

## **Protecting Ourselves: How Individuals with NVLD and Autism Spectrum Disorder Can Avoid Sexual Assault and Misunderstandings**

I often see young people with NVLD and ASD in my practice who ask, “How can I meet someone?” While this is an important question, it is equally important to ask, “How can I stay safe while dating?” It is critical that women with NVLD and ASD implement specific strategies to become aware of their surroundings. Statistics show that women with ASD are more likely to be sexually assaulted (Bargiela Sarah, 2016). While clearly no one is at fault for being sexually assaulted, the senior news writer for *Spectrum*, Nicholette Zeliadt, states that challenges understanding social norms and high-risk behaviors, such as drinking, may increase vulnerability for young women with ASD. (Zeliadt, 2018) No statistics currently exist regarding those with NVLD, but their similar symptomology most likely places them at increased risk as well. Therefore, it is essential that therapists work with these young women on developing awareness of potential dangers in their environment. It is also important to recognize that young adult males with ASD and NVLD with benign intentions may be accused of sexual harassment or inappropriate behavior. Unfortunately, many don’t find out until a report has been made at their workplace, academic institution, or even casually in social situations. Young men in therapy may benefit from developing specific social and dating skills that also help them to avoid potential misunderstandings.

Understanding a potentially dangerous situation begins by reading the advances and intentions of another person before an initial date. For example, some women on the spectrum or with NVLD may misconstrue lewd or inappropriate comments or actions such as “you’re so sexy” or standing close as compliments, while they may in fact indicate a failure to respect their boundaries. Due to the fact that “reading between the lines” may be a challenge for some of these young women, a confidential space where they can practice decoding intentions with a professional may be a critical step for developing their awareness skills. Therapists can help with this process by reviewing different situations with these young women, helping them to identify potential incidents of negative intentions or boundary violations. Also, it is sometimes prudent to refrain from an actual date before getting to know the person either online or in-person to make sure that that he or she is well-intentioned. Lastly, practicing adamantly saying “no” and being clear about one’s boundaries is also an important skill. However, as helpful as therapy can be, some young women may benefit from discussing different dating situations with their friends, who may also be able to help them decode potentially dangerous situations. Sometimes, having peer support is the best way to avoid potential harm. This is especially the case when young women attend parties that involve alcohol and drug use, during which a friend can help to regulate alcohol intake or stay sober and make sure that she does not end up in a potentially dangerous situation.

Another part of staying safe is helping young women on the spectrum and with NVLD think about location and support when they are going on a date. Specifically, a well-lit and public space is important. Having a friend on speed-dial who can provide an excuse should they need to

leave an uncomfortable situation immediately may be helpful as well. In general, it is not recommended to go on initial dates in new and unfamiliar places, such as restaurants in unknown neighborhoods, as the likelihood of becoming lost and flustered is greater than for neurotypical individuals. For women with NVLD and on the spectrum, choosing a location where they know the local transportation and can easily figure out the route home is generally an important safety measure as well.

Men on the spectrum and with NVLD are at risk of being accused of inappropriate behavior as there is increasing sensitivity regarding sexual harassment and unwelcomed advance. This is largely due to Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on sex and sexual harassment on campus. In describing the current campus environment, Lee Burdette Williams, the Director of Higher Education Training and Development for the College Autism Network, states, “Ponder this confluence for a moment: an institution where there is going to be a swift response to a student behaving in a way that appears to be inappropriate, and a growing number of students, who because of the way their brains are wired, often behave in ways that are unexpected (A less judgmental way of saying ‘inappropriate’)” (Williams, 2018). Mental health professionals can benefit greatly from helping male college students on the spectrum and with NVLD to navigate the social realities of college life. Therapists can also work with these young men on identifying and practicing appropriate dating skills through role playing, such as how and when to ask someone out, how to flirt, and how to recognize when someone is or is not interested. It is also important to note that the workplace has also become increasingly strict regarding the definitions and parameters of appropriate vs, inappropriate behavior, as jokes and invitations to date are often seen to merit disciplinary action. Therefore, therapists and coaches can be helpful to these young men in adapting to the demands of employment by having them identify and develop awareness regarding often “unwritten” rules of the workplace, something that can be a challenge for those on the spectrum and with NVLD to recognize. This is not only done by carefully reviewing the employee handbook, but also by identifying typical workplace norms before beginning a position, which could take the form of establishing a workplace mentor or partner who could help the new employee to become aware of the workplace culture

With the right support young people on the spectrum and with NVLD can develop appropriate dating skills that help them to stay safe and avoid misunderstandings.

## Works Cited

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