

Uniquely Us
Gracefully Navigating the Maze of
Neurodiverse Marriage
Autism Faith Marriage

How Marriage Helpers Can Better Navigate
Neurodiverse Christian Marriage:

8 Things Neurodiverse Christian Couples Want
You to Know

Conclusion

The number of Christian couples identifying as neurodiverse (ND) is on the rise

The number of marriage helpers who are adequately trained to support neurodiverse couples work is limited and not yet keeping up with demand

The Author's 2023 survey included the question:

“What would you want professionals or clergy or religious leaders helping neurodiverse couples to know?”

Here are their answers from our qualitative survey

Conclusion

1: Uneducated or untrained therapists who are not neurodiverse couples- or autism-aware (185/286)

Both secular and spiritual marriage helpers:

1. Failed to recognize or diagnose autism in adults
2. Failed to understand the differences and complexities in neurodiverse relationships
3. Lacked specific training in autism or neurodiverse relationships
4. Failed to acknowledge that neurodiverse relationships required different techniques and interventions than those used for neurotypical (NT) relationships

There was a consistent call to action for any marriage helpers (pastors, coaches, or counselors) to become autism-aware, informed and trained.

Conclusion

2: The marriage helper caused more harm or was not helpful (105+/286)

Consistent Statements that:

1. The therapist or pastor did not validate the couple's experience of trauma
2. The therapist did not know about or understand *Ongoing Traumatic Relationship Syndrome* (which is also known as *Cassandra Syndrome*)
3. The approach applied traditional marriage strategies which were not helpful, and even harmful
4. The helper failed to address autism or neurodiversity
5. There was a failure to address emotional abuse, neglect, indifference and apathy and its impact on the suffering spouse or the relationship

Conclusion

3: Hyper-spiritual approach or “*focused on the Christian marriage doctrine that the provider believed*” (53 to 91/286)

1. Provider gave Sunday school advice (pray more, submit more, have more sex)
2. Focused on stereotypical gender roles and the lack of role-following as the issue in the marriage
3. Blamed or pressured the woman to stay in the abusive marriage, as there was not adultery
4. The Bible and Scripture were used in a biased way towards the woman (both ND and NT respondents indicated this)
5. The provider was judgmental or uninformed
6. The marriage problems were seen as spiritually-based or as spiritual warfare coming against the marriage
7. The provider said they do not believe in labels or diagnoses, or that a label or diagnosis was disrespectful to the man (ND)
8. The man (ND) was the head of household and should be submitted to

When well-intentioned spiritual counsel is given based on perceived gender roles instead of on each person’s capabilities or capacities, or when marriage guidance is given without understanding the ND tendency towards literal, rigid thinking or the possibility of misapplication by the husband, both relational and personal harm can occur.

Conclusion

4: How challenging, complex, or traumatizing the relationship is (54 percent of respondents)

1. Chronic communication problems
2. Daily struggles which compound without resolution
3. Sexless marriage or duty/obligation sex
4. High conflict
5. Lack of conflict resolution
6. Longevity of undiagnosed neurodiversity in the relationship
7. Dual and co-occurring mental health issues
8. Negative impact of dysregulation (shutdown or meltdowns)
9. Complex family dynamics
10. Impulsivity
11. Masking and camouflaging in sessions (or at church)
12. Executive function issues that impact daily life and dependability
13. ND partner may agree to a solution in front of therapist, then does not follow through
14. The NT spouse carries the mental load

A pattern of unintentional abuse or neglect is often reported by NT wives

Conclusion

5: Lack of emotional intimacy/connection

1. No intimacy
2. Lack of connection
3. Unmet needs and longevity of unmet needs
4. Emotional neglect
5. Mocking or dismissing needs
6. Stoicism
7. The belief that logic and not having emotions is the superior way to be a human

Nearly every NT spouse says *communication* and *connection* (i.e., a lack of emotional intimacy) as top two issues.

The Five Levels of Intimacy

Conclusion

6: Stigma of autism (neurodiverse) label

1. Stop trying to fix me or cure me
2. Autism is not a sin or demon
3. Autism is not a disease
4. Autism is not all about deficits
5. Autism is seen negatively in society

Some of this stigma stems from personal shame

Negative stigma is partly due to a lack of understanding of autism, and that autistic traits are generally viewed negatively by society at large.

Conclusion

7: Need for acceptance of neurodiversity by both partners

1. Both partners need to adjust expectations
2. Both partners must not compare their relationship to an NT-NT relationship
3. The provider (helper) should not place NT-NT standard(s) on the couple
4. Both partners need to see the other's perspective
5. Sometimes alternative living situations are required to stay together

Alternative spousal living arrangements (while remaining faithful to each other) can sometimes provide “grace and space” and optimize healing and growth for all family members

Conclusion

8: Prevalence of autism being ignored

1. The individuality and different expressions of autism from person to person
2. A neurodiverse experience is an acceptable way to live

There is a need to research later-in-life autism diagnosis, and for professionals to understand masking and camouflaging and how these can keep someone from getting a proper diagnosis or identification

Conclusion

NDCs and NDCCs are seeking support from trained professionals to help them navigate their complex marriages.

There is a need for pastors and professionals who understand autism and how to accommodate autism in marriage

Lack of insight into the presence of autism can exacerbate the double empathy problem

Further research into NDCC marriages is needed to better understand how religious views may contribute to potential abuse or neglect