

# “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

# ASD & Romantic Relationship Research



- 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)

# ASD & Romantic Relationship Research



- 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




# 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

JD, 34



5

Write a message

Story


Ok, I just have to be real... I'm a bit of a shut-in. Don't get me wrong, I like going out for drinks and having fun but I find more peace and have more fun just kicking back.

I love the beach, watching football, movies, writing music and poetry, spontaneous trips, and learning about all the things I thought I knew but now realize I had no idea about.

It's a crazy world, let's be crazy together. ;)

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**

HopelessRomantic, 38



Write a message

Story

Ok, I'm not sure what to say but here are some fun facts for you:

1. My dad was a military man and I couldn't be prouder to be his daughter.
2. I plan to open my own business soon.
3. Once I ate a whole watermelon by myself because of a friend's dare.
4. My favorite beer is whatever IPA is on tap.
5. I'm a cat person. They're just so independent and furry.
6. I really don't have a type. As long as you have something interesting to say, I want to hear it.

# 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**

# Showing Understanding (Expressing Empathy)

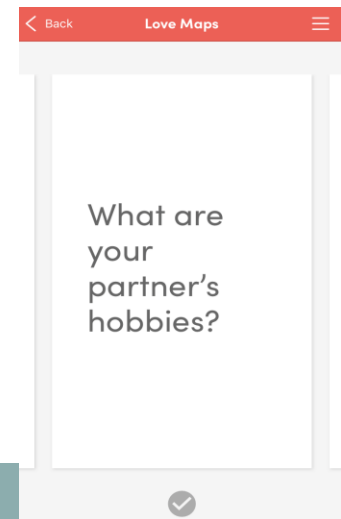
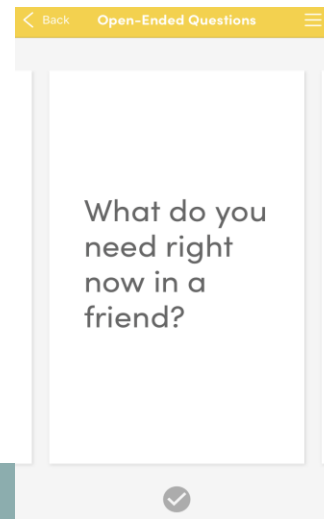
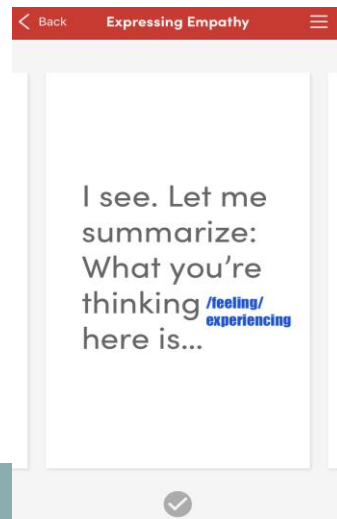
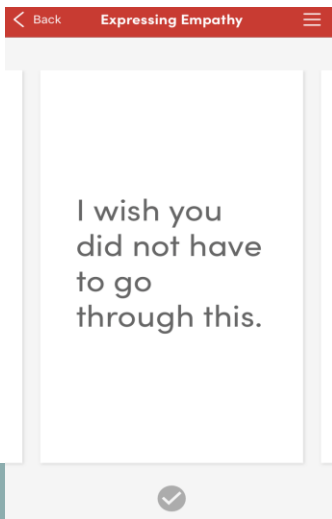


- Different levels of intimacy
- Steps for showing understanding by focusing on the other person's needs, wants, desires and dreams
  1. Listen with care and intention
    - ✦ Listen for the feelings and desires about what the person shares
  2. Repeat what the person mentioned about their feelings, desires or dreams when they share
  3. Ask follow-up questions
  4. Discuss how the persons' 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



# Resources



- *Modern Romance: An Investigation* (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015)
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver, 2015)
- *The Science of Making Friends* (Laugeson, 2014)
- *PEERS<sup>®</sup> for Young Adults Treatment Manual* (Laugeson, 2017) & videos
- *Relationship Enhancement<sup>®</sup>, Ready for Love* (Ortwein & Guerney, 2008)
- Gottman Card Decks (The Gottman Institute, 2018)
- Wrong Planet videos (<http://wrongplanet.net/videos/?cpage=2>)

# Contact Information



ALI CUNNINGHAM ABBOTT, PHD, LMHC, QS  
[ALICUNNINGHAMLMHC@GMAIL.COM](mailto:ALICUNNINGHAMLMHC@GMAIL.COM)

561-454-8985

[WEBSITE](#)

[THE CENTER FOR THE TREATMENT OF ANXIETY &  
MOOD DISORDERS & THE CHILDREN'S TREATMENT  
CENTER](#)