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## What is key to forming meaningful relationships?

### Rachel Townson

For me, a meaningful relationship is to having someone in my life that is willing to accept me as myself - the good the bad and the ugly. I am fortunate to have a group of people who accept me for who I am, but who also challenge me cognitively and emotionally. This helps to remove any internal doubts I may have that the relationships are token gestures.

I've had a number of toxic relationships with other people in the past. If I was to give my younger self any advice it would be to listen to my "gut", and to observe the behaviour of others. In the past I've made friends with someone toxic for me, and I ignored my "gut" and other signs such as her telling me others had abandoned her in the past. I felt sorry for the person and ended up feeling like their slave where I masked and abandoned my own "self" to fit in with their expectations of me. I will not be down this path again.

### Ella Tabb

For me a meaningful relationship is one in which there is trust, shared enjoyment and support. I think the key to forming meaningful relationships lies in three areas.

Firstly, shared special interests. Special interests are important to most people on the autistic spectrum. When you find someone with similar interests you always have something to talk about. This can lead to other, potentially more personal, areas of discussion.

Secondly, starting slowly. This can be hard for autistic people as we tend to be very direct, but in my experience, building rapport slowly leads to stronger, more meaningful relationships. Starting with small talk helps people to become comfortable talking about the bigger stuff.

Thirdly, you need to be honest and open. I'm a massive over-sharer and I've noticed that this helps other people to feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences with me. My openness helps other people to feel that I am honest and not judgemental. This helps them to feel safe opening up to me.

## **Lana Grant**

In my experience it can be difficult for anyone to form meaningful relationships, whether they are autistic or neurotypical. The key word is “meaningful”. Many people judge their success in relationships with how many friends they have or how exciting the relationship is. As I have become older I have realised that it's the quality of relationships that matter. Those qualities are loyalty, honesty, trust and not being judgmental.

There is the historical opinion that autistic people do not want friendships. That they are happy in their own world. The more we research the more we realise that this is not the case for everyone. Many autistics want relationships but are unsure how to go about making them and keeping them.

The key to a meaningful relationship is honesty. I may not shower my partner with physical affection all of the time, but I love him and I show that in the things I do that let him know I'm thinking of him, for example buying his favourite foods etc. I'm honest about my feelings with him and because of that there are no expectations on either side.

## **Robyn Steward**

Two questions to consider:

- what kind of relationship do you want?
- what is meaningful to you?

As late as my early 20's I had no idea that I would have people to go to gigs with who could help be my eyes, and share the experience with me instead of me feeling like a burden. For me these friendships are very meaningful.

Some autistic people do not want friends, and that should be respected. However do make the effort to find out if it is because they have been bullied and do not have any lived experiences of friendships, and if so this could be something addressed.

Some people may only be able to cope with one friend at a time, and others may need help in understanding that they can have more than one friend. Some people relish the opportunity to meet other autistic people, but for others it's not very meaningful.

So for me the key to meaningful relationships is:

- understanding what is meaningful to the person, and important to them
- understanding what shape/type of relationship they want and do not want – whether it's a friend, someone to go to gigs and events with, a date or a parent.