

# The Autism Course for Spouses is an Effective Training Program

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### Background

The autism symptoms – the persistent deficits in social interaction and communication, the restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior and interests, and the hyper/hypo sensitivities - not only lead to problems in adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) but can also have a major impact on their potential romantic relationships. The Autism Course for Spouses is developed to help spouses of men with ASD. Since, there are also men without an official ASD diagnosis - f.i. because a husband does not feel the need to request a diagnosis - the course is also accessible to spouses of men with presumable ASD.

The aim of the Autism Course for Spouses is fourfold: 1) receiving psycho-education on autism, 2) gaining insight in the effects of autism on the romantic relationship, 3) receiving tips to improve the communication with the autistic man, and 4) stimulating the empowerment of the spouse. In doing so, the focus of the course is more oriented towards strengths - of both the spouse and her partner with ASD - than (only) towards shortcomings.

Prior to the course, the non-autistic spouse received a semi-structured interview: in order to check whether ASD is reasonably present in the man (measured indirectly) and whether the spouse would fit in the Autism Course for Spouses. The therapist assesses the personality traits of the spouse, her emotional coping styles, her accountability and adjustability of own behavior, and the current coping capacity. The manner of questioning and reacting to the information given represents the way of acting and communicating in the course; hence, it forms the foundation of the course.

There are eight to ten participants and two therapists. The Autism Course for Spouses contains ten sessions, taking place every other week, each taking two hours. Each session has a specific theme. The order of these themes is fixed: 1) Acquaintance, identifying current problems and expectations of the course, 2) Psycho-education, 3) Autism in relationship and family, 4) and 5) Communication, 6) One's own role, 7) Energy, 8) Intimacy and sexuality, 9) Free choice of subject, and 10) Evaluation and closure.

During the course, three transitions are effectuated: from autism-oriented to also having attention for typical gender differences, from focusing solely on the partner's role to also evaluating one's own role, from requesting help to increasing the ability to solve problems.

### Objective

In this study, the effectiveness of the Autism Course for Spouses was analyzed.

### Methods

In total, 88 spouses of husbands with (presumably) ASD were included in this study ( $M = 49$  years old,  $M = 23$  years of relationship,  $M = 2.4$  children). Prior to the course, they all received a semi-structured interview (see above).

Next to that, all spouses filled in questionnaires prior to the course, right after completion of the course and at follow-up (3 months later, see Table 1). The following (Dutch) questionnaires were used AQ (Autism Spectrum Questionnaire, version for spouses), visual analogue scales (concerning relationship issues), UCL (coping), SCL-90 (multi-dimensional list of complaints) and Rosenberg (self-esteem).

**Table 1** Questionnaires used at the different measurement points.

	Intake	Pre course	Post course	Follow-up
Semi-structured interview	X			
AQ			X	
Reasons to participate / Effects experienced		X	X	
UCL		X	X	
SCL-90		X	X	
Autism Partner Course questionnaire		X	X	X
Rosenberg scale		X	X	X



### Results

Of the husbands with (presumable) ASD, 38% had an official ASD diagnosis; 87% had an AQ score indicative for ASD. It should be noted, that the cut-off score of this questionnaire is set for adults with an autistic disorder or Asperger's disorder; PDD-NOS is not included.

Results show that the women reported significant improvements right after completion of the course: a better interaction with their husbands (Chi Square,  $p < .05$ ), a more adequate coping style (paired sample T-test,  $p < .01$ ), a higher general wellbeing, less psychiatric symptoms in general and specifically concerning depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, insufficiency and distrust (Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test,  $p < .05$ ), and a higher self-esteem (paired sample T-test,  $p < .05$ ) was reported. At follow-up, self-esteem has improved even more ( $p = .05$ ).

### Conclusions

Spouses not only subjectively report their satisfaction with this course, also the statistical analyses indicate that the Autism Course for Spouses is an effective training program.

### References

Blijd-Hoogewys, E.M.A., & Talboom, J.P.C.M. (2005). Autism Course for Spouses. Lentis/ATN Groningen & MEE Drenthe: Internal document.

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