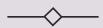
AUTISTIC SEXUALITY

─

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.'

 \longrightarrow

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



- The sense of the internal state of the body.
- This can be both conscious and nonconscious (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'.



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



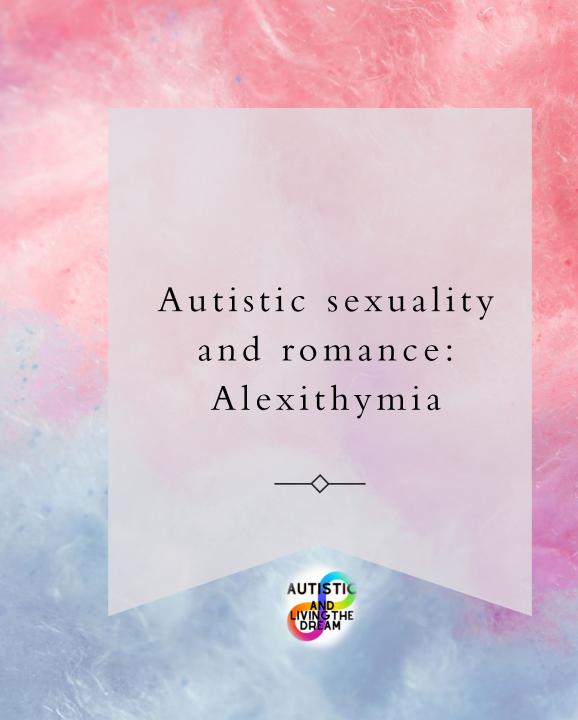
Co-occurring chronic illness can also affect an Autistic person's sex life.

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.



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.



- 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.



- 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 anon-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



- 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.



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)



- 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:



"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.



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.

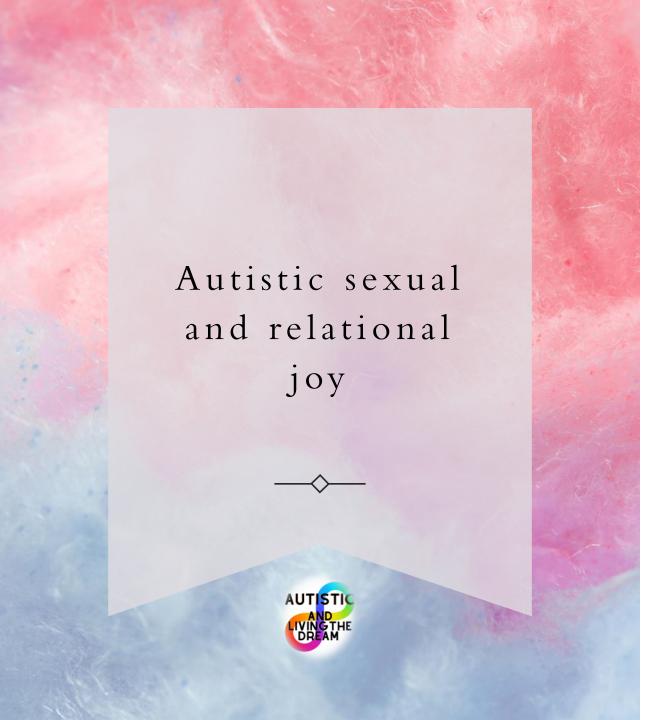


"I knew what I was supposed to do, how I was supposed to do it, and when I was supposed to do it. And there was great freedom in that."

"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,



- 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.AUTISTICLTD.CO.UK
AUTISTIC_LTD@OUTLOOK.COM

Bibliography

ATTANASIO, M., MASEDU, F., QUATTRINI, F., PINO, M. C., VAGNETTI, R., VALENTI, M., & MAZZA, M. (2022). ARE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND ASEXUALITY CONNECTED? ARCHIVES OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR, 51(4), 2091-2115.

BOUCHER, N. B. (2018). RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND BDSM BEHAVIORS. HONORS THESIS. BALL STATE UNIVERSITY.

CAZALIS, F., REYES, E., LEDUC, S., & DAVID GOURION, D. (2022). EVIDENCE THAT NINE AUTISTIC WOMEN OUT OF TEN HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE. FRONTIERS IN BEHAVIOURAL NEUROSCIENCE 16. HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.3389/FNBEH.2022.852203

DEWINTER, J., VERMEIREN, R., VANWESENBEECK, I., LOBBESTAEL, J., & NIEUWENHUIZEN, C. (2015). SEXUALITY IN ADOLESCENT BOYS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: SELF-REPORTED BEHAVIOURS AND ATTITUDES. JOURNAL OF AUTISM AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS, 45(3), 731-741. DOI: 10.1007/S10803-014-2226-3.

GEORGE, R., & STOKES, M.A. (2018). GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. AUTISM, 22 (8), 970-982.

MUNDAY, K. (2022). STORIES FROM UNDER THE DOUBLE RAINBOW - TRANS AND NON-BINARY AUTISTIC NARRATIVES. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.34886.75843

PEARSON, A., DR, & HODGETTS, S. (2022, OCTOBER 19). "COMFORTING, REASSURING, AND ... HOT": A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF ENGAGING IN BDSM AND KINK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AUTISTIC ADULTS. HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.31219/OSF.IO/DTHR3

HTTPS://WWW.VICE.COM/EN/ARTICLE/G5VQKY/HOW-TO-HAVE-GREAT-SEX-WHEN-YOURE-ON-THE-AUTISM-SPECTRUM?FBCLID=IWAR1HB1NY1MLCYKTE9HIOWR8-VKAKTRD4EISWZKWO4SU7XMVCVLKCCIGZUY4

MILTON, D. E. M., HEASMAN, B., AND SHEPPARD, E. 2020. "DOUBLE EMPATHY," IN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS, ED F. R. VOLKMAR (NEW YORK, NY: SPRINGER). P. 1-9. DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4614-6435-8_102273-2

PIPER, R. (UNDATED). AUTISM, SEX WORK AND EMPATHY. QUEER MAJORITY. HTTPS://WWW.QUEERMAJORITY.COM/ESSAYS-ALL/AUTISM-SEX-WORK-AND-EMPATHY

PRICE, D. (2022). UNMASKING AUTISM: DISCOVERING THE NEW FACES OF NEURODIVERSITY. HARMONY BOOKS.

SEERS, K. & HOGG, R. C. (2021) 'YOU DON'T LOOK AUTISTIC': A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF BEING THE 'AUTISTIC OTHER.' AUTISM 25(6), 1553-1564. DOI:

10.1177/1362361321993722.

WEIR, E., ALLISON, C., & BARON-COHEN, S. (2021). THE SEXUAL HEALTH, ORIENTATION, AND ACTIVITY OF AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS. AUTISM RESEARCH, 14 (11), 2342-2354. DOI: HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1002/AUR.2604

WALKER, N. (2021). NEUROQUEER HERESIES: NOTES ON THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM, AUTISTIC EMPOWERMENT, AND POSTNORMAL POSSIBILITIES. AUTONOMOUS PRESS.

BROWN KR, PEÑA EV, RANKIN S. UNWANTED SEXUAL CONTACT: STUDENTS WITH AUTISM AND OTHER DISABILITIES AT GREATER RISK. J COLL STUD DEV. (2017) 58:771-6. DOI: 10.1353/CSD.2017.0059

HAMBY S, GRYCH JH. THE WEB OF VIOLENCE EXPLORING CONNECTIONS AMONG DIFFERENT FORMS OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE. DORDRECHT; NEW YORK, NY: SPRINGER (2013).