

# 7

## SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

THE WORLD OF DATING and relationships is a strange one, and each person's experience is different. I think it was when I started meeting people on dates that I first obtained a real love for people. One of my favourite words is 'philanthrope', sometimes still used as a term for someone with a genuine love for people. It's only when I started dating that I realised how different everyone is; everyone has their own story, shaped by both genetics and personal experience. In Asperger's there is a 'them and us' culture that has been propagated in recent years, and it is only when you start to question this by listening to what others have to say that this cultural non-sequitur is broken down.

Ever since I was young, I have always had problems with dating. This remains the case today; it's just that at some point the nature of those problems changed. When I was younger,

people were a maze of different habits and idiosyncrasies and social ethos that I had absolutely no understanding of. I felt like a complete outsider; the world passed me by as if being viewed through a keyhole. Bits and pieces flashed by, but there was never enough to piece together a coherent social picture. Then, that fickle and beautiful thing, love, happened. I was spellbound by the dichotomy of it all - it was both the easiest and most comfortable and yet the most difficult thing I have ever come across. She was a girl a lot like me - an outsider, a wayward one, lost in a world that passed her by - and we both found solace in that. I have always written, and when I met her the words flowed easily. She was my muse. A little of that may still be present, or maybe today is simply a good day for writing, as the words are falling from my fingertips and adorn the page in their own neat order, as if sentient.

My first relationship was also my first 'heartbreak'. It ended fairly abruptly; we were too far apart. I would walk miles and miles in the dead of night to see her, but there was simply too much against us both. It felt almost tangible, a burning pain low in my chest, and my thoughts were consumed by her. Everybody struggles when it comes to love - it is the most natural and talked about of human conditions - but none, I think, more so than those on the autism spectrum. We are fixers; if something is broken, we fix it, but this device we use to explain the process of grieving when it comes to love, a broken heart, cannot be fixed. They say time heals all wounds, but wounds leave scar tissue too, and I hold the suspicion that we all carry the scars from lost

loves. Sometimes people champion them, as war wounds from battles won, as in those brave ones who have escaped abusive relationships, and sometimes they are hidden away, too painful to talk about lest they remind us of a better time.

It is in loss that we fall on one of the biggest 'unwritten rules' of dating. We are not taught how to deal with loss when we are young. People may touch upon grieving and bereavement, but when it comes to losing someone we love, not through that most final of circumstances but through simply coming to the end of a relationship, people with an ASD are often the least well-equipped. It is the biggest of changes; often that person becomes a huge part of our waking life. We shape our life events around them, share our highest and lowest moments with them, and then they are gone, often very suddenly. It is well-known, and a crucial part of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorders, that people on the spectrum do not deal well with change, and a break-up can turn someone's whole life around.

Maybe it is the struggles that surround dating and relationships when it comes to people with autism spectrum disorders that propagate the myth that people on the spectrum are somehow loveless. Often it is believed that they lack the ability to be romantically involved with another person. To arrive at this, one strips away the entire ability to relate to another person on a romantic level, and this can almost be construed as offensive. A person on the autism spectrum is just as capable of love, trust, affection, or even simply lust or infatuation, as someone who has no diagnosis, or even no traits, of autism. Indeed, often the feeling is entirely

magnified, as finding someone you can entirely relate to, especially on a romantic level, can be rare for those on the autism spectrum.

For me, being different, at first such a curse and a burden, became a great thing. When I found out I had Asperger's Syndrome I challenged the diagnostic criteria laid out before me. In doing so, I became a little better at alleviating some of the more debilitating parts of Asperger's in social situations. Still, I always stuck out as different. Initially, I used to hate this - whatever I did, I stood out like a sore thumb. In growing up, however, I grew more comfortable with this and over time even began to use it to my advantage. From then on, things began to snowball; I was meeting people and networking as part of my work in photography, and the dating side of things just seemed to come naturally. It seemed that the more I focused on my work, and everything but, the more the dating side of things just sort of happened. I'm no Casanova, but I do believe that sometimes things do just come naturally.

## **UPPING YOUR DATING GAME**

A lot of people on the autism spectrum struggle with dating, and while there is a lot of information on the subject online, it's incredibly convoluted and opinions differ widely on the subject. There is still a stereotype of people on the spectrum as being rigid, awkward, somewhat boring individuals, and obviously in some cases this can be true, but not in all cases. Some people can be awkward, and some people can

be rigid, but this is because these are ultimately human traits. Everyone is different, and even the folk who seem most uninteresting have their own stories – this is why the process of getting to know someone is so fascinating, and why you should never make assumptions about someone before getting to know them. There is a possibility that people with autism spectrum disorders have more trouble dating because there are so many subtleties involved – knowing when someone likes you, when it’s the right time to make a move, what to say, knowing when someone is hinting at something. Understanding these subtleties is like learning a second language, and to be fair, it should be treated as such.

Subtlety is tough, but a big part of understanding subtlety is first being able to take constructive criticism and understand that it’s not a reflection on your character, and second, being able to shrug it off. The world of dating and relationships is a scary place, especially when you first get feelings for someone, and even more so when you’ve known them as a friend previously. It can turn the most confident of people into rambling, incoherent, nervous wrecks. The problem is that for a lot of people with an ASD, it can become all-encompassing. With the ability of a person with Asperger’s to hyper-focus on something, it can end up overshadowing much of their life. What seems to happen is that the more you focus on searching for a significant other, the more elusive they become. Therefore, a lot of people on the autism spectrum end up obsessing over finding someone to share their interests with. This can be unhealthy and just isn’t conducive to getting a date. If finding a partner becomes

someone's be all and end all, or the thing they strive for most, it puts a lot of pressure on potential partners to match up to expectations, and can be off-putting.

In the interest of honesty, I'm going to come out and say this straight - humans are superficial creatures. We make split-second decisions on people based on very little information, such as their facial contours or expression, and this is pretty shallow. However, when it comes to snap judgements on things like clothing, the conclusions are less shallow. How a person dresses, their posture and frame, together with their facial expression can give big clues as to how a person lives their life, and thus clues as to how they'd be in a relationship. This picture starts to break down under conscious scrutiny, because each person is different, but people subconsciously assess a person's appearance. A person's appearance accounts for a great deal, and people's reaction to it often change, depending on the situation. A person in jeans, trainers and a band t-shirt may be seen as easygoing and carefree, but wear this for a job interview and you're unlikely to get the job. At other times this works the other way around - wear a tux to go on a daytime shopping trip and you're likely to get a few funny looks.

Appearances aside, there are a few things that can be done to improve your chances. Make sure you shower regularly for starters - smell matters more in first impressions than we realise. It helps to be self-reflective in this case; notice how differently people can smell and gauge which scents are pleasant and which aren't. I can still identify different people by their various smells, which are sometimes as intrinsic to

them as a photograph. Personal hygiene is important and adhering to this is something people often overlook when it comes to dating. When it comes to clothes, dressing smartly or casually is open to interpretation. There are clothes that feel nice and still look smart, and finding a balance between the two is very important. It is one thing looking presentable, but if you don't feel comfortable, it'll show.

Approaching people is something that everyone, with or without an ASD, has trouble with. There is a misconception from a lot of people within the world of Asperger's and autism that so-called 'neurotypical' people are social machines that simply know the right words to say to someone they've just met, or can walk up to a stranger and engage in the smallest of small talk until they get a date with someone. In general, everybody struggles with this - while I'm fairly sure there are those mavericks who can simply saunter up to someone and start a conversation without a second thought (if you'll excuse the alliteration), usually this isn't how it works. When you approach someone new for the first time, you have no idea what they're like, you have no idea what their views are, you have no way of even telling whether or not you will get on. Obviously, if you have a tendency to overthink things in general, then these kinds of issues are a breeding ground for anxiety. Anxiety, at its roots, takes the worst-case scenario as the most probable one. But generally the worst-case scenario is an unrealistic one, and even if it happens, things move on. You should never be afraid of looking like a bit of an idiot - it happens to everyone, and those who are

able to laugh it off and move past it are the ones who fare best in the dating world.

The anxiety that appears to go hand-in-hand with the process of meeting someone for the first time, and in particular when the interest is romantic, is not something that goes away easily, but there are ways of dealing with it. First off, disclosure is a big subject people miss when it comes to anxiety and dating. You are in no way weak by feeling anxious when you meet someone new or go on a date. It's completely normal, but the way you bring up the subject is key; remember, the anxiety is not an excuse but a reason for certain behaviours, and once you've broached the subject, don't keep coming back to it. The same goes with an autism spectrum disorder - once you've disclosed it, the other person isn't going to forget, so the subject doesn't need to be brought up again.

There is no substitute for practice when approaching new people for the first time, and it takes a big push to make yourself do it. You keep replaying the worst-case scenario in your head, and then when you actually go over and say something, it isn't so bad. I was helped by the fact that I travelled around the country a lot, so I had a few 'neutral zones'. I'd take these as places where if something went wrong, it didn't really matter because nobody knew me. There was a very high chance I'd never meet those people again. If you do suffer from anxiety, you're probably familiar with what happens when meeting someone for the first time, even if it isn't in a romantic capacity. The symptoms are the same, it's just that often we are more aware of their propensity



to embarrass us. Your heart starts pounding, as if trying to beat its way out of your chest. Your mouth goes so dry that even talking out loud is a problem, and you're sure that if you did, it would just come out as a wheeze – which is just as well, because your brain is so foggy that you can't formulate any proper words anyhow. Your palms are sweating, you're sweating. You start to reflect on everything you're doing. Do I look okay, is my posture right? Then just: 'Hi, how are you?' That's it. It doesn't make the conversation any easier, but at least you got there. It's something, and often a conversation will follow on from that.

Jumping into a conversation with the intent to ask someone out on a date can be a surefire way to get shot down. Try not to approach someone with just that intention; the conversation tends to seem empty and vacuous, because if you do this, you are basically making inane conversation until a time comes to ask about a date. Simply put, this is pretty shallow. People each have their own little habits and idiosyncrasies, and if you just dive straight in for a date, then you're either going to end up out with someone that you don't like very much, or you may come across as vapid or not invested in the conversation. Even if I fancy someone (though I can't say the word 'fancy' without feeling 16 years old again) or, rather, am attracted to someone, I try not to jump into a conversation with the idea of setting up a date, or at least not in such an obvious sense. If you just arrange a coffee or a drink without attaching the stigma of a 'date' situation to it, it takes away a lot of the expectation and pressure that come attached to the world of dating.

The question of what to talk about when spending time with someone you like is a difficult one. First off, greetings are a good start. Asking 'Hi, how are you?' is a pretty standard conversational opener, and it's a pretty decent one if you're leading the conversation. When you're out with someone for the first time in a date capacity, i.e. it's just you two and there are romantic intentions involved, it's important to remember that not every silence is an awkward silence. It's worth saying when you broach the subject of the autism spectrum that you might take a little longer to process things, as this can take a lot of the gravity out of so-called 'awkward' silence. People pause to think in general, it's nothing to worry about - don't be sorry about it if you take a little longer to process things. It is part of your personality and you shouldn't be ashamed about that.

A good thing to do is to find out what the other person likes and to play on that. Ask what kind of music they're into, what work they do, what kind of things they like to do in their spare time. If the conversation is going well, don't be afraid to move past small talk though - ask where they've travelled, if they'd like to, if they have any big dreams. Good conversation is a great skill and one that traverses many different aspects of life. Try to find common ground, subjects and activities that you both like. If asked, don't be afraid to talk about the subjects that are important to you, but don't go too far and hijack the conversation with talk on your specialist subject (if you have one). That said, don't be afraid to emote about activities and subjects you feel strongly about. Passion is a great thing, and it's sexy in any gender. Just make sure that

what you're passionate about isn't something likely to be too contentious or cause friction. If your argument is on the merits of Neo-Nazism as a system of ethics, your date is going to turn into an argument pretty fast.

Body language is a whole other language, with its own regional quirks and dialects. It's an incredibly important aspect of human existence, and if you're on the autism spectrum, it's worth doing some research. The best way to describe it is through analogy - body language works in this way: if an area is cordoned off it repels curiosity, it beseeches people to stay away, but a simple arrow in its place invites exploration. Neither of these are physical objects yet they still have power, and they are still great devices in terms of influencing people. Very often, it's not what you say, but what you don't say, and there are a few non-verbal devices that work in dating situations to help you come across in a certain way:

- If you have your arms crossed, knees together and hands clasped, you risk showing yourself as closed off and lacking in confidence. Keep your feet and knees slightly apart when sitting, and avoid crossing your arms. Lean back at your leisure, but try not to slouch, and don't worry about leaning forward when gesticulating about something you're passionate about.
- If you keep your eyes up (without staring) you come across as more forthcoming, and if you look up and away when gesticulating during conversation it gives you time to think without coming across as overly shy

or breaking the flow of conversation. Eye contact is an important factor in body language, but there are ways around difficulties with it. Try looking between the eyes or at people's mouths when they are talking. If you decide to go for full eye contact during conversation, then take breaks – look away, whether it be out of the window or into the background; this prevents staring and helps to avoid anxiety.

- If you lean in towards the other person very slightly when they are explaining something at length, it shows that you're interested in what they have to say. The same applies if the person is sitting across the table from you. This is where clasping your hands can be a good thing; if you're in a coffee shop or a restaurant, putting your elbows on the table and clasping your hands under your chin can be a good way of showing interest. A warning, though: this is where eye contact comes into play, as the same action while looking away tends to come across as bored or disaffected.
- Gesticulating in conversation is something that I personally do a lot; it emphasises points, can be a visual reminder of the conversation and shows passion. It can be a useful conversational device, but keep your movements tight and close to you in normal conversation, then be more fluid when talking about something important to you. Make sure your movements don't encroach on your date's personal space.

- When standing, while posture is important, you don't need to stand board-straight all the time. Stand however you feel most comfortable; I tend to shift my weight from one leg to the other. Try not to hunch your shoulders up - it can make you come across as uptight and uncomfortable. If you find it more comfortable putting your hands in your pockets than letting them hang, try just resting your thumbs on your pocket and keeping your fingers out. This makes you appear more approachable and friendly - people often 'talk' with their hands, so by hiding them you're cutting off a potential thread of conversation.

It's important to note that while you may feel unconfident at first, when you project yourself in a certain way, it has the effect of letting your particular attributes and positive points come through more. Behaviour that starts off as contrived in the first place becomes real; this is a process known in psychology as behavioural activation (though I am over-simplifying the term). Earlier, I likened body language to a verbal one, in that it has its dialects, regional quirks and other devices akin to a verbal language. In its likeness to verbal linguistics, it can be learned as a second language and its various attributes can be picked up, committed to memory and imitated.

Something that needs to be expanded on is the idea of chivalry when it comes to dating. There is an outmoded notion that if you are 'chivalrous' to someone then they somehow owe you something. This tends to come from people who talk about 'the friend zone'. The point is, when it comes to

males and females, girls do often get more attention than guys, but not all attention is good attention! It makes it more difficult to actually find someone suitable - I've had a lot of friends who are girls who guys have tried to use just for sex. The biggest piece of advice I can give is to treat people equally. If you're going on a date with a girl, even if you pay for things, they do not owe you anything. In turn, if you're going on a date with a guy and you're a girl, the guy is in no way obliged to pay for things. When I go on a date with a girl, what I usually do is get the bill and just say, 'I'll get this one, and you can pay for it next time.' That way you're letting the girl know that you're both on an even footing and it'll be appreciated. Girls are not vending machines - you don't put kindness in to get sex out. If this is in any way whatsoever your thinking, get out of it. You'll get a lot more out of life that way.