

# **UNDERSTANDING AuDHD**

**A comprehensive guide**

**Lee Hopkins**

third edition

# Understanding AuDHD

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# The sapiosexual experience in neurodivergent relationships

When minds meet minds

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**A** **note from Lee:** If you've ever felt like a fraud trying to explain why your heart races when someone shares a brilliant insight, or why you'd rather spend three hours discussing quantum theory than watching the latest blockbuster movie or series, this chapter is for you. After years of research into and practice with myself and others, I've come to understand that the neurodivergent experience of attraction—particularly **sapiosexual attraction**—is both more common and more complex than we've previously recognised.

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## The loneliness of being misunderstood

Myrna and I had another Zoom call recently, and as usual she fidgeted with the corner of her journal as she struggled to put words to something that had puzzled her for decades. ‘Everyone talks about physical chemistry,’ she said, ‘or that spark you’re supposed to feel when you meet the right person. But for me, it’s completely different. Last week, I went on a date with someone who was objectively attractive—my friends all said so. But when he started talking about his weekend watching footy and complained about how boring his engineering job was, I felt... nothing. Less than nothing, actually. But then I met this woman at a conference who spent twenty minutes explaining her research on mycorrhizal networks, and I was completely captivated. Not just intellectually—I mean genuinely aroused. Is that normal?’

Myrna’s experience isn’t just normal—it’s increasingly recognised as a distinct pattern of attraction that researchers now call *sapiosexuality*. But for neurodivergent individuals like Myrna, who was late diagnosed with both autism and ADHD, this attraction to intelligence isn’t simply about preferring smart people. It’s about something far more complex and profound: the recognition of kindred cognitive patterns, the resonance between nervous systems that process the world in similar ways, and the deep relief of finding someone whose mind moves in dimensions that feel like home.

What Myrna was describing—and what I’ve observed over the years—goes beyond the conventional understanding of sapiosexuality. It’s what I’ve come to call ‘neurocomplex attraction’: a multifaceted draw to mental complexity, emotional depth, sensory compatibility, and cognitive resonance that reflects the rich, layered way neurodivergent minds experience connection.

## Understanding sapiosexuality through a research lens

The term ‘sapiosexual’ has moved from internet forums to academic journals, and the research findings are both fascinating and validating for those who’ve felt like outsiders in the conventional dating world. Dr Gilles Gignac’s groundbreaking research at the University of Western Australia found that approximately 1% to 8% of young adults (aged 18-35) show measurable signs of sapiosexuality—being genuinely sexually attracted to intelligence itself, not just preferring intelligent partners.

**Research insight:** Gignac’s study, published in the journal *Intelligence*, used the Sapiosexual Questionnaire (SapioQ) to distinguish between people who simply value intelligence in partners versus those who experience sexual arousal from intelligence itself. The key finding? Sapiosexuality is a measurable phenomenon that exists independently of one’s own IQ level.

What’s particularly intriguing is that an individual’s own intelligence doesn’t predict whether they’ll be sapiosexual. This suggests that sapiosexuality isn’t about intellectual elitism or academic snobbery—it’s about a specific neurological response to cognitive stimulation. For neurodivergent individuals, this response often involves multiple sensory and cognitive systems simultaneously, creating what I call a ‘full-spectrum attraction’ that encompasses not just intellectual compatibility, but sensory, emotional, and nervous system resonance.

The research also reveals that women are slightly more likely to report sapiosexual attraction than men, though the difference is modest. More importantly, the studies show that once people find sufficient physical attractiveness in a potential partner,

intelligence becomes a significant factor in both short-term and long-term attraction—but it's particularly valued for long-term partnerships.

## **The neurodivergent difference: attraction as recognition**

For neurodivergent individuals, sapiosexual attraction often functions as something deeper than preference—it's recognition. When Emma, a 34-year-old software developer with autism and ADHD, describes her attraction to her partner, she talks about 'neurological synchrony': 'It's like finding someone whose brain speaks the same language as yours, but in a dialect you didn't know existed. When she explains complex problems or gets excited about her research, I feel this whole-body response. It's not just that I find her thoughts attractive—it's that her way of thinking creates this sense of homecoming in my nervous system.'

This neurological recognition helps explain why conventional dating advice often fails neurodivergent individuals. The emphasis on small talk, physical appearance, and immediate chemistry doesn't account for the complex, multi-layered attraction patterns that many neurodivergent people experience. Research on autism and ADHD consistently shows that these populations process social, emotional, and sensory information differently—and these differences extend to how attraction develops and is experienced.

## **The complexity paradox**

One of the most striking differences I've observed is what I call the 'complexity paradox.' While neurotypical dating advice often emphasises simplicity—clear signals, straightforward

communication, avoiding ‘complicated’ people—neurodivergent individuals often crave exactly the opposite. They’re drawn to complexity because their own inner worlds are complex. They’ve spent years navigating multiple layers of experience simultaneously: cognitive, emotional, sensory, and social.

Research published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* supports this observation. Studies on emotional intelligence in neurodivergent populations reveal that while traditional measures might suggest deficits, neurodivergent individuals often demonstrate sophisticated emotional processing—it’s just different from neurotypical patterns. They may struggle with reading facial expressions in rapid social exchanges but excel at understanding emotional nuance in deeper, more extended conversations.

Michael, a 29-year-old researcher with ADHD, captures this beautifully: ‘Most people want their relationships to be easy, predictable. But I’m not easy or predictable, so why would I want that in a partner? I want someone who can hold ambiguity, who finds uncertainty exciting rather than threatening. I want someone whose mind is a labyrinth I can explore for years.’

## **The sensory dimension of neurocomplex attraction**

Perhaps nowhere is the neurodivergent experience of attraction more distinct than in its sensory components. While mainstream culture focuses on visual attraction and physical chemistry, neurodivergent individuals often experience attraction as a full sensory symphony—or sometimes, crucially, the absence of sensory discord.

**Clinical observation:** Recent neuroimaging research shows that 90% of autistic individuals and 50-64% of people with ADHD experience significant sensory processing differences. These differences don't disappear in romantic contexts—they often become more pronounced, as intimate relationships involve increased sensory exposure and vulnerability.

Rachel, a 31-year-old musician with autism, describes her experience: 'People always talk about sparks and fireworks, but for me, attraction is more like... finding the perfect acoustic space. When I'm with someone whose presence doesn't create sensory static, whose voice has a frequency that doesn't grate, whose way of moving through space feels harmonious rather than jarring—that's when I know there's potential. And when they can understand why I need to leave loud restaurants or why certain fabrics make me unable to focus on anything else, that's when attraction deepens into love.'

### **Sensory compatibility vs sensory accommodation**

There's an important distinction between sensory compatibility and sensory accommodation. Accommodation involves adjusting to someone else's sensory needs—turning down music, avoiding certain restaurants, being mindful of lighting. Compatibility goes deeper: it's when two people's sensory systems naturally complement each other, when their presence actually regulates rather than dysregulates each other's nervous systems.

Dr Megan Anna Neff's research on neurodivergent relationships highlights how sensory compatibility can be a foundation for deeper intimacy. When partners understand that sensory processing isn't just a preference but a neurological reality, they can create environments that support both people's optimal functioning. This might mean having different lighting in

different rooms, establishing quiet times, or recognising that some forms of physical affection work better than others.

James, a 26-year-old teacher with ADHD and autism, found this with his partner: ‘We joke that we’re each other’s nervous system regulators. When I’m overstimulated, his presence actually calms my system down rather than adding to the chaos. And when he’s feeling disconnected from his body, my fidgeting and movement somehow helps him feel more grounded. It’s like we accidentally created this perfect sensory ecosystem.’

## Emotional intelligence reconsidered

The relationship between neurodivergence and emotional intelligence is far more nuanced than traditional measures suggest. While standard emotional intelligence assessments might show lower scores for neurodivergent individuals, this often reflects differences in processing style rather than deficits in emotional capability.

Research published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* examined the relationship between ADHD symptoms and trait emotional intelligence in over 4,700 adolescents and young adults. The findings revealed that difficulties with emotional regulation and stress management were indeed associated with ADHD symptoms—but so were sophisticated emotional processing abilities in other domains.

**The Lee Hopkins insight:** I’ve come to believe that neurodivergent emotional intelligence isn’t deficient—it’s differently structured. Many of my neurodivergent clients demonstrate extraordinary emotional depth, empathy, and insight. They may struggle with emotional regulation in chaotic environ-

ments or miss subtle social cues in group settings, but in one-on-one conversations, their emotional intelligence often exceeds that of their neurotypical peers.

This has profound implications for sapiosexual attraction in neurodivergent individuals. They're often drawn to partners who can demonstrate emotional precision—the ability to name complex feelings, tolerate emotional ambiguity, and engage with the full spectrum of human experience without needing to fix or simplify it immediately.

Lisa, a 33-year-old social worker with autism, explains: 'I can tell within minutes whether someone has what I call emotional vocabulary. Not just the ability to say they're sad or happy, but to distinguish between melancholy and grief, between excitement and anxiety, between being overwhelmed and being under-stimulated. When someone can articulate the subtle differences in their internal experience, that's incredibly attractive to me. It shows they've done the work of understanding themselves.'

### **The intimacy of being witnessed**

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of neurocomplex attraction is the experience of being truly witnessed—not just accepted despite one's neurodivergence, but appreciated because of the unique perspective it provides. This goes beyond tolerance or accommodation to genuine celebration of neurodivergent ways of being.

Research on autism and relationships consistently shows that autistic individuals can form deep, lasting relationships when their communication styles and emotional needs are understood and valued. The same is true for individuals with ADHD, who often bring creativity, spontaneity, and passionate

intensity to relationships, along with challenges around attention regulation and impulse control.

David, a 35-year-old architect with autism and ADHD, found this with his long-term partner: ‘She doesn’t just tolerate my special interests—she finds them genuinely fascinating. When I start explaining the mathematical principles behind Gothic cathedral construction, her eyes light up. Not because she’s interested in architecture, but because she’s interested in how my mind works, how I see patterns and connections that others miss. That’s the most seductive thing I’ve ever experienced.’

## The assessment landscape: identifying your attraction patterns

Understanding your own attraction patterns—whether sapiosexual, neurocomplex, or something else entirely—can be transformative for neurodivergent individuals who’ve felt confused or isolated by conventional dating advice. The key is developing a nuanced understanding of what actually draws you to others, beyond social expectations or theoretical preferences.

### **Self-assessment questions for neurocomplex attraction**

Rather than relying solely on formal assessment tools (though these can be helpful), I encourage clients to engage in deep self-reflection about their attraction patterns. Consider these questions over time, in different contexts, and without judgment about what your answers ‘should’ be.

**First, think about intellectual connection.** When you’ve felt most attracted to someone, what was happening in the conversation? Were you drawn to their knowledge base, their thinking process, their curiosity, or something else? Do

you find yourself more attracted to people who challenge your ideas or those who think similarly to you? How important is it that someone can engage with your special interests or areas of intense focus?

**Next, consider emotional resonance.** What does emotional intelligence look like to you in practice? Are you drawn to people who are emotionally expressive or those who are more reserved? How important is it that someone can tolerate your emotional intensity or understand your need for emotional space? Do you need partners who can explicitly discuss feelings, or are you more comfortable with implicit emotional understanding?

**Finally, reflect on sensory compatibility.** What sensory experiences enhance or detract from your sense of attraction? Are you drawn to people whose voices, movements, or physical presence feels calming or energising? How does sensory overload or under-stimulation affect your ability to connect with others? Do you need partners who share your sensory preferences or those who can complement them?

**Professional note:** These self-assessment questions aren't diagnostic tools—they're designed to help you develop vocabulary for your own experience. If you find yourself struggling to answer them or if your patterns seem consistently problematic, consider working with a neurodiversity-informed therapist who can help you explore these questions in a supportive context.

### **Red flags and green flags in neurocomplex attraction**

As with any attraction pattern, sapiosexuality and neurocomplex attraction can be healthy or unhealthy depending on how they're expressed and experienced. It's important to distinguish

between attraction that enhances your life and relationships versus patterns that isolate you or create unrealistic expectations.

Healthy neurocomplex attraction tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive. You're drawn to mental complexity and emotional depth, but you don't dismiss people who express intelligence differently than you do. You value intellectual connection, but you also appreciate other forms of intimacy and compatibility. You're attracted to people who challenge you, but you also feel safe being vulnerable with them.

Problematic patterns might include using intellectual superiority as a way to avoid emotional intimacy, being attracted only to people who validate your worldview, or having such specific requirements that you eliminate potential partners before giving relationships a chance to develop. If your attraction patterns consistently lead to isolation, judgment of others, or inability to maintain relationships, it may be worth exploring whether they're serving you well.

## **Case studies: neurocomplex attraction in practice**

To better understand how these concepts play out in real relationships, let me share several case studies (with details altered to protect confidentiality, of course).

### **Case study 1: The slow burn connection**

Alex, a 28-year-old research scientist with autism, came to therapy because she felt broken by dating apps. 'Everyone expects immediate chemistry,' she explained. 'But I need time to figure out if someone's mind is interesting to me. Physical

attraction develops for me only after I understand how someone thinks.'

Alex's pattern is common among neurodivergent individuals—what researchers call 'demisexuality' often overlaps with neurocomplex attraction. She needed extended conversation and intellectual engagement before other forms of attraction could develop. This put her at odds with dating culture that emphasises immediate spark and rapid decision-making.

The breakthrough came when Alex joined a local astronomy club—not to meet people, but to pursue her genuine interest. Over several months, she found herself drawn to another member, Jamie, who had a way of asking questions that revealed entirely new perspectives on familiar concepts. 'It wasn't love at first sight,' Alex reflects. 'It was love at first insight. When Jamie pointed out that light pollution wasn't just about losing stars—it was about losing our connection to cosmic time—I felt this shift in my chest. Like my worldview was expanding and my attraction was following.'

Alex and Jamie's relationship developed slowly, through shared wonder and intellectual discovery. Their first kiss happened after a three-hour conversation about the philosophical implications of multiple universes. For Alex, this timeline wasn't a bug in her attraction system—it was a feature. She needed the cognitive connection to be established before other forms of intimacy felt authentic or appealing.

## **Case study 2: The intensity mismatch**

On the flip side, Marcus, a 32-year-old writer with ADHD, struggled with the intensity of his neurocomplex attraction. 'When I find someone intellectually stimulating, I become obsessed,' he admitted. 'I want to know everything about how

they think, what they read, what ideas excite them. But my intensity scares people off.’

Marcus’s experience highlights a common challenge for neurodivergent individuals: the tendency toward hyperfocus can extend to relationships, creating what feels like ‘love bombing’ but stems from genuine fascination rather than manipulation. Research on ADHD and relationships shows this pattern frequently, where the neurochemical reward of novel, intellectually stimulating connection triggers intense focus and interest.

Working with Marcus involved helping him understand his own patterns and develop strategies for modulating intensity without suppressing his authentic enthusiasm. He learned to recognise when his fascination with someone’s mind was overwhelming them, and he developed ways to channel his intensity into sustainable connection rather than unsustainable infatuation.

The key insight for Marcus was understanding that sustainable neurocomplex attraction involves reciprocity. He was drawn to brilliant minds, but sustainable relationships required that his intellectual interests and thinking patterns were equally fascinating to his partners. This shifted his focus from pursuing people who impressed him to seeking those who were mutually curious about each other’s mental worlds.

### **Case study 3: The sensory sanctuary**

Perhaps the most touching case study involves Claire and Sam, both in their early fifties, who found each other after years of failed relationships. Claire, who has autism and sensory processing differences, had always struggled with physical intimacy because of tactile sensitivity. Sam, with ADHD and audi-

tory processing differences, found most people's communication styles overwhelming or insufficient—too much stimulation or not enough depth.

When they met at a quiet bookshop café, their initial connection was based on parallel play—they sat near each other, reading different books, occasionally sharing interesting passages. This low-stimulation, high-content interaction was perfect for both their nervous systems. Over weeks, their relationship developed through shared reading, written communication, and gradually increasing sensory intimacy as they learned each other's comfort zones.

'People think romance has to be passionate and overwhelming,' Claire observes. 'But for me, the most romantic thing Sam does is remember that I prefer written communication for complex topics, and that I need transition time between intellectual discussions and physical closeness. He doesn't just accommodate my sensory needs—he finds them interesting rather than burdensome.'

Claire and Sam's relationship illustrates how neurocomplex attraction can create space for forms of intimacy that aren't widely recognised or valued in mainstream culture. Their connection is built on intellectual resonance, sensory compatibility, and deep respect for each other's neurological differences. Rather than trying to fit neurotypical relationship templates, they created their own model based on their actual needs and preferences.

## **Practical strategies for neurocomplex dating**

If you recognise yourself in these descriptions, you might be wondering how to navigate dating and relationships from a

neurocomplex perspective. The key is developing strategies that honour your authentic attraction patterns while building genuine connections with compatible people.

### **Environment and context**

Where and how you meet people matters enormously for neurocomplex attraction. Traditional dating venues—loud bars, crowded parties, speed dating events—are often sensory nightmares for neurodivergent individuals and don't allow for the kind of extended conversation that builds intellectual connection.

Instead, consider environments that naturally filter for your interests and communication style. Lectures, workshops, book clubs, special interest groups, and volunteer activities create natural opportunities for the kind of extended, topic-focused conversation that allows neurocomplex attraction to develop. These settings also tend to be more sensory-friendly and less focused on immediate physical chemistry.

Online dating can work well for neurodivergent individuals if approached strategically. Use platforms that allow for detailed profiles and extended messaging before meeting in person. Be explicit about your interests and communication preferences. Look for people whose profiles demonstrate depth, curiosity, and the kind of thinking that attracts you.

### **Communication strategies**

Neurodivergent communication styles are often more direct, detailed, and intense than neurotypical norms—and this can be an asset in building authentic connections with compatible people. Rather than trying to master small talk or tone down your enthusiasm, focus on finding people who appreciate your natural communication style.

Be explicit about your needs and preferences early in getting to know someone. This isn't oversharing—it's providing information that helps potential partners understand how to connect with you successfully. Explain that you prefer text messages or emails for complex topics, or that you need processing time before responding to emotional questions, or that you're most comfortable in quiet environments for important conversations.

Remember that compatible people will find your directness refreshing rather than off-putting. If someone is put off by your communication style, they're probably not a good match for you anyway—and that's valuable information to have early.

### **Building sustainable intensity**

One of the challenges of neurocomplex attraction is managing intensity—both your own and others'. When you find someone intellectually fascinating, it's natural to want to engage deeply and frequently. But sustainable relationships require rhythm and pacing that works for both people.

Develop awareness of your own patterns. Do you tend to hyperfocus on new romantic interests? Do you need regular intellectual stimulation to maintain attraction? Are there warning signs that you're overwhelming someone with your enthusiasm? Understanding your patterns allows you to make conscious choices about how to express your interest and attraction.

Communicate about intensity explicitly. Some people thrive on deep, frequent intellectual connection, while others need more space and gradual development. Neither approach is right or wrong, but compatibility requires finding someone whose rhythm matches yours or with whom you can negotiate a sustainable balance.

## The evolution of understanding

As I write this chapter, I'm struck by how much our understanding of neurodivergent relationships has evolved—and how much it still needs to evolve. When I began my career forty years ago, neurodivergent individuals—if they were even recognised as such—were often told their relationship difficulties were inevitable consequences of their differences. The focus was on helping them adapt to neurotypical relationship norms rather than understanding and supporting their authentic ways of connecting.

Now, we're beginning to recognise that neurodivergent relationship patterns aren't deficient—they're different. The research on sapiosexuality validates what many neurodivergent individuals have always known: attraction to intelligence and mental complexity is a legitimate and measurable phenomenon. The growing body of research on neurodivergent relationships shows that with understanding and support, neurodivergent individuals can build deeply satisfying, lasting partnerships.

But we still have work to do. Much of the research on neurodivergent relationships focuses on challenges and deficits rather than strengths and unique contributions. Dating culture remains largely oriented toward neurotypical preferences and communication styles. Many mental health professionals still lack training in neurodiversity-affirming approaches to relationship therapy.

**Looking ahead:** The future of neurodivergent relationships research and support must centre neurodivergent voices and experiences. We need more research on what successful neurodivergent relationships look like from the inside, more resources

for neurodivergent dating and partnership, and more cultural recognition that there are many valid ways to form and maintain intimate connections.

## The gift of recognition

Myrna, the client I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, recently sent me an email update. She's been in a relationship for eight months with someone she met at a conference on environmental policy. 'We spent our first date discussing carbon sequestration strategies and the philosophy of land use ethics,' she wrote. 'I know that sounds incredibly nerdy, but it was the most romantic evening of my life. For the first time, I felt seen not just as a person, but as the specific kind of person I am—someone who finds beauty in complex ideas and gets excited about making sense of the world.'

Myrna's story captures something essential about neurocomplex attraction: it's not just about preferring smart people or valuing intellectual conversation. It's about finding someone whose mind resonates with yours at a frequency that creates harmony rather than static. It's about being witnessed in your complexity rather than simplified for easier consumption. It's about finding sanctuary in another person's way of being in the world.

For too long, neurodivergent individuals have been told that their attraction patterns are too picky, too intense, or too complicated. The research tells a different story: sapiosexual attraction is a genuine phenomenon that deserves understanding and respect. Neurocomplex attraction—with its multiple layers of cognitive, emotional, and sensory compatibility—reflects the rich, multifaceted way many neurodivergent minds experience connection.

## *Understanding AuDHD*

The gift of this understanding is liberation from trying to fit neurotypical relationship templates that were never designed for you. Instead of forcing yourself to feel instant chemistry or to prioritise physical attraction over mental connection, you can honour your authentic patterns of attraction and seek relationships that celebrate rather than tolerate your neurodivergent ways of loving.

As one of my clients beautifully put it:

*'I spent years thinking I was broken because I couldn't feel attracted to people the way I was supposed to. Now I realise I wasn't broken—I was just looking for a different kind of magic.*

*The magic of minds meeting minds, of nervous systems recognising each other, of finding someone who thinks in colours you didn't know existed. That's worth waiting for.'*

Indeed it is. In a world that often celebrates quick connections and immediate gratification, there's something profoundly subversive about attraction that takes time to develop, that requires depth to sustain, and that honours the full complexity of human connection. For neurodivergent individuals, this isn't settling for less—it's recognising that you deserve nothing less than someone who finds your mind as captivating as you find theirs.

The research validates what many of us have always known: there are as many ways to love as there are minds to do the loving. Your way isn't wrong—it's just waiting for the right recognition.

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**About the author:** Lee Hopkins is a 66-year-old Australian psychologist with personal experience of neurodivergent

psychology. This chapter is excerpted from the third edition of his book on AuDHD experiences, strategies, and tactics. For more resources and support, visit his website—[mindblownpsychology.com](http://mindblownpsychology.com)—or connect with local neurodivergent communities.

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