

VIEWPOINT

# Friendships pose unique challenges for women on the spectrum

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For most adults, having friends is key to happiness. The stronger a person's friendships, the happier — and even healthier — that person is likely to be<sup>1,2</sup>.

Many autistic people have trouble making and keeping friends. This has led to the myth that they don't want friends<sup>3</sup>. In reality, they long for friendships just like anyone else. But they face unique challenges in forming and maintaining them.

Autistic women, in particular, may have difficulty interpreting the social subtleties friendships entail<sup>4,5,6</sup>.

Our work reveals that they have difficulty responding to social conflict, understanding unspoken romantic innuendos and dealing with social anxiety. We need to develop interventions that help prepare them for these challenges.

Most of what we know about friendships in autism comes from studies in children, whose friendships are far less complex than those of adults. The few studies that examine relationships in autistic adults focus primarily on men.

We sought to understand how autistic women differ from neurotypical women in the challenges they face in forming and maintaining friendships, and the satisfaction they glean from the relationships. This understanding could point to specific strategies to help these girls and women navigate their social worlds.

## Safe space:

We interviewed 15 autistic women and 15 neurotypical women, aged 20 to 40 and living in England, about friendships and other relationships. Our results are unpublished. The women are enrolled in a larger study exploring the social experiences of girls and women on the spectrum.

We asked open-ended questions such as “How do you choose your friends?” and “What is it about friends that is important to you?”

We found that autistic women tend to view friendships like neurotypical women do. They value the opportunity to share their thoughts and emotions with friends, responding with answers such as, “I can tell them anything at all and they listen.” They welcome the support that friendships provide, saying things like, “She’s always helping me a lot or I’m always helping her a lot.” They also appreciate the freedom to “be yourself” in a relationship, and say that friendships offer “a safe space.”

But we identified some important differences. Whereas neurotypical women tend to have large groups of friends, autistic women tend to have a few close, intense friendships. Sometimes these intense friendships became similar to a “special interest,” one woman told us. “My friends are all-consuming, the only thing you think about,” she said.

Women on the spectrum also differ from their neurotypical peers in how they respond to acts of social aggression, such as gossip or being suddenly cut off by a friend. Many of these women experience social anxiety as a result of such challenges, which causes them to limit socializing.

This anxiety can color how these women then approach all social interactions, regardless of whether they expect a conflict. For example, one woman said that because of her anxiety, she needs to keep her interactions with others brief. This can damage friendships over time.

Autistic women use the internet to maintain friendships more than typical women do, we found. Some women seem to rely on online messaging almost exclusively to keep in touch with friends. “That’s pretty much all my social life is, the internet,” one woman said.

## Intense interests:

Women on the spectrum reported romantic relationships of similar lengths and levels of seriousness as those of neurotypical women, and said these were the most important friendships in their lives. “My husband essentially became my special interest,” one autistic woman told us. “I wouldn’t really say that I have friends apart from my partner,” another said.

One woman described romantic partners as “the ready meal of friendships,” because a partner comes with his or her own social network. Taking on a partner’s friends can alleviate the stress

and anxiety of making new friends, but it can also leave a person isolated if the romantic relationship ends. Although some neurotypical women also make their romantic partners the center of their social network, this tendency is marked among autistic women.

Autistic people sometimes have difficulty understanding the implied meaning of a conversation or their friends' social expectations, which can strain friendships<sup>7</sup>. For example, one woman described an incident in which a friend asked, "Does this dress make me look fat?" "Don't be silly," she responded. "Your fat makes you look fat, not the dress."

The difficulties women on the spectrum have understanding other people's motivations could also leave them vulnerable to harm — particularly in **romantic and sexual relationships**. More so than typical individuals, these women tend to interpret statements literally and assume other people have good intentions. "I thought we really were just having a coffee, and that isn't what he meant at all," one woman told us. These tendencies could explain why these women reported higher levels of sexual assault to us than the neurotypical women did.

We were heartened to find that all the women in our study reported becoming more self-aware and self-assured with age. As a result, they were increasingly satisfied with their friends — perhaps because they had learned how to end harmful relationships and focus on genuine friendships. One autistic woman explained, "I am now more picky about who I spend time with and who I trust." Perhaps targeted support early on can accelerate this natural process.

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