled events make you feel anxious and upset.

**Anxiety.** It's not uncommon for autistic people to experience high levels of stress and anxiety. This can lead to a tendency to overanalyze situations. You might spend hours worrying about whether you misunderstood your friend or if they're secretly mad at you. Anxiety can also lead to difficulty sleeping, which can then result in irritability and mood swings.

[\[Read: Anxiety Disorders and Anxiety Attacks\]](#)

**Narrow interests.** If you have special interests, your loved one might feel as if you prioritize those interests over the relationship. They might also grow annoyed if your enthusiasm leads you to "info-dump," or overshare details about your passion.

**Sensory issues.** Discomfort with certain sensations can lead to frustration and awkwardness in both sexual and non-sexual situations. Maybe you have to repeatedly tell your friend that tapping their feet, popping gum, or speaking at a certain volume bothers you.

Each of these obstacles can be overcome with the right strategies. It's also important for the neurotypical partner to recognize that their loved one's traits aren't the only factor at play here. For the relationship to work, the neurotypical person will also need to reflect on their own traits and habits.

# Overcoming autism relationship problems

## tip 1: Build mutual understanding

Finding common ground is always a good starting point in any relationship, but don't lose sight of your differences. The two of you likely interpret the world and your interactions in different ways. The way you respond to situations may also differ. The autistic partner may need a moment alone to process their emotions or want to take new experiences step by step. Conversely, the non-autistic partner may want to verbally vent their emotions or navigate challenges based on gut reactions.

These differences aren't necessarily a bad thing. But you will need to open yourselves up to new perspectives.

**Study up on autism.** Every autistic individual is different. However, learning about common autistic traits and experiences can help educate and empower both of you. If you're autistic, you might feel relieved to hear about other people who are dealing with similar issues. If you're not autistic, you can learn better ways to support your loved one and gain insight into the neurodivergent perspective.

[Read: [Autism in Adults: Recognizing the Signs, Living with a Diagnosis](#)]

**Approach interactions with curiosity.** Even if you feel that you completely understand your loved one, there's always more to learn. Ask questions that help you gain a better perspective on your partner's inner workings. What motivates them? What drains their energy? What are their insecurities? What kind of support do they expect from you? Consider writing down some of their answers for future reference.

Be willing to share your point of view with your loved one as well. Don't let shame or embarrassment hold you back, and don't automatically assume that your partner won't understand you.

How the autistic partner might feel:

**Frustrated.** They may feel as if society doesn't accommodate their needs or that others don't take the time to understand them. They might long to be accepted not just by their close friends and partners but by a wider social group.

**Puzzled.** They might be confused by passive aggression or disorderly habits. "Why can't other people be more straightforward?" may be a common question.

**Anxious.** They might want reassurance that they aren't missing social cues. They may fear that they've said something inappropriate or insensitive.

**Overwhelmed.** Depending on their sensory issues, an autistic person might feel stressed or anxious by environmental factors, such as lighting. Social situations can also be demanding and leave them feeling stressed out.

**Tired.** If the autistic person feels the need to mask their behavior to fit into social situations, they might frequently feel exhausted. They may also have an introverted disposition, meaning socializing is just a draining activity in general.

How the non-autistic partner might feel:

**Stressed.** They might feel as if they have to be overly attentive as they help their partner or friend navigate social situations. They might feel responsible for all of their loved one's actions.

**Annoyed.** They might feel irritated if certain issues seem to be reoccurring. For example, their autistic partner might be overly blunt, even after multiple attempts to change their communication style.

**Ignored.** When an autistic partner has special interests, the neurotypical partner might feel like they come second to those hobbies or passions.

**Emotionally restrained.** A neurotypical partner might feel as if they have to always keep their cool to avoid escalating conflicts. Emotional suppression can eventually lead to high stress, resentment, and outbursts.

## Tip 2: Take responsibility for your actions

In relationships, no one person is always in the right. It's important to be aware of how your behavior provokes reactions from your loved one and influences the dynamic of your relationship. If there's a reoccurring problem between the two of you, take some time to ponder how you might be contributing. This applies to both the autistic person as well as the neurotypical individual.

**Recognize what you can and can't control.** You can't fully control your partner by nagging them—and manipulative behavior won't foster a healthy relationship. However, you can control your own reactions which in turn can affect the relationship dynamic. For example, if you're more patient with your partner, they might be more open with you.

**Question your own motives.** Perhaps you push a friend away because you feel ignored. Or maybe you talk down to them because you feel like they'll never fully understand you. A

little introspection can give way to healthier behavior.

**Add positivity to your interactions.** Seemingly small acts of love can shift your dynamic. Give your partner unexpected gifts that make their life easier. Offer words of encouragement when they're trying to accomplish something. Tell them how much you appreciate their efforts. This can foster a sense of security, trust, and acceptance.

[Read: [Tips for Building a Healthy Relationship](#)]

**Seek treatment for disruptive traits.** These traits can include anything from jealousy to anger issues to anxiety — anything that seems to be getting in the way of a satisfying relationship. Again, this doesn't just apply to the autistic person in the relationship. Both people should be willing to admit when their own traits and habits are a problem.

Certain issues can be managed with self-help steps. For example, practicing [breathing exercises](#) or journaling might help you manage anxiety and [anger issues](#). Other issues, such as sensory disorders that get in the way of physical intimacy, may require more professional intervention.

## Avoiding the parent-child dynamic

The neurotypical partner or friend might sometimes feel as though they're the "parent" in the relationship. Perhaps the autistic partner isn't as adept at handling certain circumstances, and the neurotypical partner sees the need to take control. The neurotypical person might develop a habit of speaking for their autistic friend, fearing that their loved one is bound to make a faux pas.

This kind of dynamic leads to an unbalanced relationship. [Codependency](#) or resentment can develop as one partner starts to lose their sense of independence.

If you feel like the "parent" in your relationship, aim to let go of your controlling behavior. Support your partner when necessary, but recognize that they're an adult who can make their own decisions and learn from their mistakes.

If you feel like your partner is “parenting” you, let them know how they can help you without micro-managing your life. Can they offer you tips on avoiding mistakes in public without speaking for you? You can also aim to balance the relationship by finding ways to spoil your partner. Think of ways to make them feel cared for, such as cooking a meal or running errands for them.

## Tip 3: Build effective communication skills

If you’re an autistic adult or in a relationship with one, communication can be especially tricky. You might find yourselves frequently misinterpreting or accidentally offending each other. But this doesn’t mean that a breakdown in communication is inevitable. You’ll both just need to put in extra effort to ensure your intended messages are getting through.

### Tips for the neurotypical partner

If your partner, friend, or family member is autistic, the following communication tips may come in handy.

**Be mindful of figurative language.** Some, but not all, autistic adults tend to take things literally. If this is the case, try to be straightforward. For example, you might forgo ironic or sarcastic jokes.

**Recognize differences in body language.** If the other person isn’t maintaining eye contact or has atypical nonverbal cues, don’t take offense. Focus on what they’re saying. Also recognize that they may overlook some of your nonverbal cues.

**Be patient.** Don’t lose your temper just because there’s an initial misunderstanding. And don’t assume the autistic person is incompetent; they just process things differently.

### Tips for the autistic partner

If you’re autistic and talking to a neurotypical loved one, try the following:



**Ask for clarification.** When necessary, ask the other person to repeat or rephrase what they said. If you feel like you missed something, you can ask if they were being literal.

**Take your time.** Don't feel rushed to give a response. Rushing can lead to more misunderstandings. Pause to process what was said to you and consider how you want to respond.

**Ask for a break in the conversation.** If you feel distracted by sensory issues, ask if you can resume the conversation later or in a different setting. If anxiety is building or you feel exhausted from chatting, excuse yourself to take a short walk to compose yourself.

## Improving your communication skills as an autistic adult

**Decide on what you want to improve and why.** Perhaps you want to get better at reading nonverbal cues you can notice when your partner is frustrated.

**Break the task down into steps.** When gauging your partner's frustration, is there a clear first sign you should look for? Different people have different nonverbal cues, but some of those cues are commonplace. Perhaps your partner's brow furrows when they're annoyed. If you notice that first sign, is there another to look for?

**Practice.** Practice the skill with your partner and ask for their feedback. You can also try out the new skill with strangers.

**Don't get caught up in perfection.** Know that you don't have to get it right every single time. Your partner should also be willing to put in effort to better communicate with you. Perhaps they can be more vocal about how they feel, so you don't have to rely solely on nonverbal cues.

To learn more, see: [Nonverbal Communication and Body Language](#)

## Tips for both partners

**Don't suppress your feelings.** Hiding negative emotions like frustration can give way to resentment and elevated stress levels. Instead, be upfront and tell your partner how you're feeling. Then, you can begin to look for solutions and compromises together.

**Rein in assumptions.** It's easy to make assumptions as you try to find reasons behind your partner's words and actions. But remember that those assumptions don't necessarily reflect reality. You might think your partner is ignoring you because they're angry, but perhaps they're just focused on something else. Rather than try to guess what's going on in your loved one's head, ask questions.

**Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements.** "I" statements put emphasis on your feelings. "You" statements can sound accusatory. The latter is more likely to escalate arguments as your partner grows defensive. For example, try saying, "I feel ignored," instead of, "You are ignoring me."

[[Read: Effective Communication](#)]

## Learn to really listen

It's easy to fall into the habit of hearing but not really listening to your friend or loved one. Perhaps you find yourself simply waiting for your chance to speak instead of focusing on what's being said to you. This can be especially problematic if your communication styles differ greatly. Here are some steps to become a more active listener:

**Reduce distractions.** Put away your phone. Turn down background music. If you have sensory issues, aim to have important conversations in a space that's physically comfortable.

**Focus without judgment.** You want to ensure your attention is fully on the other person. You might find it helpful to repeat your partner's words in your head. This can help you maintain focus. Set aside any judgments or criticism and simply listen with an open mind.

**Resist the urge to interrupt.** You might feel like you need to object to something or even feel the temptation to change the direction of the conversation. Practice patience.

**Offer feedback.** When necessary, ask your loved one to clarify a point or repeat something. You can also say, “What I’m hearing is…” and then rephrase what your partner said in your own words. This ensures you’re both on the same page.

## Tip 4: Capitalize on each other’s strengths

Whether you or your loved one is autistic, it’s important to remember that you both have strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps your autistic friend or partner has a sharp memory, is highly organized, but unconfident in social situations. Maybe your neurotypical roommate is more assertive and outgoing, but not as analytical. Once you recognize each other’s strong points, you can begin to forge a balanced dynamic. The goal is to reach a point where you both feel like you’re contributing to the relationship.

Consider making a list of your individual strengths and areas that need improvement.

Some questions to address might include:

- Which one of you is more flexible and willing to adapt to new situations?
- Who is more logical and able to come up with practical solutions?
- Who is more organized and has greater attention to detail?
- Who feels more comfortable in social situations?

If you’re roommates or a couple living together, divide up tasks based on your strengths. For example, whoever is the most organized and punctual can handle tasks such as paying bills while the more outgoing partner can be in charge of communicating with the landlord.

If there’s an area that you’re both weak in, you’ll need to brainstorm ways to address it. For instance, if you both have trouble remembering to pay utility bills, you can set reminders or use automated payment systems.

If it feels like one of you has the bulk of the responsibilities, talk it out and shuffle tasks around. Figure out a plan that works for both of you, even if it means one of you has to work on building new skills.

## Make your autistic loved one's life easier

If your friend or partner is autistic, there are many ways you can offer support without resorting to nagging or micro-managing.

**Maintain consistency.** Some autistic people have difficulty adapting to sudden changes. Consistency gives them a sense of peace and security. If that's the case for your loved one, minimize unwanted surprises by keeping them updated on changes. If you plan to rearrange the living room, for example, ask for their input first.

**Adapt your living space for sensory issues.** Simple additions to your home, such as softer lighting and noise-canceling headphones can help reduce discomfort. Timers can help an autistic person stay on task if they have a tendency to lose track of time.

**Meditate together.** There's some evidence that mindfulness can reduce anxiety and increase sensory regulation. Encourage (but don't force) your partner to join you in a daily meditation practice.

## Making new social connections as an autistic adult

If you're an autistic adult and feeling lonely, you'll want to be proactive about making new connections—whether it's to **expand your group of friends** or find a romantic partner.

As an autistic adult, though, the thought of having to endure small talk and decipher ambiguous body cues may seem either boring or overwhelming. Perhaps you're worried you'll have to navigate a series of awkward moments and misunderstandings. But with the right strategies, you can make the task easier, and the connections you make in the process can change your life.

**Follow your interests.** Use services like Meetup to find local groups that match your interests. You can find everything from trail walking groups to board game meetups.

These groups and events offer good opportunities to meet people who share your passions. Focus on having a good time, and you're bound to make a few new connections.

**Engage with the neurodivergent community.** In many cases, autistic individuals find that engaging with other neurodivergent people is easier than chatting with neurotypicals. Neurodivergent friends might better understand you and make you feel more accepted. They can even offer tips for meeting more people and strategies for dealing with common hurdles such as social burnout and sensory overload. Look for neurodivergent forums online and attend in-person events whenever possible. You can even find dating apps that focus on autistic and neurodivergent singles.

**Schedule time for relaxation.** If you find social interactions to be tiring, allot some time to [relax alone](#) before and after each engagement. You might want to meditate or browse the Internet before a coffee date or go for a walk to decompress afterward.

**Establish common interests.** Try to pinpoint similarities between you and the people you engage with. This can make interactions feel more natural and provide opportunities for bonding. Think about your hobbies, places you've been, foods you tried, and media you enjoy.

**Be a good listener.** If you have special interests, you might be excited to share all of the details with new friends. Don't make the mistake of talking too much about your favorite subject, though. Give others a chance to change the subject and talk about what's going on in their lives. Use active listening techniques to stay engaged.

**Work on reading body language.** This is a useful skill whether you're trying to gauge if a person is romantically interested in you or if a friend is bored with the conversation. If reading body cues is a weak point for you, ask friends to give you pointers. You can also learn from watching other people's interactions or browsing through online guides.

[\[Read: Nonverbal Communication and Body Language\]](#)

**Identify unhealthy relationships.** Accept that not everyone is going to make a suitable friend or romantic partner. Reflect on your interactions. Does the other person talk down

to you or make jokes that hurt your feelings? Do they only talk about themselves? Do they seem overly judgmental of you or other people? If you feel uncomfortable or undervalued, perhaps you and the other person aren't a good match.

**Cope with rejection.** Rejection is part of the dating process, and you might even find that some people reject offers of friendship as well. Acknowledge any negative feelings that arise, such as resentment or sadness, but try not to dwell on the situation. It's possible that the other person is rejecting you for superficial reasons.

If you experience repeated rejections, take some time to reflect on potential problems you need to work on. Trusted loved ones might be able to offer some honest guidance. Don't be too hard on yourself, though. Just look for opportunities to improve.

Whether you're trying to maintain relationships or forge new connections, remember that people can be complicated, and there's always more to learn. Stay curious about the people around you. Spend time with those who are excited to learn more about you and your perspective. And rest assured you have lots to offer potential friends and partners.

## More Information

### References

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