Ways You Can Find TRUE LOVE ON THE SPECTRUM

By Debra SLOANE, PsyD, BCBA

I'm often asked if it's hard for people with autism to find love. The answer is... Yes! Finding love is challenging for ALL of us, so naturally, having hard-wired social difficulties exponentially raises the bar for dating dilemmas.

toward romantic relationships as a result of these painful social experiences while others continue to develop typical desires for love and romance. An unfortunate consequence of repeated social and romantic “failure” can lead to significant emotional distress.

This picture may sound very negative... however, my message is: do not give up! I remind all of my students, those on the autism spectrum and those who are not, that we ALL get rejected more times than we have romantic success! In fact, having an ASD can bring some VERY desirable traits to the dating game: loyalty, intelligence, kind-heartedness, compassion, consistency and being non-judgmental, to name a few. And while these digital days present challenges, there are many built in advantages: increased anonymity decreases anxiety, time delays to think and alter a thought, and repeated contact to determine likes or need to discontinue relationship with less effort/money/time spent.

BUT, I strongly advise to take safety measures (i.e. research identity of person, get pictures and cross-check facts) and if possible, meet in person (in public location, have an undisclosed friend there, have a back out plan ready, check out meeting place in advance to increase comfort level). Some common dat-

Some of the core Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnostic deficits contribute to this challenge: rigid thinking and behaviors, poor perspective taking, limited communication skills, emotional and sensory challenges, and decreased attention to details. Additionally, there are societal and cultural issues which compound the matter further. Our Internet age causes us to have fewer social contacts that brings fewer social (live) encounters, less practice, less skill to an already shaky skill set, false sense of “friends” (thank you, Facebook), and difficulty meeting online contacts if out of geographical area.

Further, negative social history or experiences significantly impact confidence and risk taking. All too often ASD teens are teased, rejected and worse yet, bullied, at a time when typically developing kids are practicing social initiations. Some teens and young adults on the spectrum may develop indifference...
ing pitfalls include acting too eager (reduces ability to spot red flags and can push others away) as well as being too persistent (missing social cues can lead to repeated requests — I recommend a general “three strikes, you’re out” rule of thumb; behavior may be perceived as “stalking” which can result in legal problems). Still, with ASDs so prevalent, our first responders are receiving more specialized training around the country to learn about traits and behaviors, which may reflect an ASD and not true delinquency.

SO, want to get love or keep love? GET SMART:

S - Self-knowledge (learn about your diagnosis, increase self-awareness)

M - Manage stress (emotional and sensory needs)

A - Ask questions and ask for feedback

R - Reduce rigidity (stretch thinking patterns and flexible behaviors)

T - Take your time (FRIENDS FIRST - why date someone who’s not a good friend?)

How to make this happen? Seek professional and peer support. There are specialists to help develop social skills, social thinking, self-awareness and self-acceptance. Only when you understand your own needs and abilities can you partner with someone to manage the challenges of the love language. There are many young adults on the autism spectrum who find love and enjoy long-term, satisfying romantic relationships. Allowing for unique differences, honest communication, mutual admiration, and respect, as well as fostering the ability to compromise, are the key ingredients for relationship success — with or without an ASD.

Dr. Debra Sloane received her Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology from the University of Florida in 1985 and her Master of Science and Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the Florida Institute of Technology in 1987 and 1989 respectively. She completed her Clinical Internship training at the University of South Florida’s Counseling Center for Human Development in 1989. She is a Licensed Psychologist, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and Certified Sex Therapist. She has worked extensively with college aged young adults with Asperger's Disorder or Learning Differences in individual and group therapy, as well as provided training locally and nationally on a variety of topics related to Autism Spectrum Disorders. She currently works as a Licensed Staff Psychologist with college students at Florida Tech’s Counseling and Psychological Services. In addition to working with individuals with ASD, other professional interests include developing healthy relationship skills, coping with sexuality issues, and wellness. Dr. Sloane conducts individual therapy with students, manages the group therapy programs, performs educational outreach events on campus and in the community, and enjoys supervising clinical psychology doctoral students at CAPS. She holds a position as a member of the Community Advisory Board of Florida Institute of Technology’s Scott Center for Autism Treatment and Research. She is a member of the Florida Psychological Association.