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## Dating: A Practical Guide for Autistic People

Author: a 49-year-old man with Asperger's

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In this article, a 49-year-old man with Asperger's shares his insights about being on the spectrum and handling the ins and outs of dating.

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The writer is a middle-aged, employed professional living in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was diagnosed with autism during graduate school while in his mid 30s.

As a 49-year-old guy, I have been actively dating for about 31 years now. Although for the first 11 years my efforts yielded almost nothing, the next 20 years yielded several long term relationships, hundreds of first dates, a few close friends, and many interesting stories and experiences. Through trial and error I have learned some things about meeting partners that may be helpful for others who are trying to find a special someone in their life. I hope what I have learned helps you!

### **Where to Meet Potential Partners**

When you're a student in high school or college it is easy to meet well-matched potential romantic partners. Almost all of the other students are roughly the same age as you, relationships usually turn over within a few months or even weeks so most people in partnerships will soon be single again, and it is easy to gradually get to know other students, especially if you have classes together. All of these factors make it easier to meet potential partners.

After college it becomes much more difficult to meet well-matched partners. There are three basic options for meeting people:

1. Go to singles events.

A. Talk to new people

2. Attend events centered around an area of interest, such as a photography club.

A. Learn from others

3. Online dating sites such as OKCupid.

A. Be careful

Let's look at these options more closely.

#### **Singles Events**

Singles events I've attended have often been held in loud bars or have involved some form of speed dating. I have sensory issues that include problems filtering out speech from background noise. So, when I go to a loud bar I'm frequently yelling, "pardon" or "could you please repeat that!" In a loud bar on a date I'm wasting a lot of energy struggling against the environment. This does not leave much energy to engage with a potential partner.

A few of the singles events, including speed dating, have been in coffee shops or synagogues. At these events suitors need to create an excellent first impression and find an almost instant connection. Personally I've always struggled with this. Many other people I know on the spectrum also struggle with this. Another problem with singles events is that you're in competition with almost everyone else at the event. My experience is that for people on the spectrum these are not good venues for meeting singles.

#### **Topic Centered Events**

Attending events around an interest, such as photography or dancing or even just a party, can result in meeting a potential partner. The advantages of this are that even if you don't meet someone, you can have fun at the event,

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The major disadvantage to trying to meet a partner at events that are not specifically for singles is that there are likely to be relatively few single, compatible people at any given event. Let's say I go to my photography club. Including transit time the event takes three hours. If there are 20 people at the event, half of them are likely to be of a gender that is not of interest to me and let's assume that half of the other 10 people are likely to already have partners. Of the remaining five, three are not likely to be a suitable match in terms of age range. That leaves two potential matches. A pool of two is very small.

Post college, meeting people at non-singles events tends to offer few opportunities to find potential partners.

### **Face-to-Face Contact**

Whether it is at a singles event or a topic oriented event, one major advantage of having initial contact with a partner in person versus meeting someone via the Internet is that there are fewer surprises. Even spending just a few minutes face to face with someone often gives a sense of whether chemistry exists or not. The Internet cannot provide this.

If you want to try making an initial contact with a partner in person, here are five tips that can help:

1. Go talk to a person you're attracted to when s/he is alone, rather than approach a person who is surrounded by suitors or other people. Courting a lone person provides your best chance of success because you have little competition and there is an opportunity to talk and get to know the other person. (There is an excellent scene about this in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, where this is described in terms of Game Theory.)
2. Go with a friend who can act as your wing person. This friend can say nice things about you and help you engage in conversation. You can appear modest. If you do this, it is, of course, best if you reciprocate by acting as a wing person for your friend.
3. If you want to talk to a group, look for groups where the people have their bodies somewhat facing outward rather than toward each other and there is a spot you can naturally enter into. For example, the group forms a U or V rather than an O where the circle is closed and everyone in the circle is facing others in the circle but has their backs to everyone else. The same goes for two people facing each other. Groups can be open to others entering or they can be closed to new people. If a group has its back to newcomers they probably are closed. An open group provides a better chance for you to meet people.
4. Attend the same event several times. Meet a few new people each time and also reconnect with the people you have already met. Often it works better if you do not try to get someone's contact information on the first meeting.
5. If the event is followed by a meal, try to sometimes or usually attend that meal. Try to sit across from or beside a person who interests you.
6. If you see someone you'd like to meet, ask yourself if you know anyone at the event who knows the person and also knows you. Approach the person you know when s/he is with the person you want to meet. Say hello to the person you know and it is likely you will be introduced to the person you want to meet. If you know a person well, you can request an introduction when s/he is not with the person you want to meet.
7. If a person you want to meet has a tattoo or a prominent piece of jewelry or a T-shirt with writing on it or is carrying a book, try striking up a conversation about that. For instance, you could ask "What does that tattoo mean to you?"

### **Online Dating**

In contrast, using online dating it is possible to screen potential partners much more rapidly. In three hours online it is possible to read 12-20 profiles and write 4-6 high quality messages to people of interest. (This is my own rate. Others' rates may vary.) With very few exceptions, every single profile is of an available person within your desired age range. To a large extent, the more potential partners you meet the more likely it is you will find a long-term


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potential partners. The rest of this section will be devoted to describing how to effectively use online dating sites.

Over the years, the sites I have personally tried are Match.com, JDate, eHarmony, Craig's List and OKCupid. At this point, I think OKCupid offers the best mix of services and it is free. Match and JDate have many users with listed profiles that have not logged in for months or even years. eHarmony does not offer much control for the dater. Craig's List had lots of daters on it in certain areas but over the last five years it has become a sort of unfiltered mess. Much more information about these sites can be found on the web so I will not describe them in detail.

Match, JDate and OKCupid all allow daters to create substantial profiles.

### *How To Make an Attractive Profile*

Start with good photos. The first one should be a good photo of your face. If you do not have one, it may be worth paying a professional photographer to take some photos of you. According to Aziz Ansari's and Eric Klinenberg's excellent book *Modern Romance: An Investigation* males have the most success with photos of themselves with animals such as dogs and females have the most success with photos of themselves taken from above, looking up at the camera.

Next you'll want to think about or make a list of what makes you special in good ways and what activities you could imagine sharing with a partner. Here's the start of a fictitious profile essay:

I work full time as a network engineer. When I'm not working I love to read, hike, attend jazz performances and live theater, watch movies, bicycle, visit art museums, shop at farmers' markets, play Scrabble and exercise. On weekends I enjoy exploring the great restaurants and rugged topography of San Francisco.

Even though I love living in San Francisco, broadening my worldview is important to me. So, when I have more time off, I often travel, sometimes to national parks to hike (Yosemite, Acadia and the Grand Canyon are favorites) and at other times internationally to experience other cultures. Twice I've lived abroad for more than a year. The stories of places fascinate me because they add a dimension to the surface that I can see with my eyes. I'm interested in everything from the history of the people to the fossil record to the geology of the places I visit.

When I'm at home, almost every week I read the *New Yorker*. Walking is my favorite mode of transportation because I enjoy moving, plus when I'm walking I'm not separated from my environment by glass and steel. Often I notice interesting things to explore and sometimes I'll see a sign in a window for an event and decide to attend. Sometimes walking is impractical. On those occasions I take public transit or I drive my ecologically friendly car.

This fictitious profile tells the reader how well the dater can write, that he's probably solvent, worldly, cultured, curious, etc. It also says that if someone goes on a date and the other person reads or visits museums or watches movies or explores San Francisco or has lived abroad, both daters will probably have something to talk about on a first date.

More generally, the fictitious character is saying, "I have an interesting life. I have the following to share..."

Next figure out a little about what you're looking for ideally and a little about what you're willing to accept. One hint here: it is generally only reasonable to expect what a mate has to offer to be commensurate with what you have to offer. For instance, if you're physically out of shape, don't expect to find a partner who is an athletic supermodel or if you're unemployed don't expect a partner who is super successfully employed. It probably isn't going to happen so be realistic. People generally partner with people at a similar functional level. If you want to learn more about this, read about the biological principle "assortative mating."

Here are a few criteria to think about in terms of what you're willing to accept:

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- Whether a partner wants children or not

One hint, the fewer your requirements, the bigger your pool. Personally I'm a vegetarian and I state that in my profile. However, I don't care if a partner eats meat and I state that in my profile too.

### *Narrowing Down Options*

When I read through a profile I look for things we have in common. If we have nothing in common, then I move on. Suppose I've read through the fictitious profile above and want to contact the person because I think we may be a good match. Here's what I may write:

Hi, As I read through your profile I noticed several interests we share. I like live jazz performances, play Scrabble, read the op-ed pages of the New York Times (I sure was bummed when Frank Rich left the New York Times to write for *New York Magazine*) and love exploring San Francisco.

Would you like to visit the Ferry Building farmer's market on Saturday? We could marvel at the weirdly-colored genetically-modified fruits and grab a bite to eat at Out the Door. Also, there usually is live music at the market. Another alternative is go see the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit at the De Young on Friday night. There will be live music there too. Afterward, if we're hungry we can eat dinner in the Sunset neighborhood or at the museum.

Please let me know if any of these options sounds appealing.

Warmly, Pat

By this, I've demonstrated that I've read through the profile carefully and am responding to what I read. The response is not generic. The date ideas were drawn from interests mentioned in the profile. The profile mentioned farmers' markets and art museums. By mentioning the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit I show that I know a little about what's happening in San Francisco. Likewise, mentioning eating at Out the Door hints at having local knowledge of the Ferry Building. Using the phrase, "marvel at the weirdly-colored genetically-modified fruits," sounds a bit quirky and a bit of quirkiness makes your message distinct from the other messages. Too much quirkiness would not be good but just a dash, like a spice, is good.

### **How to Plan a Good First Date**

As you can see from my message above, both of the dates offered were activity dates that included options for a meal. There are three basic types of dates with which I am familiar:

1. Coffee/meal dates
2. Activity dates
3. Hybrids of the above two

Over the years what I've learned is that coffee/meal dates don't work well for me. In contrast, activity dates with the option to add a meal work very well. A coffee/meal date mostly consists of a conversation about past experiences. Often they slide into sort of interview dates, dates where each dater is asking the other dater a series of questions without end.

In contrast, during an activity date, both people are focused on another point of interest. For instance, in an art museum both daters can look at a painting and talk about what they notice or like about it. You can ask a dater, "What's your favorite piece in this room?" Once the dater finds it, you can ask what the person likes about it. If the

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interactions. Some good activity dates include:

- Museums
- Farmers' markets
- Walking on piers
- Looking at outdoor sculptures
- Hotel lobbies
- Looking at X-mas/holiday decorations
- Seeing murals and maybe having a Mexican meal
- Stair walks (This means figuring out walks that involve walking up and down many stairways. There are books of stair walk routes in San Francisco and in the East Bay. Many of these stairways offer spectacular views.)
- Finding locations where movies were shot
- Visiting small art galleries
- Attending shows, such as orchid shows (If you do this make sure the topic of the show is of great interest to the other person. For instance, do not invite someone to attend MacWorld or a science fiction convention unless you really, really know the person is interested in the subject. These sorts of shows can completely absorb an Aspie with a special interest in the subject of the show and leave a date completely bored.)

This loops back to writing a good profile. A good profile will give a suitor a few good ideas about good date idea options, even if they only do so indirectly. From our fictitious profile we can directly determine that the writer would be interested in museums and farmers' markets. Indirectly we can easily interpret from the person's interest in art that the person may be interested in outdoor sculptures, murals and visiting small art galleries. We can see other options too by reading the profile carefully.

#### **So you landed a date! What should you do next?**

First, schedule to meet in a well-lit public place and make sure the other dater has a way to contact you, such as your cell phone number. I suggest wearing business casual attire, as if you were dressing for a day at the office. For men I would not suggest wearing a suit but a button down shirt and nice pants would be good. For women a blouse and skirt would work. Nice jeans are also OK for either gender.

Arrive a few minutes early. If you are carrying a small backpack it would be best to check that in the cloakroom (if one exists) prior to meeting. If your hands are sweaty, hold them palm up in the open air to let the sweat evaporate. When your date arrives, you may want to kiss him/her on the cheek or shake hands or hug. It depends on the interactions you've had beforehand. If the exchanges were flirtatious, then a kiss on the cheek may be in order. If they were businesslike/formal then a handshake will do. If the person shows up wearing Birkenstocks and a flowery dress/shirt, then definitely go for the hug. ;-) There's no best way to greet someone for all situations. If you want to be safe, go for the handshake. If the person starts to giggle a little or says something like, "Oh so formal," then lean in from the handshake and kiss the person on the cheek.

Flirting is important during a date. According to the Oxford American Dictionary flirting is to "behave as though attracted to or trying to attract someone, but for amusement rather than with serious intentions." Sometimes I think of flirting as equivalent to the way someone can push on ice with a stick to see if it will bear weight safely from the shore. It's a way of testing whether a more serious conversation about romance can take place but it gives both parties an easy exit if one of the parties is not interested. Flirting is indirect. As an Aspie I've always struggled with verbal flirting.

Physical flirting has always been easier for me. When I'm going up a curb or big step up or down on a trail, I offer a hand. If the person takes my hand for a little longer than necessary or just holds my hand then it is a sign the person may be interested in me romantically. In this case, what can be confusing is what exactly constitutes "a little longer

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someone will let knees touch but is not really interested. Sometimes I'll put out a hand near a person's hand so the person can take my hand but that does not always work well.

These are all signals that I'm interested in someone. If I have no interest in someone romantically, I will avoid touching and not flirt. If the person touches me I will withdraw a bit, slowly.

This is mostly what I have learned from many years of online dating. Best of luck as you venture out into your own dating experiences.

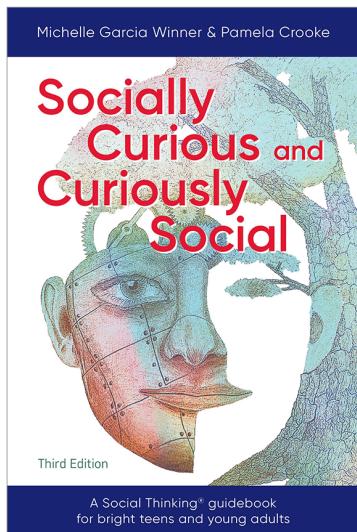
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1 A hint to make this kind of game successful is to keep it in the positive by asking about favorites. In general, it is tactically good to ask about positive experiences. When you ask a dater to describe his/her favorite vacation, the dater has happy memories. If you like the dater and you're lucky, the dater will associate those happy thoughts with you.

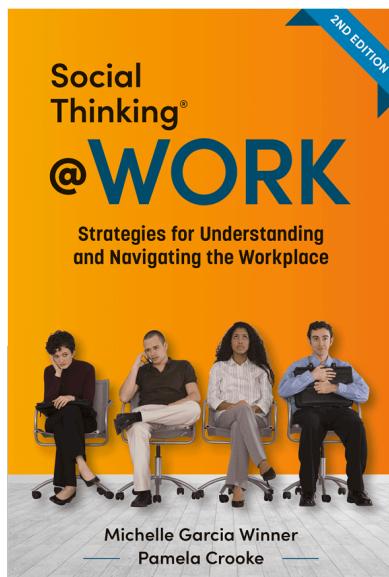
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