

AUTISTIC SEXUALITY



Katie Munday

A little about me



Katie Munday (they / them)

Autistic,
ADHD and
OCD.

Autistic and
Living the Dream
– advocate and
consultant

MRes in
Gender Studies



Overview

Autistic experiences of sexuality:

- Interoception
- Sensory differences
- Chronic illness

Autistic experiences of sexuality and romance:

- Alexithymia
- Communication differences
- Being a sexual minority

Autistic experiences of:

- Sexual assault and abuse
- BDSM
- Sex work
- Sexual and relational joy

THIS SESSION IS...

Sex positive

Body positive / neutral

Kink affirming

Supports consensual sex work

Recognises asexual and aromantic experiences



COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Autistic sexuality is seen as non-existent or paraphilic.

We are either seen a completely devoid of romance and sexuality, or the way we engage with sex and romance is perceived as ‘creepy’, ‘inappropriate’ or ‘abnormal.’



Asexual and / or aromantic Autistic people exist however seeing all of us this way is problematic as we can't get appropriate support!

Autistic sexuality: Interoception



- The sense of the internal state of the body.
- This can be both conscious and non-conscious (hunger, thirst, pain, fatigue etc).
- May make it difficult for people to understand sexual arousal.
- Physical sensations can affect mood and both can be misunderstood or overlooked.
- Pain thresholds can be varied – some people may find some sexual acts really uncomfortable or painful.

This can be attached to sensory differences especially in people with sensory processing ‘disorder’.

Autistic sexuality: Sensory differences



Differences with processing smells, touch, and sounds can affect an Autistic persons experience of sex.

Could be sensory seeking or sensory avoidant which means a person may engage with sex in 'extremes' (lots of sexual activity) or no sexual activity at all.

Spikey sensory profiles may make us inconsistent with our sexual needs and interests.

Differences are dynamic. Mood, hormones, physical wellness...

- See Kink and BDSM section

Autistic sexuality: Chronic illness



Co-occurring chronic illness can also affect an Autistic person's sex life.

Chronic pain conditions may make it painful to have sex.

Chronic fatigue (M.E) may mean people are energy depleted and may not engage in as much sex – or the kind of sex – they would like.

Auto-immune conditions can drain people's energy, affecting the time in which they can engage in affection and sexual activities.

Medication can affect sex drive, including pain medication and anti-depressants.

Autistic sexuality and romance: Alexithymia



**Alexithymia: Greek origins meaning
“no words for emotions”**

Difficulty in identifying and describing feelings, and distinguishing between feelings and the bodily sensations of emotional arousal.

Alexithymia is common in Autistic people.

- Sexual exploration can be hard to process.
- What does it *feel* like to be a certain sexuality?
- What does arousal *feel* like?
- Puberty or starting HRT changes emotions and interoceptive signals.
- Fluid or changing sexuality can be difficult for concrete thinkers.

Autistic sexuality and romance: Communication



- Interacting with others can be difficult and exhausting!
- Double empathy (Damien Milton)
- Fear of rejection from partner(s)
- Alexithymia can make talking about needs difficult.

Autistic love languages include:

- Information – dumping
- Parallel play
- Shared stimming
- Sensory integration
- Penguin pebbling (giving items based on specific interests.)
- Support swapping e.g remind others to drink or take meds.

Being Autistic and a sexual minority



- Autistic adults are approximately **eight times** more likely to identify non-heterosexual than their non-autistic peers (George & Stokes, 2018).
- Autistic men are **3.5 times** more likely to identify as bisexual than non-autistic men.
- Autistic women are **three times** more likely to identify as homosexual than non-autistic women. (Weir et al., 2021).
- Autistic people report **higher rates** of asexual identity than non-Autistic people (Attanasio et al., 2022),
- Autistic young men were **more likely** to have more same-sex feelings than their non-Autistic counterparts (Dewinter et al., 2015)

SEXUAL, ROMANTIC AND
RELATIONAL IDENTITIES ARE
SPECTRUMS:

THEY MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS
TO DIFFERENT  PEOPLE ACROSS
DIFFERENT CULTURES.



CONTENT WARNING FOR NEXT TWO
SLIDES: TALK ON SEXUAL ABUSE AND
ASSAULT



Sexual assault and abuse



- Autistic individuals are at considerable risk violence and abuse including intimate partner violence and adolescent dating violence (Hamby & Grych, 2013).
- In an online survey, 70% of Autistic adults reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization in teenage years and adulthood compared to 45% of non-Autistic individuals (Brown- Lavoie et al., 2014).
- In a college sample, Autistic students were twice as likely to report unwanted sexual contact compared to non-Autistic students (Brown et al., 2017).
- Sexual violence affects 30% of women in the general population and 60-90% of Autistic women (Cazalis et al., 2022).

Add other intersections and the risk of harm increases – sex workers, People of Colour, physically Disabled...

Sexual assault and abuse



Why might this be?

- Autistic people can have a trusting nature.
- We can succumb to love-bombing (being swept off our feet) especially if we have a history of trauma.
- We are used to being uncomfortable in many social situations.
- Alexithymia can confuse all of these feelings.
- Financial dependence.
- Severe aversion to change.
- Lack of appropriate SRE in schools.
- We can miss red flags:

“I can be quite easily manipulated and end up with people who are quite toxic. I can't tell that they're toxic.”

Toby (participant, Munday, 2022)

JUST BECAUSE WE HAVE TRAITS THAT MAY
MAKE US MORE VULNERABLE DOES NOT MEAN
WE ARE TO BLAME FOR THE ABUSE WE
EXPERIENCE.



AUTISTIC EXPERIENCES OF KINK, BDSM,
AND SEX WORK.



Bondage, discipline
domination, sadism
submission, and
(sado)masochism
(BDSM)



Autism may be more common among BDSM participants than the general population (Boucher, 2018; Seers, 2021).

Why might this be?

- Explicit language and expectations.
- Honesty, respect, negotiation and mutuality.
- Provides a place in which to try out, choose and engage in a wide variety of sexual *and* non-sexual activities. Kink can be enjoyed by asexual folks too!
- Shared sensory experiences can be cathartic:

“I love, I guess like fetish-wear and stuff like that, all that sort of stuff. It's probably sensory, the smell, the feel...”

Quin (participant, Pearson & Hodgetts, 2022)

BDSM



- Space to explore different aspects of identity.
- Comfort and safety in routine and predictability:

“It's more structured. It feels safer...I do get anxiety over sexual situations I suppose, but less so with kink, I think because it has that skeleton structure holding it up.”

Bucky (participant, Pearson & Hodgetts, 2022)

- These principles are referred to as Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK).
- Getting joy from ‘breaking the rules’ and neuroqueer-ing (Walker, 2021).
- Re-write sexual and intimate scripts to prioritise neurodivergence:

BDSM



“When Autistic people are at the reins of event planning, we can craft environments [such as BDSM events] that are tailored to our sensory and social needs.

In small, mask-free subcultures that are created and maintained by Autistic people, we get a glimpse of what a society that truly accepts neurodiversity might look like”

- Price, 2022, p. 202.

Sex work



Autistic sex workers exist!

What makes sex work accessible?

- Structured social scripts.
- Clearly define power dynamics.
- Clear expectations.
- Relatively predictable.
- Being able to reciprocate in vulnerability which may be difficult in every day life.
- Highly social work – easier to make and maintain connections.
- Sensory experiences.

Sex work



“I knew what I was supposed to do, how I was supposed to do it, and when I was supposed to do it. And there was great freedom in that.”

“Sex work was a safe way to open my heart and body to someone. The fleetingness protected me — it allowed me to be vulnerable.”

“[Sex work] was a perfect fit for everything I struggled with.”

– Maxfield Sparrow,
Autistic former sex worker,

Autistic sexual and relational joy



- Choosing how we make our families (polyamory, queer platonic, no children, living alone, ‘fur babies’).
- Loving who we love (or don’t!) openly and authentically (easier for some than others).
- Sensory joy, relaxation and regulation.
- Play with power dynamics and role play.
- A way to explore our Autistic embodiment.
- Sex which follows our preferences and embodiment.

Q&A / Discussion



WWW.AUTISTICCLTD.CO.UK
AUTISTIC_LTD@OUTLOOK.COM

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