



# Autism and Social Relationships

**SSD Autism Group Presentation**

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# Autistic Socialization

- The way you were socialized around your disability in childhood (whether you were diagnosed or not) has a MASSIVE ripple effect in your daily life.
- **The gendered experience:**
  - In 2020, it was reported that men were diagnosed twice as much as women. In 2009, the ratio was allegedly 4:1.
  - The DSM-5 is a lot more geared to diagnosing autism in boys, and the ways that autism presents differently in girls means that diagnoses tend to happen a lot later in life (if at all).



The time in your life in which you discover your autism affects EVERYTHING:

- If you were diagnosed early, **your perception of your autism may be heavily curated by your caregivers, doctors, and support people, for better and for worse.** It may also be more intrinsically tied in with your identity, and your actions by extension.
- **If you're late diagnosed/undiagnosed, the experience tends to be more self-curated since you never had any help in navigating it.** You may also mask more in daily life.
- In the former example, **patterns of coddling by caregivers may make it more difficult to gain independence**, while in the latter, **you may have needed to grow up too fast.**

In either case, being subject to constant exclusion, misunderstanding, and scrutiny sets you up for **good ole' Autistic Trauma!** :D This can manifest as switching between black-and-white thought patterns of *"It's all my fault"* or *"It's all everyone else's fault."*

# Acquaintances vs. Friends, Initiating Connections

When someone's an acquaintance:

- The structure of work or school keeps you seeing each other without any effort made on either end
- Small talk, surface-level convos, niceties
- Masking, emotional distance

When someone's a friend:

- You both go out of your way to see each other even if you don't have an external structure keeping you in contact
- Inside jokes, comfortable teasing
- Unmasking, emotional vulnerability/availability



Initiating a transition from one to the other:

- Inviting the acquaintance to personal events/parties (i.e. "Are you doing anything on Sat? Some friends and I are going out" usually means they'd like you to come).
- Asking to hang out one-on-one (i.e. going for coffee, a movie)
- Exchanging #s, messaging/sending memes
- If they don't respond, don't chase them. Whether they like you or not



# Autistic Social Anxiety, RSD, and Navigating Misconceptions

- **Autism as an excuse:** consciously avoiding accountability for hurt or mistreatment
  - **Autism as an explanation:** communicating your social/sensory blind spots from an accountability-based POV
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- Autistic Trauma gives our social anxiety slightly more rationality than NTs, which further enables how prone we are to black-and-white thinking in these moments.
- **Rejection-Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD):** shame-spiraling over signs of real or perceived rejection. Often coupled with autism, ADHD, and social anxiety.
- Self-advocacy about your disability in a social setting is difficult; you often have to navigate outsiders' blind spots, and how separate they perceive you as a person from your autism and how it affects your behaviours/actions.



# Coping Strategies

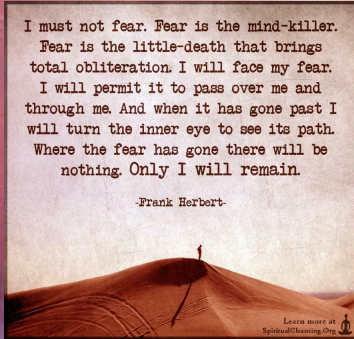
Most autistic communication difficulties can be boiled down to two central components, which are **anxiety** and **blind spots in self-awareness**. Here are some strategies for both:

## Coping with anxiety:

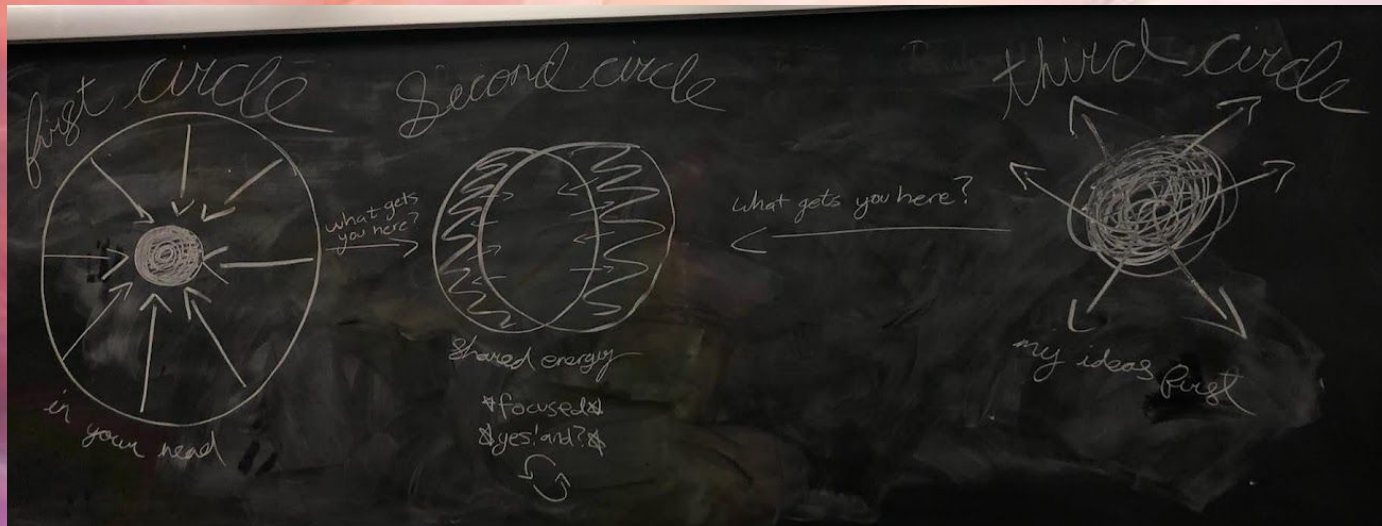
- Regular Talk Therapy
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT): strategies based on accepting/managing difficult feelings or stressors
- Mindfulness: separating yourself from your thoughts
- Researching the anxious-attachment style
- Container Exercise: a way to compartmentalize intrusive thoughts to deal with later
- Grounding techniques (54321, Light Stream Technique, breathing exercises)

## Coping with blind spots:

- Learn to distinguish between **guilt** (actions-based, necessary) and **shame** (core-self-based, unhelpful), and when you're feeling one or the other.
- Treat yourself with compassionate accountability when mistakes are made
- Journal to facilitate a constructive inner dialogue about these things, combatting a cruel inner voice by building a kind inner coach



# Presence and the 3 Circles of Energy



An acting technique by Patsy Rodenburg meant to describe where you put your energy at any given moment.

I've found it to be a helpful ND social tool as well.

1. **First Circle:** Past and future based; introverted energy, socially passive.
2. **Second Circle:** Connectivity with others, yourself, and your environment; shared energy and true presence. Socially assertive.
3. **Third Circle:** Steamrolling, outward action; extroverted energy, socially aggressive.

We need all three circles to navigate the world effectively, but Second Circle is at the heart of any truly successful connection.



- Activity-based settings have rules you can learn to help you navigate them, but **unstructured group settings are the social wild west.**
- Examples: parties, lunch/coffee breaks, group dinners, group chats, social media

- Usually, the most confident person in the group is the one who has the most control in the setting, and the conversation tends to orbit around them.
- If you find yourself needing to express yourself to others and are overlooked in your attempts, **there is no quicker way to get locked into first circle.**
- Try to enter these settings feeling as socially complete as possible so you don't get sucked into FOMO spirals.
- If you become an audience member, watch the group like a TV show and gather data; this information will help you connect with these people individually if you so choose.

# Platonic vs. Romantic Connections

## Platonic Connections:

- Relatively reserved body language
- Friend teasing (no flirting, sexual tension)
- Special, but not exclusive
- Hugs are often the extent of the physical element
- Emotional support doesn't have to be explicit
- Lower communication/active maintenance demand; can lose touch for years and pick right back up where you left off

## Romantic Connections:

- Closer body language
- Romantic teasing
- Exclusivity (yes, even in poly relationships)
- There tends to be sex in this one lol (or some kind of heightened physical element)
- If there's no mutual emotional support, bye bye
- A need for constant maintenance and communication for the relationship to stay alive



## Signs one is becoming the other:

- Spending more one-on-one time together on whims or despite inconvenience
- Increasing emotional involvement
- Latent sexual chemistry
- The relationship itself overrides outside expectations or anxiety
- Habitual "How was your day?" texts on a regular basis

## Gray Areas and Limerence:

- Friends With Benefits (FWB) is an option when both parties communicate heavily, and are self-aware about needs and expectations going in
- **Limerence:** an unhealthy, obsessive crush based on an unfulfilled personal need
- **Limerence vs. actual chemistry:** one takes place outside the relationship, the other exists inside the relationship. The latter comes from what you're lacking, the former comes from completeness in a relationship dynamic.





# Healthy vs. Unhealthy Relationships

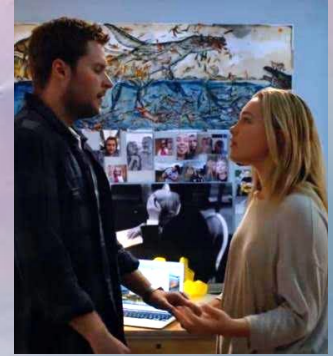
## Healthy:

- Respectful of boundaries when they're set, willing to admit when wrong
- Compromise and consensus based on collective needs
- **Honest conflict** addressed when it needs to be
- Any feeling that you have, rational or irrational, is worth communicating so long as you can detach yourself from being driven by it in the conversation
- A equitable and \*relatively\* even amount of effort put in from both parties
- Open communication about where both parties have trouble with communication and conflict



## Unhealthy:

- Having boundaries that are either too loose or too rigid, walking on eggshells
- Stonewalling or gaslighting legitimate concerns (“it was just a joke, lighten up”)
- **People-pleasing** and suppressing your issues
- RSD-spiraling overriding accountability for mistakes
- Criticisms turned back on you when brought up (“you made me do this”)
- Constant need for validation on either end
- “Mate Crime:” when people exploit someone’s naivete for their own selfish gains
- Unhealthy patterns \*can\* be improved on, but **ONLY** with communication/commitment

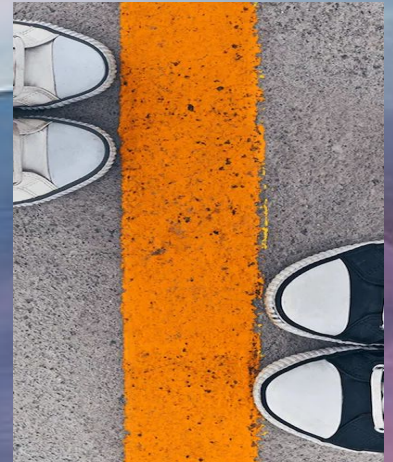


# BOUNDARIES

- Autistic people are more likely to experience abuse/victimization than their allistic peers.
- If you grow up experiencing ostracization, it's easy to begin devaluing yourself. You may not realize that you deserve better from friends/partners. You may forfeit boundaries altogether, accepting anyone who 'wants you around.'
- You deserve caring friends who respect your boundaries. Learning to set boundaries and stand up for yourself is key to healing. Sometimes, this means separating yourself from people who don't treat you well.
- Your boundaries with others inform your boundaries with yourself; if you let others cross your boundaries, you may be more likely to cross others'.
- Use your strong sense of justice/fairness to your advantage here.
- Train yourself to see the nuance in each situation you're in.
- One option is to write a Personal Constitution that outlines the basic tenets for how you will let yourself be treated by others.

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Boundaries are unique to each person, and they help define where one person ends and the other begins, so they are a crucial part of maintaining identity.



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