

Self-Advocating in Your AS Marriage or Relationship

Eva Mendes and Michael Wilcox

Eva Mendes and Michael Wilcox, from the Massachusetts Special Commission on Autism, co-presented this workshop at the Jody Acford Spirit 2013 Conference: Know Yourself—The Key to A Better Life. They discussed effective ways to communicate in Asperger marriages and relationships. This workshop focused primarily on advocating for one's own needs while respecting those of your partner, who might be a neurotypical (NT) or have AS/ASD as well.

Please note that this is not a transcript of the Q&A; the answers here are composites of what each Eva, Michael and the audience members said.

Q: My girlfriend says that I'm sad and am always saying sad things? Also, we always end up doing what she wants rather than what I want to do?

A: You might want to work on **perspective taking**. Ask yourself, "How do I appear to the other person? Why does she think that I'm always sad? Do I always say sad things?" Thinking about your girlfriend's perspective on why she feels this way might be helpful in learning how you can change your demeanor from a sad one to a more cheerful one.

Once I learned to do self-perspective taking, I was able to picture how I might be perceived by others, and what I could do to change that. This is a form of "mindfulness" and you can use mindfulness practices to help you be cognizant of what you're saying and how you're coming across to others.

A lot of adults who are autistic or Asperger's experience **depression**. **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** has proven to work well for such people and perhaps working with a CBT therapist could help you to shift your thoughts from always being sad.

CBT therapists often ask clients to keep a daily **thought and mood log**. Writing down your thoughts and moods can help you appropriately evaluate how much and how often you've really been feeling sad and saying sad things. Are you sad and expressing sad thoughts 20% of the time or is it 90% of the time?

Once you do that, you can work to set some goals for **positive thinking**. Positive thinking and gratitude exercises can really help an individual reduce their negative thinking, which in turn would change your mood and expressing sad thoughts. Being mindful of your thoughts and knowing that you can be in control of what you think rather having automatic negative thoughts. Being aware of when you're perseverating and knowing when you've perhaps spent too much time on a negative thought and then learning to let it go.

In terms of answering your question on whose activity gets more precedence, I would

recommend having an honest conversation with your girlfriend and work with a calendar together to schedule activities that both of you enjoy. You could say something like, “It seems like we always do things that you want....but let’s look at our schedule for the next month. I’d like to start next weekend with my activity and then next weekend, we can start with doing what you want.” Express your own needs and then sit down with a **calendar** along with your girlfriend and **take turns, prioritize and plan ahead** for activities that are important to each of you.

Q: Being in a crowd is very difficult and challenging for me, but I find myself going to events with my girlfriend in crowded venues and then being uncomfortable.

A: So, when you know that you’re going to be in a crowded or a social situation where there are going to be a lot of people, please plan ahead to take a few breaks during the concert, party or event. Perhaps you can walk around the parking lot as or take longer than average bathroom breaks or find a secluded spot where you can just be quiet and relax for a few moments. Also, planning down time for yourself before and after the event might be able to help you get through the stressful situation of **being in a crowd or at a party**. If you have the downtime planned for after the event, that’s something you’ll be able to look forward to as well to decompress and relax.

It’s crucial that you know and express your need for **downtime, for frequent breaks** and make sure that your girlfriend understands these needs, so that she can partner with you to get through a stressful event.

Self-advocacy via email, phone or an in-person meeting:

An audience member also noted that he uses email to communicate with his wife. When he’s upset with his wife and needs to communicate something important to her, he writes out all his thoughts in an email, but doesn’t immediately send it. He sleeps on his words and then after a day or two, when he’s not as upset or angry anymore—he edits the email once again to remove all the potentially hurtful language and sends it to his wife. Using email helps this gentleman to convey his needs mindfully and in a manner that still preserves his relationship with his wife. For many with AS, **impulsive speech** can be a problem specially when they say things bluntly, without laying foundations which can then potentially cause irreparable damage to their loved ones.

Another audience member also chimed in and spoke about how she and her partner use the phone to communicate. She stated that she has **ADHD** in addition to Asperger's and that she oftentimes has difficulty focusing on what her partner is saying if she has to look at her as well as listen to what she’s saying. They have installed two landlines in the house and use it to dialogue with each other on issues that need discussion or just to have a connecting conversation with each other. Speaking on the phone vs. having a face-to-face dialogue allowed this woman to close her eyes in order to shut out visual distractions, without offending the other person.

Additionally, picking **a time and a place to have regular discussions** and dialogues is also a useful practice in any relationship. It is important to have these conversations when both partners are feeling rested, relaxed, focused and in the right frame of mind to do so.

Q: My ex-boyfriend would always ask me, “How are you feeling?,” and I would always think to myself, “Why are you asking me such a stupid question?”

A: When a partner repeatedly ask you the same question, realize that perhaps there is something deeper that your partner is trying to communicate with you. If you haven't self-disclosed about having AS already, it might be important to **consider self-disclosing** at this point in the relationship when your partner starts asking you about your feelings either towards him or the relationship. The reason many times an NT partner might ask their partners about their feelings either towards them or the relationship is because they are experiencing feelings of deep connectedness and attachment and they want to know that this is reciprocated by their partner as well. The reasons for this might be varied, but typically an NT partner might want to be reassured that their partner is wanting to continue on with the relationship and that their partner is as committed to the relationship as they are.

As you self-disclose about your having AS to your boyfriend, you might want to explain that you might process things differently from them and that you might be more of a thinking person than a feeling person. You will want to verify why they're asking you about your feelings and if there's anything that they feel like they're not getting from you in terms of emotional reciprocity or a lack of commitment. It's important to honestly discuss these relational issues so as to not have misunderstandings and to continue to have the same expectations of the relationship.

Reading the book, the ***Five Love Languages*** by Gary Chapman might also be a good resource for those who want to learn more about their own style of being in a relationship and the love language of their partner be it quality time spent with each other, acts of service performed for each other, words of affirmation, physical touch, and sharing of mutual interests. So if your partner needs you to verbally compliment them or show them more physical affection, you can try to improve in these areas and incorporate these behaviors into your daily interactions.

Offering these acts of love in a way that your partner can receive them will help to increase their satisfaction and happiness in the relationship. Don't worry about faking or being phony while engaging in these positive behaviors with your partner. The fact is that your partner will appreciate that you're trying so hard to appreciate them and love them in ways that they can understand and receive.

Q: I feel emotionally dependent on my friends. When they go away or I'm not spending time with them, I feel very lonely and depressed.

It's possible that you're not able to have a balance between your time spent with your friends vs. alone time. It's important that each of us learn to self-sooth and be by ourselves instead of

always relying on others to alleviate our loneliness. Another audience member also shared that when she feels this way, it's because of the fact that perhaps she'd been spending too much time with her friends and not enough time by herself. Also, having a **routine and structure** of daily/weekly/monthly activities that one enjoys on a daily basis such as exercise, meditation, healthy eating, good sleeping habits and spending time in nature, with family and friends is important to live a balanced life. Spending too much time with just friends can make one emotionally dependent on them, so it's important to set boundaries to balance time spent with friends as well as oneself.

Additional topics that we discussed were emotional regulation, alexythemia, anger outbursts and how being in a neurodiverse marriage or relationship can have a unique set of challenges.