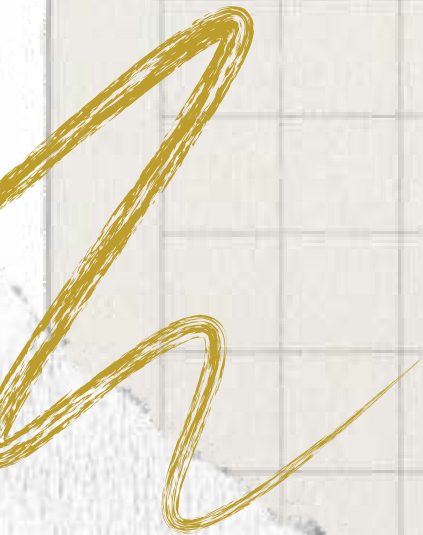




An Autistic Guide  
to Healthy  
Relationships



# Healthy Relationships

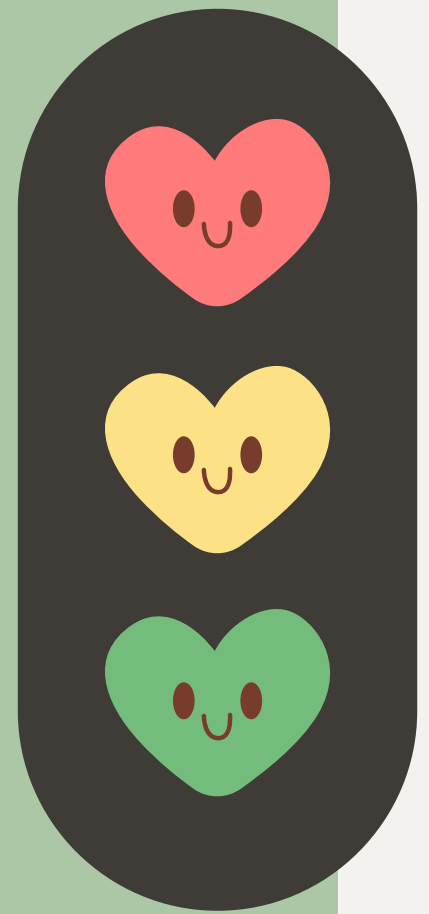
A lot of autistic people have experienced something called 'interpersonal abuse'. This is a type of abuse that occurs within relationships with people we know, like romantic partners, or friends.

Many autistic people who have experienced this kind of abuse have said that they wish they knew more about what good, healthy relationships looked like, as this might have made it easier to recognise abuse.

Relationships are complicated. No two relationships will be the same, and what might be fun for some people (lots of light teasing, or what is called 'banter') might be really upsetting for other people. It is important to be able to recognise what makes you feel good in a relationship and to be able to find people who can meet these needs (and likewise, where you can meet theirs).

In the following pages, we give some examples of:

- 'Red flags' or warning signs for an abusive relationship
- Orange flags (things that might help us to recognise relationships that are not necessarily abusive, but that are not good for us).
- Green flags, or signs that someone is treating you well and that a relationship is safe.



Some autistic people find it really hard to trust their own judgement of other people. Sometimes this is because other people have told them that they are bad at understanding social interactions (which might be true for some people, and not true for others). Sometimes people worry because they have had a bad experience in the past and aren't sure whether they will be able to spot warning signs in the future.

The aim of this short guide is to share with you some of the warning signs that autistic people who have been in abusive relationships have told us about, to help you recognise them too, and to help you recognise what good relationships look (and feel) like.

# Red Flags

Red Flags are warning signs that someone might be treating you in an abusive way.

However, it can be hard to recognise red flags, especially early in a relationship. The people we spoke to told us some of the things that had made them realise they were being treated badly in a relationship.



## At the start

At the start of a relationship, warning signs can sometimes be hard to tell apart from signs of being interested in somebody. Sometimes when you get really excited about meeting someone, you might want to know all about them really quickly and spend a lot of time together. Some neurodivergent people (like autistic people) might become very focussed on their new partner or friend because they are nice to be around.. This alone is not a 'red flag'.

However, sometimes a relationship moving very quickly is a warning sign. Someone might:

- Pressure you to spend all of your time with them
- Ask you to make big decisions, like moving in together, very quickly
- Shower you with lots of gifts and say very nice things to you (this is called 'Love bombing').
- Make BIG gestures: sweep you off on an expensive trip, or tell you that you are the only person they'll ever love.

These warning signs do not mean that someone is abusive, but if they happen and you feel like things are moving too fast, it is ok to ask the other person to slow down.

If they don't respect your decision to slow down, or react badly to you asking, that is a sign that they are not trustworthy. If you tell someone you are uncomfortable and they keep going, it is ok to choose not to spend time with them.



It can ALSO be hard to spot red flags when you have been in a relationship for a while. One of the big red flags people told us about was control, including things like being told:

- who to talk to
- what to wear
- what you can talk to people about
- what you can post online
- how much money you can spend and what you can spend it on



And

- Not letting you do your favourite things
- Wanting to know where you are ALL the time, or wanting to look at your phone to see who you are talking to.



There were lots of other things to look out for too:

- Saying nasty things or being violent after drinking alcohol (e.g. calling you names)
- Someone refusing to admit when they have made a mistake (e.g. calling you “emotional” or “crazy” when you tell them you are upset with something they have done).
- Lying and being dishonest (e.g. telling you that they have a job when they don't).
- Making threats (e.g. saying they will hurt you if you don't do what they want, or that they will hurt someone else).
- Being physically violent (e.g. hitting you, grabbing you, pushing you).
- Saying nasty things about you to other people (e.g. telling people that you are ‘stupid’).
- Invalidating your needs (e.g. making you feel ashamed for stimming, telling you that you are being ‘too sensitive’).
- Pushing you to do sexual or intimate acts that you don't want to do (like saying “if you loved me you would do this”)



If you sometimes feel scared, or feel dread when you see the other person, that is a bad sign. If you are worried and aren't sure whether you are being treated badly, it sometimes helps to speak to someone you trust (like a friend).



# Orange Flags

The people we spoke to talked about how important it is to recognise that not all bad relationships are abusive relationships.

Sometimes we might not be well matched to another person- we might have different values, needs or interests. Sometimes when other people have their own struggles, they might clash with our own.

Orange flags were signs that a relationship wasn't working very well. Sometimes an orange flag might be a sign that you need to talk about the problem and try to find a solution. Sometimes it might be a sign that the relationship is not going to work or is becoming unhealthy. A lot of relationships end because people are unhappy and cannot find a way to make things 'work'. This does not mean either person is 'bad'.

## Examples of Orange Flags

Some examples of orange flags were things like:

- Not discussing problems and ignoring them.

Communication is important for a relationship. It can be hard to talk about how you feel, or tell someone when you disagree with them, but not doing these can lead to relationship problems.

Lots of autistic people worry about 'causing trouble' by sharing their worries and needs, but it is important to feel listened to (and to listen to others) in your relationships.

- Unmanaged mental health difficulties having a big impact on the relationship and making it hard to find solutions to relationship problems.

Mental health difficulties are not our fault and do not mean that we do not deserve to have relationships. BUT they can affect our relationships with the ones we love.

While supporting a partner, we also have to look after ourselves. We can try to help someone to help themselves, or get them the kind of support they need, but we are not responsible for their mental health.. If they can't, or won't take steps towards getting help, and it is impacting you and the relationship, it can mean that the relationship will not work and that's okay. This doesn't mean that you don't care for them, or that you or they are bad people.

It is important to note that Some people might use mental health difficulties as an excuse to act in an abusive way. This is not the same as unintentionally hurting someone because you have different needs and cant find a solution. If someone keeps hurting you and blaming you for it, or hurts you a lot without changing how they are acting, this is not healthy.

# Green Flags

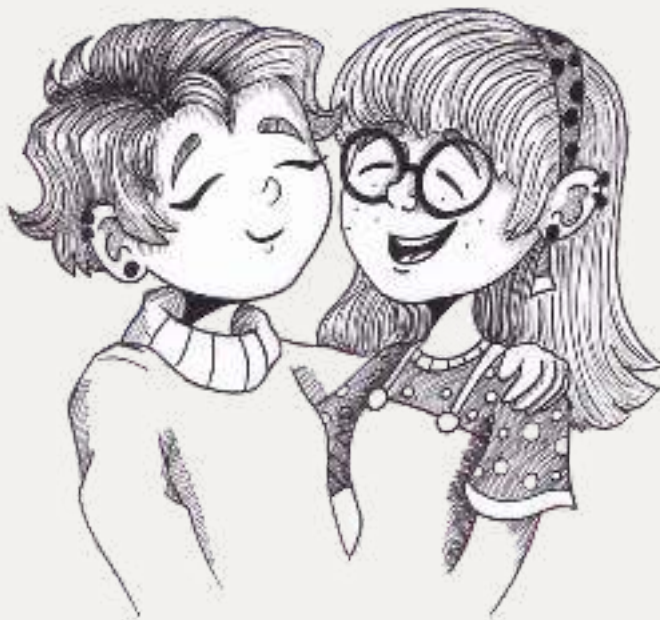
Green flags are good signs within a relationship. They are the things that other people do that make us feel safe and respected.. Healthy, good relationships will have lots of green flags, and importantly, will make us feel good.



“We argue, and Im not scared”

Conflict is a normal part of relationships- lots of people disagree, and you shouldnt be scared to tell someone when you disagree. Conflict doesnt mean being unkind.

The relationship is not one sided- you both feel respected and able to share how you feel.



“You’ve got each others backs, even when things aren't great”

You can laugh and joke with each other

They are supportive of you

They respect your boundaries and dont push you to do things you dont want to do

You feel, able to be yourself around them

They are caring and understanding

“It feels safe to unmask”

# Summary

Healthy relationships are something that can take work, and need both people to recognise each others needs and boundaries. 'Healthy' is a state (meaning it is something that can change over time), not a trait (or something that tends to stay the same over time).

Some people find relationship counselling (where both people take part) useful for creating and maintaining healthy relationships. However, relationship counselling can be harmful where there is ongoing abuse within a relationship.

All relationships are different, but good questions to ask yourself are:

1. Do I feel safe? Do I make others feel safe?
2. Do I feel respected? Do I respect others?



## Helpful Resources

ND connection have compiled a list of support organisations for people impacted by relationship abuse. Visit them on the link below, or by following the QR code.



<https://ndconnection.co.uk/resources/p/summit-support-organisations>

You can also find a list of resources at the Violence, abuse and mental health website:

<https://www.vamhn.co.uk/useful-links-and-resources.html>

This resource was created by:  
Dr Amy Pearson, Durham University  
Mr Kieran Rose, The Autistic Advocate  
Dr Monique Botha, University of Stirling  
Mrs Sarah Douglas, University of Bristol  
Dr Felicity Sedgewick, University of Bristol

This work was funded by the Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network as part of a project exploring the experience of violence and abuse in the relationships of autistic adults. The red, orange, and green flags we include here are based on what they told us during our research.

The artwork included in this resource was developed by Lauren Osborne: <https://www.laurenelizartworks.co.uk>

With special thanks to everyone who shared their experiences with us.