



## MAKING AND KEEPING CONNECTIONS

Even though relationships are difficult to manage, they are worth trying to have.

Like other older adults, people on the spectrum may be prevented by career change, illness, lack of transportation, or changes in home location or environment, from being as social or as active as they once were. They may actually miss having day to day contact with others they once had, even if they were not close to fellow workers or neighbors. If there were some fairly close friendships, a person might miss them but not know how to keep a relationship going outside of the structure it once lived in. This might manifest as loneliness or depression. Becoming more isolated can lead to greater anxiety not to mention a loss of social skills. Having interactions with others keeps our moods upbeat and our focus sharper. It can also make us aware of how we are using our time, as we share stories of what we've been doing, compare notes about shared interests or converse about common topics like news events or the weather.

Email is certainly a good way to reconnect with people but the old fashioned methods of telephone and letter writing can be just as nice. Everyone likes to get real mail ! If transportation is an issue, perhaps a relative can help plan a get-together with the friend. It's also possible to make new connections by subscribing to email lists and groups online among people with similar interests. The amount of interaction is entirely up to each participant.

It is important not to become too reclusive as we age. Aging can exaggerate the impact of chronic physical and medical issues. Research now points to a worsening of mental health issues as well, including some of our autistic tendencies and related conditions like anxiety, depression and obsessive behaviors, possibly due to greater isolation. We need to get outside of our small in house world for fresh air and sunshine. But we also need to get out so we will have a sense of belonging to a community of some kind, even if our world only consists of shop keepers or dog walkers, and the occasional visit from a relative. Getting out of the house and interacting with others is good exercise of all our abilities, encourages self-sufficiency, and also gives us an opportunity to make new connections and explore new areas. We might even find someone interested in one of our favorite topics.

Some people have plenty of shallow relationships – acquaintances but struggle with participating in deeper ones. Or we may have dysfunctional relationships, that got started, then stalled due to misunderstandings, un-met expectations, emotions running too high, insensitivities on one side or the other, all these things can leave us confused and paralyzed and ready to give up. Sometimes we have different views about the meaning or type of relationship than the other person or people involved. We may feel closer or more distant than they do. We may not understand the other's feelings or viewpoints. We may feel disrespected. Sometimes the conflicts are introvert vs. extrovert, perhaps there is a romantic problem, or a disappointment or tragedy has occurred and we're not sure what to say.

Communicating with other people can be very difficult. Managing relationships can be exhausting. But remember, these issues are just not a problem for autistic spectrum folks. Very few people are experts in communication and relationships, particularly close relationships like family or romantic ones. The ones we are born into are especially deep and usually will survive many trials and conflicts, because people who care about each other will forgive each other. Then you can start over. Always remember that it is important for the health of all relationships to respect each other's space and privacy and to feel free to take breaks from one another's company. We all need to recharge.

It's always worth it when things go wrong to try and clear things up, to keep deep relationships strong, because those connections really matter. We depend on getting people's help sometimes, and we need to be dependable ourselves if they need us. Having friendships and relationships really helps for coping with anxiety and depression, and it is good for us to have someone we can help. That makes us feel competent and needed: relating to others can give us more of a sense of purpose. And doing things with someone else is just twice as enjoyable.

Romantic relationship issues are more difficult to sort out. Often because they were haphazardly put together in the first place. That's why it's better to take romantic relationships very slowly in order to build a strong foundation. Not jumping into "the deep end" right away, living together too soon, or starting a family, until both people are on the same wavelength and have agreed about most things.

Very few people want to be isolated. Most people want to have friendships, even intimacy, the kind of relationship where one can share deep thoughts, hopes and fears. To love and be loved for who we really are. It's difficult for anyone to find that kind of connection and for people on the spectrum even more difficult.

Primarily because we have trouble “reading” people, getting to really know them, and they us. And also it is difficult for us to judging whether someone is being honest, whether they are trustworthy. We tend to be overly trusting. We have probably been hurt or betrayed many times. So we tend to be apprehensive or shield ourselves from making connections. Trying to meet people through the internet is probably the least good idea for us. Many commercial venues – restaurants or bars – being extremely loud and chaotic - are not good either.

One solution is to connect first to a group of people in a more peaceful environment: perhaps an organization, interest group or a religious community. We might try taking a class at a school, community center or gym. These are safer spaces to meet new individuals, and provides the benefit of socializing or doing things together with other people. Some groups even go out of their way to make new people feel at home! Staying on the sidelines until you feel comfortable enough to talk is more acceptable. It’s easier to say hello and find a topic of conversation.

The first step is always the hardest. You just have to decide to reach out and say Hi, then introduce yourself. Say something like: How are you today? Then wait for them to say something back to you. Show genuine interest in what they say. Don’t monopolize the conversation. The best compliment you can give is to listen. If you enjoy chatting with the person, make a point to repeat the process the next time you are there. Eventually you and the other person might find enough in common to try socializing somewhere else.

Finding an activity to explore with a new friend is a good way to begin. Start small and slowly. A trip to a coffee shop. Then maybe a movie or visit to a museum. See what develops. Most relationships start with something in common. Then getting to know each other a little at a time. Sharing details about each other’s lives and interests. And each other’s idiosyncrasies. Eventually you’ll want to help your friend with something or perhaps they will give you a small gift. Give and take. You each will trust the other person a bit more. You will learn how you are the same and how you are different. You will probably both be willing to change a routine a little bit to fit the other person’s needs. You will start to have a history. And that’s how relationships are built. But you will have to keep working at it. Don’t get distracted and forget to call.

The more you try, the better you will get at being friendly and becoming sociable. Eventually you will have a circle of connections around you.