

Conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction in individuals with an autism-spectrum disorder and their neurotypical partner.

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The aim of the current study was to examine relationship satisfaction, psychological-wellbeing, and conflict in intimate relationships where one partner has an autism-spectrum disorder and the other partner is neurotypical. Very few studies have empirically examined NT-ASD relationships and considered the unique challenges of these relationships. The present study examined relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution style (individual's approach to conflict resolution), ineffective arguing (couple's approach to conflict resolution) and psychological well-being (stress, depression, and anxiety) in NT-ASD dyads ($N=161$). This information was obtained in survey format and participants were recruited from ASD support groups worldwide. An interview component ($N=19$) was also conducted to provide a richer description of the nature of conflict in NT-ASD dyads. Results reflected reduced relationship satisfaction for NTs and individuals with an ASD. NTs were more likely to use an effective style of conflict resolution than those with an ASD. NT partners and those with an ASD reported greater ineffective arguing in their relationship compared to the control group. Depression scores were significantly higher for NT individuals than the control group. Thematic analysis revealed that NTs and those with an ASD perceived different causes of conflict in their intimate relationship. Ideals means of resolving conflict were similar for both groups and reflective of effective strategies. Emotional withdrawal was the strategy described as most commonly used by the NT partner. The strategy most frequently used by the partner with an ASD was avoidance. These findings indicate that NT-ASD relationships do differ notably from NT-NT relationships. Relationship satisfaction and psychological wellbeing are reduced, and conflict is managed differently. These findings provided evidence that intervention for these couples requires further investigation and should take into account the unique attributes of NT-ASD dyads. The key limitations of this study pertain to the limited number of participants with an ASD and the use of self-report data rather than observation when investigating conflict.

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Elyse McNeil, BA, PGDipPsych, is currently completing MPsychClin at Bond University (completed in April 2014). Elyse has a strong interest in the area of adult intimate relationships, eating disorders, gender and sexuality, and alternative approaches to therapy including mindfulness and energy psychology. She hopes to continue to conduct research and engage in clinical practice that benefits under-researched, under-resourced, and disadvantaged groups of society.