

# Dating on the Autism Spectrum

What it's like to look for romance when "a big smile can be frightening"

EMILY SHIRE | AUG 5, 2013

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The way to Paulette's heart is through her Outlook calendar. "Honestly, if you want to be romantic with me, send an email through Outlook and give me all the possible dates, locations, and times, so that I can prepare," she said.

The former Miss America system contestant and University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music-trained opera singer knew she had a different conception of romance than her previous boyfriends had and, for that matter, everyone else.

"People tend to think of romance as spur of the moment and exciting," she told me. "I think of romance as things that make sense and are logical." However, she didn't know why until

this year when, at the age of 31, when she was diagnosed with autism.

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## **“We can be interested, but have no way to tell if they're interested in us.”**

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The aspects of autism that can make everyday life challenging—reading social cues, understanding another's perspectives, making small talk and exchanging niceties—can be seriously magnified when it comes to dating. Though the American Psychiatric Association defines autism as a spectrum disorder—some people do not speak at all and have disabilities that make traditional relationships (let alone romantic ones) largely unfeasible, but there are also many who are on the "high-functioning" end and do have a clear desire for dating and romance.

Autism diagnosis rates have increased dramatically over the last two decades (the [latest CDC reports show one in 50 children are diagnosed](#)), and while much attention has been paid to early-intervention programs for toddlers and younger children, teens and adults with autism have largely been overlooked—especially when it comes to building romantic relationships.

Certain characteristics associated with the autism spectrum inherently go against typical dating norms. For example, while a "neuro-typical" person might think a bar is great place for a first date, it could be one of the worst spots for someone on the spectrum. Dorsey Massey, a social worker who helps run dating and social programs for adults with various intellectual disabilities, explained, “If it's a loud, crowded place, an individual on the spectrum may be uncomfortable or distracted.” Sensory issues may also make certain lights and noises especially unpleasant.

Seemingly basic, non-sexual touching may be an issue, as well.

“It may give them discomfort for someone to kiss them lightly or hold their hand,” Massey said. “They need pressure, and that's not typically what you think of with tender, romantic love.”

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## “Neuro-typical guys appreciate when women are blunt.”

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Perhaps because so much of their behavior runs counter to mainstream conceptions of how to express affection and love, people with autism are rarely considered in romantic contexts. A constant complaint among the individuals interviewed for this piece is the misconception that people with autism can't express love or care for others. “I think a lot of times someone will go out on a date with someone on the spectrum and think they're a robot,” said Alex Plank, founder of WrongPlanet.net, a popular online autism community. “It's hard to read us if we don't explicitly say what we're feeling, but all the feelings are there.”

In fact, people with autism may have greater emotional capacities. “Studies have shown that people with autism can have feelings that are stronger and deeper than those without autism,” said John Elder Robison, bestselling author of *Look Me in the Eyes* and autism advocate. “Yet those feelings may be invisible to outsiders because we don't show them. Because we don't show them or the expected response, people make the wrong assumption about our depth of feeling about other people.”

It's not that individuals on the spectrum do not have the same desire for love; they just may not know how to find it. Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson, an Assistant Clinical Professor at UCLA said, “If you asked a person with autism if they wanted a romantic relationship, they would probably say yes, but they would probably also say they don't know how to.”

Partially from the emphasis on early intervention treatments, there's a dearth of dating skills programs, or, rather, effective ones for people on the spectrum. “Early intervention can significantly improve the outcome, but kids grow up, and we don't have the proper services,” said Laugeson, who serves as director of UCLA PEERS, a program that teaches social, including romantic, interaction skills to teens and young adults on the spectrum.

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Central to PEERS is the promotion of “ecologically valid” social skills, traits humans have been shown to exhibit in reality, rather than what we think we're “supposed” to do. “We know people with autism think very concretely,” said Laugeson. “Social skills can be abstract behavior that's difficult to describe, but we try to break it into concrete steps.”

For example, PEERS will take the seemingly mundane, but actually complex act of flirting and translate it into a step-by-step lesson. “First, a couple notices each other across the room. They make eye contact and look away, and they look again and they look away,” said Laugeson. “The look away makes it known you're safe, but the common error someone with autism can make is to stare, which can seem predatory and scare a person.” People with autism are also specifically instructed how to smile and for how long, since “another common mistake is to smile really big rather than giving a slight smile,” said Laugeson. “A big smile can also be frightening.”

Neuro-typical people often take flirting for granted as a fairly organic, coy, and even fun back-and-forth, but for someone with autism, it is really a complex, nonsensical interaction. “Flirting still doesn't make sense to me. It seems like a waste of time,” said Plank, who worked on [a video](#) with Laugeson to teach his WrongPlanet community members how to flirt. “If you think about it logically, you say things you wouldn't normally say, so it's harder. There are a whole other set of things you have to deal with.”



While he didn't have PEERS to guide him, in college, Plank studied guys who were always successful at picking up girls and started mimicking their behaviors. He quickly realized acting confident was the key to dating success, especially if you're a man.

However, maintaining that confidence may be the hardest part of dating for someone on the spectrum, because of their difficulty processing social cues from others. "We will constantly not be able to read whether someone is interested, so you can have an insecurity about whether the person you're dating likes you," said Plank.

In heterosexual courtships where men are still often expected to pursue women, males with autism are at a distinct disadvantage to their female counterpart. "For guys on the spectrum it's a one-way thing," said Robison. "We can be interested, but have no way to tell if they're interested in us."

Some women with autism may ultimately have an edge in the dating world. A common trait of people on the spectrum is being extremely logical and straightforward. A blunt man may repulse women or get a slap in the face; think of how a woman would react if a date told her yes, she did look fat in that dress, or consider the [famous 1989 study](#) where a female researcher received positive responses to her request for sex from men on the street 69 to 75 percent of the times compared to her male counterpart who received not a single yes. Women who are forward are prized for it. "Especially if they're really attractive, neuro-typical guys appreciate when women are blunt," said Plank.

While Paulette doesn't necessarily think women with autism have it easier than men, she

has noticed that her neuro-typical dates have particularly valued many of her autistic traits. “I’ve found that people who are neuro-typical really appreciate the qualities that people on the spectrum possess: complete honesty and almost an inability to lie,” she said.

However, both sexes on the spectrum struggle equally with the fear of rejection. Since so much of dating for adults with autism is trial by error, the risk of mistakes, and often embarrassing ones, is high. Jeremy Hamburg, a dating specialist for people with special needs, including those on the autism spectrum, has noticed how hard his clients take initial failure with dating. “The risk and rewards are very different for people who are neuro-typical,” he said. “The average neuro-typical person can go out and meet ten and do well with one and feel success, but for one with special needs who has been rejected all their life that can really hurt their self-esteem.”

Plank has witnessed friends on the spectrum too quickly walk away from dating for fear of rejection. “It’s a numbers game in many ways and because people on the spectrum are black-and-white thinking, they think they’re doing something wrong,” he said. “I wish more people on the spectrum knew you need to practice, you need to go out on more dates.”

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Worse, is that people on the spectrum may turn the blame on themselves for not exhibiting neuro-typical norms for dating and romance. While interviewing subjects on the spectrum for his documentary *Autism in Love* (still in production), filmmaker Matt Fuller noticed how. “When something perceived as inappropriate, and it gets addressed, they will get embarrassed leading to a rabbit hole of self-deprecating thoughts.” And Paulette, too, remember feeling self-conscious and abnormal for her views of dating and romance. “I have struggled in the past with people telling me ‘this is how it should be’ and having sort of a crisis of maybe I just don’t get it, maybe I’m wrong,” she said

In fact, it was during one of those types of fights in a relationship earlier this year that

Paulette decided to be evaluated for autism. She realized past boyfriends' frustrations over her "rigid thinking" and "boundary issues," could be explained by autism and a subsequent psychological evaluation confirmed it. However, rather than alarmed, she felt relief.

Perhaps because she had spent so much of her life trying to "act" normal and confine to others' expectations for romance, knowing she had autism has helped her become more comfortable with dating. It's a feeling not necessarily shared by all members on the spectrum, but realizing why she saw love and romance the way she does freed her from the pressure of neuro-typical standards. Now, she is following her own heart. "The number one freedom I found in the diagnosis is I don't need to really give into a partner's idea of what a relationship should or needs to look like," she said. "It's really liberating to know I've been living my life a certain way, and it turns out that that's okay"

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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