



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly e-mail to answer questions submitted by the autism community. This is one of the past issues of the column. Visit [www.ausm.org](http://www.ausm.org) to sign up to receive the e-mails.

**Dear Therapist:**

I'm having communication difficulties with my partner. Do you have any suggestions for navigating committed relationships through an ASD lens?

– Committed and Communicating

**Dear Committed:**

Great question! Communication is key in committed relationships, and when navigating neurodiversity in relationships, another layer of importance to add is understanding how each person processes information – and feels understood.

A few communication tips/reminders to try:

Talk about important topics when both people can give their full attention, feel as fully resourced as possible, and are in a space where sensory needs are met.

If you are going through a particularly stressful time, it may be helpful to use memory aids or other concrete tools such as post-it notes, written lists, or calendar alerts to help with communication. Executive functioning skills can be more challenging when stressed or burned out.

Alexithymia is very common in autistic people (difficulty with being aware of, identifying and describing feelings). Working together to create something like a 5-point scale may help in identifying broad categories of need – and having a common language to share can help avoid having to guess or feeling misunderstood.



For example, level 1 may look like contentment and level 5 may look like a meltdown, with levels 2-4 covering everything in-between. Questions for all levels may include: What does this look/feel like for me? What can I do to help regulate myself? What supports would be helpful from my partner?

It's okay to take breaks! If a conversation is feeling stuck, consider taking a break. Be sure to let your partner know that you will return to the conversation again, and communicate a specific timeframe – like coming back in 30 minutes, or trying again tomorrow at 5 p.m. This affirms that you've heard your partner but need more time to process.

Try not to assume. Ask clarifying questions to get more information about how someone is feeling or why they reacted the way they did. Assumptions can lead to misunderstanding and hurt feelings for both parties.

Find more tips, read this post: <https://www.gottman.com/blog/two-different-brains-in-love-conflict-resolution-in-neurodiverse-relationships/>

Being an adult and in a committed relationship is not always easy. What you have to say matters, as does and feeling heard and seen. AuSM's therapy team provides relational services for couples, families etc. Please reach out if you're in need of support.

Maura McDonald, MA

If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail [autismcounseling@ausm.org](mailto:autismcounseling@ausm.org) or contact us at 651.647.1083.