

"A positive, powerful plan for living life to the fullest."—*Stephen Shore*

Living Well on the Spectrum

How to **Use Your Strengths** to Meet
the Challenges of Asperger Syndrome/
High-Functioning Autism

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Dating, Sex, and Marriage

Having a satisfying relationship with a romantic partner can be a great source of support and enrichment for any adult. Yet some people on the spectrum choose to stay single and/or celibate for a variety of reasons, and they are healthy and happy with that lifestyle. If you're among them, you probably don't need to read this chapter. However, the fact that you turned to this page suggests that you're still seeking clarity on this issue for yourself. This chapter will show you how to use the problem-solving approach to make a more definitive decision about your lifestyle, to find an intimate partner, or to improve your romantic life with someone. These struggles are among the most painful for my patients, and coming to a resolution may provide some emotional healing from troublesome social experiences you may have had.

Noel, introduced in Chapter 1, is 37, single, and lonely; he wants to date more often. He has had very little success using online dating services and has felt very *uncomfortable making conversation* with the few dates he did meet. He *persists with this strategy*, even though it is not bringing him the results he wants. He believes he is doing something to put off the women he meets, but he is not sure what it is.

George, age 29, has never felt comfortable talking to members of the opposite sex, although his social anxiety improved significantly when he worked with a behavioral therapist during college and made several friends. His desire to date is hindered by his belief that he would have to reveal that he is a virgin. He would like to go out with a woman with whom he worked on a project at their aerospace technology company but is terrified to ask her out because of *embarrassment about his sexual history*.

Carla, another person introduced in Chapter 1, sometimes avoids her husband because she *does not like to be hugged*, even though she enjoys sexual activity. Carla's husband has told her he feels hurt by her behavior, and now he is beginning to resent her because she hasn't been able to explain why she reacts this way due to her *difficulty communicating how she feels to others*.

In Chapter 1, your clock worksheet may have indicated that you are stressed

at a particular time of day because of an issue related to dating, sex, or committed partnership. If so, some of the items on Worksheets 35–37 may look familiar since they were in the checklists in Chapter 1. Each sheet lists problems common to people on the spectrum but also leaves blank spaces at the bottom for you to fill in any other problems you have.

Problem Solving

If you identified more than one problem with intimate relationships, you will need to choose one to address first; you can then repeat the problem-solving steps for each of the other problems at a later time. As mentioned in Chapter 6, it makes sense to start working on the issue that is causing the most distress for you and/

WORKSHEET 35

My Problems with Dating

Check off (✓) the statements below that sound familiar to you or reflect your experiences with dating. If you have a problem with going on dates that does not appear on this list, fill it in on one of the blanks at the bottom of the list.

- I don't know where to meet people to date.
- I don't know when/how to approach someone I want to ask for a date.
- I don't like to go to crowded places, like parties or bars.
- I can't seem to make "small talk"—I can't keep a conversation going.
- I don't understand different gender roles or customs that apply on a date (e.g., how the woman should act, how the man should act, who should pick up the tab on a date).
- I want to meet someone to marry, but I have never had a girlfriend/boyfriend in my life—I don't know where to begin.
- I have joined several online dating services over the past few years, and I never got a date.
- I have had several relationships on the Internet, but they have all been with people who live far away, and we never seem to get to meet.
- I have had several relationships on the Internet, but things always seem to fall apart after we meet in person.
- _____
- _____

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My Problems with Sex

Check off (✓) the statements below that sound familiar to you or reflect your experiences with sexuality. If your problem does not appear on this list, fill it in on one of the blanks at the bottom of the list.

- I feel very uncertain about how to handle sex.
- I am embarrassed about being a virgin at my age.
- I am very uncomfortable with my own sexuality.
- I don't enjoy sexual activity.
- I do not like to be touched.
- I have had some unpleasant sexual experiences in the past, and I am afraid to be sexual again.
- I doubt I can trust another person enough to become intimate.
- I am afraid another person will not understand or accept what arouses me (e.g., specific types of touch or particular fantasies I might have).
- _____
- _____

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My Problems with Marriage/ Committed Partnership

If you are in a long-term relationship with a spouse or domestic partner, check off (✓) the statements below that sound familiar or reflect your experiences. If your problem does not appear on this list, fill it in on one of the blanks at the bottom of the list.

- I don't know what to do when there is a disagreement with my partner.
- My partner is unhappy with the amount of time I spend with him/her.
- My behavior sometimes embarrasses my partner at parties.
- I get so upset when my partner is upset, but I freeze and don't know what to do.
- My partner tells me I am insensitive.
- My partner embarrasses me when he/she corrects me in front of other people.
- My partner gets annoyed at me for not doing more chores around the house.
- My partner blames all of our problems on my ASD, and it makes me feel guilty.
- _____
- _____

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or the people around you. The exercise on Worksheet 38 can help you figure out which one that is. Rate the level of distress caused by each problem and then pick the one with the highest score to tackle first. You can return to the others later, in order of most to least distress. It can also be helpful to talk over this prioritizing with a trusted person in your life.

The next few pages will guide you through the steps of solving the problem you just identified. For each step you will be asked to write your answers in the question boxes. Each box will give you instructions, and then I'll show you how *Noel* filled in the box.

Step 1: Identify and Define Your Problem with Your Romantic Life

What is bothering you about either meeting or getting along with romantic partners? You've already done this first step if you filled out Worksheets 35-38. Write the problem you have chosen to work on first below.

WORKSHEET 38

Choosing Which Problem to Work on First

If you checked off only one problem on Worksheets 35-37, you need not fill out this question box. Otherwise, list the problems you checked in the first column below. Then use this rating scale to estimate the amount of stress the issue is causing you and/or the people around you.

How much distress is this problem causing in my life?

Almost None	Some	Moderate Amount	A Lot	Extreme
1	2	3	4	5

Problem

Distress Rating

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____