



Structure of the session

An overview of the importance of relationships for individuals with autism

Consider some of the difficulties in this area

Explore a few potential strategies

Sex and sexuality

Sexuality does not have to be only about the physical act, but it is related to personal identity and social development.

Autism and sexual behaviour

Sexual behaviour is displayed by a majority of people on the autism spectrum (Hellemans et al., 2007).

There is no proof of lack of need for intimate or sexual or romantic relationships (Tarnai and Wolfe, 2008; Hellemans et al., 2007; Ray et al., 2004).

Gender identity disorder, homosexuality and bisexuality have been reported in this population (Haracopos & Pedersen, 1992; Hellemans et al., 2007 ; Ray et al. 2004).

Concerns

Around 25% of people with ASD have experienced sexual abuse (Koller, 2000; Mandell et al. 2005; Murphy and Young, 2005).

Some studies (Cambridge et al., 2003) suggest that sexual frustration can lead to challenging behaviour.

Higher instances of public sexual behaviour is observed in individuals on the spectrum.

Issues

Difficulties in social understanding- although good factual knowledge

Communicational differences

Repetitive and restrictive interests (such as collecting sexual facts, magazines)

Sensory processing differences

Poor self-awareness

May not learn from peers or be exploited by others

The affect of attitudes

Society's attitudes can create a barrier for people with autism and intellectual disabilities (Murphy and Young, 2005).

Role of sex education

It should:

Cover information

Develop values

Develop interpersonal skills and the ability to make responsible decisions. (Haffner, 1990)

Sex education

Sex education should be individualised based on needs and strengths.

Provide accurate information

Needs to develop social competence

Basic features

Explain private and public behaviours

Physical development and differences in gender

Teaching about appropriate touch and staying safe

Understanding emotions and expressing them in an appropriate manner.

Knowledge of reproduction

How to.... masturbate, manage menstrual cycle, use contraception

Understanding variety of relationships

Sexual health awareness

Relationships

Social interaction skills (for dating and future)

Rules of physical intimacy

Consensual relations (legislation)

Dealing with rejection

Managing conflicts and on-going relationships

Potential strategies

Use a combination of strategies- behaviourist, cognitive-behaviourist and perspective taking.

Pictures, visual clues, schedules

Strategies

Providing communication means and helping to use them appropriately

Role play, using videos

Explaining social rules- lists, circles of closeness

Using distractions and alternatives

Understanding the required vocabulary

Social stories

Comic strip conversations

Problem solving scenarios

Resources

Provide clear and explicit visuals

Need for same sex teachers?

Consider your school/ organisation sex education policy

Involve the individual and their family members

To sum up

Individuals with autism often have similar sexual and relationship needs

It is important to recognise this and provide the required skills.

Appropriate sex and relationships education can improve the quality of life(Koller, 2000).

References and useful reading

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