“It’s Not You, It’s Me”
Navigating the world of dating & romantic relationships

ALI CUNNINGHAM ABBOTT, PHD, LMHC, QS
Overview

- Review dating & romantic relationship ASD research
- Identify ecologically valid skills for dating & romantic relationships
- Demonstrate skills instruction & rehearsal
  - Review of 3 skills
In recent years, a surge of adult research has emerged primarily investigating:

- Diagnostic issues & effectiveness
- Comorbid diagnoses (White & DiCriscio, 2016)

Sorely need improvements in the efforts toward understanding intervention effectiveness

- Some exists for relationship tx & employment outcomes

Research results are varied and heterogenous:

- Only 2-31% report having experience in romantic relationships (Engstrom, Ekstrom, Emilsson, 2003; Howlin, 2004, 2012; Hovfander et al., 2009; Renty & Roeyers, 2006);
- 73% indicate experience and interest in romantic relationships (Strunz, et al., 2016)
- Males & females, age ranges, specifiers and intellectual disabilities

- Approximately one in four young adults with autism are socially isolated; they reported not seeing or talking with friends and were not invited to social activities within the past year. (NAIR, 2015)

- Martial satisfaction is high among ASD couples as compared to non-ASD couples (Lau & Peterson, 2011)
  - Attachment styles: avoidant & secure

- Males with ASD report significantly greater dyadic sexual well-being, including greater sexual satisfaction, assertiveness, arousability, and desire and lower sexual anxiety and fewer sexual problems (Byers, et al., 2013)
There are physical and mental health benefits to engaging in healthy & happy romantic relationships:

- Social relationships are seen as an essential domain of quality of life for people with and without disabilities (Verdugo, Navas, Gómez, & Schalock, 2012)
- Social participation is an important aspect of quality of life for ASD individuals (Orsmond et al., 2013)

Exhibit social behaviors such as:

- One-way conversations
- Stalking or harassment
- Policing (Stokes, Newton & Kaur, 2007)

A majority of adults with ASD report wanting to learn how to interact in romantic relationships (Mehzabin, 2010; Strunz, et al., 2016)

Treatment outcomes:

- Adults with ASD in social skills treatment result in decrease in AS symptoms, feelings of loneliness, improvements in social skills and frequency of get-togethers (Laugeson, et al., 2015)
- Romantic relationship treatment as usual can improve social skills and empathy in adults with ASD (Cunningham, et al., 2016)
Ecologically Valid Skills

- Ecologically valid vs. “what we should do”?

- Gaining declarative & procedural knowledge around dating and romantic relationship skills
Evidence-Based Methods for Social Skill Acquisition

1. **Didactic instruction**
   - Structured lessons with concrete rules of social interaction/etiquette
   - Socratic method

2. **Role-playing or Modeling**
   - Appropriate and inappropriate demonstrations
   - Social thinking

3. **Behavioral rehearsals with in session coaching**
   - Performance feedback

4. **Real-world practice and application**
   - Homework
   - Social coach feedback

❖ **Ideal conditions:**
  ❖ Small group format (7-11)
  ❖ Concurrent instruction for social coach
    ✖ Feedback loop
    ✖ Generalization and maintenance of skills

Matson, 1984; Davies & Rogers, 1985; Fleming & Fleming, 1982; Mesibov, 1984; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Gralinski & Kopp, 1993; Rubin & Sloman, 1984, Frankel & Myatt, 2003; Rao, Beidel, & Murray, 2008; Laugeson et al., 2008
Identifying a Social Coach

A consistent, trusted person who is socially savvy to help with maintenance & generalization of skills

Important tips for social coaches:

- Use specific questions, avoid general questions
  - “What are your common interests?”
  - “What could be the problem with...?”
- Be a helpful guide
  - “How could you do that next time?”
  - Encourage small efforts & incremental improvement
  - Avoid overtly negative corrections and being too directive
- Provide plenty of opportunities
  - Identify how and when to practice skills
    - Once a week/month?
  - Research and get involved in activities based on one’s interests
Ecologically Valid Skills for Dating & Relationships

Pre-requisite relationship skills
- Conversation skills (scaffolding of skills)
- Electronic communication (social media, online dating, etc.)*
- Humor feedback
- Entering a group conversation
- Get-togethers
- Flirting and letting someone know you like them
- Dating do’s and don’ts
- Kissing, touching, etc.
- Handling sexual pressure*
- Resolving disagreements

Requisite relationship skills
- Showing understanding*
- Managing emotions & discussing needs/desires/dreams
- Conflict management

(Laugeson, 2017; Ortwein & Guerney, 2008; Gottman & Silver, 2015)
Online Dating Skills

- Setting up a profile
  - Male versus female profile pictures that are most successful

- Selecting who to connect with
  - Identifying common interests
    - This can start with the type of site you choose (i.e. niche sites)
  - What are your priorities in a partner?
    - Physical attributes, values, etc. (”Where do you stand?”)

- Strategies for communicating
  - The copy/paste effect

- Safety
  - Verified profiles & secure sites
  - Be mindful of victimization & cyberbullying
    - Don’t share personal information too soon or AT ALL (i.e. address, date of birth, financials)
    - Keep records of any worrisome or harassing communication (i.e. screenshots, in-app messages) in case they need to be reported
  - If/when meeting in person, choose a safe, public place where others will be
  - Inform a trusted person (social coach) of your plans including the person’s name, physical description and a check-in method
Online Dating Skill Practice & Feedback

1. **Taking a Successful Profile Picture**
2. **Find 2-3 Niche Dating Sites Based on Your Interests**
3. **Create Your Opening Message**
4. **Get Feedback from Your Practice Partner/Social Coach**
How to Handle Sexual Pressure

- Identify your boundaries and limits
  - What are you ok with and not ok with?
    - Last minute get-togethers, late night texting, sleep-overs without exclusivity, etc.

- If/when these are challenged AND you want to maintain the relationship, follow these steps:
  - Keep your cool
  - Tell them what you DON’T want to do
  - Give a cover story
  - Use “I” statements to say how you feel
  - Change the subject
  - If you’re ready to go, give a cover story and leave
  - Remember, dating is a choice

**Do not follow these steps if the sexual pressure becomes physical or persistent in nature.**
Handling Sexual Pressure
Practice & Feedback

1. IDENTIFY ONE OF YOUR BOUNDARIES IN DATING OR RELATIONSHIPS
2. PRACTICE THE STEPS FOR HANDLING THIS IF/WHEN SOMEONE PRESSURES YOU
3. GET FEEDBACK FROM YOUR PRACTICE PARTNER/SOCIAL COACH
Different levels of intimacy

Steps for showing understanding by focusing on the other person’s needs, wants, desires and dreams

1. Listen with care and intention
   - Listen for the feelings and desires about what the person shares
2. Repeat what the person mentioned about their feelings, desires or dreams when they share
3. Ask follow-up questions
4. Discuss how the person’s thoughts, feelings, desires or dreams will influence your relationship and the way you respond to them

• Gottman Card Decks app
Expressing Empathy Practice & Feedback

1. DOWNLOAD FREE “GOTTMAN CARD DECKS” APP
2. PRACTICE EXPRESSING EMPATHY, OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS OR LOVE MAPS
3. GET FEEDBACK FROM YOUR PRACTICE PARTNER/SOCIAL COACH

I wish you did not have to go through this.

I see. Let me summarize: What you’re thinking here is...

What do you need right now in a friend?

What are your partner’s hobbies?
Resources

- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver, 2015)
- *PEERS® for Young Adults Treatment Manual* (Laugeson, 2017) & videos
- *Relationship Enhancement®, Ready for Love* (Ortwein & Guerney, 2008)
- Gottman Card Decks (The Gottman Institute, 2018)
- Wrong Planet videos ([http://wrongplanet.net/videos/?cpage=2](http://wrongplanet.net/videos/?cpage=2))
Contact Information

ALI CUNNINGHAM ABBOTT, PHD, LMHC, QS
ALICUNNINGHAMLMHCLMLMC@GMAIL.COM
561-454-8985
WEBSITE

THE CENTER FOR THE TREATMENT OF ANXIETY & MOOD DISORDERS & THE CHILDREN’S TREATMENT CENTER