

OPINION

Love story

BY VIRGINIA HUGHES

17 JANUARY 2012

As anyone who's read Shakespeare, seen the *Twilight* movies or trudged through junior high school knows, there is no social interaction more maddeningly complex than romantic love.

So someone with autism, who presumably lacks the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings, couldn't possibly manage a meaningful relationship. Right?

In fact, many people with autism **forge deep romantic relationships**, as I learned last month from an engaging *New York Times* profile of two teenagers with **Asperger syndrome**.

The couple, Kirsten and Jack, live together and are in love — and they're not all that unusual, according to the article. There are apparently large online communities devoted to helping people with Asperger syndrome find dates and improve their intimate relationships.

Like any couple, Kirsten and Jack's relationship has its ups and downs. Their autism diagnoses make certain things easier. They bond over their shared interest in science, and don't have to hide their **repetitive behaviors**. They each say exactly how they feel — no games, no passive aggression, no agonizing over what kind of Christmas present to buy.

But she has trouble keeping her emotions in check, leading to tearful breakdowns over how to cut cauliflower or his refusal to get a cat. They have different **sensory preferences**: He hates kissing and holding hands and likes to be softly petted, whereas she likes to be

squeezed deeply and yearns for more physical affection.

Each struggles to understand what the other one is thinking — a skill called **theory of mind**. Since 1985, researchers have known that this **ability is impaired** in most people with autism. Studies have found that its absence not only impedes social communication in people with the disorder, but can affect their **moral reasoning** and even **the way they structure sentences**.

That said, theory of mind seems to be more nuanced in some people with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome. A couple of years ago, a study in *Science* suggested that although they don't automatically grasp what other people are thinking or feeling, **they can learn the skill** over years of real-world practice.

That may be why Kirsten and Jack are making it work. It seems that a big part of their success is the help they've received from books, online forums and therapists. Kirsten's therapist, for example, taught her that when she is in a bad mood, she should try to focus on her favorite character from the television cartoon *My Little Pony*, who always makes her laugh.

This is all encouraging, particularly because **so little is known** about how adults on the autism spectrum **fare in life**. The article suggests that, if they want to and receive the right guidance, adults with autism can not only live independently and find jobs, but also commit to a partner.

Besides, it's not as if romantic relationships between people who don't have autism are all sun and roses. As the Bard wrote: "The course of true love never did run smooth."