

LOVE

on the spectrum



A HEART-WARMING SERIES FOLLOWING THE STORIES OF YOUNG ADULTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM AS THEY NAVIGATE THE WORLD OF DATING AND RELATIONSHIPS

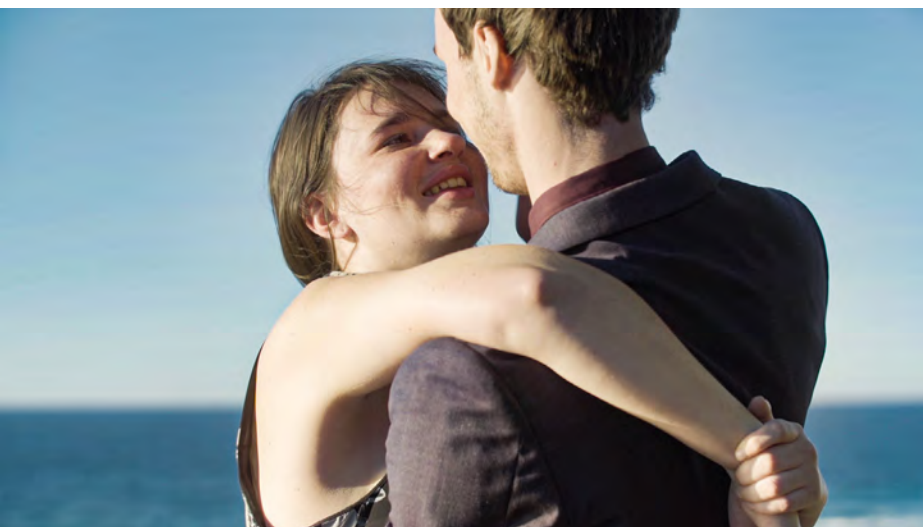
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Index.

<i>Series Overview</i>	1
<i>Episode One</i>	2
<i>Episode Two</i>	3
<i>Episode Three</i>	4
<i>Episode Four</i>	5
<i>The Singles</i>	6-12
<i>The Couples</i>	13-14
<i>The Experts</i>	15-16
<i>Director's Statement</i>	17
<i>'Making Of' Notes</i>	18
<i>Background facts on autism</i>	19
<i>How to talk about autism</i>	21
<i>About Northern Pictures</i>	22
<i>About the team</i>	23
<i>Credits</i>	24
<i>Contact</i>	25



Series Overview.

LOVE ON THE SPECTRUM is a four-part documentary series following young adults on the autism spectrum as they explore the unpredictable world of love, dating and relationships.

Most people on the spectrum have the same desire for intimacy and companionship as the rest of the population, yet difficulties in social interaction and communication are a key feature of autism, which makes finding a partner an often daunting and difficult experience.

Far too many people on the autism spectrum want love and want to find someone special but haven't had the opportunity. Many haven't been on a date, ever.

Love on the Spectrum follows seven singles as they take their first steps into the world of dating. As well as help from their families, experts provide our love-seekers with practical skills to help them navigate what can be a confusing experience, giving them the confidence to begin their journey on the road to finding love.

We also follow couples who have found their match. Ruth and Thomas have been engaged for a year and a half, and Jimmy and Sharnae met each other three years ago. Their love stories are an inspiration to others.

This uplifting and insightful series celebrates diversity and difference, with participants who are warm, funny and generously open. It sets out to teach us all lessons of love, romance, intimacy and acceptance.

Airs Tuesdays from 19 November 2019
8.30pm on ABC + ABC iview
#LOTSAU



Episode 1.

MICHAEL has a very clear goal in life – he wants to become a husband. Despite having never been on a date, he has already decided on a wedding ring for his future wife. Michael doesn't see his autism as a barrier but more of a gift. Armed with skills learned from relationship expert **JODI RODGERS**, Michael hits the dating scene. He attends a singles dinner for people with disabilities and hits it off with a girl who shares his love of toy collecting.



CHLOE doesn't know what it feels like to be in love or have a crush, but she does know that she wants to experience it. Sadly, it is common for people with autism to be bullied and as a young girl on the spectrum with a hearing impairment Chloe was not immune from being a target. When it comes to dating, Chloe doesn't see gender as an issue and is open to meeting anyone as long as they are kind. She steps out on dates with two very different people and finds the connection she's been looking for.



RUTH AND THOMAS are both on the autism spectrum and have been engaged for over a year. Thomas is a self-confessed public transport nerd and Ruth collects business cards and loves animals. They are a unique couple who complement and accept each other's quirks. As they approach their fourth anniversary Thomas has a surprise planned.

Airs Tuesday 19 November
8.30pm on ABC + ABC iview
#LOTSAU

Episode 2.

MADDI describes herself as independent, smart and quirky. At 23 she has never had a boyfriend and she isn't sure if she knows or truly understands what love is. Regardless, she still knows what she wants in a man – he should be tall, muscular, and rich. Maddi goes out on her first ever date on Valentine's Day with a handsome, starry-eyed guy who showers her with flowers and chocolates.

KELVIN lives with his Dad, who hopes one day his son will find someone who is on the same wavelength. Kelvin is a huge fan of Japanese manga and is in the process of writing and animating his own manga book. He has a great talent for drawing, but socially he struggles. Relationship expert Jodi Rodgers works with Kelvin on some introductory dating skills, and as he goes out for his first date, we see him put his lesson into practice.

After dinner with Amanda didn't go as he had hoped, **MICHAEL** talks through his experience with relationship expert Jodi Rodgers. With a comic convention in town, not only does he get the chance to go on a second date with Amanda, but Michael meets a woman he describes as 'the total package'.

Airs Tuesday 26 November
8.30pm on ABC + ABC iView
#LOTSAU





Episode 3.

MARK is 29-years-old and has never had a girlfriend. He thinks it sucks being single. His brother is getting married soon and Mark wants nothing more than to walk down the aisle himself one day. He feels his autism makes meeting girls difficult, but he is still capable of falling in love. He attends a 'dating bootcamp' for people on the spectrum, hosted by internationally renowned **PROFESSOR ELIZABETH LAUGESON** from UCLA.



OLIVIA is a quick-witted and fiery 25-year-old. Her passion in life is acting and she counts the people at the Options Disability Theatre Company as her 'family'. It is common for girls to be diagnosed with autism later in life as their traits can present differently to boys. Olivia didn't know she was on the spectrum until she was 18-years-old and she thinks having autism lowers her chances of finding a partner and she worries about being alone for the rest of her life. With hopes and dreams of love and romance, she steps out on the first date of her life.



MADDI's enthusiasm keeps her on course to finding the guy who might ignite a spark of romance. She meets a sweet man who initially appears shy, until he impresses her with his performance skills on their first date.

Airs Tuesday 3 December
8.30pm on ABC + ABC iview
#LOTSAU

Episode 4.

OLIVIA hasn't given up on her search for Mr Right. She goes on a date with a kind and handsome young man who is also on the spectrum. They have many interests in common and their mutual attraction is obvious by the end of the night. Things are looking up for Olivia.

ANDREW's life runs to a regular routine. He likes rules and procedures, order and precision. He has a full-time job and his own car, but at 27-years-old he's never dated and thinks time is running out for him to find a partner. Andrew attends a speed dating event where he does his best at making small talk and conversation. The next morning, he finds out if he got a match. Helped by relationship expert Jodi Rodgers, Andrew heads out on his first one-on-one date.

JIMMY AND SHARNAE are very much in love and are confident that their relationship will last. The 21-year-olds are both on the autism spectrum and despite being very different people, they complement each other well. Sharnae loves socialising, and Jimmy can often get overwhelmed by anxiety. While on holiday, their relationship reaches new heights as Jimmy organises the biggest surprise of Sharnae's life.

Airs Tuesday 10 December
8.30pm on ABC + ABC iView
#LOTSAU





Michael, 25

*“An A+ partner
looks like me”*

Michael is ‘sick to death of being single’. He has never been on a date, but already has in mind what he hopes his friends will say to his wife at his funeral. He likes to think ahead. He has also selected a ring for his future wife, in the form of a crown, to symbolise that she will be his queen.

Chloe, 19

“Autism makes me who I am”

Chloe has had relationships in the past with both guys and girls. She doesn't see gender as important, she just wants someone genuine and kind who will see past her disabilities. She has never felt romantic love but it's something she longs for.





Kelvin, 20

“I’m caring, smart, gentle, considerate... and professional”

Kelvin has never been on a date but he and his Dad both hope he can find a girlfriend who is on his wavelength. He loves anime and manga, and when he isn't at work he is writing his own manga book. He would love to find a girl who is friendly, different, serious and smells nice.

Maddi, 23

“The world would be boring if everyone was the same”

Maddi is quirky, smart and engaging. She’s never had any romantic feelings towards anyone, but when she describes her ideal man, he’s tall, has blonde hair, green eyes, an 8-pack, and is rich...



Olivia, 25

“I’m a hopeless romantic”

Olivia has had ‘a bazillion’ unrequited loves. She thinks being on the spectrum makes it much harder to find someone special, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t deserve to find love just like everyone else.



Mark, 29

“Even though I’m on the spectrum I’m still capable of falling in love”

Mark sees beauty and joy in all things and really wants someone to share his life with. He longs to find a girl he can love as much as he loves dinosaurs. For Mark, having a partner would mean the world, but he worries he might never find the right person.



Andrew, 27

“I want to start my own family as soon as possible”

Andrew likes teddy bears and jigsaw puzzles. As he approaches 30, he feels like his time to find love is running out. He wants to start a family of his own, but hasn't ever been on a date.



Ruth, 22 & Thomas, 25

Thomas:

“Ruth is a spicy chicken tikka masala and I’m a mild mango chicken”

Ruth and Thomas are both on the autism spectrum. They are a devoted couple and their relationship illustrates the positive impact love and companionship can have when you experience other challenges in life. Thomas loves all things public transport, in particular trains and buses. Ruth only has eyes for three things in her life: her cat, her pet snake and Thomas. Thomas is full of surprises and has something special planned for Ruth.





Jimmy, 21 & Sharnae, 21

Sharnae:

“True love. I’ve found it”

Jimmy and Sharnae are a young couple very much in love. They’ve taken a big step in their relationship by moving into their own place together. They are both on the autism spectrum but have very different strengths and challenges. They complement each other and work together to make a perfect union.



Jodi Rodgers

“Knowledge about relationships and sexuality should be accessible to all people, no matter what their age or learning abilities.”

Jodi Rodgers is a Relationship Specialist. She has worked in Australia and internationally for over 20 years within the fields of education, disability, relationships and sexuality. She started her career as a special education teacher and spent twelve years with ASPECT (Autism Spectrum Australia). She is a qualified counsellor and holds a Masters degree in Sexual Health.



Dr Elizabeth Laugeson

“A lot of people think that social skills are abstract but in reality, we're all naturally following concrete rules and steps. It's really critical that we outline what these steps are for young adults on the spectrum”

Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behaviour. She is the Founder and Director of the UCLA PEERS (Programme for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) which is one of the only evidence-based programs providing social skills training for young adults on the autism spectrum.

Director's Statement.

What is the most important thing in life? Many people would answer: LOVE. There is a common misconception that people on the autism spectrum are not interested in relationships or romance. From my experience, this simply isn't true.

In making television series about disability over the years, I have spoken to many young adults on the autism spectrum as well as families, job coaches, psychologists, and autism organisations. One thing really stood out for me: So many people on the spectrum were wanting to find love, but many had never even been on a date in their lives. When you speak to a large number of people whose main desire in life is to have a partner, and they haven't even been on a date, something isn't right.

Looking into what help and support there is in Australia for people on the spectrum when it comes to dating and relationships, we found there is almost nothing. The vast majority of autism resources are devoted to early intervention and childhood programs, and the services for young adults are mostly focused on developing work skills and trying to find employment. There are some places providing social skills training to help people develop and maintain friendships (arguably not enough), but dating? Close to nothing.

As a storyteller I felt we had an opportunity to explore this issue by shining a light on the struggles many people on the spectrum face in seeking out meaningful relationships. I hope this series will start conversations, help bring about understanding and acceptance, and ultimately inspire people with autism, their families and society at large to find ways to help people on the spectrum find love.

– Cian O'Clery



‘Making Of’ Notes.

LOVE ON THE SPECTRUM features a group of people that are largely misunderstood. The latest data on autism prevalence in Australia believes it to be as high as 1 in 70.¹ That is a lot of people.

The series allows us the opportunity to delve deep and break down some of the misconceptions and stereotypical views about people with autism. The autism spectrum is wide and varied. Not everyone is Rain Man, not everyone is good at maths, and not everyone wants to hide away alone in their room playing video games.

Love on the Spectrum celebrates differences.

The most important aspect of making the series was caring for our participants and enabling them to tell their stories in a comfortable and collaborative way.

As a team, we have experience working with people on the spectrum after making two series of *Employable Me* for ABC TV, following the journeys of people with neurodiverse conditions who were job hunting.

Our casting processes were extensive. We spoke to hundreds of people who were interested in being part of the series, which confirmed the real need for support. We worked closely with autism and disability organisations to ensure the production was sensitive to the needs of people on the spectrum.

As well as following individuals seeking love, we included couples in the series. We felt it was important to tell positive stories that can serve as inspiration for people out there who are struggling to find someone special.

The main participants of the series are all people on the spectrum, however all other casting was inclusive, with the key criteria for the participant's 'dates' being similarities in age, location and interests.

Dates were organised by the production team with strict code of conduct and policies in place. All participants had to acknowledge their intention to be kind and respectful. Though all participants were over the age of 18 and capable of having the dignity to make decisions for themselves, we felt it was important to communicate our plans with parents and families - most of whom were also included in filming.

On the dates we made sure people knew they could put up their hand to stop filming if they felt overwhelmed, anxious or uncomfortable. It was made clear they should feel in control. Ultimately, there is a responsibility in telling such personal stories and we hope our compassionate, collaborative and ethical approach is imbued throughout the series.

¹ Autism Australia, "What is Autism?", <<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/about-autism/what-is-autism>> cited September 2019.



Background facts on autism.

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition. It is characterised by:

- differences in behaviour
- social interaction
- communication
- special interests
- sensory processing

These differences can present people on the autism spectrum with challenges in how they interact with their environment.

Some characteristics of autism are common to a greater or lesser extent among many people on the autism spectrum; other characteristics are typical but not necessarily experienced by all people on the autism spectrum. Thus, the word 'spectrum' is used to reflect the wide scope of differences in how individual people experience autism and their environment.

While some people on the autism spectrum also have an intellectual impairment or disability, many others have average intelligence, while others have above-average intelligence.

Individuals on the autism spectrum often have the same desire for intimacy and companionship as the rest of the population. Given that difficulties in social interaction are a key feature of having autism, finding a partner and making a relationship work are often more difficult for a person on the spectrum. That being said, many examples exist of successful relationships. Assets of a person with autism in terms of a romantic relationship may be loyalty, punctuality, reliability, commitment, and honesty.



EXCERPT FROM AN ARTICLE IN [The Atlantic](#):

Perhaps because so much of their behavior runs counter to mainstream conceptions of how to express affection and love, people with autism are rarely considered in romantic contexts. A constant complaint among the individuals interviewed for this piece is the misconception that people with autism can't express love or care for others. "I think a lot of times someone will go out on a date with someone on the spectrum and think they're a robot," said Alex Plank, founder of WrongPlanet.net, a popular online autism community. "It's hard to read us if we don't explicitly say what we're feeling, but all the feelings are there."

In fact, people with autism may have greater emotional capacities. "Studies have shown that people with autism can have feelings that are stronger and deeper than those without autism," said John Elder Robison, bestselling author of *Look Me in the Eyes* and autism advocate. "Yet those feelings may be invisible to outsiders because we don't show them. Because we don't show them or the expected response, people make the wrong assumption about our depth of feeling about other people."

It's not that individuals on the spectrum do not have the same desire for love; they just may not know how to find it. Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson, an Assistant Clinical Professor at UCLA said, "If you asked a person with autism if they wanted a romantic relationship, they would probably say yes, but they would probably also say they don't know how to."



How to talk about autism.

MAKING SENSE OF LANGUAGE

People with disabilities are not by definition “special”, “poor” or “unfortunate”. They should be referred to with the same respect we expect people to show everyone.

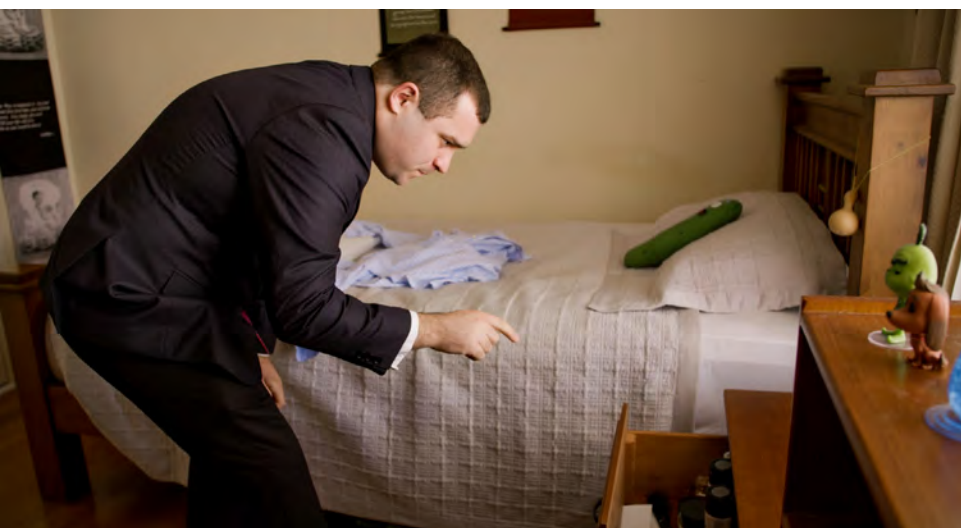
People do not “suffer from” a disability. Avoid other terms that imply this. For example, “a victim of” or “afflicted by”.

Disability Australia urges people to refer to: ‘People with autism’ instead of ‘autistic people’ and advocate against the use of patronising language, describing people as “brave” or “special” just because they live with disability.

Some people still use terms like Asperger’s Syndrome or ‘Aspie’ to describe their condition, while some people might use terms like ASD, autism, and Asperger’s interchangeably. Others prefer to refer to autism as a ‘condition’ not a ‘disorder’.

For more information on autism in Australia, including guidelines on appropriate language:

- www.autismawareness.com.au
- www.autismspectrum.org.au





Northern Pictures.

As a champion of original content, Northern Pictures is a factual production company known for innovation, priding itself on documentary series underpinned by journalistic values, unique access and cinematic sensibilities. In its ninth year of production, the company has produced some of Australia's most awarded and recognised documentary content for ABC, SBS, Channel 9 and 7, and selling internationally into broadcasters including BBC, Arte, PBS, Netflix, National Geographic and Discovery Channel. A significant emphasis is put on social issues documentary series, featuring subjects such as disability, racism, crime, sex and love. Programs produced by the company have been nominated for both the Emmy and the Grierson Award, and won numerous prizes at New York festivals, Cannes Media, Venice TV and Vancouver.

Cian O'Clery.

SERIES PRODUCER/DIRECTOR

Cian is an ADG and AACTA award-winning series director and producer. This is his fifth documentary series with Northern Pictures. He was the series director of *Employable Me* which was both a critical and audience success, winning numerous awards both in Australia and internationally. His two series of *Changing Minds: The Inside Story*, an observational documentary filmed inside a mental health unit, also won numerous awards within both the TV industry and the human rights sector. Cian is attracted to projects that have something to say, while not forgetting who they are for: the audience.

Jenni Wilks.

SUPERVISING PRODUCER

Jenni is a producer with an interest and unique expertise in the realm of medical and social issue-based documentary. A former Registered Nurse, Jenni was the Supervising Producer on the successful hospital-based observational medical series *RPA* for over 10 years, as well as *Miracle Hospital* for National Geographic and *Keeping Australia Safe* for ABC TV. At Northern Pictures, Jenni has worked as Series Producer on both the first and second series of *Changing Minds: The Inside Story* where cameras were granted access to acute mental health units in Australia for the first time. She was also Series Producer of series one and series two of *Employable Me*.

Karina Holden.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Karina is known as a dynamic industry leader working in both the independent sector as Head of Production, Creative Producer and Writer/Director, as well as within the national broadcaster as Commissioning Editor and Head of Factual for ABC TV. She has been a key creative and executive on break out series such as *Go Back To Where You Came From*, *Redesign My Brain*, *Magical Land of Oz*, *Luke Warm Sex*, *Changing Minds* and *Employable Me*. The crux of her creative work is to create change, truth tell and find unlikely heroes who challenge our perceptions.

Credits.

Series Producer and Director

CIAN O'CLERY

Supervising Producer

JENNI WILKS

Executive Producer

KARINA HOLDEN

Narrator

BROOKE SATCHWELL

Associate Producers

LAURA GRACE

AMELIA BARRY

Cinematography

TOBY RALPH

AARON SMITH

CIAN O'CLERY

Editors

RACHEL GRIERSON-JOHS

SIMON CALLOW-WRIGHT

Production Manager

BIANCA AUSTIN

Production Supervisor

GINA TWYBLE

Post Producers

RAINA WEIR

CIAN O'CLERY

Original Score

THE DA'S OFFICE

Format created by

CIAN O'CLERY &

KARINA HOLDEN

ABC Commissioning Editor

STEPHEN OLIVER

ABC Head of Entertainment and Factual

JOSIE MASON-CAMPBELL

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