

Interview with Beast

This interview was conducted on March 4, 2022. Names have been changed for privacy. Beast is a man in his early 40s, who is happily married and has children. Beast is autistic.

What is Autism spectrum disorder?

ASD includes conditions that were previously considered separate (autism, Asperger's syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder and an unspecified form of pervasive developmental disorder). ASD is related to brain development that impacts how a person perceives and socializes with others, causing problems in social interaction and communication. The disorder also includes limited and repetitive patterns of behaviour. ASD begins in early childhood and causes problems functioning in society (social settings, school, and work), and can impact how a person forms friendships and romantic relationships. ASD is a lifelong disorder which means it cannot be cured. Intensive, early treatment can make a big difference in people's lives. "Spectrum" is used to indicate the wide range of symptoms and their severity. [Learn more at Mayo Clinic.](#)

1. Since one of the most googled questions about autism is, "Can someone with autism feel love?", I wondered if there is anything you would like to say about writing sex and romance for people with autism?

Beast: Autism is a spectrum, which is a fancy way of saying that how it manifests is all over the place. You introduced the topic with the

information that one of the most Googled questions was, "Can someone with autism love?" and that was a lot more startling than it probably should have been to me, as I know both how some autistic folks behaviours appear outwardly, and because of a lot of media portrayal.

The short version is yes, we absolutely love. How it gets expressed varies a lot, but autism does not stop anyone with it from loving another person/people.

A lack of emotion or empathy is **not** a trait of autism, but as some autistic people's emotional cues are either muted or different than neurotypical people's, I can see how people still draw that conclusion.

Aside - what is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the thoughts or feelings of another. To feel and display empathy, it's not necessary to share the same experiences or circumstances as others. Rather, empathy is an attempt to better understand the other person by getting to know their perspective. There are three types of empathy:

1. **Cognitive empathy** is the ability to understand how a person feels and what they might be thinking. Cognitive empathy makes us better communicators because it helps us relay information in a way that best reaches the other person.
2. **Emotional empathy (affective empathy)** is the ability to share the feelings of another person. Some have described it as "your pain in my heart." This type of empathy helps you build emotional connections with others.

3. **Compassionate empathy (empathic concern)** goes beyond understanding others and sharing their feelings: it moves us to **take action**, to help however we can.
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Beast: It is important to acknowledge two major, global issues with regard to researching autism:

1. It is never possible to understand how another person processes their thoughts and emotions if they do it in a different way than you do.
2. The vast majority of research on autism is done by non-autistic people.

The first one is a two-way street. I can't get into anyone else's head (whether they are autistic or not), any more than they can get into mine. This means that **every last bit of insight** on the subject of **how** an autistic person thinks and feels differently from a neurotypical person **is correlational and** based on a faulty perspective (to some degree).

I don't know what you can do about the second point, aside from listening to autistic people. The central point is that while research is important and those that do it in good faith are both valuable and valued, it is hubris to think that any of it is absolute truth.

Cognitive empathy is what a lot of autistic people struggle with. A lot of autistic people have trouble recognizing certain physiological emotional cues. The subtleties of facial expression and body language are lost on some of us which can lead to the impression that we are either emotionally dense, or apathetic towards the feelings of others.

Sometimes we are not very good at recognizing these emotions in ourselves, too.

I over-explain things as a coping mechanism. I developed this coping mechanism because I have come to realize that some of my nonverbal language either does not instinctually get expressed the way most people's do, so I compensate by being hyper-communicative. That is just one person's reaction, and I just happen to have recognized it.

When it comes to effective empathy, an autistic person can, by all appearances, feel what other people are feeling, once it is recognized, extremely intensely. This means that, once an emotion is identified, an autistic person may feel it very, very strongly, be it love, anger, sadness, or whatever. In the case of a shared emotion like love, this can sometimes be overwhelming, though because many of us do not emote, you might not realize we are struggling with it.

So going back to the question of autism, love, and sex - yes, autistic people can love. They can love you deeply. But sometimes it's harder to see.

Sex with an autistic person isn't really physiologically different than sex with a neurotypical person, all the equipment works the same. Autistic people may be more or less able to have casual vs. romantic sexual relations based entirely on their specific reaction to the world, and, for lack of better phrasing, the specific filter their autism puts it through.

Example: One autistic person may have trouble with emotional cues. This may lead them to only seek casual sexual relationships because it's easier - they don't have to worry about the depths of emotion in the other person they aren't picking up on. A different autistic person might be fanatically monogamous, having **finally** figured out their loved one's cues enough to understand them, and having an intense capacity for affective empathy that means they feel especially close to that person.

Autism is such a broad umbrella that it is hard to establish any kind of real, solid, universal patterns, which unfortunately also makes it challenging to give a really definitive guide for how to write them. Maybe that in itself is a suggestion - when writing an autistic person, give them context and specificity without saying, "This is what **all** autistic people are like."

Follow-up question: I know it is not the same thing at all and we both have different mental health conditions. But I want to say...many people act like people with my disorder do not feel things "correctly", or that all we are capable of is extreme selfishness that we erroneously believe is love.

Those people are garbage. If they do not understand how you show and receive love and affection, that does not make them right. There are many ways to give your heart.

Beast: That was something I kind of wanted to address, but I didn't want to speak on other people's behalf. I think it applies to a lot of neurodiversity. You said it better than I would have anyway.

Follow-up: I think with any medical condition, whether it is a disability or not, nobody's experience is exactly the same. I do not speak for everyone with my mental illness. You don't speak for everyone on the autism spectrum. I do not believe either of us is under the mistaken impression that we do speak for everyone.

2. Moving topics a bit, autism is recognized as a disability. Do you think of yourself as disabled? Do you think you are part of a disabled community?

Beast: No, I don't think of myself as disabled. What I finally decided, at one point, is that disabled is just a word, and having a box to put a person into doesn't ultimately change who they are. A rose by any other name, and all that.

It's particularly tricky with autism. I did not have very many services in my life, and while I was always acutely aware of my difference, I did not have a label for it until I was nearly an adult, because they did not diagnose it as often when I was a kid, and I was always afraid of being a squeaky wheel, so I spent a lot of mental energy trying to cover. I have an education, I can communicate with people, and I can generally function within society.

But I have family members who are not as functioning as me. They are non-verbal and it's unlikely that one of them will ever live independently. I can see their struggle with the same pattern of

cognitive development that I had. While autism isn't a disability for **me**, it is for them.

I think that, if you define disability as something that creates additional challenges in daily life, then sure, I'm disabled, but that doesn't put any concept of scale into the definition.

There are some representations of autism that some people get up in arms about, e.g. Sheldon from the **Big Bang Theory**. Some people find that character incredibly offensive, and yet I know the actor who portrays Sheldon actually did his homework on autism, and even though that character is not **me**, I know **there are** autistic people out there that are very much like Sheldon. I personally know two autistic people that are very much like Sheldon.

There will always be somebody who is upset by a representation of their specific condition because mileage varies. I think research and experience go a long way, and the fickle nature of public opinion can make a decision to damn or praise a TV rendition based simply on which option gains the most momentum. I do think that personally experiencing a thing, though, **absolutely** gives you the right to tell a story about it.

3. What would you like to say to scriptwriters who might write scripts with characters with autism? Any specific things to include?

- Any pitfalls to avoid?
- Any online resources you think are handy?

- For example, part of writing inclusive content for a person who uses a wheelchair is mentioning the wheelchair in the script itself. Are there certain things you would like to see writers mention in scripts about people with autism?
- What tags would you like to see, besides [autism] ?

Beast: Hmm. **These** are really tricky. Foremost, I would say, "tread lightly," but I feel weird about saying it as it sounds like a threat or personal warning about erasure, and that isn't how I mean it.

Autism is, like I've said, all over the place. This means that a 100% accurate account of one autistic person's experience might be completely off for another, which makes writing about autism tricky. I think something a lot of portrayals of non "severe," autism (which isn't a preferred term for a lot of the autistic community but I don't have anything better), get past the challenge of variation in autism by just **not** calling a character autistic. The character is just awkward or has reactions that aren't quite what you would expect, and follow some patterns **that one might associate** with autism **without** calling it autism. This is a double-edged sword because it leads to erasure. On the other hand, it puts the person before the label, which is something I suspect a lot of us appreciate.

I really do not have a great answer. It is complicated and is really, I think, one of the reasons there are so few generally positively regarded representations of autism.

Honestly, I'm not sure if this is a vote for or against this, but I think that in *GWA*, once in a while I see [awkward] or [adorkable] used, and I think, "This person is just describing an autistic person."

Not every time, mind you, but this also begs the question - at what point does a person's reactions in a portrayal go from quirky to autism-like? That line is incredibly blurry, because, "quirky," is the extent of what you might think about how a lot of autistic folks interact.

4. I think "tread lightly" is sound advice. Whether the writer has autism or not, what they are writing does not reflect the shared experience of every person with autism.

I can see how that leads to erasure. When the character is just a character and the illness isn't named, is the writer really giving representation to that group?

When I was growing up, the terms were "special needs" and "disabled". The current language is "people with disabilities" or **PWD**. Yet some of the requests I have received from people (to write for their disability), **the person who made the request** provided the tag [disabled listener], **not** [listener with disability].

However some people dislike that wording, they would prefer to see: [listener with disability] [listener with autism] instead of [autistic listener]

What do you think about that?

Beast: "Person with disability" vs "disabled person", or "person with autism" vs "autistic person" is another super-tricky question. There is actually a lot of contention about the specific question of, "people with autism," vs. "autistic person," in the community, and I don't know that there is a right answer.

The arguments some people make for "people with autism," revolve around the wording implying that autism is a disability, which is not how many autistic people see it. Those same people prefer, "autistic person," while others don't want to feel defined by the label, making, "autistic person," a problem for them. What this amounts to is a quagmire that is very easy to get stuck in.

So I understand why many people who want to depict an autistic person just don't call them that. It's simpler, and there is plausible deniability if somebody is outraged that the character does not represent them. It can even be a good thing in some respects if it's done in a way that **doesn't** portray the undefined autistic person as foolish or utterly unlikeable, normalizing something a lot of people don't even think of as a disability. You don't want there to be zero representation of autism out there though, as that is how you end up with the misconceptions that abound today, that lead to, "Can autistic people love?" being a top Google search.

I think that an easy way to decide if something you want to do for a portrayal or not is a good idea is to go ahead and take several other kinds of under-represented people, put them in the same slot, and then ask, "Are any of these scenarios offensive?" If they are, then you

really have to analyze what the particular gimmick is doing for the story or the people you are trying to represent.

5. If you decided to look for content about characters with autism, would you prefer:

- Listener has autism
- Speaker has autism
- Both have autism
- You have no preference

Beast: Hmm. I honestly have kind of a hard time weighing in on this one. I don't think I have a preference.

6. In a script where **the speaker has autism**, would that be weird if **the performer** does not have autism? Movie actors perform roles of disabled people when they are not disabled themselves but this seems...**different** from when the listener has autism because we don't know the listener's silent lines and their responses are up to our imagination. But if the speaker is **acting a role** of a character with autism, they are going to be representing people with autism. Do you think this makes a difference in audio porn?

Beast: I do not think it is weird for non-autistic people to play autistic people, or vice versa provided it is done in good faith, with a sound knowledge base. I really see audio porn as a role in the same way as screen acting is a role, so for myself, I think the same rules apply to both.