Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism Program Overview

The Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism (HRSA) program is a 12 module program for adults with autism, developed by Autism Nova Scotia in 2017. HRSA is a 500+ page comprehensive sexuality education curriculum on an array of topics relating to relationships and sexuality, specifically developed for adults (19 years and over) with autism.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It is the international best practice standard. It aims to equip individuals with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives” (UNESCO).

Importantly, Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is more than education on intercourse, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. It helps individuals understand and explore the foundations of healthy relations and sexuality as part of that. HRSA’s 12 modules cover topics from personal values, sexual behaviours, emotions, navigating complex social dynamics, and dating (see outline on page 2).

For that reason, HRSA was developed using CSE criteria from Sexuality Information and Education Council (SIECUS) and Sexuality Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) in its development. In addition to those core criteria we have also integrated pedagogical frameworks derived from best practices in classroom and small group teaching and universal design, among others, to increase the program’s accessibility to learners with autism.

Autism Nova Scotia also developed the program with the support and extensive feedback of an Autistic Advisory Board—a first voice board that met to help ensure first person voice and perspectives fueled the development of the program. This, combined with two rounds of external evaluation during the pilot phases, means that HRSA has undergone extensive peer and evaluator rigour.

HRSA was piloted in 2018 in Halifax for a group of 6 adults with autism, and has been run in Truro and once more in Halifax with extremely positive feedback from participants, educators and community alike.

Below are some highlights compiled by the external evaluator.

Participants from the first cohort said they:
- had expanded their personal frame of reference for information related to healthy relationships, sexual health and sexuality
- the program was structure and way it was delivered created a safe space for them to learn about a very tough and sensitive subject but also to allow for sharing of personal trauma events, if they felt so inclined to share.
- after having gone through the program, they felt more confident in navigating social situations, including more intimate relationships.
- positive experiences
- showed an increase in sexual knowledge after taking the program

Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism Atlantic Canada Roll Out

Autism Nova Scotia recently received federal funding through the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) for $600,000 over 27 months. This funding is to roll HRSA out across Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada through 7 sites. These 7 sites are with 8 community partners, including:

- Autism Society Newfoundland & Labrador
- Stars for Life Foundation for Autism in Partnership with Autism Society of Prince Edward Island (PEI)
- Autism Connections Fredericton
- Moncton Autism Resource Centre
- AutismNS Annapolis Valley Chapter
- AutismNS South Shore Chapter
- AutismNS Truro Chapter

This initiative is also, importantly, designed to act as the prospective backbone for an emergent Atlantic Autism Alliance; a coalition of autism resource and service providers across the Atlantic Provinces that will provide a platform to share best practices and knowledge and collectively build capacity across the Atlantic region around program and service delivery. The Atlantic Autism Alliance, like the HRSA pilot, is constructed on the belief that all ships should rise together.

We are excited for this project as HRSA is one of the few comprehensive sexuality education programs for adults with autism in the country, and perhaps the only one available, at no cost, through community based service and support organizations.

HRSA Program Outline (Table of Contents)
- Prep Module: Preparing to Run HRSA
- Pre-Module: Meet & Greet
- Module 1: Myself and values
- Module 2: Anatomy and Function
- Module 3: Gender, Sexual Orientation and Attraction
- Module 4: Sexual Behaviour (including: arousal, sexual response cycles, sexual activity, privacy and masturbation)
- Module 5: Sexual Health (including: menstruation, pregnancy, contraception, STIs, STBBIs)
- Module 6: Sexual Behaviour- Part 2 (including: pornography, consent, sexual assault/abuse/harassment)
- **Module 7**: When to have sex? (including: "virginity", hymen, reasons why people have sex, how do you know when to have sex?)

- **Module 8**: Relationships (Including: types of relationships, healthy vs unhealthy relationships, what are you looking for in a relationship?)

- **Module 9**: Emotions (including: emotion recognition in self, emotional recognition in others)

- **Module 10**: Dating (including: what is dating?, why do people date?, where do people meet?, planning a date, during a date, after a date, rejection)

- **Post-Module**: Wrap up and Grad Party

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**Media related to HRSA**

