

Uniquely US

Gracefully Navigating the Maze
of Neurodiverse Marriage

Autism • Marriage • Faith

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WORKBOOK

for Individuals, Couples, or Groups

There is hope for your future!

Introduction: Welcome to Uniquely US!

Before we get started in the workbook or one on one or group coaching with this book, let's start with a concept in the neurodiverse relationship world called, "The Double Empathy Problem."

The Double Empathy Problem: Navigating Relationships Between AS Individuals and NT Partners

By Dr. Stephanie Holmes

In the realm of interpersonal relationships, empathy serves as a vital cornerstone for understanding and connecting with others. However, when two individuals, one on the autism spectrum and the other neurotypical, come together in a close relationship like marriage, a unique challenge known as the "double empathy problem" emerges. This phenomenon, highlighted by researchers like Damian Milton in 2012, sheds light on the complexities of communication and empathy that arise within such relationships. In this blog, we will delve into the double empathy problem, exploring its implications, causes, and potential solutions.

Understanding the Double Empathy Problem

The concept of the double empathy problem stems from the realization that empathetic communication is a two-way street. Traditional perspectives on empathy often assume that empathy flows predominantly from the neurotypical partner to the individual on the autism spectrum, yet this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of empathy. Damian Milton, a researcher and adult on the autism spectrum himself, introduced the concept in 2012 to address this imbalance in understanding.

Milton's argument challenges the assumption that communication and social interaction difficulties are solely the responsibility of individuals on the autism spectrum. He posits that instead of focusing solely on deficits within individuals on the spectrum, we should also recognize the potential barriers that neurotypical individuals may inadvertently contribute to the communication dynamic. This shift in perspective calls for a more holistic understanding of the interpersonal challenges within mixed-neurotype relationships.

Causes of the Double Empathy Problem

The double empathy problem arises from a combination of factors related to differing communication styles, sensory processing, and societal expectations. Understanding these factors is essential to appreciating the challenges faced by both partners in a mixed-neurotype relationship.

- **Communication Styles:** Individuals on the autism spectrum often exhibit unique communication styles that prioritize clarity and directness. Neurotypical communication, on the other hand, often relies on subtle cues, nonverbal gestures, and shared assumptions. These differing styles can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations between partners.
- **Sensory Processing:** Sensory sensitivities are common among individuals on the autism spectrum. Certain stimuli that are perceived as benign by neurotypical individuals might be overwhelming for someone on the spectrum. This sensory dissonance can lead to emotional distress and hinder effective communication.
- **Societal Norms and Expectations:** Societal norms dictate many aspects of behavior and communication. Neurotypical individuals might unknowingly adhere to these norms, assuming that their partner should do the same. This can create a disconnect when the individual on the spectrum does not conform to these expectations.

Implications and Challenges

The double empathy problem can give rise to a range of challenges within mixed-neurotype relationships. These challenges have the potential to strain the partnership if not addressed openly and empathetically:

- **Misunderstandings:** Miscommunications resulting from different communication styles can lead to frustration, hurt feelings, and a sense of being unheard.
- **Emotional Disconnect:** Sensory sensitivities and difficulties in expressing emotions can lead to an emotional disconnect between partners. This disconnect may cause one or both partners to feel isolated within the relationship.
- **Blame and Misattributions:** Without an understanding of the double empathy problem, neurotypical partners might misattribute communication difficulties solely to their partner's condition, rather than recognizing the role their own communication style plays.
- **Decreased Empathy:** Over time, the challenges of navigating these misunderstandings might erode empathy between partners, creating a cycle of frustration and withdrawal.

Navigating Solutions

The journey towards addressing the double empathy problem involves mutual understanding, effective communication, and a willingness to adapt. Here are some strategies that couples in mixed-neurotype relationships can consider:

- **Education and Awareness:** Both partners should actively educate themselves about each other's communication styles, sensory sensitivities, and needs. Learning about the challenges associated with autism and neurotypical behavior can foster empathy and reduce misconceptions.
- **Open Communication:** Creating an environment of open and nonjudgmental communication is crucial. Partners should feel comfortable expressing their needs, concerns, and feelings, fostering a sense of emotional safety.
- **Empathy Building:** Both individuals can work on empathetic listening and understanding. This involves actively putting oneself in the other's shoes, acknowledging their perspective, and validating their experiences.
- **Collaborative Problem-Solving:** Instead of assigning blame, partners can collaborate to find creative solutions to challenges arising from the double empathy problem. This might involve compromise and adjustments in communication methods.
- **Seeking Professional Support:** Couples therapy or counseling can provide a safe space for addressing challenges and learning effective strategies for improving communication and understanding.

Conclusion

The double empathy problem sheds light on the intricacies of relationships between individuals on the autism spectrum and their neurotypical partners. Damian Milton's concept serves as a reminder that effective communication and empathy are shared responsibilities within any relationship, regardless of neurotype. By acknowledging and addressing the double empathy problem, couples can work towards nurturing understanding, empathy, and a stronger connection, ultimately fostering healthier and more fulfilling relationships.

Dr. Holmes did a YouTube on the subject of Double Empathy at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wp-t2z0QUfQ>

Now, let's turn to the topic matter at hand and purpose for the book and workbook. Growing and developing your NeuroDiverse Christian Relationship!

Reference

Milton, D. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society* 27(6), 883-887.

Growing a “Fruitful” NeuroDiverse Christian Marriage



The authors of the book and this workbook pray for you to create a healthy and fulfilling NeuroDiverse Christian Marriage! In order to produce fruit, you will need to abide in the Vine.

At a time of deep despair and season of trials, Dan and I (Stephanie) did a deep dive into John 15. Without Christ, we can do nothing. Without a relationship with Christ, we can not love well. Without daily relationship with Christ and invitation of the Holy Spirit to empower us, we are doing life and marriage alone on our own strength.

As you begin this workbook reflect on what it means to truly Abide in the Vine: John 15 (ESV):

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. “This

is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

Let's Get Started! Your heart needs to be ready for this work!

Let's start with what you need to invite transformation into your heart (individually) and your marriage (teamwork)? Taking a class, showing up, reading the book is all for nothing if you are not willing to be transformed and try new things! Thinking about change is not change! Wanting to want to is not the same as actually doing!

Key Ingredients to a Healthy, Mutually Satisfying, God-Honoring Neurodiverse Christian Couple: Building a Fruitful Marriage

By Stephanie and Dan Holmes

As you begin this course through group study, self-study or working with a coach. We are glad you are here and starting a journey to work on your Neurodiverse Christian Marriage. We want to set the stage for what is to come and what we believe are key ingredients needed to have a healthy, mutually satisfying, God-Honoring marriage. Note we did not say the perfect Christian utopian marriage promised in other workbooks, but one that is thriving and established on new expectations, realistic expectations! We will be delving into the “fruits of the Spirit” but before we do, we also believe there are some key ingredients for your marriage that we believe are Biblical.

As coaches, we often hear questions about what makes such marriages work and what doesn't. While we've extensively covered the challenges in the book and on our podcasts, we're focusing on the positive elements that can foster a thriving relationship. Our insights are based on observations from our counseling/coaching sessions, group discussions, and personal experiences.

These key ingredients are: Acceptance, Humility, Teachability, Understanding, and Vulnerability.

Acceptance

The journey towards a healthy neurodiverse marriage begins with acceptance. Acceptance involves recognizing and embracing the unique characteristics and needs of each partner. It's about understanding that a neurodiverse relationship will not mirror a neurotypical one, and that's perfectly okay. Acceptance starts with both parties acknowledging neurodiversity and adapting their expectations accordingly.

In many cases, acceptance comes through a diagnosis, either of a partner or a child. This diagnosis (official or self-identification) often acts as a catalyst for understanding and adjusting to neurodiversity. However, it's not uncommon for couples to struggle with acceptance, especially if they come to counseling/coaching several years post-diagnosis, frustrated and hurt. The longer the marriage has existed without understanding neurodiversity, the harder it can be to shift from traditional expectations to a neurodiverse framework.

Acceptance also means giving up the old expectations and fully embracing the new reality. It's not just about changing the expectation, but also about letting go of the past. Holding on to what "could have been" hinders the present and future potential of the relationship. Both partners must commit to working together as a team, progressing day by day with mutual understanding and effort.

Humility

Humility is the foundation of acceptance and a key ingredient in a successful neurodiverse marriage. It requires acknowledging that we don't know everything and that there is always room for growth. Humility allows us to accept our limitations and seek wisdom from our partners and from God. It's about being open to learning and recognizing that our spouse might have valuable insights and experiences that we can benefit from.

In a Christian context, humility is central. It aligns with the biblical teachings that emphasize our dependence on God and the need for continual growth and learning. Pride, on the other hand, is the root of many relational issues, regardless of neurotype. It manifests in various forms, such as self-sufficiency, arrogance, and an unwillingness to accept help or admit wrongdoing.

Teachability

Closely related to humility is teachability. A teachable spirit is essential for growth in any relationship, especially in a neurodiverse marriage. It involves being open to feedback, willing to learn from mistakes, and ready to make changes for the betterment of the relationship. Teachability is about recognizing that we don't have all the answers and that we can always improve.

In practical terms, teachability might mean seeking counseling/coaching, attending workshops, or reading books on neurodiversity and relationships. It also involves being open to your partner's perspective and experiences. It's about creating an environment where both partners feel safe to express their needs and concerns without fear of judgment or rejection or dysregulations.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is another critical component of a healthy neurodiverse marriage. It involves being honest about our limitations, asking for help when needed, and admitting when we don't have all the answers. Vulnerability fosters trust and intimacy, as it shows that we are willing to be open and honest with our partner.

In practical terms, vulnerability might mean admitting when you're overwhelmed and need support, or when you're struggling with a particular issue. It's about creating a safe space where both partners feel comfortable sharing their struggles and seeking help. This can be particularly challenging in a neurodiverse relationship, where communication and emotional expression might be different from what is typical.

Curiosity and Understanding

Finally, a successful neurodiverse marriage requires a genuine curiosity and desire to understand your partner. This means taking the time to learn about their experiences, their needs, and their perspective. It's about being interested in who they are as a person and showing empathy and support.

Curiosity involves asking questions, listening actively, and seeking to understand rather than judge. It's about being open to learning new things about your partner and appreciating their unique qualities. In a neurodiverse relationship, this might mean learning about their sensory needs, their communication style, or their special interests.

Understanding Individual Work vs. Marriage Work

In a neurodiverse marriage, it's crucial to distinguish between individual work and marriage work. Individual issues, such as anger management, addiction, or trauma, need to be addressed separately before they can be effectively worked on within the marriage. These issues impact the relationship, but they are fundamentally personal challenges that require individual attention and healing.

Marriage work, on the other hand, involves both partners working together on common issues such as communication, conflict resolution, and intimacy. It's about collaborating to build a strong foundation for the relationship. However, expecting the marriage to improve without addressing individual issues first is unrealistic and often counterproductive. Before building the new marriage, it may be necessary to address old wounds to understand how we got here, how good intentions can have a harmful or trauma inducing impact.

Growing a healthy, mutually satisfying, and functioning neurodiverse Christian marriage requires acceptance, humility, teachability, understanding the difference between individual and marriage work, vulnerability, and curiosity. These ingredients create a strong foundation for a relationship that can thrive despite the challenges. By embracing these qualities, couples can navigate their differences with grace and build a partnership that honors both their individual needs and their shared commitment to each other.

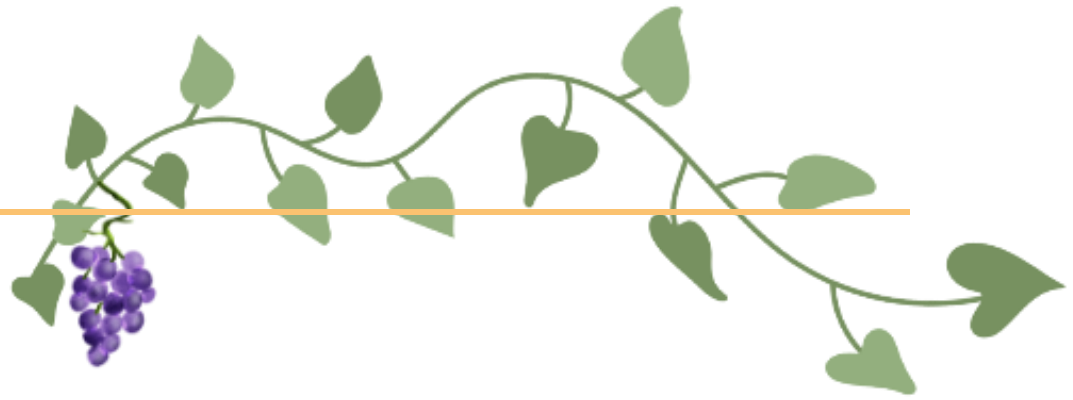
As you study or discuss the book and work in this workbook, we invite you to have a growth mindset and remain teachable. You will only get out of this course or workbook what you are willing to receive. It is not enough to read the book, the workbook, show up for a coaching session, to make progress you each need to do the work and apply the knowledge into action.

In other words be “doers” and just not participators. We often hear, “This course did not work” or “This class did not help us.” There is nothing magical or healing about a book, course or class. There is nothing that will be imparted to you from class. You will need to do more than “study” and “learn” but apply and do!

Before you begin, stop and pray before each section and before each discussion, a simple prayer such as is found in Psalm 51: 10-12 (KJV). “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.”

***In the Conclusion section, there are 10 questions to consider before starting marriage work together with a coach/counselor.*

Lesson 1



Section 1 Research and Basic Understanding of Adult Autism and Neurodiverse Marriage

As we begin to discuss this book and what it means to you as a NeuroDiverse Christian Couple, and what it means to be a NeuroDiverse Christian Couple, there is importance in understanding our neurological differences. However, this new finding as a neurodiverse couple, cannot be the source of your identity now. We want to remind you as individuals, that if you believe in Christ, are a follower in Christ, your identity is first to be a Christian, or Christ-like and your goal individually is to keep learning and growing and be willing to be transformed in His image and likeness. Why people struggle so much to do this in their marriage is confusing to me. We can get bogged down by our needs, wants and desires and what is missing and what we expect and forget that in the scheme of eternity, you are made in the Image of Christ, so is your spouse. We were created to be in relationship with God and others. The most sacred relationship that should reflect God's love, mercy, compassion and hesed (attachment/faithful love) between two people is marriage. While the neurodiverse marriage is complicated and more complex, we do not believe that a neurodiverse marriage is incapable of reflecting God's love nor that both spouses are incapable of growth and transformation.

For this workbook, we have questions for you as the individual reader to invite you into growth and the lifelong journey of being transformed so that you reflect the love of Christ. Our spiritual focus will come from Galatians 5 on the passages many know as the "fruit of the Spirit." We as ordained ministers, Christian life coaches, and neurodiverse Christian couples do not believe any person's neurology or family of origin trauma excuses anyone from developing these fruits in our personal lives. Each lesson we will begin with a "fruit" of the Spirit to help you as an individual become more "fruitful" in your own personal growth!



Our Main Text for this Study

Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV): "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Galatians 5:22-23 (KJV): “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

Galatians 5:22-23 (NKJV): But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV) “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

No matter what translation you choose, the passage shows us we as follows of Christ should bear these fruits. When there have been years of undiagnosed and unseen neurodiversity there is a lot of pain and trauma. We invite you first on your journey to grow Patience.



Reflection Question:

If you are being honest with yourself, which of the above “fruits” is a struggle for you? Next, which “fruits” tend to be lacking in you concerning your marriage? Are you focused on where your spouse needs to grow or what fruit they need to produce in their lives?

How are you doing with Patience? Let us be clear, you do not have to forebear abusive or trauma inducing behaviors. You do not need to “suffer for Jesus” as some pastors say in your marriage if you are enduring suffering or trauma or abuse from a partner/spouse. More on the definitions of abuse later.

When we speak of Patience, we mean more about your response to things you desire to change. When you find out you are a neurodiverse couple, there is much to learn. There may be bad marriage theology you need to “unlearn.” You may feel entitled based on what you learned about marriage from leading marriage books. You may not know very much about autism/neurodiversity in marriage and will have to learn and read new things.

One of you may have more motivation to change and one of you in denial and not be on the same page as to the urgency and need for change. You may have to find yourself and your identity again or establish a Christ based identity. You will need to change expectations based on realistic changes in your neurodiversity. You and your partner/spouse will have to learn new ways to communicate, regulate, solve problems and figure out intimacy and connection on what it means to each of you.

When do you want it (change/connection)? Now.
How long will this take? It is a marathon not a sprint. Both of you will have to partner together to change the marriage, but you can do your own growth and change!

So you need patience with yourself. Patience with your partner/spouse. Patience with your coach and counselor. Patience to learn and try new things. Patience for changes to take effect. Patience and time as you try new things, make mistakes, try again, give grace for mistakes and then even more Patience.

The book title is “Gracefully Navigating the Maze ” because you will need grace for yourself and grace for your spouse that you need to seek spiritual guidance and strength for this marriage.

Patience: Defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as:

“The ability to wait, or to continue doing something despite difficulties, or to suffer without complaining or becoming annoyed.”

What does Scripture say about Patience:

Romans 12:12 (ESV) Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Galatians 6:9 (ESV) And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

Romans 8:25 (ESV) But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Ephesians 4:2 (ESV) With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

Psalms 37:7 (ESV) Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!

1 Corinthians 13:4 (ESV) Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant

Psalms 37:7-9 (ESV)

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.



Personal Reflection Question: Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.

Isaiah 64:6 (ESV) “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”

How do we become clean?

Psalms 51:10 (ESV) Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me

Therefore the Word of God, Scripture is our SOAP.



S is for writing out the Scripture. O is to make an observation from the text itself. A is how do I feel the Lord would ask me to apply this in my life. P is for prayer. Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in PATIENCE. You will be invited to do this for each fruit of the Spirit in each lesson.

S

O

A

P



Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Introduction: What is Neurodiversity? What Autism Is and Is Not

Themes to consider:

- In the introduction, Dr Stephanie states that she likes, “the definition presented by Harvard Health Publishing: the authors stated that the word neurodiversity refers to types of brain neurology and wiring that are different from the typical population, and most often includes autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning differences or disabilities and other developmental differences, difficulties, delays and divergences.”
- We invite you to lay down biases and what you previously thought about autism, and to broaden your perspective on adult autism and the additional

complexities and nuances which faith and autism present to a neurodiverse couple.

Spiritual Focus:

- It is important to understand that autism is not a spiritual issue. It is a neurological wiring difference. As we broaden the discussion on autism in marriage, we will distinguish autism spectrum behaviors and traits from character flaws, sin and spiritual growth issues. Separate wiring, from personality, sin and character.
- Throughout the workbook, we will be discussing the Fruits of the Spirit and how they apply to the themes presented.



Group Discussion Questions:

- Discuss the traits of Autism that Tony Attwood lays out in his forward and share your story on how you can relate to them.
- What does the term 'Neurodiversity' (as opposed to Autism Levels 1,2,3 or the previous term Asperger's) mean to you?
- Discuss how Autism and Intelligence are 2 different issues. Do you think definitions of the past and stigmas and myths about autism shade how individuals see autism or create negative impact when the term is applied to someone as an adult?
- Discuss what it would mean to over-spiritualize an Autism diagnosis.

Chapter 1. Navigating the Maze of Adult Autism Identification and Acceptance Finding the “Lost Generation”

Themes:

- Impact of undiagnosed autism and new research. This research shared in this chapter underscores the importance of increased awareness and training in diagnosing autism in adults, enhancing support for neurodiverse marriages, and filling the research gap in understanding these unique dynamics.
- A barrier in the maze of identification can be acceptance of the diagnosis by both spouses which may include defensiveness and denial.
- Co-occurring issues can make diagnosis difficult and issues can mask or hide the full picture. Many may feel angry or confused that this was missed for so long; however, different presentations, outdated understandings and co-occurring issues are part of

why autism/neurodiversity was missed. Are you feeling angry or resentment that this was missed by providers or counselors in your life?



Group Discussion Questions or Personal Coaching Questions:

- Discuss what stood out as interesting from the statistics presented about Autism in chapter one.
- Discuss why some may have gotten a 'later in life' diagnosis and why they would be called 'The Lost Generation'.
- What is the diagnosis status of the two of you in your marriage and how can you relate to any of the three journeys that were shared by the men or the wife's journey that was shared?
- What are some co-occurring conditions that can accompany Autism? Have you or your spouse experienced any?
- How do self-control and self-discipline work together with the diagnostic steps laid out by Dr. Stephanie in Chapter 1? What part does regulation play in growing healthy?

“
What is the diagnosis status of the two of you in your marriage and how can you relate to any of the three journeys that were shared by the men or the wife's journey that was shared?
”



Conclusion Chapter: 8 Themes: What Neurodiverse Couples Want You to Know

We surveyed over 300 individuals about their neurodiverse marriage. Only 10-12% of those who answered the survey indicated they were “happy” or “fulfilled”. We asked each respondent to comment on what they want counselors or clergy or chaplains or other couples to know about their neurodiversity in marriage.

The 8 themes:

Code 1: Uneducated or untrained therapists who are not neurodiverse couples- or autism-aware

Code 2: The marriage helper caused more harm or was not helpful

Code 3: Hyper-spiritual approach

Code 4: How challenging, complex, or traumatizing the relationship is

Code 5: Lack of emotional intimacy/connection

Code 6: Stigma of autism (neurodiverse) label

Code 7: Need for acceptance of neurodiversity by both partners

Code 8: Prevalence of autism being ignored



Escaping the Maze

Reflection Question: Which theme or code may be causing your resentment, bitterness or anger (if present)?



Group Discussion Question: Which of the codes/themes resonate with you?

Which codes/themes do you think have impacted your marriage or getting proper help?



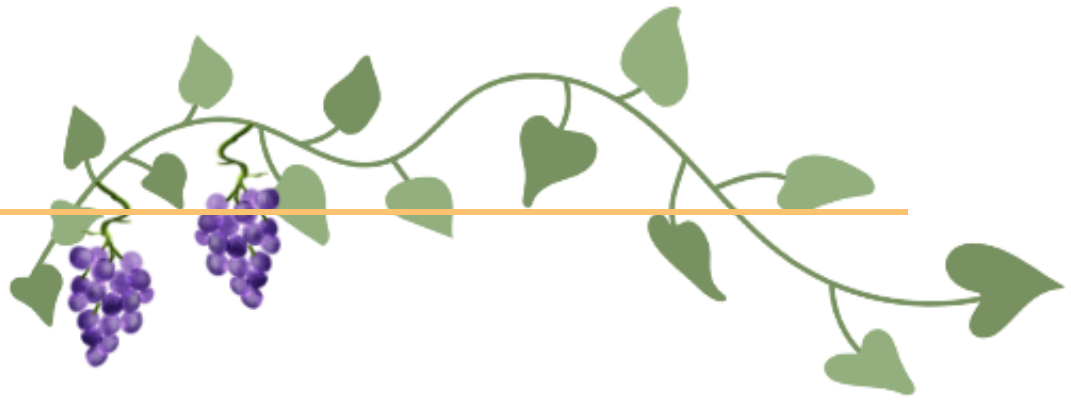
After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

References

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.) Patience.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/patience>

Lesson 2



Exploring Dr. Wilder's Work on Hesed (Love) and Its Impact on Marriage

By Rev. Dan Holmes

Marriage, often referred to as the union of two souls, is a journey that demands understanding, commitment, and compassion. It's a relationship where two individuals come together to build a life filled with love, companionship, and shared experiences. Wilder's groundbreaking work on "hesed" sheds light on the profound impact that this ancient Hebrew concept can have on the dynamics of a marriage.

Understanding Hesed: The Heart of Dr. Wilder's Work

Dr. Wilder, a renowned psychologist and theologian, delved into the depths of human relationships, drawing inspiration from various cultures and traditions. He found the concept of "hesed" particularly captivating due to its rich meaning and potential to transform relationships. "Hesed" is a Hebrew word that is often translated as "loving-kindness" or "steadfast love." It encompasses qualities such as compassion, loyalty, mercy, and faithfulness, making it a powerful framework for examining and nurturing relationships.

The Application of Hesed in Marriage

In the context of marriage, Dr. Wilder's exploration of hesed takes on a profound significance. Let's delve into how the principles of hesed can be applied to create a strong, harmonious, and fulfilling marital bond.

- **Compassion and Empathy:** Hesed calls for a deep sense of compassion and empathy. In a marriage, partners can practice hesed by actively listening to each other's feelings, concerns, and joys. By understanding each other's perspectives and emotions, couples can build an environment of emotional safety and connection.

- **Loyalty and Commitment:** Heshed emphasizes loyalty and commitment even during challenging times. When couples demonstrate unwavering support and dedication to one another, they create a foundation of trust that can weather any storm. This commitment is a reflection of the heshed principle and helps in nurturing a lasting bond.
- **Mercy and Forgiveness:** Marriage is not without its ups and downs, and conflicts are inevitable. Heshed encourages partners to approach conflicts with a sense of mercy and forgiveness. By extending grace and understanding, couples can resolve conflicts in a healthier and more productive manner.
- **Faithfulness and Trust:** Trust is the cornerstone of any successful marriage. The concept of heshed emphasizes faithfulness and trustworthiness, which are essential for building a strong and resilient marital relationship. When partners prioritize each other's emotional and physical well-being, they create an atmosphere of security.
- **Generosity and Selflessness:** Heshed encourages a spirit of generosity and selflessness. Partners who embody these qualities in their marriage willingly prioritize each other's needs and well-being. This spirit of giving without expecting something in return fosters a deeper sense of intimacy and connection.

What Heshed Looks Like in Real-Life Marriages

Practicing heshed in a marriage involves intentional efforts and ongoing growth. Couples who incorporate the principles of heshed into their relationship often experience:

- **Deeper Emotional Intimacy:** By practicing compassion, empathy, and understanding, couples create an environment where they can share their innermost thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment.
- **Enhanced Communication:** The commitment to actively listening and valuing each other's perspectives leads to improved communication. This, in turn, helps in resolving conflicts more constructively.
- **Resilience in Challenges:** The loyalty and commitment inherent in heshed provide couples with the strength to overcome challenges together, fostering a sense of unity even in tough times.
- **Sustainable Love:** The emphasis on mercy, forgiveness, and faithfulness contributes to a lasting love that withstands the test of time.

Incorporating the principles of heshed into a marriage transforms it into a space of warmth, understanding, and profound connection. Wilder's work underscores the transformative power of this ancient concept, breathing new life into the sacred institution of marriage. As couples strive to embody heshed in their relationship, they pave the way for a harmonious and fulfilling marital journey.



Reflection Question: Before you move forward, what part of Rev. Dan’s message speaks to you? What is missing in your marriage? Ask for the Holy Spirit to show you where you can grow in this area of Hesed (Love):

Hesed/Love: Definition of Hesed from Bible Project

The Hebrew word “hesed” combines the ideas of unconditional love, generosity, and enduring commitment. Further along in description it is more than a feeling, it is displayed by actions.

What does Scripture say about love?

Psalm 136 is a great example of our Heavenly Father’s hesed/love for us. Whenever you see “his love endures forever” that is the use specifically of hesed. Read Psalm 136 in its entirety.



Reflection: Stop and Reflect on God’s Love for you. Thank Him for His enduring love.

Other Scriptures About Love:

1 Corinthians 13 in its entirety is a great read, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (ESV):

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 16:14 (ESV): “ Let all that you do be done in love.”

1 John 4: 7-12 (ESV)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”

Ephesians 4:1-7 (ESV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Ephesians 5:1-2 (ESV)

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

John 13:34 (ESV)

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

1 John 4:7-12,18-21 (ESV)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot^[a] love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.



Personal Reflection Question: Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in LOVE. You will be invited to do this for each fruit of the Spirit in each lesson.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Chapter 2. Navigating the Maze of Marital Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction from the Perspective of the Neurodivergent or Autistic Spouse

Themes:

- The comparison of the identification of being a neurodiverse couple to finally stepping onto a "game board."
- The research is clear in showing that the AS/ND spouse's experience of satisfaction differs from that of the NA/NT spouse.
- To foster empathy and understanding in a neurodiverse marriage, it's essential to consider what the ND/AS spouse needs from their NA/NT partner.
- Addressing the common pitfall of comparing one's relationship to idealized standards, our book is aptly titled "Uniquely Us." This title reflects the understanding that joy and satisfaction in a relationship are highly individual and may not resemble portrayals seen on TV or in other couples.
- Having strategies in place is a greatly helpful tool in marital satisfaction.

Spiritual Focus:

- The tension in the prodigal son story (Luke 15:11-32) is broken (and another tension created) when it is revealed the father is running to the son as he sees him on the road. The phrasing of the NIV is that the father saw him from "a long way off". This is a picture of love, patience, waiting, and expectation. The son was wanted regardless of his actions, words, and thoughts from earlier days. The father proves that.
- Love. Love never fails – This story gives us a picture of unfailing love, before 1 Corinthians 13 was written. The endurance and hope of the father are not easy to maintain. Some days – many days you don't feel like loving unfailingly.
- The call to action is for both partners to act as the good father while pushing back the temptation to be the older brother... It is that attitude that keeps this cycle moving the relationship forward, escaping every maze.



Group Discussion Questions:

- Name some common challenges with AS spouses and has this been experienced in your marriage?
- Discuss the communication strategies Dr. Stephanie lists that she and Dan use. What strategies have you tried, of these or other strategies?
- What does intentionality mean to you? How can you use it to better your relationship?

Chapter 3. Navigating the Maze of Expectations and Marital Satisfaction from the Perspective of the Neurotypical or Non-Autistic Spouse: A Tale of 2 Marriages

Themes:

- For this chapter, the focus is specifically on an NA/NT spouse married to someone on the autism spectrum.
- A Tale of Two Marriages comes from a Charles Dickens quote about the best of times and the worst of times.
- A look at the differences in marital satisfaction from the point of view of the NA/NT wife and how the two see the marital challenge differently. The NA/NT spouse expressed higher dissatisfaction.
- Various blogs and podcasts have different definitions for Cassandra, this is a compilation of symptoms: negative self-image or loss of self-identity, anger and emotion dysregulation, various anxiety or trauma responses (OCD, PTSD, panic), hypervigilance, flashbacks or triggers of trauma, physical illnesses, and weakened immune system.
- Our goal is not to meet the expectations of an NT-NT marriage, this is not what we have, the goals are to reexamine the expectations and goals in light of an AS/NT or NA/ND marriage and strive to reach a relationship where both can feel marital satisfaction.

Spiritual Focus:

- A prayer for you in the song “Breath Miracles” by Red Rocks Worship which cannot be quoted due to copyright, but I invite you to breathe and seek your hope in the only Hope in the one who created you with a purpose.
- “Father, I ask that for those who read this and desire it for themselves. Furthermore, that You would be near them and draw them to yourself and that as 3 John 1:2 says they would “prosper even as their soul prospers”. Amen



Group or Coaching Discussion Questions:

- Cassandra and Ongoing Traumatic Relationship Disorder (OTRS) were defined. What are some symptoms of the Cassandra experience?
- Discuss masking and its effects on the AS spouse
- What makes something a ‘special interest’?
- Once AS is discovered, what are the shifts in expectation that should happen?
- Dan’s hindsight... What thoughts/feelings does reading this evoke?

Chapter 4. Navigating the Maze of Similarities and Differences Among Different Types of Neurodiverse Couples

Themes

- Females on the spectrum face a higher risk of misdiagnosis or remaining undiagnosed. This issue arises because symptom research and criteria have historically been based on male presentations of autism.
- Professor Tony Attwood and Dr. Michelle Garnett (n.d.) stated that a common choice of partner for an autistic woman tends to be an autistic partner rather than a non-autistic partner. Autistic-to-autistic communication is reported to be more comfortable and less anxiety-provoking, having similar communication styles (Attwood & Garnett, n.d.; Crompton et al., 2020).
- The autistic female is satisfied in the relationship if she feels safe and supported, especially if he is tolerant and compassionate when she is agitated

or dysregulated for various reasons. However, they report from their clinical experience and research by Ying Yew and associates (2021) that both the autistic and non-autistic partners report low satisfaction with emotional communication, amount of leisure time together, and intimacy.

- In AS-AS marriage interviews, communication was not perceived as easier but more challenging, competing sensory profiles and sexual preferences were difficult to manage, and when the other spouse is dysregulated, it can be challenging.
- There are aspects among the different types of neurodiverse couples that are similar, and there are different power dynamics that can occur based on gender roles and physical strength and size.

Spiritual Focus

- Reflect again on previous verses and discussion about HeseD. Psalm 136 is a great example of our Heavenly Father's heseD/love for us. Whenever you see "his love endures forever" that is the use specifically of heseD.



Group or Coaching Discussion Questions:

- What types of behaviors do women on the spectrum exhibit that makes them difficult to diagnose?
- Discuss the challenges in an ND marriage listed from the survey that were over 50%. What were some commonalities among the different groups?
- What were some of the themes that emerged from the three ND-ND couples and do you see any of these in your own marriage?



After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

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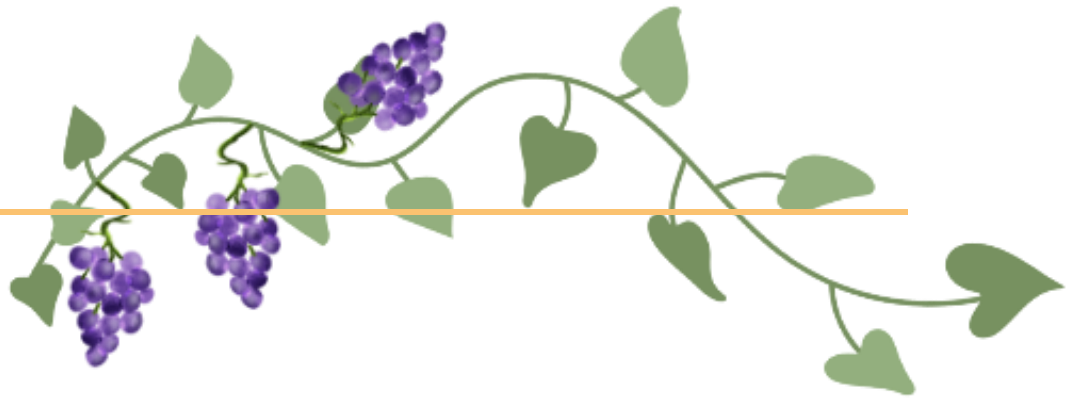
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Lesson 3



In the correlating book chapter, the focus was neuroplasticity and joy building. The book illustrated the hope of neuroplasticity and defined love and joy. If you are not building joy and building shalom, you are at risk for Enemy Mode.

Navigating the Neurodiverse Relationship Terrain: Understanding Dr. Jim Wilder's Enemy Mode

By Dr. Stephanie Holmes

In the realm of relationships, the intricacies of human connection often lead us through uncharted territories. Every relationship is unique, colored by the personalities, histories, and quirks of the individuals involved. For neurodiverse couples – where partners exhibit differences in neurological functioning – the journey can be even more complex. Dr. Jim Wilder's concept of "enemy mode" sheds light on how neurodiverse couples can unwittingly fall into destructive patterns and offers insights into how they can navigate these challenges with empathy and understanding.

Understanding Enemy Mode: The Neurobiology of Stress and Connection

Dr. Jim Wilder, a renowned neurotheologian, has extensively studied the interplay between neuroscience, psychology, and spirituality in the context of relationships. His theory of "enemy mode" revolves around the concept of the brain's stress response and its impact on interpersonal dynamics.

When individuals find themselves in a stressful situation, their brain's survival instincts kick in. This activates the sympathetic nervous system, triggering the well-known "fight or flight" response. In the context of relationships, stress can emerge from various sources, such as miscommunication, differing expectations, or external pressures. For neurodiverse couples, who may already navigate distinct ways of processing information and emotions, these stressors can trigger the onset of enemy mode.

Enemy mode is characterized by a heightened state of defensiveness, where partners perceive each other as threats rather than allies. In this mode, the brain is primed for self-preservation, which often leads to heightened emotions, misunderstandings, and a

breakdown in communication. As neurodiverse couples attempt to bridge the gap between their distinct cognitive styles, enemy mode can become a formidable barrier, hindering connection and intimacy.

The Neurodiverse Perspective: Unique Cognitive Styles

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that neurological differences, such as autism, ADHD, and other cognitive variations, are natural variations of the human experience rather than disorders to be fixed. When these different cognitive styles come together in a relationship, the potential for both enrichment and friction is immense.

For instance, an individual with autism might excel in pattern recognition, analytical thinking, and attention to detail. On the other hand, their partner without autism might bring a heightened emotional sensitivity, spontaneous creativity, and empathetic understanding. These differences, while valuable, can also lead to misunderstandings and frustration.

Imagine a scenario where the neurotypical partner craves spontaneity and surprises, while the neurodiverse partner with autism seeks routine and predictability. If not approached with empathy, this divergence in expectations can trigger enemy mode. The neurotypical partner might feel neglected and unimportant, while the neurodiverse partner could feel overwhelmed and anxious. This sets the stage for an escalating cycle of defensiveness, where both partners are unwittingly pushed into enemy mode.

Navigating Enemy Mode: Insights for Neurodiverse Couples

Recognizing the signs of enemy mode is crucial for neurodiverse couples. This includes heightened emotional responses, difficulty in understanding each other's perspectives, and a breakdown in effective communication. Rather than succumbing to this destructive cycle, couples can employ strategies inspired by Dr. Jim Wilder's work to break free from enemy mode and foster genuine connection.

- **Cultivate Awareness:** The first step is acknowledging the presence of enemy mode when it arises. This requires a conscious effort to recognize the signs of stress and defensiveness. By understanding how stress triggers impact your unique cognitive styles, you can begin to differentiate between instinctual reactions and deliberate responses.
- **Practice Co-Regulation:** Co-regulation involves partners working together to manage each other's emotions and stress responses. For example, if one partner senses that the other is becoming overwhelmed, they can intervene with calming gestures or soothing words. This practice fosters an atmosphere of safety, allowing both individuals to remain connected even during challenging moments.

- **Embrace Differences:** Instead of viewing cognitive differences as obstacles, celebrate them as strengths. Both partners bring unique perspectives to the relationship, and learning from each other can lead to personal growth. Regularly communicate your needs, preferences, and challenges to create an environment of understanding.
- **Build Rituals of Connection:** Dr. Wilder emphasizes the importance of building rituals that promote connection. These can be simple activities like sharing a meal, taking a leisurely walk, or engaging in a shared hobby. Regular engagement in these rituals reinforces the bond between partners and provides opportunities to preemptively address potential stressors.
- **Prioritize Empathy:** Empathy forms the bedrock of any successful relationship. Take the time to understand each other's neurodiverse experiences and perspectives. Empathy allows you to step into each other's shoes, fostering mutual respect and appreciation.

Conclusion: Forging a Deeper Connection Through Understanding

Dr. Jim Wilder's concept of enemy mode provides a valuable framework for understanding the challenges neurodiverse couples may face in their relationships. By recognizing the triggers and signs of enemy mode, couples can actively work towards maintaining a deep and meaningful connection. Neurodiversity enriches relationships with diverse cognitive styles, but it requires intentional effort and empathy to navigate the unique terrain.

Through awareness, co-regulation, embracing differences, building rituals of connection, and prioritizing empathy, neurodiverse couples can not only sidestep the pitfalls of enemy mode but also strengthen their bond in the process. The journey might be complex, but it is through these intentional actions that the beauty of neurodiverse partnerships truly shines – a testament to the power of love, understanding, and shared growth.

You can find Dr. Wilder's book "[Escaping Enemy Mode](#)" book on Amazon. We have a free course on our website at www.christianneurodiversemarriage.com. Group coaching: Escaping Enemy Mode.

You can hear our interview with Dr. Wilder on escaping Enemy Mode at: <https://www.spreaker.com/user/mhnrnetwork/dr-jim-wilder-mixdown>

To Build a Fruitful Marriage and Reduce Enemy Mode, Joy and Peace are Essential!

Defining Joy: Defined by Dr. Wilder, joy can only be had/grown with another (in right relationship), and is based on someone being glad to “be with you.” It is a high energy emotion. The brain needs joy; a joyful environment invites growth and transformation.

“Joy helps us regulate our emotions and endure suffering. Jesus refused to relinquish joy in the midst of His suffering on the cross. When we are able to stay relationally connected to others and God, we experience joy while we suffer. Joy does not remove our pain, but it gives us the strength to endure. Remember that joy is relational, so “joy in suffering” means that God and our community are glad to be with us in our distress. They do not allow us to suffer alone. We are able to bear our suffering like Jesus, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2 ESV).”

— **Jim Wilder, The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation**

Defining Shalom/Peace: The word shalom is defined by the Life Model as the experience of “everything [being] harmonized and working together correctly, the right things in the right place in the right amount so everything pleases God” (Wilder et al., 2013, p. 243). According to the Life Model, living in a mutual mind which creates unity and joy will bring a feeling of shalom. Shalom is a low energy state and invites rest.

Rest (Shalom) and Joy (Fuel) are equally important to the brain and to relationships, according to Dr. Wilder

What Does Scripture Say About Joy?

Psalm 16:11 (ESV)

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

James 1:2-4 (ESV)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Nehemiah 8:10b (ESV)

And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

Romans 15:13 (ESV)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope

What Does Scripture Say About Peace?

Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance^[c] upon you and give you peace.

John 14:27 (ESV)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Philippians 4:6-9 (ESV)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned^[e] and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

What is missing in your marriage or personal life? Joy? Peace? Both?



Personal Reflection Question: Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in JOY or PEACE.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Chapter 5. Navigating the Maze of Neuroscience and Neuroplasticity: From Enemy Mode to Joyful Foundation

Theme:

- The goal for the chapter is to briefly discuss some neurological differences, why they matter, and the hope that neuroplasticity brings to this discussion.
- According to Dr. Wilder², the brain's two hemispheres, known as the left and right sides, have traditionally associated the left brain with logic and the right brain with creativity. Wilder's material presents a different perspective: it emphasizes that the right hemisphere is more relationally oriented, while the left is more process-driven. Furthermore, these hemispheres operate at distinct speeds, with the right side processing relational aspects more rapidly than the left.
- Where is the joy center located? According to Wilder's study and additional research, in the right orbital prefrontal cortex (OFC).

- While knowledge, new activities, and intense, passionate interests are important to the autistic brain and person, moderation is needed in order for relational circuits (RCs) to improve.
- Special interests, passions, and hobbies have their place in restoring peace or a resting state in the brain, but there must be vigilance that these do not replace relationship or relational joy-building, or there will be neurological and relational consequences.
- Finding your way out of the maze is not easy to do.

Spiritual Focus:

- The Four Soils: A framework for growth and connection
Joy - “I’m happy to be with you!”
Hesed - “Loyal love”
Group Identity - “Who are my people?”
Healthy Correction - “Propelling towards betterment”
- Dr. Wilder and others stated that joy is the foundation of maturity and growth and that with a firm joy foundation, one can increase resiliency and manage stress. In *Daring Greatly*, 5 Dr. Brené Brown adds that joy is important to have in your armor to combat unhealthy or toxic shame. Under toxic or unhealthy shame, according to Brown, one will protect oneself, blame others, rationalize the behavior, and offer disingenuous apologies. Joy is powerful! Where have we heard that before? Nehemiah 8:10c (NIV) says, “For the joy of the Lord is your strength!”



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- With the knowledge that those on the spectrum can be more easily drawn into enemy mode, how does neuroplasticity help?
- Discuss the four soils: Joy, Hesed, Group identity and Healthy Correction. How do these relate to a neurodiverse marriage?
- What are the consequences to most frequently choosing knowledge building activities (more left brain focused) over building relationships (right brain focused)?
- According to Dr. Gill, what is a simple definition of “Attachment” and what is the difference between trauma A and trauma B?
- Discuss the steps that Dr. Stephanie and Dan took in their marriage to bridge connection and intimacy.
- In Dan’s hindsight, what does he mean by “taste and see”? What are a few steps he put into place to ‘see’ Stephanie? And what are some things you can put into place to take a step forward in your relationship?

Section 2 What can we expect to change? Change vs. Accommodations, Modifications & Strategies

Introduction: Realistic Expectations



Group Discussion Questions or Personal Coaching Question:

As you move into the next section, what are you hoping to learn more about? What are your expectations of what can change before reading the following chapters? Check back with your answers and see if changes are realistic in a neurodiverse marriage. If some of your hopes and desires may not be met in this marriage, how will you grieve this? What are you pondering right now before the next section of the book?



After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

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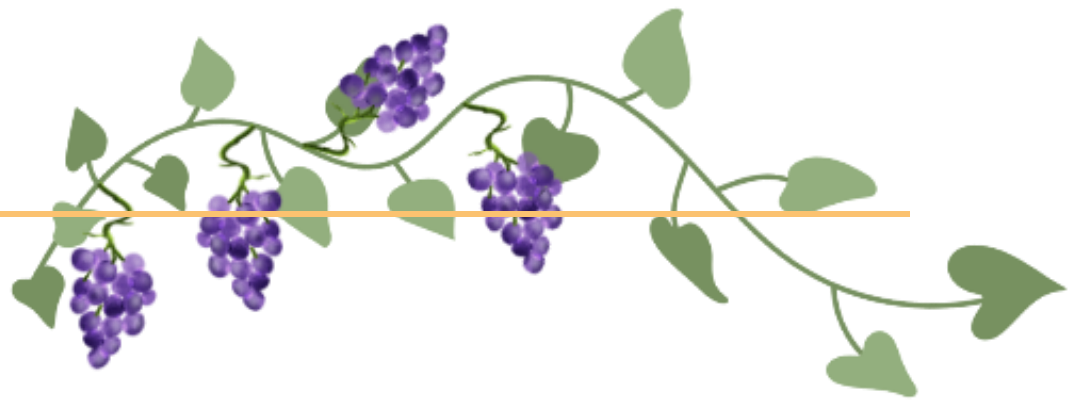
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Lesson 4



Understanding Worldly Sorrow and Godly Sorrow: A Path to Genuine Repentance and Transformation

Based on the Podcast Interviews of Barbara Grant,
Written by Dr. Stephanie C. Holmes with collaboration from Barbara Grant

“Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while— yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter” (2 Corinthians 7: 8-11).

First, notice that Paul in writing to the respondent(s) does not regret that calling out the issue or speaking of what needs to change may cause sorrow to the reader. For it is true sorrow that will lead to repentance. When someone tells you have caused them hurt or harm or trauma or even abuse this may cause you to feel something internally that is not comfortable. It is natural to not feel pleasant when hearing someone say, “This hurt me.” The what you do with it can promote change or block change.

Change is a fundamental aspect of human life. Whether it's a shift in perspective, behavior, or lifestyle, the journey of transformation often starts with a profound realization. For many, this realization is accompanied by feelings of sorrow or regret. However, not all sorrow leads to positive change. In this section, we will discuss the concepts of worldly sorrow and godly sorrow, how shame can block change, and the stages of change that guide individuals towards genuine transformation. How does this show Kindness and Self-control? If you are living in shame and defensive or reactive, this is not showing Kindness and is not self-control as described in Scripture.

Worldly Sorrow vs. Godly Sorrow

Worldly Sorrow

Worldly sorrow is often characterized by feelings of regret that are rooted in self-centered concerns. This type of sorrow emerges from the consequences of one's actions, such as the fear of losing reputation, facing punishment, or experiencing discomfort. It is driven by a desire to avoid negative outcomes rather than a sincere recognition of wrongdoing. Worldly sorrow can lead to temporary changes in behavior, but these changes are typically superficial and short-lived, as the underlying motivations remain unchanged.

Godly Sorrow

In contrast, godly sorrow is a deep, heartfelt remorse that arises from a genuine understanding of one's actions and their impact on others and oneself. It is a sorrow that acknowledges the moral and spiritual dimensions of wrongdoing. Godly sorrow leads to repentance, which involves a complete transformation of the heart and mind. This type of sorrow is not merely about avoiding negative consequences but is driven by a sincere desire to make amends, seek forgiveness, and align one's life with higher principles and values.

The Role of Shame in Blocking Change

Shame is a powerful emotion that can significantly impede the process of change. It is often confused with guilt, but there is a crucial distinction between the two. Guilt is the feeling of remorse for specific actions, while shame is the belief that one's entire self is flawed or unworthy.

How Shame Impedes Change

1. **Paralysis and Inaction:** Shame can lead to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, making individuals feel incapable of change. When someone believes they are fundamentally flawed, they may see no point in trying to improve.
2. **Defensiveness and Denial:** To protect themselves from the painful feelings of shame, individuals may become defensive or deny their shortcomings. This prevents them from acknowledging their need for change and taking responsibility for their actions.
3. **Isolation:** Shame often drives people to withdraw from others, fearing judgment or rejection. This isolation can cut off crucial sources of support and encouragement that are essential for the process of change.

4. **Self-Sabotage:** Those who feel shame may engage in self-destructive behaviors, consciously or unconsciously, as a way to cope with their negative self-perception. This can create a cycle of failure and reinforce the belief that change is impossible.

The Stages of Change

Understanding the stages of change can provide a roadmap for individuals seeking genuine transformation. Developed by Prochaska and DiClemente, the Stages of Change Model outlines a series of steps that people typically go through when making a significant change in their lives.

1. **Precontemplation:** At this stage, individuals are not yet aware of the need for change. They may be in denial about their problems or simply unaware of the impact of their actions. Or in the neurodiverse relationship, in the tale of 2 marriages, one person's marriage is going fine and the other is in pain. The one who is not in pain may not see a problem or believe change is needed.
2. **Contemplation:** In this stage, individuals become aware of the need for change and start to think about the pros and cons. They recognize the problem but may feel ambivalent about making a change. Again, the one in the least pain or is most satisfied may not believe the changes to be made, the work to make change is worth the investment.
3. **Preparation:** During the preparation stage, individuals make a commitment to change. They begin to make small steps towards their goal and develop a plan of action.
4. **Action:** This is the stage where individuals actively implement their plan and make significant changes to their behavior. It requires substantial effort and is often the most challenging stage. This can be difficult in neurodiverse marriage to sustain. If a person was only motivated by pain or relief of symptoms, or simple behavior modifications the changes may not last. Changes will endure if there is a mindset shift or beliefs not simple behavior modifications.
5. **Maintenance:** Once the initial changes have been made, individuals enter the maintenance stage, where they work to sustain their new behaviors and prevent relapse. If the changes are being made out of true transformation, mistakes may be made and the person is open to feedback.
6. **Relapse:** Relapse is a common part of the change process. It involves returning to old behaviors and can be a valuable learning experience if individuals analyze what went wrong and how to avoid similar pitfalls in the future.

Integrating Godly Sorrow into the Stages of Change

Integrating the concept of godly sorrow into the stages of change can enhance the process of transformation by providing a deeper, more meaningful motivation for change.

1. **Precontemplation:** Encourage self-reflection and awareness. Individuals can benefit from examining their actions and their consequences, fostering a sense of godly sorrow that goes beyond surface-level regrets.
2. **Contemplation:** In this stage, individuals can delve deeper into the moral and spiritual implications of their actions. Godly sorrow can help them move beyond ambivalence and develop a sincere desire for change.
3. **Preparation:** With a foundation of godly sorrow, individuals can create a more robust and heartfelt plan for change. This stage involves seeking guidance, support, and forgiveness, which can strengthen their commitment.
4. **Action:** Godly sorrow can provide the motivation and resilience needed to persevere through the challenges of the action stage. It can also inspire individuals to make more comprehensive changes, addressing the root causes of their behavior.
5. **Maintenance:** In the maintenance stage, godly sorrow can help individuals stay focused on their higher principles and values, providing ongoing motivation to sustain their new behaviors.
6. **Relapse:** When relapse occurs, godly sorrow can help individuals approach it with humility and a willingness to learn. It can prevent the cycle of shame and self-sabotage, allowing for a more constructive response to setbacks.

Overcoming Shame and Embracing Godly Sorrow

To overcome shame and embrace godly sorrow, individuals can take several steps:

1. **Self-Compassion:** Practice self-compassion by acknowledging that everyone makes mistakes and that these do not define one's worth. Recognize that growth and change are possible.
2. **Seeking Support:** Reach out to supportive friends, family, or professionals who can provide encouragement and perspective. Sharing one's struggles can alleviate the burden of shame.
3. **Mindfulness and Reflection:** Engage in mindfulness practices and self-reflection to understand the sources of shame and to develop a more balanced view of oneself.
4. **Spiritual Practices:** For those inclined, spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, or attending religious services can provide comfort and a sense of connection to a higher purpose.
5. **Therapeutic Interventions:** Professional therapy can help individuals address deep-seated shame and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic approaches can be particularly effective.

Understanding the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow is crucial for anyone seeking genuine transformation. While worldly sorrow may lead to temporary and superficial changes, godly sorrow fosters a deep, heartfelt repentance that can drive lasting change. However, shame can block this process by paralyzing individuals and preventing them from taking responsibility for their actions. By recognizing and addressing shame, individuals can embrace godly sorrow and navigate the stages of change with greater

resilience and purpose. Ultimately, this journey leads to a more fulfilling and authentic life, aligned with one's highest values and principles.

**Above written combining thoughts of Barbara Grant's interviews on NeuroDiverse Christian Couples. To hear those podcasts go to the website catalog link and look for the following three titles with Grant:

- Complex Marriages: How to Stay and When to Leave
- Boundaries vs Codependency, Godly Sorrow vs Worldly Sorrow
- The Role of Shame in Blocking Change

<https://www.spreaker.com/podcast/neurodiverse-christian-couples--4992356>



Personal Reflection:

Where do you see yourself in the stages of change? Where do you perceive your spouse is? What Evidence or facts do you use to support that view?

A Look at Self-Control

Authors of *Emotional Intelligence in Christ (EIC)*, discuss elements of emotional intelligence as self-awareness (personal identity in Christ), self-management (self-control), social awareness (altruistic attitude), relational management (Christ connections). *EIC* states “The closer you draw into Christ’s love, the more capable you will become at managing your emotions with self control. Self-control is a supernatural mastery over the mind, emotions and will that comes as a result of being transformed by the Spirit of the One who mastered every thought, feeling and behavior perfectly (pp.85-87).” Self-control is the anchor fruit of all the other fruits of the Spirit. (*EIC*).

What Does Scripture Say About Self-Control?

Titus 2: 11-12 (ESV) For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age

Proverbs 25:28 (ESV) Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27a (ESV) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control

Proverbs 16:32 (ESV) Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules [controls] his spirit than he who takes a city.

Proverbs 29:11 (ESV) A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds [self-control] it back.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-18 (ESV) About the Concept of Self-Control In Action And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.



Personal Reflection Question:

Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in SELF CONTROL.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Chapter 6. Navigating the Mazes of Change & Growth in Neurodiverse Marriages Motivation, Boundaries, Acceptance & Healing By Barbara Grant, MMFT, CAS, NCC

Themes:

- Neurodiverse couples are often in a state of complex trauma by the time they finally discover their neurodiversity.
- A diagnosis or discovery of neurodiversity often brings a period of shock, grief, or maybe denial for one or both partners. (A diagnosis is not necessary, unless there are benefits to having one, such as accommodations that a workplace or school must legally offer because of the American with Disabilities Act).
- The word autism comes from the Greek word autos, which means “self.” Autism is a self-referencing condition, and even highly functional autistic people can struggle with a limited theory of mind (this is the ability to see a situation from another’s point of view and a perspective that is different, but equally valid to one’s own.)
- Identifying what you need to take responsibility for will require defining boundaries.

- Change in neurodiverse relationships takes a lot of energy. It's not a sprint, but definitely a marathon! And each individual must decide to change, regardless of what the other chooses to do.

Spiritual Focus:

- Change and growth are God's plan for us, so if we lean into God, we are not alone in our journey of discovery and maturation!
- Acknowledging and changing our habits of behavior is not an easy task – as Stephen Covey (the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) said, “You can't talk yourself out of a problem that you behaved yourself into.” When we commit to action, we begin to learn bit by bit, uncovering habits and unearthing the wrong-thinking that motivated them. Then we have to rethink our motives and behave in a new way, repeating the new behavior until it becomes our new habit. Then we can tackle another habit and reform that. These are the ways the apostle Paul described the process: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV). And, “do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2a, NIV). It's faith-building to know that cognitive behavioral therapy is nothing new – the Bible prescribed this thousands of years ago!
- Hope that growth is possible for you and your relationship, too. As it says in Romans 5:2b-5: “...we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- Discuss/list the 5 stages of change. Where do you see yourself in the stages?
- Where do you see your spouse?
- What is a boundary? Why are they important?
- Have you been told/taught or believe Christians should not have boundaries?
- Discuss the 'giving grace and space' strategy. In what situations could this be used?
- What are the dangers of being a people pleaser?
- How can understanding Christ's teachings help in your growth and identity?
- What can happen when a couple accepts the neurological differences in their marriage?



After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

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Lesson 5



Taming the Tongue: 3 Tips for Christian Couples and Gentle and Graceful Communication in a Neurodiverse Marriage

Rev. Dr. Stephanie Holmes

Communication is the lifeblood of any successful marriage, and when it comes to a neurodiverse marriage, it takes on an even greater significance. Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in neurological functioning, including conditions such as autism, ADHD, or other cognitive differences. In a Christian marriage, it's crucial to approach communication with understanding, empathy, and a willingness to adapt. Here are three essential tips for Christian couples navigating communication in a neurodiverse marriage. As a Christian Neurodiverse couple, we have a higher calling to watch our words and guard our tongue: Proverbs 21:23 (ESV) "Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles."

Before some tips let's reflect on the importance of Taming the Tongue from James 4:2-6. "We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

So with that foundation, each person taming his/her tongue is the foundation for communication in NeuroDiverse Christian marriage.

Cultivate a Foundation of Patience and Understanding:

- Patience and understanding form the bedrock of any successful relationship, and they are especially vital in a neurodiverse marriage. Embrace the unique qualities of your partner and their neurodivergent perspective. Recognize that differences in communication styles, sensory sensitivities, or social cues may exist, but they should not be viewed as obstacles. Instead, view them as opportunities to grow in patience and understanding. Take the time to listen

actively, ask clarifying questions, and practice empathy to foster a deeper connection with your spouse.

Tailor Communication Styles to Individual Needs:

- Effective communication requires flexibility and adaptability. In a neurodiverse marriage, it's important to recognize that what works for one person may not work for the other. Each partner may have different preferences and needs when it comes to communication styles. Take the time to explore and understand your partner's communication style, and be open to adjusting your own approach accordingly.

For example, if one partner finds it challenging to process verbal information, incorporating visual aids, written instructions, or even utilizing technology like communication apps or assistive devices can be incredibly helpful. Additionally, setting aside specific times for open, structured conversations can provide a comfortable and predictable space for sharing thoughts and concerns. Remember, communication is a two-way street, and both partners should be actively engaged in finding common ground and adapting their styles to foster effective communication. If you are struggling to come up with adaptive strategies, find a Neurodiverse trained coach or counselor to help you.

Establish Rituals of Connection and Emotional Check-Ins:

In any marriage, nurturing emotional connection is crucial. In a neurodiverse marriage, intentional rituals of connection and emotional check-ins become even more essential. Create routines or rituals that allow you and your partner to connect on a deeper emotional level regularly. These can include activities such as daily devotionals, prayer, or shared hobbies. Such rituals provide stability and help build trust and understanding between partners. You may each define connection differently. It is important for each of you to discuss what connection means to you and seek to fulfill that for each other. Healthy marriages are reciprocal, not one-sided.

Additionally, schedule regular emotional check-ins to discuss any challenges, concerns, or triumphs that either partner may be experiencing. Create a safe space where both partners can express their feelings openly and without judgment. Use active listening techniques, such as reflecting back what you hear, to ensure understanding and validate each other's emotions. These check-ins can strengthen the emotional bond between partners and provide an avenue for addressing and resolving conflicts effectively.

Navigating communication in a neurodiverse marriage requires intentionality, understanding, and adaptability. By cultivating a foundation of patience and understanding, tailoring communication styles to individual needs, and establishing rituals of connection and emotional check-ins, Christian couples can strengthen their bond and build a thriving

relationship. Remember that love, empathy, and a willingness to embrace neurodiversity can create a marriage that thrives despite any challenges it may face.



Personal Reflection:

How are you at gentle or graceful communication? Take time to reflect and pray and ask the Lord where you can grow in gentle and grace filled communication with your spouse, even when you are hurt or confused or overwhelmed.

Taking a Look at Gentleness: Gentle Christian Parenting offers the following definition: “Gentleness is the quality or characteristic of being kind, tender, mild-mannered, compassionate, and considerate. To be gentle means showing love and care for others in how you act and speak. To have gentleness is to have a gentle spirit or nature about you.”

Bible Study Tools offers this definition :Gentleness: Sensitivity of disposition and kindness of behavior, founded on strength and prompted by love.

What Does Scripture Say About Gentleness?

Proverbs 15:1-4 (ESV) A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly. The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. A gentle^[a] tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

Ephesians 4:15 (ESV) Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ

Colossians 4:6 (ESV) Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

James 3:2-6 (ESV) What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions^[a] are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

2 Timothy 2:23-26 (ESV) Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant^[a] must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.



Personal Reflection Question:

Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in GENTLENESS, especially in speech.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Chapter 7. Navigating the Maze of Communication: Social Language Pragmatics

Themes:

- The purpose of communication is to give someone else information or to connect. The information could be how you feel, what you are thinking, your opinion, what you need at the grocery store and so on. Someone needs to be the recipient and understand you for true communication to take place.
- Language is both the words we use and how we use them; speech is the sound of spoken language, such as articulation, fluency and voice. Language has five areas: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The two main areas impacted by autism are semantics and pragmatics: semantics is the meaning of the words both on the surface and the underlying meanings.
- Language is also divided into receptive language (what we take in and understand), expressive language (what comes out as we speak; our expression), and inner language (all the things roaming around in our head and the conversations we have with ourselves that are not spoken).

- What is important to understand is that while many of the traits of autism are seen at various times in neurotypical people, it is the frequency (how often it happens), the intensity (how strong of a reaction it is or how forceful the words) and the duration (how long the reaction goes on, if there is a meltdown, or if the person won't let go of an issue or get the issue resolved) that sets the neurodiverse relationship apart from what happens in a neurotypical relationship.
- Often the AS/ND person doesn't know what to say or how to respond due to processing issues. Other times, the conversation stays in their head, as in inner communication.

Spiritual Focus:

- With this information, reread James 3:2-6



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- Greg processes in his head and has a single focus whereas Carol processes verbally and asks questions during projects. Discuss how each of you process in your marriage.
- What are two purposes of communication?
- What is a general definition of semantics? Pragmatics?
- What are some areas that are used for diagnosis of autism that are in the social communication realm?
- What does frequency, intensity and duration have to do with autism?
- Discuss how reading body language can be difficult for both partners.
- What is 'inner language' and how can this cause confusion?
- What are some considerations when starting a conversation, and what are some tips to keep it going?



After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

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Lesson 6



Breathing for Balance: Harnessing the Power of Breath in Autism Spectrum Management

By Dan Holmes

Breathing – it's a fundamental process, yet its profound impact on our wellbeing, particularly for those on the Autism spectrum, is often underestimated. Let's explore how simple breathing techniques can be transformative, offering tools for stress management, focus enhancement, and overall life quality improvement for individuals with Autism.

The Science Behind Breathing and Stress Relief

Breathing exercises do more than just relax the mind; they engage the body's parasympathetic nervous system, often referred to as the "rest and digest" system. This contrasts with the sympathetic nervous system, which governs our "fight or flight" response. When we practice deep, controlled breathing, we signal our body to shift from a state of stress to one of calm, activating the parasympathetic response. This shift lowers heart rate, reduces blood pressure, and slows the breathing rate, creating a sense of calm and stability.

The Benefits of Breathing Techniques in Stress Management

- **Reducing Stress and Anxiety:** By activating the parasympathetic response, breathing exercises help reduce anxiety, mitigating the often overwhelming stress experienced by individuals with Autism.
- **Enhancing Focus and Concentration:** Regular breathing practice can lead to improved concentration, aiding learning and social interactions.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Techniques like deep breathing provide strategies for handling overwhelming emotional states.
- **Self-Regulation Skills:** These exercises promote control over physical and emotional states, fostering self-awareness.
- **Improved Sleep Patterns:** The calming effect of controlled breathing can encourage better sleep.

- **Sensory Integration Support:** Breathing exercises can serve as a therapeutic tool for sensory processing.
- **Social and Communication Skill Enhancement:** Lowering stress and anxiety barriers can lead to more comfortable social interactions.

Breathing Exercises to Try

- **Diaphragmatic Breathing:** Focuses on deep belly breaths, calming the nervous system.
- **4-7-8 Breathing:** A stress-relief tool involving specific counts for inhaling, holding, and exhaling.
- **Box Breathing:** A method of equal breaths in, hold, out, and hold, excellent for focus.
- **Balloon Breathing:** A fun, child-friendly approach to deep breathing.
- **Alternate Nostril Breathing:** Balances brain hemispheres, fostering calm and focus.
- **Counted Breath:** Simple breathing to a count, aiding in mindfulness.
- **Visualization Breathing:** Combines breathing with mental imagery for a deeper calming effect.
- **Breath Prayers:** Breathing in and reflecting on a Scripture or prayer and exhaling deeply.

A web search on each of those will yield more details about each one.

Conclusion

Integrating breathing exercises into the daily life of those with Autism or married to someone on the autism spectrum can have a substantial impact. These techniques offer a natural, accessible way to manage the challenges associated with Autism, empowering individuals with lifelong skills. Consistency and practice are key to unlocking these benefits.

Encouragement for Practice

For those on the Autism spectrum, these breathing techniques can be a valuable addition to your daily routine. Start gently, be patient, and observe the positive changes they bring. Here's to a more focused, calm, and joyful life through the power of breath!

goodness, love) tends to cover a broad range of meaning, with mercy and grace being progressively narrower.”

What does Scripture Say About Kindness?

Ephesian 4:31-32 (ESV) Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Romans 2:1-11 (ESV) Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking^[a] and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (ESV) Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Luke 6:32-8 (ESV) If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.

Colossians 3:12-17 (ESV) Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Proverbs 31:25-28 (ESV) Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:



Personal Reflection Question:

Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in KINDNESS.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Chapter 8. Navigating the Maze of Executive Function Differences & Challenges

Themes:

- This chapter delves into the complex topic of Executive Function (EF) and its influence on Neurodivergent individuals and Neurodiverse (ND) couples (when one or both are Autistic).
- Executive Function (EF) is the term commonly used to describe processes of the brain that we each need to use to achieve every task we wish to complete each day.
- In defining EF, I have referred to both ASD and ADHD. Research displays that 50-70% of Autistic people also meet the criteria for ADHD, these people have come to refer to themselves as AuDHD (Dawson, and Guare, 2016), (Hours et al., 2022), (Marmorstein, 2023, November). This high co-occurrence implies that the strengths and challenges that commonly exist for either an Autistic person or a person with ADHD have the potential to display in either neurotype.
- Awareness of EF strengths and challenges is a first step that leads to improved skills at home or work.

Spiritual Focus:

- Self-control - Genuine self-improvement is a life of self-mastery. It is an amalgam of self-control and self-discipline. Self-control so that you temper your desires and self-

discipline so that you engage in the benefits of the difficult. It takes both to grow healthily but in doing so you become a better person and a better person to be around. It enhances all forms of your relationships. I encourage you to embrace this mindset if you don't already have it.

- We must have self-control to develop all of the other fruits of the spirit. Self-control is one of the most difficult to focus on but regulation is the key to the other fruits. Not having this fruit will hinder the other fruits being seen in your life.
- Dr. Vernard Gant's words at the Brooklyn Tabernacle echo this sentiment, emphasizing compassion as the key to embracing diversity, as commanded "Love one another as I have loved you" in John 13:34 (Gant, 2021) (Bible gateway, n.d.). Embracing Christlike love, we can bridge our differences by being curious about our brain strengths and challenges, sharing them with our partners, and understanding each other to create safe, inclusive home-based teams.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. Titus 2:11-12 (NIV).



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- What are some of the skills that fall under Executive Function? Are any of them a surprise to you?
- We usually think of the one with neurodivergence as having executive function issues, but under stress there are EF compromises as well. Where might the NT/NA spouse be struggling with EF issues?
- Discuss some of the challenges of executive function for those with ASD, ADHD and AuDHD (combined ASD and ADHD).
- The author lists 12 common EF processes. Briefly discuss each one and a challenge that can occur as a result of difficulty in each area.
- Several mini-case studies with suggestions/solutions were listed. Find one that you relate to and discuss. Can any of the solutions listed help in your situation?
- If the relationship has thus far focused on the ND/AS spouse with NT partner, the one who is socially and relationally more non-autistic (NA), is there ADHD in the "NA" spouse? If so, how does this impact the relational dynamic with both partners having EF challenges at times?

- Are your chores/roles still based on stereotypical gender roles? Dan and Stephanie have shared earlier in the book and in their podcasts that they divide their house chores based on skill sets and interests. Would changing up some house chore roles/'honey do' list or hiring out certain chores provide a more impact on the marriage?



After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

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Lesson 7



Hindsight Learning: Generosity Starts at Home

Author: Dan Holmes

This is taken from work Dan has contributed to the Holmes' upcoming book: *Embracing the Autism Spectrum: Finding Hope & Joy Navigating the NeuroDiverse Family Journey*

As I reflect back on the journey our family has taken, it's impossible not to acknowledge the moments I missed. I am Dan – the dad and husband in this narrative. My role in our family dynamics wasn't absent, but it was passive. I would listen to the events, nod in agreement, and occasionally participate, but I realize now that my involvement lacked depth and presence.

From the girls' perspective, our weekends were filled with play and laughter. They had the essentials and more – a comfortable home, nourishing food, clothing, toys, and school. Dress-up and our playful game of "Freddie the Fish" became cherished memories. But what they couldn't see, and what I didn't communicate, was my advocacy for them. I left that responsibility to Stephanie. I didn't fully stand beside her in the challenges she faced while fighting for our daughters' well-being and future.

Regrettably, I didn't offer her the support she needed most during those times. The pressure and disappointment that grew in her heart were outcomes of my absence – not a physical absence, but an emotional one. I was there, yet strangely distant. I didn't realize the pain she carried underneath her outward frustrations. Each complaint or irritation was part of a larger theme that I failed to see, a theme that would eventually manifest in ways I never expected.

My silence, my passive approach, robbed her of a partner in navigating the storm. I lacked engagement not only with the practical challenges but, more importantly, with her. I failed to express curiosity about her feelings or experiences. I was oblivious to the depth of her struggles, and this lack of presence allowed negativity from the periphery to seep in unchecked.

When I say "silent," I don't mean just words. I mean a wholehearted engagement with her – a commitment to understand and cherish her. My generosity was one-dimensional, my gestures of love often limited to empty promises. While I didn't need or want much myself, I

projected this onto her. This one-dimensional approach left her feeling unfulfilled, longing for a connection that extended beyond material gestures.

My lack of interest and curiosity further exacerbated the divide. While she was a person of many projects and tasks, I didn't make the effort to share in those interests. I didn't communicate that she was cherished, that her presence in my life was a gift. I realize now that I should have fought for her attention, for moments of togetherness that communicated her intrinsic value to me.

Finding creative outlets for these expressions of love could have alleviated some of the pressure. It wasn't about grand gestures, but consistent efforts to connect. Investing in each family member, truly engaging with their worlds, is an invaluable endeavor. It might require effort and practice, but the rewards are immeasurable.

The journey of life often disappoints, revealing that even in places where we expect righteousness, there can be wickedness. Yet, these trials are opportunities for growth. They refine us, teaching us resilience in the face of adversity. Our burdens, whether light or heavy, connect us as humans, and as Christians, we are called to support one another through these trials.

Bearing our own crosses is a difficult path, one that Christ himself walked. It's not meant to be easy, but through it, we find strength and transformation. In times of light, when our burdens seem manageable, we must also be prepared to share the load of others. Galatians 6:2 reminds us of this responsibility, urging us to bear each other's burdens.

As I look back on my journey as a husband and father, I see where I fell short. I recognize the importance of active engagement, of communicating love and interest through actions and words. My hindsight reflection serves as a reminder to all parents and spouses – our roles are not merely passive. We must be generous with our time, love, engagement, curiosity and much more. We must actively invest in the lives of our loved ones, building connections that withstand the challenges of life. Does your job, church, volunteering, interests, hobbies get the best of your time and energy? Generosity and goodness should start at home with our spouse and children getting the very best of us, not the leftovers or the worst parts of us.

How do I build a relationship with my ND child when I too am on the spectrum?

Author: Jeremy Rochford

As an Autistic father of two Autistic children, one of the questions I get asked rather frequently is: "How do I build a relationship with my ND child when I too am on the

spectrum? "I'm not going to lie; this was tricky for me at first. Like most parents, I had grand visions of playing Hockey with my daughter and spending Sundays' hanging out with my son watching NASCAR (both of which are my personal special interests). But alas, my daughter would rather read Percy Jackson and my son would rather play Legos. So, what's a guy to do?

Well, there are many things I could do.

I could force them to be involved in my own special interests.

I could get upset and offended when they get bored and walk away.

I could even play the "Dad" card and pull out a few "because I said so's" when their lack of interest comes across as defiance. These are all things I could do...Or I could take a moment (while I'm regulated of course) and think about the legacy I'm building with my children.

I could stop and ask myself;

- How do I want to be remembered as a father?
- How do I want them to speak of me when I'm not around?
- How do I want our relationship to be when they're adults and no longer "have" to be around me?

For me, the legacy I want to build as a father is one of love. I feel this is not only noble but also biblical. If we, as the head(s) of the household, are to be the first model(s) of who Christ is to our children, then why would we want to settle for anything less? Woe is us if the only picture we paint of heaven for our children is that of an Old Testament God of wrath while completely omitting the New Testament God of grace.

The fact that we get to see both sides of God throughout scripture shows that we too can offer correction while also offering grace. Yes, I fully acknowledge that Autism and ADHD can present a challenge when black and white thinking are involved, but through the spirit, and using Galatians 5:22-23 (the Fruits of the Spirit) as a guide, patterns can be disrupted, and balance can be had. For me, it started by doing 3 things.

First, I had to remember that my children are tiny humans. I know this might sound "simple," but it grounds me in the reality that while yes, they are my children, they're also them-selves.

They have their own hopes, dreams, wants and desires. Just like I did when I was their age. By first seeing them as what they are (tiny humans), it allows me to be set up for the next thing.

Which is...

Second, I've adjusted my expectations. Notice what I didn't say there. I didn't say "lower" my expectations. Rather, I said "adjusted." What this means to me, from a practical perspective, is that my goals have shifted. Rather than trying to "bond" with them I've simply made my goal to be present. Which ironically has allowed me to bond with them more than I ever could have imagined. By simply seeking to be "present" I don't set myself up for failure or dysregulation. All I have to do to be a good father is be present. Now, if my ADHD kick's in and I start to get bored with what they're doing, I've made it a point to get curios rather than disengage. So, when my mind starts to wander, I start asking my kids questions about what we're doing. Things like "Why is this musical your favorite?" or "What about this Lego set impresses you." While getting curios not only saves myself from getting bored, it also allows my kids to feel like I'm truly engaged.

WIN- WIN.

Which brings us to...

Third, I remember that time is short. Like it or not, everyday we're making memories. We're the ones who get to choose whether they're happy and positive, or sad and regretful. I've learned that if I focus on getting the first two right (acknowledging their humanness & adjusting expectations to simply be present), the third takes care of itself.

Full disclosure, this was not an overnight process for me and I'm still not perfect at it. There are times my dysregulation can make things more challenging than I'd like. But having this 3-step process at my disposal have given me a framework to go through and by using the Fruits of the Spirit, I've set guidelines in place to make sure I'm doing it right. By doing this, my wife has been happier.

My children have been happier.

And I've been happier.

My hope is that you'll take these three steps and start to make your own version of what "happier" looks like in your home and relationship(s). Because I know that if I can do it- so can you.



Personal Reflection:

Did Dan or Jeremy’s sharing resonate with you or bring conviction that generosity should start at home with your spouse and family? Are you generous with your time and resources to your family first? Where is moderation on work-life balance, passions or hobbies and intentional relationship with your spouse and family? What is an action point for you?

Taking a Look at Goodness and Generosity

Easton’s Bible Dictionary defines Goodness as “in man/woman is not a mere passive quality, but the deliberate preference of right to wrong, the firm and persistent resistance of all moral evil, and the choosing and following of all moral good.”

Renew.org defines Generosity in the Bible as “Generosity is the virtue of freely giving good things. Notice it’s not just giving things; it’s giving *good* things, both material and immaterial. When they hear the word “generosity,” some people will first think about giving money. Other people might be giving time, service, love, or forgiveness. With all these good things, someone can be generous or miserly. Generosity means giving these things freely and even sacrificially—not grudgingly or forced. Generosity is a practice that when you do it again and again, becomes a routine. This habit, in time, becomes an instinctive impulse that helps give shape to a virtuous, Jesus-like life.”

What Does Scripture Say About Goodness or Generosity?

Galatians 1:10 (ESV) Brothers if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he

is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load. Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

2 Corinthians 9:6-9a (ESV) The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully^[d] will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency^j in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work

Galatians 6:9-10 (ESV) Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Psalms 106:1-2 (ESV) God is our example of Goodness and Generosity! Praise the LORD! Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Who can utter the mighty deeds of the LORD, or declare all his praise?

Mark 10:18 (ESV) And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

Proverbs 11:24-25 (ESV) One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.

1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV) But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Parenting or Being an Example:

Ephesians 6:4 (ESV) Fathers [parents], do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Titus 2:7-8 (NLT) In everything, set them an example by doing what is good; Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching. Teach the truth so that your teaching can't be criticized.



Personal Reflection Question:

Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in GOODNESS THROUGH GENEROSITY.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Chapter 9. Navigating the Mazes of Diagnosis, Acceptance, Pre-Regulation, & Curiosity: Better Than Imagined or Worse Than Expected? It is up to you.

Themes:

- Jeremy Rochford states, “For me, autism never excused any of my behaviors, but it did start to explain them. And that gave me the freedom to openly assess the aspects of my life that were serving me well, and the parts that were causing conflict. It was like I was finally given the instruction manual to my personality... I’m finally able to look at myself in the mirror and ask the question “Why” in a curious tone, rather than the tone of guilt and shame (that I used for far too long).”
- When the couple is dating, everything is fine. Autistic masking can start and stop as needed, there is plenty of time to self-regulate, and everything is still new and segmented. As the relationship turns to marriage, there is less opportunity for the autistic to “comfortably” be themselves.
- The trick – doing the work. It’s true for any individual or couple, ND/NT or not, that those who make the effort to grow and adapt together are the ones who will be the most joyous and successful. The problem, again, is that many autistics don’t inherently “get” this.

Spiritual Focus:

- So how does someone even begin to find joy in all of this? By the grace of John 8:32 NIV... which states: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”
- It does take both parties to fully acknowledge, and embrace, the reality that as an act of faith in Christ, we ALL must submit to HIS will. Ephesians 4:1-6 does a great job of making this simple and clear for us; “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just

as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- The author of this chapter refers to learning about his autism diagnosis as ‘the ultimate cheat code’. What does he mean by this? For the one with the ADHD, ASD, AuDHD label have you moved to this mindset or do you remain defensive and angry or offended by the label? To the NA spouse, have you recognized and seen the strengths that come with neurodiversity?
- Three realizations followed by actions saved the author’s marriage.
 - Mind shift – What types of things changed for him in this area?
 - Self-regulation/Pre-regulation - Discuss the three steps he lists for better self-regulation
 - Dumping out - Not dumping on – What does this mean and how does it relate to receiving feedback and curiosity?
- What was the purpose of Jeremy using sarcasm in his life and how did this work in his marriage?
- At the end of the chapter he says, “The choice is up to you”. What choice is that? What is your choice? If your marriage is in a state of discontent, disrepair, or negative cycle, what do you each see as your part to bring the marriage to a new place of health and reciprocity?

Chapter 10. Navigating the Maze of Co-Parenting and Teamwork

Themes:

- Jeremy observes that, “As we were learning more and more about Autism, we discovered that men were diagnosed four to one and that the dominant gene

sequencing that genetically passes Autism to children usually comes from the male's side of the family. Or, in other terms, ME.”

- “My parenting really took an upswing when I realized how important behavior modeling was for my children. The more I learned how to show joy, peace, patience, etc. the more they experienced it from me. The more they saw it from me the more I could see them trying to mimic those behaviors to others.”
- Beyond the big stuff, though, making sure that your “yes” is yes and your “no” is no is very important. The more your children can learn to trust in your faithfulness, the more they’re going to be open to trusting God’s faithfulness.
- The increased challenge in my life means I had to step up in my own regulation. I really learned that if I’m going to model what “good Christian living” meant then I knew I had to do it in my own life. Whether it’s breath work, prayer, meditation or just taking 5 minutes to calm yourself, paying attention to your own regulation means all the difference in having the self-control you need to help parent your children in the way they deserve.

Spiritual Focus:

- We genuinely needed direction and with so few resources available on how to approach parenting neurodivergent children from a Godly perspective, we decided it was best to go to the source. Galatians 5:22-23 ESV: “For the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”
- Parenting in the fruits of the Spirit



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- Team Rochford suggests you stop and reflect on each fruit of the spirit and ask yourself individually then as a couple, what fruit(s) are missing or are a challenge?
- Discuss how Jeremy and Charity’s reactions to the autism diagnosis of their children were different. Can you relate to either of them?
- Parenting in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruit of the spirit) were each discussed. Which was deemed the most important to work on first? Briefly discuss each and if you have challenges or feel it’s a strength for you within each Area. What are the strengths of each spouse in the “fruits”?
- What does self-regulation have to do with parenting through the fruit of the Spirit?

Chapter 11. Navigating the Additional Mazes of Stigma and Bias in Diagnosis of People of Color *By Dr. Mary H. Jones, Pediatrician, ASD Clinical Specialist & Life Coach*

** While this chapter may not lend itself to group discussion, it is important to note key themes:

Themes

- Bias and stigma in diagnosing people in the Black community
- Why children and adults of color are often missed or delayed in proper diagnosis
- White children receive more resources and helps earlier than those in the Black community
- Why Nicole Mar and the Interviewees felt they could not share the diagnosis, not out of shame but concern it would be used against them in their workplace or misunderstood by their community
- Takeaways for the additional mistrust of the Black community to the medical and educational systems for past inequitable treatment and deception in seeking diagnosis or resources (when applicable).



After Coaching/Group: Personal Growth

Upon reflection of this material, workbook, or work with an individual coach or group class based on this book, what are you committed to do differently? What is your action point? Without focusing on what your partner/spouse needs to do, what do you need to think differently about? Where is your growth point?

Reference

Easton Bible Dictionary (n.d.). Goodness.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/goodness/>

Renew. Org (n.d.) Generosity in the Bible. <https://renew.org/generosity-in-the-bible/>

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Lesson 8



We would not presume to tell the reader whether or not to stay or leave their neurodiverse marriage but we do believe there are grounds for divorce beyond adultery. If a marriage has been destructive and abusive or has cycles of unrepentant addictions (pornography included). Based on an interview with Leslie Vernick, author of *Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, some points below outline what a healthy marriage includes. The points below are from an interview of Leslie Vernick from an interview.

The Core of Healthy Marriages

Leslie Vernick begins by debunking common misconceptions about healthy marriages. Contrary to the idealized Hollywood narratives, she emphasizes that the essence of a healthy marriage lies in trust and safety, not in perfect romantic harmony. In a healthy marriage, trust and safety are foundational, enabling partners to express themselves freely without fear or restraint. Mutuality, reciprocity, and the freedom to be oneself are also vital components of a thriving marriage.

Breaking Trust: Beyond the Obvious

While infidelity and abuse are often highlighted as trust-breakers, Leslie points out other subtle yet significant ways trust can erode in a relationship. These include feeling unsafe to disagree or express oneself, experiencing a lack of care and empathy from a partner, and encountering unreliability in fulfilling commitments. These issues can deeply affect the stability and safety of a marriage.

Neurodiversity in Marriages: A Special Focus

The conversation takes a turn when addressing marriages with neurodiverse and neurotypical partners. Leslie and Stephanie explore the additional complexity that neurodiversity brings to the dynamics of trust and safety in a relationship. They discuss how the literal, concrete thinking patterns of a neurodiverse partner can lead to

misunderstandings and misapplications of biblical teachings on headship and submission, further complicating the relationship.

Case Studies in Neurodiverse Relationships

Real-life examples from Stephanie's practice bring to light the unique challenges in neurodiverse marriages. One striking example involves a neurodiverse husband's unilateral decision to reject community support for his wife during her cancer treatment, driven by his personal preferences and discomfort. This incident raises critical questions about the balance between accommodating neurodiversity and ensuring the emotional and practical needs of a neurotypical partner are met.

The Intersection of Neurodiversity and Selfishness

A crucial part of the discussion revolves around distinguishing the limitations posed by neurodiversity from outright selfishness or pride. Leslie stresses the importance of recognizing when a neurodiverse individual is genuinely struggling to understand a partner's needs versus when they are unwilling to acknowledge or cater to those needs. The conversation delves into how neurodiverse individuals can learn and adapt once their partners explicitly communicate their needs and expectations.

Empathy and Understanding: Keys to Progress

Leslie emphasizes empathy and understanding as essential for progress in neurodiverse relationships. She draws parallels with cultural and racial differences, underscoring the importance of acknowledging and respecting each other's experiences and perspectives. This empathy must be a two-way street, where both partners strive to understand and accommodate each other's unique viewpoints and needs.

Misunderstandings and Misapplications of Scriptural Teachings

The dialogue also touches upon the misinterpretation of biblical teachings in neurodiverse marriages, particularly regarding submission and headship. Leslie and Stephanie discuss how these misinterpretations can exacerbate issues in the relationship, leading to a misuse of Scripture to justify unmet needs or lack of understanding.

Conclusion: Building Bridges in Neurodiverse Christian Marriages

Our insightful conversation with Leslie Vernick sheds light on the complexities of neurodiverse marriages. It highlights the need for clear communication, empathy, and mutual respect in navigating these unique relationships. For neurodiverse Christian couples, understanding each other's perspectives, accommodating each other's needs, and correctly applying biblical principles are key to building a strong, healthy marriage.

If you are willing to rebuild trust and safety, core features of a healthy marriage, fear bonds can be turned to joy bonds with hard work, ownership and responsibility and repentance of the one who has abused and willingness to do what is necessary to repair the past abusive or trauma inducing behaviors.

Transforming Fear Bonds into Love Bonds: Dr. Jim Wilder's Insights

By Dr. Stephanie Holmes

In the realm of interpersonal relationships, the concepts of fear bonds and love bonds, as coined by Dr. Jim Wilder, offer a profound understanding of the dynamics that shape our connections with others. These bonds can significantly impact the quality of our relationships and even influence our overall well-being.

Understanding Fear Bonds and Love Bonds

Fear Bonds: At their core, fear bonds are formed through negative emotional experiences, often tied to moments of pain, threat, or trauma. These experiences create neural pathways in our brains that associate the presence of certain individuals or situations with feelings of fear, anxiety, or insecurity. Fear bonds can hinder authentic connection, as they trigger defensive mechanisms that prioritize self-preservation over vulnerability.

Love Bonds: On the other hand, love bonds are forged through positive emotional experiences that nurture feelings of safety, trust, and affection. These experiences activate neural pathways associated with reward, pleasure, and bonding. Love bonds facilitate deeper connections by enabling individuals to feel secure enough to express vulnerability and engage in emotional intimacy.

The Impact of Fear Bonds and Love Bonds

Fear Bonds: Relationships dominated by fear bonds are characterized by distrust, defensiveness, and distance. In such relationships, individuals may withhold their true feelings and thoughts to avoid potential harm or rejection. Communication tends to be strained, and conflicts often escalate due to the underlying fear-based dynamics.

Love Bonds: Relationships built on love bonds, on the other hand, thrive in an environment of emotional safety and trust. Individuals feel valued and cherished, fostering open and honest communication. Love bonds encourage personal growth and allow for vulnerability without fear of judgment.

Transforming Fear Bonds into Love Bonds

- **Self-Awareness:** The first step in transforming fear bonds into love bonds is self-awareness. Reflect on your emotional responses and patterns in your relationships. Identify moments of fear, anxiety, or defensiveness, and explore their origins. Recognizing your triggers and understanding your emotional reactions lays the foundation for change.
- **Mindful Communication:** Practice mindful communication by actively listening and responding without judgment. Cultivate empathy for both yourself and others involved in the relationship. Replace reactive responses with thoughtful and compassionate interactions.
- **Recognize Patterns:** Identify recurring patterns of fear-based behavior in your relationships. Are there certain situations or individuals that consistently trigger fear bonds? Recognizing these patterns empowers you to anticipate and navigate them more effectively.
- **Foster Emotional Safety:** To transform fear bonds into love bonds, create an atmosphere of emotional safety. Assure those you're connected with that their feelings and perspectives are valued. Share your own vulnerabilities to encourage reciprocity and trust.
- **Gradual Exposure:** If fear bonds are deeply ingrained, gradual exposure can be helpful. Gradually reintroduce positive experiences with the individuals involved. This process allows new neural pathways associated with safety and positivity to form.
- **Practice Gratitude:** Cultivate a habit of gratitude within your relationships. Focus on the positive aspects of the bond and express appreciation for the qualities that inspire love and connection. This shift in focus can dilute the power of fear-based associations.
- **Seek Professional Support:** In cases where fear bonds have significantly impacted your ability to connect with others, seeking professional support can be invaluable. Therapists or counselors can guide you through the process of unpacking and transforming these patterns.

Taking a Look at Faithfulness: Got Questions: Your Questions Biblical Answers defines Faithfulness as:

“To be faithful is to be reliable, steadfast and unwavering, and the Bible speaks of this type of faithfulness in four ways: as an attribute of God, as a positive characteristic of some people, as a characteristic that many people lack, and as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. *Faithful* is also used in the sense of “believing,” as in the case of the Christians in Ephesus and Colossae.”

What Does Scripture Say About Faithfulness?

Matthew 5:37 (ESV) Reliability/Keeping your word

Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

Luke 16:10 (ESV)

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.

Proverbs 20:5-7 (ESV)

The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out. Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find? The righteous who walks in his integrity— blessed are his children after him!

Psalms 31: 23 (ESV)

Love the LORD, all you his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.

John 15:12-13 (ESV)

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

Ephesians 4:1-3 (ESV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Romans 12:9-10 (ESV)

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

What Does Scripture Say about Abuse? Treatment of Others?

Merriam Webster Defines “A fool” as: someone who lacks good sense or judgment
Oxford Dictionary defines “hard-hearted” as: incapable of being moved to pity or tenderness; unfeeling.

We often see the word fool or one hard hearted associated with the traits and behaviors of abuse in relationships. It can be helpful to do a Bible study or search on the Biblical definition of a fool or being heart hearted and how we are to respond.

Proverbs 18:2 (ESV)

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

Proverbs 18:6 (ESV)

A fool's lips bring strife, and his mouth calls for blows.

Proverbs 18:7

A fool's mouth is his ruin and his lips are the snare of his soul.

Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Proverbs 28:13-24 (ESV) Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.

2 Tim 3:1-5 (NIV)

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.



Personal Reflection Question:

Which verse above are you drawn to? Which verse can you choose to make an anchor verse for you in your marriage? Will you write the verse out? In our church circles we have learned the method called SOAP.



Write a prayer personalizing this verse and your commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to help you grow in FAITHFULNESS and TREATMENT OF OTHER.

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Gracefully Navigating the Maze

For Group Discussion or Personal Study

Section 3: When Things Do Not Go as Planned

Introduction: What Happened to My Happily Ever After?

Chapter 12. Escaping the Maze of Religion & Roles and Weaponized Scripture

Themes:

- This section delves into the complexities of neurodiverse Christian marriages, highlighting the unique communication challenges and potential for misinterpretation of roles and rules by the neurodivergent spouse.
- In our discussion of neurodiverse couples, we have yet to consider the influence of faith or religious beliefs. It's crucial to acknowledge that Christian couples do not uniformly interpret Scripture, leading to the diversity of denominations; faith can either be a guiding force in navigating neurodiverse relationships or a source of barriers and complications if rigid or inflexible interpretations of biblical texts are applied.
- This combined with an intolerance for uncertainties and ambiguities with a black-and-white mentality or adherence to rules and literalism can be problematic for any relationship, but the addition of religion with rules and roles increases the intricacies and issues for NDCCs.
- When examining the verses often used to formulate marriage theology and doctrine, it becomes evident how these can be misinterpreted and lead to spiritual, emotional, and psychological abuse, especially towards women in neurodiverse relationships, whether they are autistic or non-autistic.
- Christians in neurodiverse relationships face additional complexities, including the stigma of admitting marital issues, finding educated, professional help, and other challenges unique to ND couples. When the teachings of respected pastors and authors are interpreted through a rigid, black-and-white lens, devoid of context, the

potential for abuse in Christian neurodiverse marriages becomes even more apparent.

Spiritual Focus:

- A desire to be transformed into Christ's likeness, motivation to change, humility and teachability are the key ingredients to a God-honoring, healthy marriage.
- Jesus modeled how we should use scripture through his interactions with those around him. Consider the story of the woman caught in adultery. He didn't force Old Testament law on her. He showed her mercy. His corrective action was "go and sin no more". His approach was full of compassion. He saw her first then he addressed sin. And he addressed it without condemnation. He called her to a higher way instead of reminding her of her failure. The Samaritan woman at the well is in a similar situation. Jesus again led with compassion simply by being there. He talked with her, not at her. He didn't demand anything; he asked and then followed up with questions that invited her to self-revelation. He led that interaction as someone interested in the image-bearer of God that was.



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

****One of the features/criteria of autism is context blindness according to Dr. Vermeulen. It is very important that scripture is viewed in light of context and not wielded as a weapon of fear or control of others.**

- Have you ever felt like scripture was being used as a weapon against you? What verses or teachings have been used to make you feel that way? Rev. Stephanie and Rev. Dan mentions the key verses in chapter 12 that are used to define "marriage theology," have you used any of these without proper context? Have any been used against you?
- What are small steps you can take to discover for yourself what the Bible really has to say about Christ-centered marriage versus abusive relationships?
- Are you and your spouse willing to take part in the repentance and reconciliation process? What does that look like?
- Going back to worldly sorrow versus Godly sorrow? When you read this chapter what feelings were evoked in you? Why do you think that is?

If this chapter was informative and did not apply to your situation, we hope it helps explain how many can get trapped in abusive situations. Be careful not to judge someone who has

stayed in an abusive relationship or spiritually or religiously abuse them if they have decided they need to leave the relationship through separation or divorce.

Chapter 13. Trapped in the Maze and Confusion of Abuse

Themes:

- This chapter is about the complexities of abuse that may occur with a neurodiverse Christian couple (NDCC). The abuse may be intentional or unintentional because of the complexities that are unique in a neurodiverse/neurotypical (ND/NT) relationship.
- Just because someone is neurodiverse does not mean that they will be an abuser.
- Tragically, in many of the marriages I see that are struggling or don't make it, there has been some type of abuse, trauma or neglect. Some of it is unintentional because the ASD person may struggle with Theory of Mind (ToM) or mind blindness, combined with black-and-white/rigid thinking and/or executive functioning. Having these things complicates marriage at an entirely different level.
- Spiritual abuse is typically experienced with other forms of abuse and often produces the highest levels of toxic shame.
- According to Celestia Tracy (2023a; 2023b) and Leslie Vernick (2013), emotional and verbal abuse can be among the more damaging forms of abuse because of their subjective nature. Words can strike with force at the very core of who we are, for either good or evil. It is important to note that those who are neurodivergent may refer to feedback as abuse, and it is important to understand the difference between constructive feedback, boundaries and verbal abuse.
- Recalling the definitions Dr. Jim Wilder (2013) gave us in a previous chapter, when there is Trauma A or B, this can affect the person's OFC or "joy center" and lead to loss of identity and ability to build love bonds; then fear bonds abound which will impact attachment.

***Counselor/Coach/Clergy/Chaplain:** When a couple comes to you and the wife has indicated she is being abused in any way, it is crucial that you, the leader or counselor do not add secondary spiritual abuse or religious trauma to an already complicated marriage. Unless you are

autism trained, it is ethical or moral to refer the couple for professional support with a counselor or coach who is neurodiverse trained.

Spiritual Focus:

- Colossians 3:19 (NIV) says, "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." 1 Peter 3:7 (NIV) says, "Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." This tells the husband to consider his wife's needs, to adapt to her, and to treat her with respect. Women respond naturally to husbands who treat them this way.
- Mentioned both in Proverbs 8:13 and Matthew 12:34, Scripture tells us that out of the abundance or overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. What spews from one's mouth comes from what lies in the heart. Learning self-control, regulation and how to take a pause or break when dysregulated or overwhelmed is work the AS/ND spouse should undertake with spiritual leadership holding him accountable to this work.



Group Discussion or Personal Coaching Questions:

- **Just because someone has autism does not mean they will be an abuser.** Yet, intentional or unintentional, without awareness and understanding, abuse often takes place in ND marriages higher than NT marriages. It can be overwhelming and confusing, but being honest about your situation opens the door to awareness and healing. As you look at your marriage, do you see harmful characteristics or abusive traits? If you do, do you have someone to talk to about those things?
- Are you willing to be held accountable for words and actions? If so, are you actively engaged in finding help and accountability, real accountability from someone who will understand your goals and challenges, for yourself? This can be the husband or the wife as abusive behavior, uncontrolled anger, dysregulation and overwhelm can be on both sides of an ND relationship. Both can actively be working on this on their own in ways that greatly impact marriage health.
- What is one way that you can practice self-control and regulation, practicing the concepts from transforming fear bonds into love bonds mentioned in this workbook? (Look below for various types of abuse outlined by Dr.Celestia Tracy).

**Leslie Vernick noted in an American Association of Christian Counselors World Conference track lesson called "Roadmap to Peace " there is a difference between hurt and harm. When someone has been harmed, traumatized or abused they may choose to put up boundaries or space/distance from the relationship including a therapeutic separation or ask someone to leave (if the behavior is not stopped). While this may cause pain or hurt to the one receiving boundaries or space, this is not the same or equal to the harm, trauma or abuse that necessitated the boundaries. If someone has said, "This behavior causes me harm and I need it to stop, or I have to protect myself, take space, etc." and this is ignored boundaries with consequences may be needed. Boundaries cannot make someone stop or start a behavior; boundaries are about what I can allow or tolerate or not allow any longer. Note in Chapter 6 the loving way to state boundaries. You may need a coach or counselor's help to implement boundaries or space.

Additional Resources About Abuse/Abusive Behaviors (Intentional or Unintentional)

Types of Abuse (Taken From *Mending the Soul Workbook* pg. 64, by Celestia Tracy)

Emotional/Physical Neglect:

Person fails to provide psychological or emotional care when asked. Failure to provide for basic needs.

Add to this Dr. Wilder's Definition of Trauma A: rejection, abandonment, neglect, the absence of the good things we need in relationships.

Sexual:

One person objectifying the other, voyeurism (watching them without consent in shower or undressing), fetishes (use of a person's objects that become sexualized like undergarments or shoes etc.), sexualized jokes or put downs, touches another without consent claiming marriage does not need consent for touch or sexual activity, requires "duty" or obligation sex or does not give the spouse ability to say no or expects sexual favors when the other partner is sick or after surgeries or child bearing.

Spiritual/Religious:

Preoccupation with "authority" in the home; use of Scripture as a weapon or manipulation; double standards for self on Scripture than for others in the home; expects spouse to

“obey” as a child would obey; expresses own voice as “God’s voice”, rejects or punishes or retaliates such as tit for tat or eye for an eye thinking; Christianity is based on rules/roles instead of love and compassion; a culture of pretend peace; while there are strong “religious rules” there is not the same standard of accountability for both.

Psychological:

Verbal aggression, threats, jealousy without cause, insults, name-calling, putdowns, passive-aggressive comments, cyber-bullying or social media manipulative statements.

Verbal:

Use of orders, constant correction of one’s speech, ignoring, curses, name-calling, true criticism (not simply telling someone you have been hurt- this is not criticism)

Economic:

One partner controls the money; one partner is treated like a child being given an allowance; one party limits financial access to accounts (passwords, credit cards etc- NOTE if there has been gambling or addictions this may be appropriate to limit access but do so with counselor/coach/mediator’s help); keeping accounts or money or resources a secret (NOTE unless one is being abused and trying to find a way of escape); controlling through budgeting only one person gets to decide the budget; not allowing medical care or dental care if one person does not believe it is necessary; control of thermostat for “financial reasons” ignoring if family members are freezing at night or overheated - refusal to turn on air; requiring accounting or receipts for every penny; and one person has free access and can spend what they want but strict rules and watching of the other spouse.

Stonewalling:

Using silence and isolation as a weapon; halts a conversation if it becomes emotional; repeats inconsequential information; trying to make hurts even when one party expresses a hurt or need; refuses to look at other perspectives, avoids conflict resolution; hides and isolates; and sins of omission or deception to avoid discussion or not have to be accountable for behaviors or broken agreements.

Threats:

Threatening violence or loss of access to resource if there is not compliance to a demand/desire; using body or hands in such a way that is intimidating to get the other party to back; using physical size or object to threaten violence.

Intimidation:

The use of blocking someone from exiting or locking someone in a space or confining someone; hand gestures or body language or verbal language that communicate a threat or innuendos.

Humiliation:

Asserting power through social humiliation; belittles other; spanking adult; erotic humiliation; hostile humor and sarcasm at the expense of another.

Patriarchy:

The male of the house sees himself as the ultimate authority and uses spiritual words and religion to assert dominance; does not believe wife or children's needs matter; does not believe wife's opinions or perspectives matter; emphasizing submission and obedience; shows contempt for emotions of others; refusal to be held accountable for his behaviors even by church/pastor.

Passive Aggression:

Unable to verbalize anger in a healthy way so uses ambiguous communication, retaliation, uses double meanings; refuses to take personal responsibility, blame shifts, deflects, is inwardly resentful and rarely follows through on promises/agreements.

Property Violence:

Destroys or threatens to destroy property or items of meaning; in anger smashes objects or throws objects; pounds table; slams doors; pulls doors or cabinets off hinges; punches a wall; causes harm to the pets; harm to the vehicle; graffiti; damages others' phone.

Children:

Controls the children, triangulates children, parent alienation, uses visitation as a means to harass others; uses children as leverage; tries to restrict access to children (without court approval); causes pain to the other parent by harming or threatening to hurt a child.

Isolation:

Controls someone else's action; denies access of others into the home; tries to limit interactions of others; listens in on phone calls or records someone without permission for

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Conclusion

Are you ready for marriage work? 10 things to consider.

Dr. Stephanie Holmes & Barbara Grant, MMFT

After a spouse is found to be neurodiverse, most couples want to start marriage work, but they may not both be ready to work together in joint sessions. Depending on what help a couple seeks, doing joint work at the start may be traumatizing for one or both. Identifying all the issues at play (in addition to the neurodiversity) is critical to making progress. Here are some questions to consider:

Question 1: Is there an addiction of any kind in either spouse? This includes substances of any kind (alcohol drugs, prescription medications etc.), pornography, sex or fetishes, food, gambling, technology or gaming. If there is an addiction or abuse of the above, these things are individual issues to be worked on. These problems are likely contributing to the couple's marital problems, but they are issues that can and should be worked on individually, first. Marriage coaching and counseling are not the appropriate context for an individual to address these challenges, as substance abuse and other addictions are separate diagnoses that require specialized care.

Question 2: Is there active abuse that makes it unsafe to work on the marriage in the same home? If there is domestic violence or any form of active abuse, it may not be safe to work on the marriage under the same roof. Safety is paramount. If one or both spouses are abusive, this should be worked on prior to doing joint marriage work. Abuse is an individual character issue that impacts marriage, but it is not something that marital work can address. The one who is abusive needs to do substantial personal work before joint marital work is safe. Specialized help is required for issues of abuse.

Question 3: Is there significant depression, anxiety, or another mental health issue that may be causing suicidal ideation or other patterns of dysfunction or self-harm? Like addictions or abuse, these are special psychiatric challenges that may require a spouse to seek psychiatric care and possible medication. Some level of emotional and mental stability is needed for successful joint marriage work to address a neurodiverse couple's issues.

Question 4: Are there childhood traumas or adverse events that have not been acknowledged or worked through and healed by either spouse? This work also needs to be done individually. Sometimes it can be worked on simultaneously while joint marriage work is being done, but working through childhood trauma and abuse is individual work that will impact marital work. We recommend that each person do their own work with someone different than the marriage coach or counselor.

Question 5: Is there trauma right now in the relationship? Depending on the type of trauma (A or B) joint marital work may be able to start, but your coach or counselor may need to work with each of you separately before working together. Safety and self-regulation are essential to cultivate before starting joint marital work. Your neurodiverse-trained coach or counselor should also be trauma-informed.

Question 6: Are there any BEEPS? “BEEPS” is defined by Dr. Jim Wilder and others (in Joy Starts Here) as: Behaviors, Events, Experiences, People, or Substances that we form dysfunctional attachments to instead of attaching to God and people in joy. These are patterns of thinking and behavior that each person should examine individually, as there may be fear bonds, which can become significant obstacles to developing healthy joy or love bonds.

Question 7: Does each spouse acknowledge and accept the neurodiversity in the marriage? While a formal diagnosis may not be necessary, true change in a marriage is difficult if both spouses do not acknowledge and accept neurodiversity and begin to adjust their relationship expectations accordingly. Each partner is responsible for learning about autism, ADHD, and neurodiversity and its impact on marriage. If both partners accept the reality of neurodiversity, marital work with a neurodiverse-trained coach or counselor can be very productive.

Question 8: Is each partner willing to look at their contribution to the marriage dynamic and be coachable and teachable, with humility and openness? Never should a spouse blame 100% of the marriage issues on neurodiversity. Are both willing to look at how they contribute to the negative or traumatizing relational cycles? Are both committed to doing their individual and joint work? If so, working with a neurodiverse-trained coach or counselor can be fruitful.

Question 9: Is either partner angry and defensive about the neurodiversity in the marriage? Denial or defensiveness can indicate there are issues of unresolved personal shame. These can run very deep and be difficult to identify and eradicate. Similarly, a tendency to blame-shift may be motivated by a sense of shame. Some individual work to identify and remediate denial, defensiveness or shame may be needed in addition to marriage work.

Question 10: Are there struggles and challenges in co-parenting children with neurodivergence? Additional care or support may be needed to understand the needs of neurodivergent and/or special needs kids. Co-parenting is often difficult for NDCCs to traverse together (for both NT or ND children) and will need additional parenting support. Many communities have family support resources for how to parent neurodiverse children, and such support is separate from marriage work.

The contributing authors of this book also believe in the transformative power of support groups. Group work facilitated by qualified and trained coaches or counselors can be a great way to get started in doing individual or marital work. Faith-based support groups are available for NT/NA spouses, NA/ND spouses, or couples, and there are also online courses for neurodiverse Christian couples.

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