




PEER TO PEER

Autism Peer-to-Peer Series is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA).

May 2021



Healthy Dating Relationships: A Guide for Autistic Individuals

Autistic individuals commonly report having the same desire for love as individuals that are not on the spectrum. Making the decision to date or to enter into a romantic relationship is exciting, but navigating romantic relationships can be difficult. A key part of dating is learning how to have a healthy relationship. This resource is designed to provide youth and young adults on the spectrum with important information about healthy dating relationships.

When dating or before starting to date, it is important to know what a healthy relationship looks like as well as the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship that could signal a need to break up. It is not always easy to tell if you are just going through a rough patch in your relationship or if you are in an unhealthy relationship. Romantic relationships take time and energy. Whether you are single or currently in a relationship, it is a good idea to think carefully about whom you choose as a romantic partner.



Crisis Support for the Autism Community

Common Ground provides a 24-hour Resource and Crisis Helpline for autistic individuals. If you are experiencing a crisis, call **1-800-231-1127** for confidential counseling, information, and referrals. Visit this [website](#) for information about how to visit, text, or chat with a professional.



Signs of a Healthy Relationship

Research has identified incidents of victimization within romantic relationships, particularly among females with autism. In interviews with a small group of women with autism in the UK, Bargiela et al. (2016) found trends indicating that a tendency to be passive, to please others, and to mis-read social cues contributed to unhealthy relationships and incidents of exploitation. Familiarizing yourself with the signs of a healthy relationship and learning how to manage conflict can have a positive impact on your romantic relationships.

Healthy relationships have several benefits for your mental health and well-being. For example, having a healthy relationship with a romantic partner can decrease stress, increase happiness, and add a sense of purpose to life. In a healthy romantic relationship, your partner should make you feel good about yourself, support you, and make you feel safe. You should also feel comfortable being yourself around your partner at all times.

Relationships look different for everyone, because people have different needs. However, a few key signs stand out in healthy relationships. Look for these signs in your relationship to give you an idea of whether or not you are in a relationship that makes you happy and is meeting your needs.

Attributes	Explanation	Questions to Ask Yourself
Mutual Respect	Partners should value one another and understand each other's boundaries.	1) Do you listen to each other? 2) Do you treat each other like friends? 3) Are you proud of each other? 4) Are you kind to each other?
Trust	Partners should be able to rely on one another and feel safe with one another.	1) Are you both okay with spending time away from each other? 2) Do you feel secure about your relationship? 3) Do you have confidence in each other's decisions?
Honesty	Partners should be themselves around each other and always tell each other the truth. Honesty helps build trust and strengthens relationships.	1) Do you both admit when you are wrong? 2) Do you both feel like you can tell the truth? 3) Do you talk openly about your feelings, even when it is hard?
Good Communication	Partners should be clear about expressing what they want, need, and feel. If one person needs time to think about their feelings, the other partner should be respectful and wait until he/she is ready to talk.	1) Do you talk about your feelings with each other? 2) Can you disagree about something without being disrespectful toward one another? 3) Do you listen to each other without judgement?



Equality	Partners should respect and try to meet each other's interests and desires.	1) Do you both make decisions about your relationship and how you spend time? 2) Do you both compromise? 3) Do you consider each other's feelings when talking and making decisions?
Mutual Consent	Partners should only engage in activities that each partner is comfortable doing.	1) Do you feel safe with each other? 2) Do you both respect when the other person says "no"?

Addressing Conflict in Relationships

Conflict is a normal part of relationships, and partners can still have healthy relationships when they know how to resolve conflicts appropriately. Your ability to understand other people's emotions as well as any experiences with past trauma such as bullying, assault, teasing, or emotional abuse can impact how you manage conflict in relationships. The following resources provide tips and strategies for handling conflict in relationships:

- [Dating on the Autism Spectrum: Handling Conflict](#)
- [Autism Communication and Conflict Resolution](#)
- [Conflict Resolution from PAAutism.org](#)

Signs of an Unhealthy Relationship

The following examples are warning signs of an unhealthy relationship. If any of these signs are present in your relationship or in the person with whom you are considering having a relationship, talk to him/her about how you feel. If they are unwilling to listen and/or change, you should end the relationship.

Control	Your partner tells you what you can and cannot do.
Pressure	Your partner tries to make you do things that you do not want to do.
Physical abuse	Your partner pushes you, hits you, or destroys your things.
Humiliation	Your partner says unkind things about you or puts you down in front of other people.
Unpredictability	Your partner gets angry easily, and it makes you feel unsafe.
Isolation	Your partner makes you feel guilty for spending time with other people, and you feel distant from your family, friends, and other close relationships.
Excessive jealousy	Your partner uses jealousy as an excuse to act possessive, aggressive, or controlling.
Deflecting responsibility and blame	Your partner blames you or somebody else for failures or issues without taking responsibility for his/her own actions.
Frequent arguments	You and your partner argue often, and your partner frequently raises his/her voice.
Trying to change you	Your partner tries to change things about you that you like about yourself and do not want to change.



Ending an Unhealthy Relationship

You can take several steps if you feel that your relationship may not be healthy, and you think it is time to break up with your partner:

- **Seek support.** Talk to an adult you trust who will make you feel safe and support your decision to end your relationship. If you need support, but do not know who to ask, you can contact the **Safe Connections 24-hour Crisis Helpline** at **314-513-2003**.
- **Create a plan for breaking up with your partner.** It is considerate to break up with a person face-to-face. However, if you are concerned for your safety, break up with your partner in a public place, somewhere that other people are present, or by phone.
- **Stick with your decision.** Follow through by breaking up with your partner. If your partner tries to change your mind, keep in mind the reasons you decided to end the relationship in the first place and do not let your partner talk you out of your decision.

Recovering from an Unhealthy Relationship

Going through a breakup is never easy, no matter what the reason was for ending the relationship. For advice about going through a breakup from an individual with autism with experience in dating and break ups, visit this [link](#). Below are some additional tips for recovering after a breakup.

- **Pay attention to and accept your feelings.** You may experience a variety of feelings after a break-up, including sadness or anger. Allow yourself to experience what you are feeling – no feeling is a bad feeling. Find ways to release those feelings – whether that is crying, talking to a friend or professional, using creative outlets (like writing or art), or physical outlets (like exercise). Releasing feelings can help you move on from the relationship. Do not expect to feel back to normal right away. Give yourself time to heal and focus on ways to move forward in a healthy and positive way.
- **Create new routines.** Find something to do that will bring you happiness such as a new hobby or project to distract you from your breakup. Also, consider returning to some of your old routines or doing things that you used to enjoy before the relationship.
- **Spend time with other people.** After a breakup, being around family and friends can help you to combat feelings of loneliness. Even if you feel tempted to contact your ex-partner, resist the temptation to call or text them. Healing after a breakup takes time, and separation from your ex-partner is necessary for the healing process to work. Over time, being around other people will help you to create new routines.
- **Look forward.** Think about the future and setting goals for what you want to achieve. Even small goals such as learning a new skill or taking a dream vacation can help you to focus on what is ahead and get you excited for your future.
- **Love yourself.** Remember, you cannot change what happened, and you will get through this tough time. Recognize your self-worth and focus on self-love. If you love yourself, it will be easier to find someone to love again and someone who will love you in a healthy relationship!



If you want someone to talk to after a breakup, you can speak to a **peer advocate** by calling **1-866-331-9474**.

Additional Resources



Autism Society Toolkit

A resource to help autistic individuals navigate love and relationships.

Love & Autism

A compilation of videos about relationships from the perspective of individuals on the autism spectrum and their partners.

Autism Spectrum Launchpad

A resource designed specifically for individuals with ASD that provides information on dating and relationships.

Love is Respect

A website that provides information, support, and advocacy to young people between the ages of 13-26 who may have questions or concerns about their romantic relationships through free and confidential services via phone, text, and live chat.

Healthy Relationships Resource Kit

A resource that provides information about healthy relationships for children and adults of all ages.

Ending an Unhealthy Relationship

A website that provides tips for ending an unhealthy relationship.

Citation

Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W. (2016). The experiences of late-diagnosed women with autism spectrum conditions: An investigation of the female autism phenotype. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 46(10), 3281-3294.



**FRANK PORTER GRAHAM
CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE**

Permission is granted to reprint this *Autism Peer-to-Peer* if you acknowledge CSESA and the authors of this document. For more information, please visit CSESA at <http://csefa.fpg.unc.edu/> or <https://www.facebook.com/csefa.asd>

The work reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grants R324C120006 and R324A180091 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Suggested citation: Dickerson, L., & Dees, R. (2021, May). *Healthy Dating Relationships* (Autism Peer-to-Peer Series). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.