

Hello, and Welcome to the Flexible Mind Therapy Podcast.

My name is Joe Falkner, and I will be your host today. Thank you for joining me. I'm still working to get the hang of podcasting, and I hope to improve over time. Thank you for your patience.

In the last podcast, we discussed neurotypical development of sexuality and introduced some of the difficulties that individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders may have in their development. During that podcast, we discussed that sexuality goes far beyond sexual intercourse, and in fact encompasses our relationships, self-image, identity (in particular, our gender identity and sexual identity), intimacy, as well as a number of other areas. As the World Health Organization acknowledges, sexuality and sexual health are basic human rights. And as I mentioned last time, mature, fulfilling relationships that meet the individuals' social, emotional, and sexual needs are often the logical extensions of the social skills work that we begin with individuals with ASD when they are younger.

In today's podcast, we will look more at how the social difficulties that many people with Autism Spectrum Disorders experience affects their relationship and sexual development. Now, as the popular saying in autism community goes, if you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. Key for me here is that the person is an individual. They may have individual strengths and challenges that are very different from others. The expression of their ASD may be unique, and it may have greater or lesser impact on their relationship and sexual development. In addition, the individual's life experiences, co-occurring challenges and/or disorders, and cultural and spiritual backgrounds, may have profound effects on how individual's development.

I mention this because there can be a tendency to want to lump everyone together, and/or to say, "this person doesn't have Autism" because they do not fit a particular profile or expression of ASD. What I'm sharing today are generalities, and they may fit a particular individual to a greater or lesser extent. These generalities, though, will hopefully provide some insights into the specific actions of particular individuals with ASD for you.

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction are one of the two defining characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fifth Edition. The other characteristic, restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, will be discussed in a later podcast. These deficits may be expressed as challenges with social-emotional reciprocity (or the back-and-forth of interactions both socially and emotionally), use and understanding of nonverbal communication behaviors for social interaction (including facial expressions, eye gaze and contact, and interpretation of body motion), and developing and maintaining relationships appropriate to their developmental levels (including, play partners early on, friends, familial relationships, and later intimate relationships). There are a number of ways that these can be manifested within the individual's everyday social interactions and relationships, and as is probably apparent, these can have significant effects on relationship and sexual development.

Authors and researchers have combined personal and professional experience with research findings to define a number of areas that may be causing struggles for individuals with ASD in the social domain. As I mentioned in the prior podcast, many individuals with ASD will develop at a faster rate biologically than they do socially, emotionally, and interpersonally. This may mean that although they are chronologically and or physically demonstrating the characteristics of a certain developmental age, their social and emotional development may lag behind. Thus, an individual with ASD who is chronologically 18, who has been progressing through puberty and into young adulthood, may have yet to meet some of the social and emotional milestones that one would expect for their age.

This may lead to confusion with partners and others who have chronological age expectations of the individual that the individual with ASD may have difficulty meeting. They may lack the social and emotional experiences and maturity that others their same age have. On the one hand, this may be appealing to some partners who see the individual with ASD as more innocent and kind. (Attwood, *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, 2007) On the other, over time this social and emotional maturity can lead to stressors within the relationship that may be difficult for the individual with ASD to both see and address. This may put a strain on the relationship, where their partner sees their role evolving in ways as

more of a “helper” rather than a true partner. We will discuss this further a little bit later when we discuss the topic of social/emotional reciprocity.

In addition, this social immaturity can lead some individuals with ASD to be more gullible and vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by others. As with younger individuals with ASD, adolescents and adults may be prone to being bullied, or may be given misinformation about relationships and sexuality by others. “This can include instances of being deceived and ‘set up’ that could lead the person with Asperger’s syndrome to be accused of inappropriate social or sexual behaviour.” (Attwood, Relationship Problems of Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome , 2012) The individual with ASD may believe an underage partner when they tell them that they are of age without checking or attending to many of the signs that a similarly aged young adult might.

They may also be manipulated, coerced or exploited due to their social naivete’. This can take a number of different forms: 1) they may be convinced to engage in sexual activity because they enjoy the attention that they may be given, but misinterpret that the attention is solely sexual in nature and isn’t a part of a fuller, richer relationship (Attwood, Relationship Problems of Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome , 2012); 2) they may be convinced to give money or gifts as a part of the relationship, not understanding that the attention shared is merely to coerce additional money or gifts; 3) they may place themselves in unsafe positions because they trust their partner, that may actually place them at risk for sexual exploitation or rape; and 4) they may act on information provided by others that is inaccurate, and even harmful (such as approaching a young woman who they have been told is interested in them, only to find out this was a “cruel joke” from the person who told them this information).

These are just a few examples of how the social immaturity and/or naivete’ may be exploited by others. There may be many other examples that could be appropriate for this explanation. When we discuss this vulnerability, we must be careful not to blame the vulnerability (or victimization that may occur) on the individual with ASD. This can lead to situations where the individual with ASD is “protected” from others or information. Dave Hingsburger (1995) describes this as the “prison of protection.” This protection is meant to protect the individual from sexual information, decision-making, society, and relationships; all because

their “vulnerability” places them at risk for victimization. He goes on to say that this prison is built of kindness, and is designed to “protect the person, who is seen as vulnerability encased in flesh.” Paradoxically, this not only blames the person for their victimization, this also deprives them of the training and skills necessary to empower them and help them to make the decisions that would mitigate their vulnerability. In essence, the “kindness” and desire to protect makes the individual with ASD more susceptible to exploitation and victimization. Their need is to receive the sociosexual training and information that helps them develop the skills and abilities to make decisions and successfully manage mature, fulfilling relationships that meet the individuals’ social, emotional, and sexual needs.

Now, it may be that some individuals with ASD may have intellectual or cognitive disabilities that place some limits on their ability to learn all of these skills. Some individuals will lack the capacity to consent to aspects of mature social, emotional and sexual behaviors. But, it is important that we do not see this individual as perpetually a child. There may be training needs for this person in appropriate sexual expression (including masturbation), public vs. private behaviors, hygiene and taking care of themselves, as well as other behaviors. The individual may need certain adaptations to material and training to be able to access this information. But, key is the understanding that despite their intellectual or cognitive disabilities, they will still go through the physical changes of puberty and still require sociosexual information and training tailored to their needs. We will hopefully discuss this further in future podcasts.

Another area of social difficulties that may lead to difficulties in development of relationships and sexuality is related to a concept called the “hidden curriculum.” “The hidden curriculum refers to the set of rules or guidelines that are often not directly taught but are assumed to be known.” (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2013) There are a number of “unwritten rules” involved in relationships, dating, marriage, etc... (Jackson, 2017) These “unwritten rules” are often the ones that carry some of the most significant social consequences. Examples of these may be: 1) “wanting to know the answer to a specific question should not be more important than the feelings of the people around you who might be embarrassed by your question” and 2) “if (someone) of the opposite sex is nice to you, this

does not mean that he/she is your boyfriend or girlfriend. Going around and telling your classmates and friends will make it very difficult to have relationships in the future.” (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2013)

As you can see from these examples, the hidden curriculum is quite varied. In fact, the very nature of the hidden curriculum can make it difficult to intuit on the one hand and teach on the other. The “unwritten rules” may be so ubiquitous, or omnipresent, that we may not even be aware of them. In fact, it may only be when these rules are violated that we do pay attention to them. I’m reminded of a young man with ASD that I worked with who got in trouble for writing on the bathroom stall walls at school. When questioned, he said that he had seen writing on the walls of most of the bathroom stalls that he had used, so he thought that it was okay. He thought he had “learned” or “intuited” the hidden curriculum of bathroom wall writing, but had missed that this was the exception (or really the breaking of the “unwritten rule”) rather than the rule itself.

The hidden curriculum of relationships, dating and sex can be even more difficult to figure out. “There is a relationship continuum from being an acquaintance to being a partner.” (Attwood, Relationship Problems of Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, 2012) How we move along this continuum with another person relies on our understanding of the “hidden curriculum” or “unwritten rules.” Drew (2017) writes “It is quite common for someone with autism to come on too strong too soon because we assume we have become friends with somebody and bombard them with compliments and invitations to events and want to hang out with them and discuss personal, intimate topics, only to discover they were only ever an acquaintance and now they think we’re weird. Alternatively, we can take things too slowly, not realizing the depth of the relationship we have formed, and can remain aloof and standoffish as we think we are not yet at that stage, which can equally damage the association with the other person as they think we are not interested.” Blasingame (2011) adds, “Learning to manage sexual urges in socially appropriate or acceptable ways becomes more challenging for a youth who has limitations in his grasp of the rules of social interaction. Many youth with ASD conditions have difficulty reading social cues and body language (Miller, Karam, & Rain, 2010). They have difficulty understanding social proprieties and may act upon a variety of urges - not just sexual ones - in a setting not

appropriate for that behavior.” In both of these examples from these authors, we again see the variety of ways that not understanding the “hidden curriculum” may affect individuals with ASD. Due to the consequences of the social faux pas that result from these rule violations, individuals with ASD may experience even greater rejection, isolation, and loneliness. These challenges may contribute to the depression and anxiety that many individuals with ASD experience.

One of the social difficulties that many individuals with ASD experience that may underlie some of these other social difficulties may be delays in the development of Theory of Mind. Theory of mind “...refers to two important abilities, (a) the capacity to recognize the thoughts, beliefs, and intentions of others and understand that these mental states are different from our own; and (b) using this understanding to predict the behavior of others” (Carnahan & Williamson, 2010). This concept is quite complex, and develops over a lengthy period of time from infancy through adulthood. At times, the complexity of Theory of Mind can escape us as we are judging the intentions and behaviors of others. Robert Selman (1973) writes about both the complexity and developmental stages of what he calls “Social Role-Taking Stages.” These role-taking stages describe a development from what is initially a more egocentric role-taking (where there is a lack of distinction between how the child may personally view a situation and how he or she believes that others view the situation) to what is ultimately a more societal role-taking (where the individual understands that the perspective of a situation may be influenced by one or more of larger societal values). In Selman’s theory, this development moves sequentially through these stages as the individual slowly gains the ability to not only take the perspective of others, but also to gradually think of how a third party may view the perspectives of individuals, and ultimately how society may view the perspectives of the individuals. I hope to be able to discuss Theory of Mind more fully in a later podcast.

This distinction is important though, because it helps to describe the range of responses that an individual with ASD may exhibit due to challenges with the development of Theory of Mind. As I mentioned earlier, individuals with ASD may struggle with the social and emotional reciprocity that is involved in relationships and intimacy. Depending on the level of role-, or perspective-taking, that the person is at, the person may go from not recognizing that the other individual has

thoughts, feelings, and experiences that need to be acknowledged to not spontaneously sharing their own thoughts, feelings, or emotions with their partner (Drew, 2017). These can contribute to difficulties in all aspects of relationship and sexuality development; and may also contribute to difficulties with developing an intimate connection, sharing experiences, resolving disputes, etc...

Blasingame (2011) goes on to describe some of these difficulties in greater detail. "They also do not understand how they are coming across to others. Lacking in social perspective taking, many of these youth are insensitive to how their behavior affects others. Making a social or sexual faux pas only adds to their social isolation and discourages further experimentation with social behaviors, which interferes with the normal pathways of learning social and sexual boundaries."

These difficulties with Theory of Mind can have profound impacts on the development "of the important relationship skills of empathy, trust, and the ability to repair someone's emotions and share thoughts and responsibilities (Attwood 2004) (Attwood T. , Relationship Problems of Adults with Asperger's Syndrome , 2012)

An additional social difficulty that many individuals with ASD experience is difficulty with understanding nonverbal cues and social contexts. As a part of social interactions, we utilize our eye gaze and contact to monitor our communication partner; we attend to nonverbal cues (body language and motion, facial expressions, prosody and paralinguistics) that they emit; we utilize these nonverbal cues to interpret the complex and subtle nature of emotions; and we integrate nonverbal cues with verbal cues to further intuit information about the interaction. At the same time that we are monitoring the nonverbal communication of our communication partner, we are also interpreting the social context in which the social interaction is taking place. This includes understanding how the time, place, situation, and circumstances in which the social interaction takes place influences the interpretation of others' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. These intricate actions are occurring simultaneously, and require constant updating as both the nonverbal communication of our partner, and the social context in which the interaction is taking place, change.

We've all been in social situations where either the cues we are getting from our communication partner, and/or changes in the environmental context (such as someone else walking into the room as you are having a "private" conversation), have necessitated changes on our part in how we are interacting with our communication partner. These subtle and transitory cues can be very difficult for some individuals with ASD. They may lack the awareness, attention to, or understanding of the nonverbal cues of others. Their eye gaze and contact may be idiosyncratic, where they may avoid eye contact with others, or gaze away from others' eyes to other structures of the face during conversations. They may miss the environmental cues that signal the context of situations, so they may engage in inappropriate behaviors for that particular context/environment.

Attwood (2012) has this to say about the impact of difficulties in these areas on relationship and sexuality development for individuals with ASD: "To progress along the relationship continuum from a friend to a boyfriend or girlfriend, an adolescent or adult with Asperger's syndrome needs to understand the art of flirting and romance, to accurately read the signals of mutual attraction and understand the dating game. These abilities are not intuitive for people with Asperger's syndrome." Drew (2017) also adds that individuals with ASD may miss "the deeper understanding of friendships fulfilling complex emotional and social needs, as opposed to (just) practical ones." This may occur because the individual with ASD is neither picking up on the nonverbal cues, nor on the social contexts, that signal that deeper, more complex, social and emotional connection is necessitated.

Individuals with ASD may also struggle with the verbal communication requirements of relationships and sexuality. They may struggle with the pragmatic aspect of language, otherwise known as the social use of language. They may have difficulty with using language for different purposes, organizing thoughts, changing language according to the needs of the listeners and contexts, and following language rules (Social Language Use (Pragmatics), 2017). Some individuals with ASD may struggle with the abstract nature of language. This aspect of language requires that they understand figurative and abstract language, and they be able to make an accurate inference of what is meant.

Relationships and sexuality are full of interactions that require a good understanding of both the social use of language, as well as its abstract nature. Going back to Attwood's example, think about how complex the language can be around the act of flirting. Beyond interpreting the physical actions, the verbal interaction may be filled with complex social rules and abstract, and inferential language that the person needs to interpret. Difficulties in these areas can lead to embarrassing social faux pas that may lead to rejection and isolation.

Due to these many social difficulties, many individuals with ASD lack access to social sources of information related to sexuality and relationships. Since social sources of relationship and sexuality information are so important to their development, individuals with autism spectrum disorders experience greater developmental challenges in these areas due to their difficulties with social interaction. These challenges compound the social difficulties that individuals experience, and can contribute to challenging behaviors that some individuals with ASD experience.

For many individuals with ASD, the social difficulties that I have reviewed today can be effectively addressed. But, just as with other areas of struggles, unless they are addressed within the context of mature relationship and sexuality development, it may be difficult for individuals with ASD to generalize social learning that has been done at other times.

A transcript of this podcast, along with citations and a related bibliography, can be found on the flexiblemindtherapy.com website.

Thank you for joining me today.

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