

## AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASDs): IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Social norms govern most aspects of our lives and there are many unwritten rules that guide our behaviour, especially in terms of romantic and sexual relationships. Autism is a disorder that impairs both communication and social skills and limits a person's ability to detect emotional and social cues. Autistic individuals have difficulty learning and understanding the unwritten rules of social interaction and thus may exhibit behaviours considered to be inappropriate or troubling. In this issue of Check the Research, we will discuss aspects of autism that may affect sexuality and interpersonal relationships. A review of recent research on sexuality and autism will add to our understanding of the unique social challenges faced by individuals with autism and demonstrate the importance of high quality sexuality education for this group.

### WHAT ARE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASDs)?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) include a range of conditions that are characterized by difficulty with communication and social interaction, repetitive behaviours, and a tendency toward narrow, focussed interests. The terms autism and Asperger syndrome refer to conditions on the spectrum of autistic disorders. A diagnosis of Asperger syndrome traditionally has been applied to those who are considered to be higher functioning. Individuals with autism exhibit symptoms that range from mild to severe. There is now a move towards using the designation autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to encompass all individuals with autistic symptoms of varying severity and prevalence.

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorders has been steadily rising over the last decade. While there are no comprehensive Canadian statistics on the prevalence of autism, recent statistics from the United States indicate that 1 in 88 children have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (CDC, 2012). Statistics also show that ASDs are five times more common among boys than girls, and these disorders cross all ethnic, racial and socioeconomic groups.

### ASDs AND SEXUALITY

People with ASDs have difficulty reading social cues, such as facial expressions and body language, which can lead to difficulties forming and maintaining relationships. Some may suffer from hypersensitivity, where physical touch and stimuli is unpleasant and even painful, and others may be hyposensitive, which leads to an increased need for sensory information in order to feel comfortable and secure. Both these conditions may cause sexual and relationship problems. A hypersensitive individual may avoid physical intimacy and thus alienate partners. A person who needs constant or excessive stimulation may experience difficulties with arousal and orgasm.

Studies have shown that youth with ASDs generally have the same desire for sexual and romantic involvement as their typically developing peers (Chan & John, 2012). However, research also shows that these youth have less sexual health knowledge than their peers (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011). Youth often rely on their peer group as a main source of information about sexual and romantic relationships, and those with autism disorders have fewer chances to interact socially and to learn the "rules" of appropriate sexual and relationship behaviour. Since youth with autism disorders often lack social interaction and sexual knowledge they may have difficulty in grasping the concept of public and private space, and they may display inappropriate sexual behaviour such as unwanted touching, masturbation and undressing in public.



“I’M WORRIED THAT MY SON IS GOING TO BE PERCEIVED AS A STALKER WHEN HE IS JUST LONELY AND WANTS SOMEONE TO TALK TO.”

“I’M CONCERNED THAT HIS EXPRESSION OF AFFECTION OR INNOCENT CURIOSITY WILL BE MISTAKEN FOR A SEXUAL COME-ON.”

“MY SON’S BEHAVIOR MIGHT BE MISINTERPRETED AND BECAUSE HE CANNOT COMMUNICATE WELL, HE WILL BE ARRESTED.”

(Comments by parents of autistic children cited in Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009. pp. 79-80.)

## RECENT RESEARCH ON ASDs AND SEXUALITY

In a recent review of research on autism and sexuality, Gougeon (2010) highlighted a number of findings from various studies. As previously noted, autistic youth were shown to lack some basic communicative and relationship skills such as the ability to read facial expressions and to anticipate emotional responses, and the ability to initiate and end social interactions. According to Gougeon, researchers have found that most sexuality education curriculums assume that youth have learned these skills outside the classroom. Such an assumption cannot be made for youth with autism disorders since many have not learned these rules of behaviour in their day-to-day lives. This lack of basic communication and social skills highlights the need for sexuality education programs to include instruction on socially acceptable behaviour (Gougeon, 2010).

“THERE IS A SURPRISINGLY LARGE NUMBER OF RULES TO LEARN WHEN IT COMES TO SEXUALITY—MANY OF WHICH ARE UNWRITTEN AND RELY ON SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING AND NUANCES. FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH ASDs, SOCIAL DEFICITS CONTRIBUTE GREATLY TO DIFFICULTIES WITH SOCIOSEXUAL CONCEPTS.”

(Nichols, S. & Blakeley-Smith, A., 2009, p.86)

An Australian survey of 21 young adults with high functioning autism and 39 typically developing young adults, found significant differences between the two groups on a number of measures of sexual behaviour (Mehzabin, & Stokes, 2011). When compared to the control group, individuals with autism reported having fewer sexual experiences, less sexual knowledge and fewer social interactions in general. Young adults with autism also reported more anxiety and concern about their future, in terms of the possibility of finding a life partner and the chances of having their behaviour misinterpreted as sexual when it was not intended as such. The authors conclude that given these findings sexual education for youth with ASD should include a focus on social rules and ways to enhance interpersonal communication and social interaction (Mehzabin & Stokes).

Canadian researchers Byers, Nichols, Voyer, and Reilly (2012) conducted an online study of 141 individuals with high functioning autism who were living in the community and had had at least one romantic relationship of 3 months or longer. Participants were primarily white (91%), heterosexual (68%) and female (60%), and ranged in age from 21 to 73 years. The authors contacted national and international autism organizations for



interested participants, the majority of whom were from the United States (57%), followed by Australia (23%), Europe (9%), the UK (7%) and Canada (4%). Byers et al. note that while autism is much more common among males than females, their sample did not reflect this ratio. As well, they caution that the results might not be representative of many individuals with ASDs, for example, those with limited sexual experience or those who are uncomfortable talking about sexual issues. Given these limitations, the study offers some interesting observations about the sexual well-being of individuals with ASDs.

Byers et al. (2012) found that the men in their study reported higher levels of sexual well-being than women. Sexual well-being was characterized by sexual satisfaction, desire, arousal, positive thoughts and frequency of masturbation. Women reported higher levels of sexual knowledge, and men and women did not differ significantly in terms of sexual esteem, assertiveness, anxiety, frequency of sexual activity. However, Byers et al. reported that those individuals with more severe ASD symptoms had higher levels of sexual anxiety and lower levels of sexual satisfaction. Those in relationships, regardless of the severity of ASD symptoms, reported higher levels of sexual activity and satisfaction. The importance of this study lies in its focus on healthy sexuality rather than on problematic sexual behaviour. Byers et al. note that their study helps to counter the image of individuals with ASDs as being asexual or incapable of healthy sexual relationships, and supports the importance of sexual education that emphasizes positive sexual messages.

**“BY STARTING EARLY, PROVIDING POSITIVE MESSAGES ABOUT SEXUALITY...INDIVIDUALS WITH ASDs WILL HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE SEXUAL SELF-VIEW, BUILD CONFIDENCE AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE, AVOID POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS SITUATIONS FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS, AND SEEK THE SEXUAL WELL-BEING THAT BEST MEETS THEIR NEEDS AND DESIRES.”**

(Byers, Nichols, Voyer, & Reilly, 2012. p. 13)

Researchers Gilmour, Schalomon and Smith (2012) compared 82 high functioning ASD individuals living in the community with a control group of 282 members of the general population. The study found no significant difference between the two groups in terms of understanding of sexual language. As well, there was no significant difference between the range of reported sexual orientations of the two groups. The results did show a higher rate of asexuality among individuals with ASDs as compared to the control group, and a higher rate of homosexuality among females with ASDs. The authors note that this finding of an increased rate of homosexuality among females with ASDs highlights the need for sexuality education that deals with issues related to sexual orientation (Gilmour, Schalomon, & Smith, 2012).

## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Individuals with ASDs have difficulty recognizing social cues and learning the unwritten rules that govern sexual and romantic behaviour. These social impairments may lead to inappropriate behaviour and difficulty forming relationships. However, research shows that those with autism disorders experience sexual feelings and desire sexual relationships similar to their typically developing peers. Sexuality education that focuses on learning socially accepted behaviours, and that promotes the concept of healthy sexuality, is an important step in ensuring that individuals with ASDs have satisfying sexual experiences and relationships.



“..INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM ARE SEXUAL; THEY ARE INTERESTED IN SEXUALITY, HAVE SEXUAL NEEDS, AND OFTENTIMES WANT TO DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS. MOREOVER, INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM DISPLAY A WIDE VARIETY OF SEXUAL INTERESTS AND BEHAVIOURS. IN OTHER WORDS, SEX MATTERS.”

(Gougeon, 2010, p. 348)

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