

Dating, Marriage & Autism



Stephen Shore (right)
with his wife, Yi Liu

A Personal Perspective

One doesn't need to be on the autism spectrum to be mystified by what is involved in dating. The challenges of beginning as acquaintances and shifting to friendship and/or a significant other requires excellent communication in the realms of the verbal, nonverbal, pragmatics and "theory of mind."

Those diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder are people too. The variations of strengths and needs non-spectrum people have are just as valid as someone not on the spectrum. So by looking at what could make socialization and dating easier for non-spectrum people and by goosing the amplitude some, perhaps it is possible to arrive at accommodations that will not only be useful to those on the spectrum, but perhaps assist a larger population of people, too.

By Stephen Shore

SPECIAL REPORT

Background

I was diagnosed at age two-and-a-half as having “atypical development with strong autistic tendencies,” and, at one point, viewed as being “too sick” to be treated on an outpatient basis and was recommended for institutionalization. With much help from my parents, teachers, and others, I am currently completing a doctoral degree in special education at Boston University with a focus on helping people in the autism spectrum develop their capacities to the fullest.

I am also married and consult internationally on adult issues pertinent to relationships, among other topics. In this article, I talk about how and why developing relationships for individuals on the autism spectrum can be difficult, and I offer examples of the kinds of things I did that helped me make it through my adolescent years and early adulthood.

Socializing

For starters, “small talk” can be difficult. Small talk is introductory conversation that doesn’t really go anywhere. For example, when passing a co-worker you may inquire, “How are you?” The response will most likely be “Fine, and you?”

Communication with those diagnosed with autism or Asperger Disorder tends to be more direction-oriented. Activity-based gatherings are much easier for those on the spectrum, too, rather than socially intensive activities. Examples of activity-based events might include school clubs devoted to certain interests such as computers, math, or even Pokémon; socially-intensive activities might include an office party, senior prom, or going to bar. (For me, a bar is a basketful of sensory violations where observations can be made

on non-spectrum interactions... but that’s for another article.)

During high school, one of my special interests was bicycling. When I started a bicycle club in high school and joined community-based bicycling clubs, such as American Youth Hostels, I was able to put my interest to use by socializing with others. Perhaps more important, I had a captive audience for my bicycle preservations.

Another special interest – music – was satisfied when I joined middle and high school musical ensembles. So by making use of and engaging in these special interests, it was the difference between a miserable public school experience versus a tolerable or even great one.

Demystifying Dating

A lot of thought should go into the process of dating. Hundreds of books have been written on the subject, and there are entire companies devoted to helping people find “that perfect match.” But how does it all translate to dating?

In most of Western cultures, the act of dating centers on socially based activities, where a premium is placed on nonverbal communication that is buttressed by communication of the verbal sort.

There are some key things that may make getting to know other people and dating easier. One important aspect is focusing on a mutual interest or a project so that the center of attention is not on impressing or otherwise being concerned about saying the right thing at the right time. Even if there is no intent on reaching “significant other status” with the other person, doing things with others can result in more friends and additional circulation in the community, as the probability of meeting others increases as one circulates with others.

Jerry Newport, a well-known person with Asperger Disorder, indicates that he met his wife, Mary, at an Asperger support group meeting. Both of them engaged in activities they liked, socialized with other like-minded individuals, and eventually they married.

Types of Dates

There are three types of “situations,” which I loosely classify as “dates” – play dates, homework dates, and serious dates. These are activities where people get together with the goal of accomplishing a task and/or getting to know each other.

Play Dates.

The first of this type of activity are the play dates. At the elementary school age, due to today’s busy lifestyle, it is common for parents to set up play dates for their children. Parents of two or more children schedule a time for their young ones to get together for the purpose of playing.

Homework Dates.

The second category is the homework date. The homework date is an extension of the play date. Usually this happens unintentionally as students of middle or high school and college levels agree to meet to work on an outside-of-class assignment. This is how my wife, Yi Liu, and I met. Having, by chance, ended up in a music class, we agreed to meet regularly for mutual assistance. Since my wife-to-be had only recently arrived from the People’s Republic of China, it was difficult for her to understand the instructions our Music professor was giving, and, for her, it was a significant challenge. However, her musical ability somewhat exceeded that of our instructor, as she served as principal harpist of the Beijing Symphony for nine years before coming to the United States to further her education.

At predetermined times, we met either at school, or at one of our homes to work on the assignments. While I helped her understand the language aspects of the coursework, she assisted me in better understanding music.

These homework dates gave us a way to share a common interest (or project) and allowed us to know each other better. As with the play date, the activity was primary with the act of getting to know each other secondary. However, this secondary benefit of getting to know others in this manner is very important for anyone challenged by the “standard” ways of meeting other people. Homework dates are one way to increase socialization with others.

Serious Dates:

These are situations where the goal of meeting is to get to know someone better for the express purpose of moving toward significant other status. This type of dating requires very good reading of subtle social situations and nonverbal cues; which can often be very difficult for people on the autism spectrum to perceive and decode accurately. Due to this difficulty in using the subtle nonverbal and verbal social cues that are often such an important component of the non-spectrum dating scene, I feel it is important for people on the spectrum to get to know others from a position of strength; things and/or through events where social interaction is secondary to activities at hand.

Obstacles To Be Aware Of

There are obstacles that might affect your child’s ability to develop relationships.

Detecting Interest.

As I have written in my book, *Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger*

Syndrome, I depended on the women I dated to use the “cranial concussive therapy method” in order to let her intentions be known to me. In other words, a woman would have to explicitly tell me and/or give me a hug to let me know that she desired to date me. Being unable to read the numerous dating-related nonverbal cues involved made it impossible for me to determine whether another person was interested in dating me, and I was very fortunate that no one took advantage of me given the situation.

Reading Nonverbal Cues.

With that said, difficulty reading nonverbal cues related to dating can pose additional challenges for those with autism, particularly those desiring to meet others and establishing intimate relationships. For men with the disorder, this is especially hard. In society today, men are expected to make the first move; however, he does so, they need to be able to detect the gesture will be welcome.

Bullying.

Bullying by one’s peers is a serious problem and can have a life-long affect on someone’s self-esteem and how one interacts with others in their environment. An example of bullying is when a friend of mine on the autism spectrum was not only forced into and trapped in a school locker, but also locked into a dark room. As a result, she experiences a traumatic stress syndrome related effect if she feels she is locked in any room against her will. One time, when locked in a hotel room, it was all her friend could do to prevent her from trying to escape out a window... which was several stories above ground.

I experienced bullying all through elementary, school, even up until today. While in middle school, when a group of children began

to bully me in middle school, my math teacher handled the situation in an interesting fashion. First, he brought me into his office and asked for a list of children who were giving me a problem. I was very nervous at his proposal that we call each one down to his office and confront them individually. Eventually, though he talked me into pursuing these confrontations.

With sweaty palms I waited as my math teacher, who turned into my very own protector, called the first one of the students who had been bullying me to join us. Once in the room, my teacher explained to this person that even though I “seemed a little different” there was no need to “tease,” and he made it clear that further teasing would not be tolerated. At the end of the 15-minute session, the administrator asked both of us to shake hands and, down the road, those who were my enemies began to talk to me in a more reasonable fashion were much friendlier.

Marriage

Marriage to me, is very interesting, to say the least. The guidelines for maintaining a good marriage are similar to those who are not on the spectrum. They include: a lot of hard work, honesty, and not depending on the other person to “mind read” the other’s desires and intentions.

It is important for my wife to tell me if she is angry with me, rather than to depend on my trying to figure out her state of mind by her actions. If something is upsetting to another person or if they would like their partner do something, it is best for them to just directly talk about it in a calm manner.

For example, there is a windup travel alarm clock my wife uses to time her practice sessions on the

harp. While most people may like the sound of a ticking clock, for me, it draws all of my attention and makes it impossible to concentrate on anything else such as reading or resting. Aural sensitivities make it difficult to keep background stimuli out of the foreground and are common to those on the autism spectrum (Smith-Myles, Cook, Miller, Rinner & Robbins, 2000). My solution was to close up the clock and stuff it under the cushion of a chair. So when I would arrive home after a long day of work or studying, I'd find an angry wife storming around the house, demanding to know what I had done with the clock that was now missing. Although telling her where the clock was during solved the problem of locating the clock, it didn't resolve her anger at my moving her belonging.

After some discussion about sensory sensitivities common to those with autism, she realized why I hid the clock and now knows that when the clock is missing, which chair cushion it most likely will reside under. Domestic tranquility at last! A more proactive step might have been for me to realize that while I may have had good reason to move the clock out of "earshot," it would have been important to tell my wife what I had done with the clock and why.

It is important to realize that people with autism often perceive the environment and express their emotions differently; their thought processes are not similar to those not on the autism spectrum.

Advice for Parents

Learning how to develop relationships can be difficult for any young person, and it can be especially hard for individuals with autism. Parents can play a crucial role in helping their child with autism develop the skills he

or she needs to build any relationship, from friendship to romance.

Tips I offer to parents are as follows:

1. Take an active role in learning more about the subtleties of adolescence and relationships. Tap into resources that you find most comfortable, whether they be books, the Internet, other parents, educators, counselors, etc.
2. Encourage your child to get involved with activities of interest that involve interactions with other people either in group or club-like settings. This way, interaction with others will center on the activity or interest at hand without the pressure of social interaction being the primary reason for getting together. The automatic commonality between people who have gathered together for this reason can, and will, lay the groundwork towards closer relationships with others.
3. Teach your children how to interact with others when a romantic interest is present. In addition, teach the importance of not forcing oneself on another and being able to recognize a lack of interest. That said, it can be a challenge for people on the autism spectrum to know how to ask a person on a date more than once and that continued queries become a bother or perhaps worse, considered harassment. Note that there are many more issues related to dating. Useful ideas on encouraging appropriate behavior for men and women can be found in the book *Autism-Asperger's and Sexuality: Puberty & Beyond* by Jerry and Mary Newport.

Stephen Shore is currently a doctoral student in special education at Boston University with a focus on helping people in the autism spectrum develop their capacities to the fullest. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Autism Society of America, and involved in or plays a similar leadership role in other autism-related groups.

In addition to consulting internationally on the topic of relationships, among other issues, he is the author of the book Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences With Autism and Asperger Syndrome. You can learn more about Stephen Shore by visiting his Web site at www.autismasperger.info.

Recommended Reading:

Two very good sources in understanding relationships between people on the autism spectrum are:

- *The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome* by Maxine Aston
- *An Asperger Marriage* by Gisela and Christopher Slater-Walker.

References:

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