



## UNDRESSING DISABILITY

enhance the uk

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# Dating and Neurodiversity

## Dating is difficult.

### **While it can be great fun, it can also be stressful and overwhelming even more so when you are neurodivergent.**

There are several conditions that come under the neurodivergent umbrella such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Autism, Tourette's Syndrome, Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia and Dyslexia. Each condition is different and even people with the same condition can present completely opposite traits. Sometimes, people can have more than one condition such as Autism and ADHD which can often be referred to as AuDHD.

Neurodivergence is more common than people think, and it is estimated that one in seven people are neurodivergent. This means there is a good chance you have dated someone with one or more of the conditions above.

If you are neurodivergent and dipping a toe into the dating pool again, here is our guide on dating and neurodiversity. We have also included some frequently asked questions about safety.

### **When do I need to tell someone that I am neurodivergent?**

It can be tough to know the right time to disclose your neurodiversity to a potential partner. There is no set time that you have to tell someone but often, the right time is when you are ready to give someone that information. For many, placing a mention on a profile works wonders as it gives a potential date the heads up and may get the conversation on neurodiversity started.

We can think that everyone knows about autism or what ADHD stands for but that may not always be the case. Adding a line to a bio can give our dates the chance to do a quick Google and get informed. However, it's worth noting that there is a lot of misinformation online which may mean that, with all the best intentions, your date may not find the correct information they need. Sometimes, to avoid this, conversation is key. It may also mean that you encourage your date to disclose their own neurodiversity. While they say opposites might attract, it doesn't always have to be the case! If you choose to wait until a date to tell someone then just make sure it's when you are ready to have that conversation. Chances are, your date will need time to understand, adjust and ask questions.

## **How can I prepare to disclose?**

When it comes to having a discussion about neurodiversity, it's important to know what this looks like for you and encourage communication. If you know your traits, then you should be able to communicate with your partner about what your needs are. The more information you can give someone, the better. While it can be exhausting educating people, for the right person, it's worth starting a relationship from a place of honesty and understanding. It also means you can better advocate for yourself when you do need something changed and so can they. While you can't tell a new partner everything they need to know in one date, you can say it's an ongoing process where you can let them know if something is affecting you.

## **Where do I arrange to meet someone?**

Think about what your needs are and have a discussion about ideas. If you feel comfortable, don't be afraid to let your date know if something won't work for you. This could be meeting somewhere quieter if you are autistic or have ADHD. If eye contact is difficult with strangers then why not arrange to do an activity where you are not sitting facing each other for the whole date? There are lots of quirky first-date ideas out there just waiting to be explored!

## How can using dating apps be difficult for neurodivergent people?

### *Info dumping*

Some neurodivergent conditions can struggle with forming boundaries when it comes to oversharing. While this is usually a sign that you are enthusiastic and like someone you are talking to - it can also mean that the other person may feel the conversation is going too quickly or bombarded by messages.

### *Missing social cues*

Autistic or ADHD people may miss social cues which can lead to misunderstandings or do not instinctively learn to adjust to suit different social settings. This can feel really anxiety-inducing when added to the already stressful first date situation.

### *Information overload*

Apps have a lot to them in terms of what we need to do, how to swipe, finances and more. Very few are designed with neurodiversity in mind so it can lead to overwhelm, frustration and meltdown when technology doesn't behave the way we want it to. It can be exhausting to have to google how to do something because it's not designed in the right way. Apps for neurodivergent dating are only just starting to appear on the market such as Hiki for the autistic community.

### *Taking extra time*

Different neurodivergent conditions may mean that people need extra time to understand instructions or large amounts of information. This may cause a delay in responding to messages, feeling overwhelmed or withdrawing from responding either immediately or at all.

## How can dating be difficult for neurodivergent people?

There are lots of different ways that neurodiversity can affect dates, especially first dates.

### *Eye contact*

It can be difficult for neurodivergent people to maintain eye contact for long periods of time.

There's another common misunderstanding that a lack of eye contact indicates a lack of empathy or understanding. However, more recent studies have dictated that it is more likely to cause someone to feel awkward or overwhelmed.

Quick win: Why not plan a date that is a fun activity where you don't have to sit facing each other? Mini golf or arcade games are a great way to avoid sitting in pubs or cafes.

### *Reading and texting*

Sometimes people with dyslexia can find texting difficult and it may take longer for them to reply. They may prefer to leave voice notes or use apps to help. Dyslexia may also make it more difficult for a person to read a menu or process information while on a date. Especially if there is pressure to make a snappy decision.

Quick win: If you are planning on going for a meal, why not arrange a restaurant in advance that has the menu online so that everyone can read and plan ahead of time?

### *Coordination*

Conditions such as dyspraxia mean people have difficulties controlling their muscles affecting their movement. This can make someone appear uncoordinated, immature or socially awkward even when they are not. Other neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD can mean a person is more clumsy than usual and this can make people extra nervous, especially on a first date.

Quick win: researching a venue ahead of time can allow a person to become familiar with the layout which can help with coordination. Also using venues that have table service or app ordering services means drinks or food can be delivered to you rather than requiring balancing acts.

### *Stimming*

Some people with ADHD or Autism may rely on stimming behaviours to calm themselves if they are in an overwhelming environment. Examples of stimming behaviours may include hand flapping or hair pulling as a means of processing multiple stimuli at once. This can feel embarrassing on a date or make someone feel anxious about how this will be perceived.

Quick win: Stimming is perfectly normal but if you find you are becoming overwhelmed, do what you can to eliminate or reduce the stress, and provide a calming environment. Grab some fresh air or pop into a quiet room. To lower stimuli, look for a venue to meet in that is quieter than a pub or bar so there are fewer distractions or loud noises.

### *Forgetfulness*

Dyslexia or ADHD can affect short-term memory so this means people may forget parts of the conversation or important dates. It can also affect remembering names, locations or travel instructions which are crucial for a first date.

Quick win: Setting reminders and screenshotting information so you have it to hand can help reduce this. Although, it's worth being kind to yourself over forgotten dates and times - it happens.

### *Tics*

Tourette's Syndrome can mean a person experiences unwanted tics especially when stressed or anxious. While we commonly associate Tourette's Syndrome with saying inappropriate things, that is actually less common than we think. Some of the more common tics can include shrugging, head nodding or eyebrow raising.

Quick win: Stress and anxiety can make tics worse. While it is difficult to remove the stress and anxiety from a first date, making sure that the venue is quieter, less stressful and it can also help to make your date aware ahead of time.

## **The danger of dating**

When it comes to dating, there are, unfortunately, times when things don't always go well. Some neurodivergent conditions make it more difficult to recognise danger or 'red flags' that mean you should consider leaving the date.

### *How do we recognise red flags?*

It can be tough for neurodivergent people to recognise red flags. It's important to recognise that if you are feeling uncomfortable - you can leave a date at any time. Some red flags could be someone looks dramatically different from their profile photo, they may be too familiar with you, or you may not feel safe in their presence.

It is not rude to excuse yourself, be honest if you feel like the date isn't working for you or have a friend on standby who can call with a reason to leave. If you don't feel like telling someone that the date isn't working - you don't have to there and then, but it is worth letting them know gently via text or the app the following day. If they are persistent, blocking their number or reporting their behaviour to the app is also an option. It could be as simple as someone asking uncomfortable questions. Disclosing doesn't mean that you need to answer awkward or rude questions about your neurodiversity.

There are a number of things you can do to reduce the risk:

## **App chat safety**

*Don't give out personal details*

*You can block strangers*

*Report bad behaviour*

*Ask a friend*

*Be honest*

## **First date safety**

*Always meet in a public place*

This doesn't have to be a bar or a pub but could be a coffee shop or somewhere without alcohol.

*Tell someone where you are!*

Always let someone know where you are and who you are with. It is worth having a friend on standby who can check in to see if you are comfortable. This could be a text or phone call mid-date to see if you need to leave.

### *Ask for Angela or alerting the bar staff*

If a date doesn't feel right or you want to leave, there are many ways to get discreet help from venue staff. Many pubs or bars operate an 'ask for Angela' scheme where you can ask for a non-existent member of staff called Angela which signals to the staff that you are on a date that you need help leaving.

### *Staying sober*

Being on a date can be nerve-wracking and it is tempting to have a cheeky glass of wine to help calm yourself down. However, one glass can easily become two meaning that inhibitions are lowered. Staying sober on a first date can mean that you can recognise if someone or something doesn't feel right. It can also mean that you can help figure out a plan if you need to make a break for it mid-date.

### *Figure out your transport*

Don't rely on someone to give you a lift or provide you with a taxi. This will allow you to leave should you need to.

### *Carry condoms*

If the date is going really well and things progress, then make sure you stay safe.



# About us

'Undressing Disability' is a global campaign which aims to raise standards in sexual health and sexual awareness for disabled people. Issues around sexuality and sexual frustration are frequently raised by disabled people who feel that they have less opportunity and ability to explore their sexuality than others. Through a lack of understanding, education and a general lack of services, disabled people frequently cannot access the support that would make it possible for them to make the sorts of choices about their lifestyles that most of us take for granted. As part of our campaign we run the Love Lounge, an online forum providing free advice on all things sex, love and disability. We also have free downloadable resources. As a user-led charity, our aim is to change the way people view disability, which often involves removing the 'fear factor' that so often surrounds the subject. We support businesses to be more inclusive by providing disability awareness training, British Sign Language workshops and accessibility audits, amongst other things.

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