



# SOCIAL LIFE

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## Student Clubs

Student clubs can be a straightforward and stress-free way of finding other students who share some of your interests. In clubs, you don't need to worry as much about many of the complexities of finding friends: you can be fairly confident of finding at least some other club members at any given meeting. Because student clubs are structured, you might also find the group meetings less anxiety-provoking than more unpredictable social settings.

Because of the large size of many post-secondary institutions in comparison to high school, many of them can support an immense diversity of clubs focused on many different topics.

### These could include:

- Different academic or professional fields
- Technology and robotics, arts
- Media and entertainment
- Recreation
- Volunteerism and community service, and more.

One can also find identity-based organizations, like groups for students of particular nationalities or religions. There are sometimes even clubs of autistic students! It is completely normal for a medium-sized or large university to have hundreds of clubs.

For the most part, student clubs are organized and run by students, with minimal involvement from the institution. You can find information about different clubs online. Often the institution's list of clubs is managed by the student society, while other institutions will host the list of clubs on their own website through a centre for student involvement/community. Information about specific club meetings might also be posted online, or you could email the club organizers to get details. In pre-COVID times, institutions would also commonly hold an orientation to clubs near the beginning of the year, in which new students could walk around and visit tables set up by different club representatives.

- Many clubs will accept any new members who present themselves, while others (e.g., certain academic/professional organizations) might have specific membership requirements. If you are unsure if a club has membership requirements, you can always email the club organizers to express your interest and ask about these details.

Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, some clubs have suspended operations, while others continue to meet virtually.

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## Social Activities

Being on a university, college, or polytechnic campus there will be many opportunities to immerse yourself in social life. From orientation to student clubs, movie nights with the student union, and volunteering opportunities at home and abroad, how you connect with others will depend on how you like to express yourself and develop your unique identity.



### Volunteering

There are many volunteer opportunities on campus. You may want to develop your leadership skills by becoming a peer helper or a tutor. You may want to volunteer with a student organization, assist with a food donation drives, or develop a new club or organization yourself. As a volunteer you can learn organizational, leadership skills and gain important contacts through your service.

Volunteering can be a great addition to your resume in addition to meeting like-minded individuals who want to make a positive difference. Check your campus student union website for volunteering opportunities.

### Student Clubs

Student union clubs can range from academic-focused, religious or spiritual, to physical and artistic endeavours. Check out your student unions' webpage for a listing of clubs and how you can join. Some campuses have a 'clubs week' where students can interact with current members to get a better idea of how each club fits with your interests, schedule and time commitment. Some clubs have a small annual fee to become a member.

### Campus Community

Your campus may have an athletics team who play locally and who travel to compete with other teams. There are usually a variety of sports teams like basketball, field hockey, golf, hockey, soccer, swimming, wrestling, volleyball, rugby, track & field/cross country, among others. If you like watching (or playing) any of these sports, get involved and meet some like minded students. Some campuses also have debate teams, chess teams and intramural sports teams where you can choose to participate or be a spectator.

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### Intersectional Identities

The term LGBTQ2SIA (also known as LGBT, LGBTQ or LGBTQ+) stands for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, 2 Spirit, Intersex, and Asexual community. It represents those who identify as having romantic/sexual and or gender identities other than cisgender/heterosexual. Cisgender is defined as those who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Heterosexual connotes those who are romantically or sexually attracted to the opposite sex or gender.

Often in college and universities, there are LGBTQ2SIA groups you can join to meet other students who may have similar identity expressions and experiences as you do in the world. The LGBTQ community can be a supportive and accepting space for those who already identify as being in this group and for those who are starting their journey of self-discovery of their own identities. There are also LGBTQ mentoring programs in some schools that offer support, advice, education, and resources.

If you consider yourself to be a part of this community, you may be able to find a supportive LGBTQ2SIA group on most campuses. The best time to join is usually during the first week of classes sometimes called club week, fresher's week, or frosh week. You can also find support on social media platforms as well.



**CONSIDERATIONS:** Though there may be safety within the LGBTQ2SIA community, it is important to understand that not everyone respects the different identities that we represent across the human spectrum. There may be a safety issue when disclosing your identity to others outside of the LGBTQ2SIA community. Using the same strategies in the discussion about diagnosis disclosure, you can decide if and with whom you feel comfortable sharing your identity. Discussing disclosure safety with other members of the LGBTQ2SIA community or with a counsellor can be very helpful. Sharing your identity with others should always be your choice.

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### **Ethnicity and Religion**

Most educational institutions have policies that promote a diversity of learners in their communities therefore campuses can have a vast array of people from many different backgrounds. Being from different ethnic and religious backgrounds can offer many rich differences in the educational community. Learning about people's way of life can bring a multitude of new experiences including introductions to new languages, foods, styles of dressing, routines, behaviours, and more. Respecting each other is an important part of belonging to the larger community. If you have questions regarding another person's culture, religion, or traditions, asking them about it in a respectful manner is acceptable. Everyone has a right to not engage therefore if you are rebuffed, do not take it personally. Respect others' space and freedom to engage or not engage.

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### **Student Experience with Intersectionality**

Intersectionality of autism and race, sexual/gender identity, age, class etc., can have an effect on how you are perceived in the world. You may have advantages or disadvantages as a result of the way you are regarded. Those who aren't familiar with you may ascribe their personal perspective of who you are onto you as a result of first impressions or personal biases.

This can sometimes mean that others may ascribe a negative impression to you. It is not your responsibility to change anyone's impression of you. If you experience a negative attitude from anyone based on your race, ethnicity, or religion and it makes you feel unsafe, report it to your teacher, campus security, campus helpline, or student services. You may need to report it to more than one person or office in order to get the assistance you require. Everyone has the right to safety and every student is an important part of the educational community.

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### **Social Media**

Social media offers autistic students a series of conveniences that aren't as common in the real world. For one thing, it's easier to reach like-minded people when you have a far greater access to different communities beyond your real-life circle at a post-secondary institution, which is a great advantage to students on the spectrum. Additionally, interacting with people online is far less stressful than doing it in real life, and can act as a stepping stone towards being able to comfortably interact with people in regular social settings.

On the other hand, social media can be a detriment or even a danger to autistic students. We can potentially get stuck in the online world and forget or choose not to progress forward to



interacting in the real world, or let the internet occupy all of our time. We can get stuck in various online rabbit holes too that may be mentally unhealthy for us, and some communities online may be uncomfortable or controversial enough to lead to serious social consequences if your involvement in them is exposed; this goes for anything you post on regular social media as well. With that said, there are plenty of positive online communities as well, the autism forum WrongPlanet being one such example.

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### Camouflaging

For a long time, many autistic people have been saying that concealing our autism and trying to appear more neurotypical can be exhausting and stressful. Attempting to appear more neurotypical in this way is often called “camouflaging,” “masking,” or “compensation.” Researchers have only recently started to study this sort of camouflaging, but so far, their findings do provide empirical support to the idea that camouflaging is often related to poorer mental health.

This new branch of research challenges many of traditional assumptions. Neurotypical people have often told autistic people that we would be better off if we tried to appear more neurotypical. In some contexts, like certain job environments, this might indeed be true: for better or worse, we might sometimes need to accommodate ourselves to neurotypical social norms. However, camouflaging constantly - effortfully trying to hide who we are, even or especially during supposed “leisure time” - could drain our energy, prevent us from finding to relax and recharge, and cause us to experience burnout.

Interestingly, a number of studies suggest that autistic women are particularly likely to camouflage. Many autistic women describe observing others around them, finding social models to imitate and copy, developing scripts they can try to follow in social interactions, and other very explicit camouflaging practices. However, the idea that *only* autistic women camouflage is a gender stereotype. All autistic people, including men and nonbinary autistics, face great pressure to conform to neurotypical social norms.

**How can we avoid the stresses and negative consequences of camouflaging?** It’s important to allow yourself to be yourself. For example, if you enjoy parties, then you should definitely feel free to go to parties in your leisure time. However, if you are only going to parties because it is a behaviour expected of neurotypical people - if you find parties exhausting and stressful - then maybe you should spend a relaxing evening in your own room instead.

As autistic and neurodivergent people, we’re different from others, and that can make it harder for us to accept ourselves and become comfortable in our own skin. However, as autistic people, we should not be trying to have a neurotypical life. We should try to have our own best autistic life.



### Romantic Relationships and Dating

Romantic relationships can be difficult to navigate. Being on the spectrum may introduce new challenges. Not everyone has an interest in dating or relationships and that is perfectly all right! You may feel nervous about dating especially if you experience sensory load, heightened anxiety, or miss some social cues. If you are interested in dating casually or seriously, read on and we will cover some of the intricacies of the dating.

**Apps + Online:** One of the biggest changes in the modern dating world has been the shift to online and app based dating platforms. Online dating can expand the reach of your search to those you would not normally interact with on a day-to-day basis and thus, increase your chances of meeting the right person. While it is convenient it can still be challenging to find a 'match'. One of the perks of using an online dating is that you can know a little bit about the person before you meet them by reading their profile and then start a chat by direct messaging. Things you can chat about include information such as preferred movies, music, hobbies.

**Social Networks:** If using a dating app does not sound appealing to you, try looking around the places you visit everyday and see who you would like to talk to and get to know better. For example, the library, museum, park, grocery store, volunteering, student club, are places you may encounter those with similar interests and dispositions.

If you are having trouble finding someone whom you would like to know better, try expanding your social circle in ways which are meaningful to you. School clubs and other general internet-based social networks (like meetup.com) are great places to meet people, express yourself and explore your interests with others who share similar interests. There may be less pressure interacting in a group setting than one-on-one.

Meeting through friends is another way of connecting to a larger social network without using apps. This works for some people but can be awkward for others. Take note of what you feel about going out with a friend of a friend. Would you be all right with seeing them again if it doesn't work out?

One thing to be careful about is meeting people at work. Employers are almost never allowed to date their employees. Romantic relationships even with co-workers at your same level can still be complicated and it may be against company policy to date someone that you work with. This could endanger your future employment or opportunities for advancement or could be awkward if your co-worker declines your advance or it does not work out.

### Online Dating Safety

Safety should be a priority when meeting a date in person, while most people on dating site are looking for a compatible match, not everyone is straightforward about what they are looking for. Some people are looking for a monogamous relationship; others may be looking for something like a one-time encounter or more of a casual relationship like 'friends with



benefits'. Be upfront if you know what you are looking for in a partner, do not assume you know what they are looking for, more on communication later in the module.

Similar to general online safety, do not give out personal information like your home address, or any financial information, as unfortunately, there are people who are looking to take advantage of others. During the first few dates, always meet your date in public, tell a friend or a close family member where you are going and when you plan to return home.

### **Casual vs. serious dating**

As you may already know, people arrange their dating lives in many different ways. These are not forever choices; they can fluctuate depending on your current life situation and the other person. The three main categories are hooking-up, casually dating, and serious relationships. Depending on their life situation, some people are only looking for one of these relationship types and others may know what they want after hanging out after a while, and that is perfectly okay!

**Asking them out:** Asking someone out can be nerve-wracking. If asking them out online, it is best to do so after getting to know them a little over messaging, but don't wait too long. As you may know, sometimes you have chemistry with someone online but in person, the same excitement is not there. This is perfectly all right and has happened to lots of us.

It is best to have chatted with someone a bit before you go and ask them out, make sure you both have a connection and you are comfortable chatting. It is good to suggest something casual like, "would you like to go out sometime" or "would you like to grab a coffee sometime?" These are both good options to gauge the other person's interest in getting to know you. Choose a location and an activity that allows both of you to have an "out" if the date is not what you expected or it is not going well. Try grabbing a coffee or going for a walk in a park.

**On a date:** Make sure you make an effort to find out about the other person and what they enjoy. Ask some follow-up questions about things they say, but try to avoid bombarding them with too many questions. People like talking about themselves but not being interviewed!

### **Here are a few ways to develop respect in your dating relationship:**

- Listen to your partner and remember what they say
- Express gratitude for your partner in small ways
- Respect your partner's preferences, beliefs, and boundaries
- Do not compare your partner with others, if you do, make sure it places them in a positive light
- Express any relationship concerns kindly, do not criticize, blame, or yell
- Do not disclose any confidential information to other people that your partner has shared with you





- If your partner is having a bad day, listen to them, acknowledge the situation or feelings they are experiencing and use compassionate language when speaking

### Communication skills in dating

Communication is the foundation for any strong relationship. Speaking in a clear, kind, and direct way can help diminish any potential miscommunication and help build trust between you and your partner. Certain styles of communicating can create confusion - sarcasm and teasing to name a few. If these or any other way of communicating are difficult for you to pick up on, let them know and they can make adjustments to make you feel more comfortable.

You may not always say the right thing, but being a kind, authentic person can help you connect with others in a meaningful way. Being vulnerable and communicating your anxieties, concerns, and needs and they doing the same will help you and your partner understand and support each other. It can be scary not knowing if you will be accepted for who you are, but this is the way to build a strong, healthy relationship with a foundation of trust.

**Flirting:** Flirting can be a subtle way of communicating your interest in another person. This can be a tricky area for anyone to navigate, as it is complex, subtle, and sometimes brief. Pay attention to subtle cues like their behaviour changes around you. They may find excuses to initiate physical contact, laugh at your jokes, or make lots of eye contact – all of these may be ways of flirting with you.

If you have difficulties understanding social signals this may be an area to focus on. Asking follow-up questions can help clear up any miscommunication.

**Rejection:** Rejection is a fact of dating life; it hurts and can come out of nowhere. People can change their minds and decide to split even if they were previously excited about the relationship and 'all-in'. Understand that rejection is normal and happens to everyone who dates. If this happens to you, talk to friends and family; immerse yourself in your hobbies and daily life. Take time to focus on yourself, maybe learn a new hobby and when you are ready to meet another person and potentially get close to them, apply the lessons you learned from previous dating experience. Most importantly, just try to have fun getting to know another person.

### Setting and respecting boundaries

Setting healthy boundaries is a crucial step in your dating life (and life in general). Boundaries are an important aspect of your self care, they are often emotional or psychological but can also be physical. A lack of healthy boundaries can lead to resentment, stress, relationship issues such as losing your sense of self. Holding strong boundaries can help you make decisions that are in your best interest and not doing what the other person wants all the time that can leave you run down, resentful, and stressed.



## AUTISM CAMPUS PREP

- One example of a relational boundary would be to tell your partner you need a few days alone each week to decompress and re-charge. They should respect this boundary by listening to you and giving you the space each week.
- You'll need to spend some time and figure out what are important boundaries for you, this can be done by thinking about what you want from your relationship, write boundaries based on those needs, and communicating this to your partner clearly, and tell them why they are important for you. Discussion of boundaries can be on-going, fluid and something each of you can bring up and discuss as needed.

Dating can be confusing but having an understanding of who you are and what you want while working on open and honest communication, and a genuine desire to get to know someone will help set you up for success. Go easy on yourself, enjoy the process of getting to know another person and yourself on a deeper level and see where the relationship goes.

### **Signs that your relationship may be unhealthy:**

- Your partner pressures you into doing or saying things that you are not comfortable with. This can include moving too quickly emotional or sexually, whereby you feel pressured to do things you don't want to do
- Your partner has habits that negatively influence you, for example drinking excessively
- Your partner refuses to talk about issues in the relationship or constantly puts off difficult conversations
- Your partner does not prioritize areas of life that are important to you
- Your partner calls you names, degrades, mocks, or humiliates you
- Your partner tries to control you by stating where you can go, who you can see, what you wear
- Your partner uses threatening language or physical force
- Your partner doesn't celebrate your 'wins', however big or small
- Your partner manipulates you and tries to control your decisions or beliefs
- Your partner isolates you from friends and family

If you feel your relationship is not healthy, reach out to those closest to you for help. Your family and friends can be allies, help you establish healthy boundaries or help you exit a toxic relationship. You can also reach out to your campus counselling services and speak with a professional for help.

