



Why Love Can Be the Hardest Part of Being Autistic

I used to think I was simply bad at relationships.

Not spectacularly bad, not chaotic or dramatic, just slightly out of step. I could hold my own at work, deliver a presentation without notes and build a career in environments that prized speed and precision. Yet somehow I could derail an entirely pleasant evening at home because I answered “What’s wrong?” with silence.

It is such a small question and it should not feel loaded but when you are autistic and you have spent an entire day masking, adjusting your tone, your facial expressions, your reactions so that no one questions your competence or your likeability, by the time you close the front door behind you there is often very little left.

I would not be angry, I would not be upset, I would simply be empty. Unfortunately, emptiness looks remarkably like indifference!

For years before I was diagnosed at 25, I assumed this was a character flaw. I had already been misdiagnosed with anxiety and I’d been told I needed to “try harder socially”. I believed that other women found love easier because they were softer, more intuitive, more naturally equipped for emotional fluency.

What I understand now is that it was never about a lack of feeling, it was about how my brain processes feeling.

There is a cultural script around romance that suggests connection should be instinctive. The right person will simply understand you and that communication will just, flow. Autistic communication is often far more literal. If I say I do not mind where we eat, I genuinely do not mind. I am not hinting. I am not testing you. I am not expecting you to guess my hidden preference. I simply do not have the cognitive energy left to simulate enthusiasm for options.

And yet that small exchange can grow.

“You never mind.”

“It feels like you don’t care.”

I care deeply. I feel things intensely. That intensity is often part of the difficulty!

Research over the past decade has increasingly shown that autistic adults desire intimacy and long term partnership just as much as anyone else. The difference lies in processing style. Raised voices

can feel physically sharp, sudden changes of plan can register as threat rather than inconvenience, and silence is not brooding...it is just, buffering.

When I pause in conversation, I am not constructing a clever retort. I am processing what has just been said. But relationships are built on rhythm, and when that rhythm falters it can create insecurity on both sides.

December tends to magnify all of this, routines disappear and social expectations multiply. Last December alone more than four million people engaged with my reflections on autistic overload. The messages were strikingly similar. Women who loved their partners but felt brittle and reactive. People who could negotiate contracts all day and then crumble at a crowded family lunch. So many describing the same bewildering pattern of competence at work and conflict at home.

Masking all day costs energy. When that energy runs out, the person closest to you often sees the crash.

It is not that the love disappears. It is that the nervous system is overwhelmed.

When Christine McGuinness spoke about telling dates upfront that she might not cope in a loud, unfamiliar restaurant, it resonated deeply. For autistic women especially, who are so often socialised to accommodate, to smooth things over and not make a fuss, stating a need plainly can feel radical. I spent years pushing through environments that exhausted me, then wondering why I seemed disproportionately upset afterwards. The upset was rarely about the person. It was about overload.

AntiPocket, which launches publicly on 1 April, was born from recognising how frequently overwhelm is misread as emotional failure. It is not a relationship app. It is not a promise of romantic harmony. It is structured, practical support for autistic and neurodivergent adults navigating high demand environments. When you regulate the nervous system before and after stress, you reduce the spillover. When you reduce the spillover, you protect the relationships that matter most.

Autism Acceptance Month creates a valuable space to discuss these realities openly. But the friction does not only appear in April. It appears on ordinary evenings when one person feels ignored and the other feels flooded.

The most liberating realisation for me was not that I needed to become better at love. It was that I needed language. Language to explain that silence can mean processing rather than punishment. Language to say I am overwhelmed rather than pretending I am fine. Language that allows difference to be understood rather than pathologised.

Autistic women are often described as intense or difficult. The truth is far less interesting, many of us are just exhausted from trying to meet expectations that were never designed with us in mind.

Love with a neurodivergent mind is no Bridget Jones movie, it is honest and asks for clarity rather than mind reading, it just needs both people to learn each other's wiring.

When that happens, something shifts and the love, which was always there, finally has room to breathe.

Editor's note

Rosie is an autistic founder, speaker and author of My Autistic Fight Song. Her social platforms reach

millions each month and she regularly speaks and appears on podcasts about autism, ambition and relationships. AntiPocket, her support app for neurodivergent adults, launches publicly on 1 April and is available for discussion during Autism Acceptance Month.