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## Developing and maintaining a relationship – a personal perspective

The difficulties associated with social interaction, communication and imagination are some of the most painful aspects of having autism. It is this triad of impairments that creates the 'glass jar' in which I reside. The glass jar makes it very difficult to connect with people. It is a good metaphorical description for: not fitting in, social anxiety, being an observer not a participant, feeling lonely even when around others, having different interests...

Relationships have always been really difficult for me and the reality is that I just cannot meet the 'neurotypical' expectations that most people have. For example, the type, frequency and duration of socialising that many people do - particularly at the start of a relationship - is not possible for me to keep up with. I don't like doing things in the evenings, meeting another person's friends and family is stressful, I don't like talking on the phone, I need a very large amount of alone time and privacy, and I don't seek activities that are outside of my usual routine (even very 'normal' things such as going to a pub or a bar, or going to the cinema or an art gallery cause me enormous amounts of anxiety).

As you can see, there are a number of difficulties that both of us have to contend with.

The key to a successful relationship is communication. In fact, I have learned that one of the most desirable things in a potential partner is good communication skills - or at least a willingness to be a better communicator. I already find communication very hard so I need to be with someone who finds communication easy and enjoyable. They need to be open minded and patient and understand that verbal conversation is hard for me, particularly when I'm feeling stressed. Writing or drawing or typing to each other - even if not done in real time - can be really effective.

A person who wants to have a relationship with me will need to understand that my routine is critical to my mental well being. Often this means I will be inflexible and rigid about the things

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we do and the times we do them but if someone is able to fit in around the routine (and we're both happy with the arrangement) then we will both end up enjoying each other's company a lot more. Advance planning for other things outside of the norm is important and can allow us to do these things with as little stress as possible, rather than miss out on them altogether. For example, if the partner wants to go and see a particular film at the cinema, we will plan together:

- the most comfortable time to go (weekday mornings tend to be quietest)
- how we will travel there (cycling or walking are always preferable over public transport)
- what we are going to do after the film has ended (usually, we go straight home).

Developing a relationship is probably more difficult than maintaining it. It takes a lot of effort to develop a starting 'level' of intimacy (i.e. friendship) because in order to get to know one another, I have to be committed to learning about the other person and spending time with them. This commitment can be hard, because my natural priorities in life are: alone time, routine and my special interest.

Until the other person understands what autism is and - most importantly - how it affects me (which can only really happen through time and experience), it's easy for them to doubt my level of interest and commitment to them, causing them to walk away from relationship possibilities.

Maintaining a relationship requires hard work and effort from both people but once both people know each other well enough (hobbies, reliability, punctuality, daily schedules, even the sorts of words and kind of language we use, etc.), there is less pressure to 'perform' and instead of being unable to meet unrealistic expectations, we are able to meet real ones.

The key to a long lasting, happy relationship for both people is to establish 'rules' so that each person knows what they can and can't expect from one another and hence will not be disappointed if they are not met. For example, if my partner has told me that watching football is important to him, I will cope better if he chooses to watch a match rather than see me for our normal 'routine time'. If he had not told me from the start that football was important to him, I'd find it hard to cope with his decision due to my strong desire for things to always be the same, regardless of outside factors.

For me, the advantages of being in a relationship are being able to connect with someone and have the opportunity to come out of the aforementioned glass jar and hence I feel less alone in the world. I like that we can do 'normal' things together, such as talking, walking the dog, or having a cup of tea, without getting bored. For him, he has someone very straightforward and genuinely very interested in learning about his experiences, thoughts and feelings. He knows where he is with me. For both of us, our life together is predictable, relaxing, and comforting.

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