

FAIRY GODMOTHER

Loved & Understood™

Relationship & Dating Confidence for Autistic Women

You do not need to become less autistic to be loved.

Printed workbook · 12 lessons

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What dating actually is

The stages nobody explains

Dating is usually taught as a feeling: you meet someone, something happens, and the rest is supposed to be obvious. For a lot of autistic women that description is useless, because it describes the weather rather than the map.

So here is the map. Early dating has four stages, and they are not the same thing. First, contact: you are both deciding whether there is enough interest to spend an evening together. Second, exploration: three to six meetings where you are gathering information about how this person behaves, not performing a version of yourself. Third, definition: someone says out loud what this is. Fourth, integration: your lives begin to touch — friends, routines, plans further ahead than next weekend.

Most confusion and most pain comes from being at a different stage from the other person without either of you saying so. Someone can be warm, attentive and physically affectionate in stage two and still not be moving towards stage three. That is not necessarily deceit. It is usually that nobody named the stage.

You are allowed to name it. Asking "what are we doing here?" is not needy and it is not a rule violation. The unwritten rule is that you should work it out by inference; that rule was written by people who find inference cheap. It is not cheap for you, and you do not have to pay for it.

For the rest of this programme we will treat dating as a process with visible steps, not a code you failed to crack. Nothing here asks you to be less direct, less literal, or less yourself. Directness is not the problem being solved. Ambiguity is.

PRACTICE

Take one past connection and write which of the four stages it actually reached.
Then write the moment you first felt unsure which stage you were in.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Where has dating felt most confusing to me, and what information was I missing?"

CARRY THIS

I can ask for the map instead of guessing the route.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Interest, availability, intention

Three separate things

Someone can be genuinely interested in you and completely unavailable. Someone can be available and have no intention of building anything. These are three separate measurements, and reading them as one number is the single most common source of heartbreak in early dating.

Interest is attention: they enjoy your company, they respond, they are curious. Availability is capacity: emotional room, time, freedom from an unfinished relationship. Intention is direction: they want the same kind of thing you want, and they are willing to say so.

Interest is the easiest to read and the least informative. It is also the one most people, autistic or not, over-weight — because it feels wonderful. Availability shows in patterns rather than words: cancelled plans, a life you are never allowed into, contact that runs hot then vanishes for a week. Intention shows only when someone states it and then behaves consistently with it for several weeks.

You do not need to become a better mind-reader to assess these. You need a longer observation window and permission to ask direct questions. "Are you dating other people?" and "Are you looking for something serious?" are ordinary questions. The answers, and how comfortably they are given, are data.

One protective habit: never upgrade your assessment of someone based on how they made you feel in a single evening. Upgrade it based on repetition. Feelings are fast. Patterns are slow. Patterns are more accurate.

PRACTICE

Score a current or recent connection out of five on each: interest, availability, intention. Note what evidence you used for each score.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Which of the three have I historically confused for the others?"

CARRY THIS

Warmth is not a plan. I look for direction.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

The unwritten rules, written down

Explicit social scripts

Here are the conventions people rarely say out loud. You are not obliged to follow any of them. You are entitled to know they exist, so that breaking one is your choice rather than an accident.

First meetings are usually short by design — one to two hours in a public place — because both people are assessing safety, not compatibility. A short first meeting is not rejection. Second, most people expect the person who suggested the meeting to propose the place; you can hand that back by saying "you choose, I'm happy with anywhere quiet". Third, replies within a day are normal in early dating; replies within seconds are not required, and nobody is counting as carefully as you fear.

Fourth, and most useful: people generally signal declining interest by reducing rather than announcing. Fewer questions, slower replies, vaguer plans. This is cowardly but extremely common. You are allowed to convert it into information by asking once, plainly: "I've noticed things have gone quiet — are you still interested in meeting up?" One clear question saves three weeks of decoding.

Fifth: small talk is not a test of intelligence, it is a safety ritual. It exists so two strangers can check each other's tone before risking anything real. If it exhausts you, you can shorten it honestly — "I'm not great at small talk, can I ask you something more interesting?" — and most people are relieved.

Write your own version of these rules as you go. The point is not to obey convention. It is to see it clearly enough that it stops being an invisible tripwire.

PRACTICE

Write three social rules you have been punished for breaking. Beside each, decide: keep it, adapt it, or refuse it.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Which rules do I actually want to follow, and which have only ever cost me?"

CARRY THIS

Explicit is not rude. Explicit is kind.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Saying what you mean

Directness as a strength

You have probably been told you are too direct. Read that complaint carefully: it is almost never about the content of what you said. It is about the absence of the cushioning that neurotypical conversation uses to protect the other person's face.

You do not have to abandon directness to add a cushion. A cushion is usually one short clause: a reason, a warmth marker, or an invitation to reply. "I don't want to go to the bar" becomes "I'd rather not do the bar — loud places wipe me out. Could we walk instead?" Same content, same honesty, no masking. You added a reason and an alternative.

This is not manipulation and it is not pretending. It is the difference between a headline and an article. Many autistic women were taught to fix this by saying less; that is the wrong repair, because it removes your needs from the conversation entirely. The right repair is saying slightly more.

The second half of saying what you mean is asking for what you mean. "Do you want to see me again?" is a complete, dignified sentence. So is "I like you and I'd like to know where this is going." The fear is that asking will scare someone off. In practice, asking scares off exactly the people who were never going anywhere — which is the point.

One rule to keep: never deliver a serious request when you are dysregulated or exhausted. Not because your feelings are wrong, but because you deserve to be heard in conditions where you can hear the answer.

PRACTICE

Rewrite three things you would normally leave unsaid as one-sentence requests, each with a reason and an alternative.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What have I stopped saying out loud, and what did that silence cost me?"

CARRY THIS

Clear is not cold. I can be warm and exact.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Measuring reciprocity

Does effort flow both ways?

Reciprocity is the most reliable predictor of whether a relationship will be good for you, and it is measurable. Not felt — measured. This is good news, because measurement is something you can do well.

There are four channels to count over a fortnight. Initiation: who starts contact? Curiosity: who asks questions about the other's life, and follows up on the answers? Effort: who travels, plans, remembers, adjusts? Repair: who notices when something went wrong and returns to it?

Perfect symmetry is not the goal and does not exist. What you are looking for is a rough balance over time, and the absence of a persistent one-way pattern. If you initiate nine times out of ten, you do not have a relationship, you have a hobby.

The most useful test is the pause. Stop initiating for a week and simply notice what happens. This is not a game or a punishment, and you should not announce it. It is an experiment that answers a question no amount of analysis can answer: does this connection exist when I stop carrying it?

Many autistic women are exceptional at effort and have been taught that being loved is something you earn through it. You are allowed to be chosen on days when you do nothing at all. If a connection only survives your effort, the connection is to your effort, not to you.

PRACTICE

Draw four columns — initiation, curiosity, effort, repair — and tally the last two weeks honestly.

JOURNAL PROMPT

“What does the tally show that my feelings were arguing with?”

CARRY THIS

I count what is given, not only what I give.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Misunderstanding and repair

What to do after it goes wrong

Every relationship contains misunderstanding. Cross-neurotype relationships contain more, because two people are running different assumptions about what a pause, a tone or a blunt sentence means. The research word for this is the double empathy problem: the gap goes both ways. You are not the only one misreading.

That reframe matters. If you believe every misunderstanding is your processing error, you will apologise for existing and then mask harder. If you understand it as a translation gap, you can do the thing that actually works — say the translation out loud.

A repair has three parts and takes about four sentences. Name what happened without motive: "When you went quiet after I said that, I didn't know what it meant." State your interpretation and mark it as a guess: "I assumed you were annoyed." Ask: "What was actually going on?" Then, crucially, believe the answer rather than your rehearsal of it.

Watch for the shutdown trap. After conflict, many autistic women lose access to speech for a while. That is not stonewalling and you do not have to power through it. "I need an hour, I'm not leaving, I'll come back to this" is a complete and healthy sentence. Say it before the shutdown if you can.

How a person handles repair tells you more about your future than how they behave when everything is easy. Someone who can be told they hurt you without collapsing or attacking is showing you the whole rest of the relationship.

PRACTICE

Write your four-sentence repair script and keep it somewhere you can read it when speech is hard.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What do I need from someone in the hour after a conflict?"

CARRY THIS

A gap in translation is not a fault in me.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Green flags, precisely

What safe behaviour looks like

Green flags are usually described in ways that are impossible to check: "good energy", "emotionally available". Here they are as observable behaviours instead, so you can tick them rather than sense them.

They tell you plans in advance and keep them. They answer direct questions directly, including uncomfortable ones. When you say no to something small, nothing bad happens — no sulking, no negotiation, no cooling off. They speak about previous partners without contempt. They accept information about you at face value: you say loud places are hard, and the next suggestion is quieter, without a lecture.

The most underrated green flag is boring consistency. Contact that arrives at a similar rhythm week after week is worth more than intensity, and it is the single easiest thing to measure. Intensity is often just anxiety wearing romance as a costume.

Another: they are curious about your interests rather than tolerant of them. Tolerance sounds like "that's cute, you're obsessed with that". Curiosity sounds like a question you actually want to answer. You are allowed to require curiosity.

Finally, watch what they do with your directness. A person who is right for you will be relieved by it — because they never have to guess where they stand either. That relief, when you see it, is one of the clearest green flags there is.

PRACTICE

Write your five non-negotiable green flags as behaviours someone could be filmed doing.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Which green flag have I never actually required?"

CARRY THIS

Consistency is the romance.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Yellow flags and the pause

Slow down, gather data

Yellow flags are not reasons to leave. They are reasons to stop accelerating and collect more information. Treating them as either nothing or everything is what makes early dating so exhausting.

Common ones: contact that runs hot and then disappears; vagueness about their situation; plans always made last-minute; jokes at your expense followed by "I'm only teasing"; a partner history in which every ex was "crazy"; pressure towards physical intimacy on a timeline that is theirs; and love-bombing — intensity that arrives before knowledge, declarations of certainty about a person they have met three times.

For an autistic woman, love-bombing is particularly hazardous, because being seen and adored after years of feeling difficult is powerfully disarming. Use a rule rather than a feeling: no major decision — exclusivity, meeting family, money, moving — inside the first eight weeks, no matter how right it feels. A person who is genuinely good for you will not be damaged by that pace. A person who is not will fight it, and that fight is your answer.

The correct response to a yellow flag is one clear sentence and then observation. "I've noticed plans usually happen last-minute, and I need more notice than that." Then watch for two weeks. Behaviour after being told is the real information; anyone can perform well before being told.

Write your yellow flags down when you are calm, and consult the list when you are not. Your standards are most accurate on a Tuesday afternoon, not at midnight after three good messages.

PRACTICE

List your yellow flags and, next to each, the exact sentence you will say if it appears.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Where have I sped up precisely when I should have slowed down?"

CARRY THIS

Time is the test that cannot be faked.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Red flags and safety

Leaving is a skill, not a failure

Some behaviours are not to be discussed, negotiated or understood. They are reasons to end contact, and the fact that you can explain why someone does them does not make them safer.

Red flags: any physical aggression, including towards objects, pets or walls. Any pressure or persuasion around sex after you have said no. Controlling who you see, what you wear, how you spend money. Isolating you from friends or family. Threats of self-harm used to stop you leaving. Reading your messages or tracking your location. Contempt — mockery of your autistic traits, your voice, your interests, your body. Repeatedly telling you that your perception of an event did not happen.

That last one deserves emphasis. Many autistic women have spent a lifetime being told they misread situations, which makes them unusually easy to convince that they are wrong about their own memory. Your memory is evidence. Keep a private, dated note of incidents that unsettled you. Not to build a case — to keep your own record intact.

Practical safety for meeting people: meet publicly for the first three dates, tell one person where you are and when you expect to be home, keep your own transport or fare, and do not share your home address early. If you use a support person, agree a single word by text that means "call me with an excuse".

If you need to leave a relationship that frightens you, you do not owe an explanation, a final conversation or a fair hearing. Tell someone you trust, and contact a domestic abuse service in your country — in the UK, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline is 0808 2000 247; in Portugal, the SOS line is 800 202 148. If you are in immediate danger, call your local emergency number. Leaving is a skill, and asking for help with it is part of the skill.

PRACTICE

Write your safety plan: who you tell, your code word, how you get home, and one service number saved in your phone.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What have I previously explained away that I would now name plainly?"

CARRY THIS

My memory of what happened is evidence.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Unmasking, safely and slowly

Choosing what to show, and when

Masking is not dishonesty. It is a survival strategy that worked, and it cost you enormously. The goal here is not to drop it all at once in front of a stranger — that is not authenticity, it is exposure without safety. The goal is to unmask deliberately, in stages, and to notice how each stage is received.

Think of it as three layers. Layer one: preferences. Quiet places, earlier evenings, texting rather than calling. Share these at the start; they are low-risk and immediately filter out people who cannot accommodate an ordinary need. Layer two: processing. That you need time to answer, that you take things literally, that you may need to leave when it gets loud. Share these once someone has passed layer one. Layer three: your inner life — stimming, meltdowns, shutdowns, the interests that hold you together. This layer is for people who have earned it with consistency.

You are not obliged to disclose a diagnosis at any stage, in any order. Disclosure is a choice about safety, not a moral duty. Some women disclose early to filter fast; others prefer to describe needs behaviourally and never use the word. Both are legitimate; pick the one that costs you less.

What you should watch is not whether someone says the right thing when you tell them, but what they do in the following weeks. Anyone can say "that's totally fine". Fewer people adjust a plan without being asked twice.

The reward for unmasking with the right person is very specific: the exhaustion goes. If you spend time with someone and leave with energy rather than a recovery day, take that seriously. It is data about the relationship, not a coincidence about the weather.

PRACTICE

Sort ten things about yourself into the three layers, and write when each becomes shareable.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"Who have I been able to be least masked with, and what made that possible?"

CARRY THIS

I reveal myself at the speed of safety.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

Sensory-aware dating

Design the date around your body

Most dating advice assumes a body that finds restaurants relaxing. If yours does not, the standard script is not neutral — it is a stress test you are asked to pass before anyone gets to meet you.

So design the conditions instead. Good first dates for many autistic women share four features: a defined end time, a shared activity so silence is not a failure, a predictable sensory environment, and an exit you control. Walks, galleries, botanical gardens, bookshops, daytime coffee in a quiet café, an aquarium. Bad ones: loud bars, busy restaurants at peak time, group events, anything open-ended in an unfamiliar place.

Say the conditions plainly when you arrange it: "I'd love to meet. Could we do a walk on Saturday afternoon rather than a bar? Loud places make it hard for me to hear and I'd rather actually talk to you." This sentence does two jobs at once — it gets you a workable date, and it tells you immediately how someone handles a stated need.

Plan the recovery as carefully as the date. Nothing scheduled afterwards. Something regulating on the way home. If you know you will be verbally exhausted, tell the person in advance that you go quiet afterwards and it means nothing bad. Prepared silence is much easier to read than sudden silence.

You are not high maintenance for needing conditions. Everyone has conditions; most people's happen to be the default. Naming yours is not a burden you bring to a date — it is the reason the date has a chance of being good.

PRACTICE

Write your three ideal first-date formats, your three no-go formats, and the message you will send to propose the first kind.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What conditions make me most myself in company?"

CARRY THIS

I choose the conditions in which I can be met.

YOUR WRITING SPACE

A relationship that fits

Designing your own shape

There is a standard relationship template — live together quickly, share everything, spend most free time in each other's company, be endlessly spontaneous — and there is no rule that says love has to take that shape.

Many autistic women thrive in relationships with more structure and more solitude than the template allows: separate bedrooms, planned rather than spontaneous contact, protected alone time that nobody takes personally, a weekly rhythm you can both rely on. These are not compromises or sad adaptations. For the right two people they are the reason it works.

So write your specification before you need it. How much time alone do you need each week to stay well? How much notice do you need for a change of plan? What does support look like in a shutdown — presence, distance, a glass of water, silence? What are you not willing to give up: your routines, your interests, your Sunday?

Then hold that specification lightly but visibly. Say it early, in ordinary language: "I need one evening a week entirely to myself; it isn't about you and I'll be much better company for it." Someone who is right for you will find this easy to work with, because everyone functions better inside a known rhythm.

You have finished this programme. What you take from it is not a set of techniques for being more palatable. It is a way of seeing dating as observable, askable and negotiable — and a standard that you are allowed to hold. You do not need to become less autistic to be loved. You need conditions, clarity, and people who are relieved by both.

PRACTICE

Write your relationship specification in one page: time alone, notice needed, support during shutdown, and three things you will not give up.

JOURNAL PROMPT

"What shape would a relationship take if it were built around how I actually work?"

CARRY THIS

I do not need to become less myself to be loved.

YOUR WRITING SPACE
