Healthy Relationships on the Autism Spectrum (HEARTS):
A healthy relationships class for autistic people co-taught with autistic teachers

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Sensitive topic
- Trigger warning: We talk about abuse and violence in this presentation

Identity-First Language

Resources:


Bullying
46-96% of autistic youth (Morton, 2021)

Dissatisfied with current number of friendships
60% of autistic people ages 18-24 years old (as compared to 18% of non-autistic people) (Finke et al., 2019)

40% of autistic adults do not experience reciprocal friendships (Kubayashi and Murata, 1998; Howlin et al., 2000)

Consequences of difficulties with social relationships

NLTS2 data from 2009
n=600 (ASD)

Never see friends
39 vs. 20%

Never get called by friends
47 vs. 17%

Never be invited to activities
48 vs. 37%

Socially isolated
28 vs. 9%

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40% of autistic adults do not experience reciprocal friendships (Kubayashi and Murata, 1998; Howlin et al., 2000)
**Most autistic people experience sexual attraction**

- The idea that most autistic people are asexual has been debunked (Kelaher, 2015).
  - 5% of autistic men and 15% of women feel no sexual attraction (compared to 1-2% of controls) (Dewinter, De Graf & Begeer, 2017).
- The idea that many autistic people feel same-gender attraction is supported.
  - 18% of autistic men and 56% of autistic women feel some same-gender attraction (Dewinter, De Graf & Begeer, 2017).

**Social skills interventions (N=16)**
- UCLA Peers
- SDARI
- Skills Streaming
- Social Stories
- MASSI
- Sensory Enrichment Therapy
- Sense Theater
- Transitioning Together
- SOSTA FRA
- Reciprocal Imitation Training
- KONTAKT
- The Access Program
- Alvin model of free improvisation
- Superpower Glass Intervention
- Social Tools and Rules for Teens
- Mind Reading (computer software)

**What are social skills?**

Social skills facilitate interaction and communication with others and may be verbal or nonverbal.

**Examples** of social skills include:
- Initiate a conversation
- Take turns in conversation
- Make eye contact
- Ask open-ended questions
- Express interest in the other person
- Do not interrupt during a conversation
- Respect personal space bubble

**What are healthy relationship skills?**

Healthy relationship skills encompass the knowledge, competencies and abilities to initiate, maintain, and—if necessary—end friendships and intimate partnerships.

**Examples** of healthy relationship skills include:
- Knowledge about what counts as abuse
- Recognizing equitable and respectful behavior
- Communicating and respecting boundaries, including sexual consent
- Ability to communicate affection and attraction in a mutually-acceptable way
- Resolving conflict and problem-solving
- Having difficult conversations
- Knowledge about how to end relationships

**Healthy relationships interventions (N=3)**
- UCLA PEER DM
- Supporting Teens with Autism in Relationships (STAR)
- Tackling Teenage Training (TTT)

**Advisory Board**

- M. Chiang
- Amelia Sanchez
- Reid Caplan (ASAN)
- Peter Wharmby
- Mariah Person
HEARTS Evolution

2019
Safer Dating on the autism spectrum pilot test

2020
Formative research N=25 autistic youth, N=7 providers, and feedback from Advisory Board

2021
Pilot test with N=55 autistic young adults ages 20-43 years old through AANE

Using formative research to develop HEARTS: A curriculum-based healthy relationships promoting intervention for individuals on the autism spectrum

Emily Rothman and Laura Graham Holman

Abstract
Contact the social relationship skills to extinct individuals on the autism spectrum. The purpose of this formative research study was to describe the views of teens, youth, adults, and young adults in terms of healthy and unhealthy behaviors and dating relationship, in order to determine what types of skills they would be involved to have in a relationship, and in order to know better what people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) & other neurodevelopmental conditions can do to make and maintain friendships, and what would benefit from education about unhealthy mental health and social anxiety. The research was staged in a summer from a special Advisory Board comprised of autistic people. Twenty-two of the students individually aged 14-22 (20 years old or older) were interviewed. The interviews were conducted by in-person, online, and over the phone. The interviews were focused on topics such as self-awareness, self-care, and social anxiety. The results indicated that the participants had experienced various forms of social anxiety and that they would benefit from understanding healthy mental health practices, such as the use of social anxiety. The interview results are consistent with the literature on healthy social relationships, as well as the need for more research on the impact of social anxiety on healthy relationships.

HEARTS Teacher qualifications

(a) prior experience using dating apps;
(b) comfort discussing contemporary dating and sexual relationship topics such as (a) polyamory, kink, same-sex sexuality, pornography, and asexuality;
(c) a commitment to anti-racist, anti-ableist, and gender and sexual minority supporting practice;
(d) firsthand experience making friends, ending friendships, falling in love, and ending a serious intimate partnership;
(e) prior experience facilitating group discussions online and familiarity with Zoom; and
(f) capacity to attend HEARTS-related supervision meetings weekly.

Deficit model vs. neurodiversity perspective

Theme 2: Overcoming anxiety rooted in bad prior experiences

"I've grown up being taught, often pretty explicitly, that the way I interact with people is wrong and there is something wrong with me, and so I avoid interacting with others because I've internalized that so thoroughly... Like, our 'social anxiety' is not always an unfounded fear."

22-year-old non-binary participant
Sex positive

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Healthy relationships...

- Make you happy
- Feel good to both people
- Sexually
- You can count on the other person
- Trust
- Respect
- Interdependence
- Commitment
- Communication
- Bring out the best in you
- Sexual attraction (if sexual relationship)
- Serve as a great change
- Turn off anger or joy

Warning signs of an unhealthy relationship

- Repeatedly asked
- Tries to control you
- Is violent, abusive, possessive
- Has a scary temper
- The person uses drugs or alcohol in an unhealthy way
- Says too serious too fast
- Refuses to back out with them
- They shut you out and feel out on them, or otherwise violate your boundaries too many times
- They make you feel bad
- They make you do things that you don’t want to do

What happens when brains do not get what they need?

- Hungry
- Tired
- Frightened
- Stressed

Then what happens?

More brain problems
- Cognitive failures (mistakes)
- Less rational thinking
- Bummed
- Executive function
- Motivation

Relationship problems
- Relate in short-term
- Pass the words
- Partially
- Single-minded
- Giving up
- All or nothing thinking
- Irritable
- Aggressive
- Withdraw
- Take rejection personally
- Less attuned to friend’s desire
Research study (N=55)

- One-group pre/post test design
- All procedures approved by the IRB at Boston University
- Participants registered for HEARTS through the organization AANE
- Used valid and reliable survey measures
- Qualitative feedback on class
HEARTS study participants (N=55)

- 20-43 years old
- 80% White, 7% Multiracial, 6% Black, 6% Asian
- 55% female, 31% male, 11% non-binary
- 6 had an intellectual disability
- 47% lived with parents
- 56% were employed
- 82% had diagnosis of anxiety
- 76% had diagnosis of depression
- 46% had ADD or ADHD
- 26% had PTSD

HEARTS outcomes

Increase
- Flourishing
- Coping
- Social motivation

Decrease
- Hostile automatic thoughts
- Dating abuse
- Emotional dysregulation
- Rejection sensitivity
- Loneliness

Participant satisfaction

participants scored the class as a 3
(on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the best)

27% reported that the workshop improved their ability to meet new people
60% reported improved their ability to have healthy relationships
60% reported that the workshop taught them how to improve their relationships
HEARTS feedback

“I was grateful that there was an autistic moderator.”

“I liked that a person on the spectrum was...teaching the class. It’s nice to have someone on the spectrum talk about their own experiences and how they handle certain situations.”

Participant critique

1. there were too few sessions and too much material
2. some topics felt less relevant to some students, and they felt bored during those
3. frustrations with the way that some participants used the chat feature on Zoom

Laura’s reflections

1. What it was like to work with the Advisory Board
2. What it was like to co-teach with an autistic teacher

Reid’s reflections

1. What it was like to be on the Advisory Board and work with this research team
2. Thoughts about the HEARTS class

Next steps

1. Recruiting sites for RCT
2. Securing funding

Next Steps

E-Learning training for college sexual assault counselors
Informed by autistic students
Wide testing; you are invited to participate