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Autism, relationships and marriage

When it comes to forming relationships I have always been, what I call, someone that 'follows'. What I mean by this is that I need someone to take the lead in a social situation, someone to engage me and be proactive in the situation, otherwise I won't necessarily have the inclination to engage with others.

Up until I met my soon to be wife, I had not had any girlfriends in my life at all. In fact, relationships with most people had been difficult and I would really only engage with people when they initiated it and it would often have to be on my terms. I needed someone to drive interaction otherwise I wouldn't have instigated, nor felt I wanted, a relationship. My plan as a young man was to live alone - I could never have imagined having a relationship with anyone, I couldn't even relate to the concept of relationships.

Even at school I was a loner. No one would really engage with me, except occasionally when I spoke about my interests, such as space. However, these relationships and interactions would tend to be one-sided. They would involve either me giving a lecture about space or children joining in with games I had made up. If other children wanted to join in (they didn't often) then they would have to play to my set rules.

Forming our relationship

I first met my lovely wife on a computer course. I was 23 at the time and didn't have a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome back then. I was shy and didn't attempt to communicate with others in the class. My wife showed an interest in me and initiated everything, from talking to me to asking me on a date to the cinema.

I was extremely anxious of the date – what to expect, what to do, what was the protocol, what was I expected to say... My anxiety levels proved too much and I didn't turn up for the date.

Luckily for me, my wife forgave this and invited me on a second date. This time I did go. I wanted to stay at home and read but I also wanted to do the right thing and didn't want to let her down (again). My anxiety was again very high and the whole time I was constantly thinking "what I should do, what should I say" etc... I didn't look at her, instead focused on her shoes -

which I still remember. I managed to disguise my anxiety as best I could. Eventually I started to relax in her company and we started to talk a little more. Fortunately for me, she would take the lead on everything; what we did, where we went and when.

As I started to relax, I felt more comfortable meeting up. The more relaxed I became the more I spoke. I would tell her about my interests, I was more comfortable when talking about these subjects and could 'perform' quite well socially when doing so – my wife seemed to enjoy hearing me talk about these things as well!

My wife took the lead in initiating the relationship, something which was essential to us forming a relationship. I was very lucky to meet someone who was willing to take the lead with me and who genuinely seemed to appreciate me for me.

Developing our relationship

We got married in 2001 and our relationship has developed over this time, with me also getting a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome in 1997. Since diagnosis it has been easier for me to understand why I might have certain difficulties within our relationship and social situations more generally. It's also helped my partner to understand why I might not always respond to her in a way she might expect. Equally though I worry that it also means she holds certain things back from me as she feels it might be too much for me and make me stressed.

My wife has become aware of what I need in the relationship. For example sometimes I need quiet time, where I can go to a separate room and just be on my own, just read or do some writing (something I find important in terms of self-expression). She understands that I require this time either to calm down from being anxious or to prevent becoming anxious. It is now part of our relationship and is accepted – this really helps to make me feel understood.

Expectations in relationships

The key challenges for me in a relationship are the demands or expectations to do things. The expectation to do something new is very anxiety provoking. But the first challenge is often realising there even is an expectation. Often I won't know unless my partner explicitly tells me what she needs or wants. Over time we have both become better at expressing this.

The next challenge is how to respond to the need or expectation. I find it anxiety ridden, so to cope I attempt to turn it into a routine. If I can add the expectation or need into a routine then it becomes manageable for me and something I can do again and again.

To give a small and rather trivial example, when I first started sharing a flat with my wife she did all the cooking and washing up. She never asked for help or support. I thought she enjoyed the tasks and didn't require or want any help. It was only after several months that she asked why I never helped. "I didn't realise you wanted me to" I replied. Some may view this as avoiding a job but it really wasn't, it was a complete lack of awareness and understanding that she wanted, or might like, help. After it was explicitly said I felt terrible for not previously offering and I changed my routine to assist, it is now part of my daily activities.

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Date of publication: 02 January 2018

Although I like routines, changing them or creating a new one is still anxiety provoking. But I also have a very strong wish to make my wife happy, and feel very guilty if I know there is something she wants or needs and I haven't met that need. People often say autistic people lack empathy or can appear uncaring - for me I always want to be caring and do the right thing but often unless I'm explicitly told what people want I don't pick up on it. When I do realise I feel extremely guilty for not noticing – this for me is an issue related to being autistic – not always being tuned into to the needs of others.

“You become connected”

Life and marriage has meant being fortunate to find people to push me, to lead me into doing things. I often enjoy doing the very things that push me out of my normal comfort zone, going out for example. Without someone to push me towards that, I might not do it at all. I have been very lucky to find my wife, someone who was willing to take the lead, enter my world and be patient with me when I needed it. In return I hope I have been able to meet her needs and make her happy.

When I was younger the idea or notion of love was always slightly puzzling, now I have a better understanding of it, at least what it means to me. My idea of love is that once you have been around someone for a significant time, once you have shared memories and experiences, your lives become entwined, you become connected and have a longing to stay connected. If you didn't have that you would be totally lost because they are your other half, and a part of you.

My desire to please my wife has become even stronger as the years go by because of this growing connection. As a young man I never thought I would ever want a relationship, but now I can't imagine my life without it.