

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

**Chapter 3:**  
**Navigating the Maze of Expectations and**  
**Marital Satisfaction**

From the Perspective of the Neurotypical or Non-Autistic  
Spouse

A Tale of Two Marriages

# Chapter 3

There are different perceptions of marital satisfaction between the AS/ND and NA/NT spouse.

Nicole Mar's story as an NA/NT wife

Dr. Stephanie's 'Tale of Two Marriages' (before and after Dan's autism diagnosis)

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## Marital Satisfaction in ND marriages (from the 322 survey participants)

- ND spouses are more satisfied (68%) with the relationship than their NT spouses are (35%)
- Closing the NT-ND satisfaction gap requires a lifestyle of mutual teamwork and accommodation

## When things changed in the relationship:

1. In response to another life stage or milestone change (health crisis, child custody change...)
- The autistic brain is not flexible enough to accommodate unpredicted or seemingly random changes (context blindness)

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## Cassandra Syndrome (Ongoing Traumatic Relationship Syndrome-OTRS)

When no matter how correct the prediction is by the NA/NT spouse, the AS/ND spouse disregards it

- NA/NT spouses typically have better predictive abilities and fewer predictive errors about social and relational issues
- The AS/ND spouse often dismisses these predictions or needs leading to surprise when the predicted change or situation occurs.
- Then blame is assigned to the NA/NT spouse by the AS/ND spouse

While being recognized more often now, Cassandra (OTRS) is not yet a diagnostic criteria for autism, likely because the autism diagnosis was not known for several years of the marriage

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## Cassandra Syndrome (Ongoing Traumatic Relationship Syndrome-OTRS) Symptoms

- Negative self-image or loss of self identity
- Anger and emotion dysregulation
- Various anxiety or trauma responses
- Hypervigilance
- Flashbacks or triggers of trauma
- Physical illnesses
- Weakened immune system

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When things changed in the relationship:

2. Masking or Camouflaging by the AS/ND partner
  - Autistic people will observe others, analyze and interpret their behavior and then copy these observed behaviors to mask their social difficulties
  - This masking can delay a proper diagnosis
  - Such masking is not a conscious behavior-masking is not purposefully done by the AS/ND person to mislead others
  - At home the AS/ND partner may revert to unmasked behaviors and this leads to confusion and conflict in the marriage

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When things changed in the relationship:

3. NA/**NT** spouse was a special interest of the AS/ND partner
  - Special interests are the focus of the AS/ND person
  - Time energy, thoughts, and imagination are focused on the interest
  - Interests may last from 3-5 years, though some remain over a lifetime
  - A change in the relationship (such as marriage) may result in a diversion of the AS/ND spouse's interest to something else

2016 survey: Dating qualities vs. Reasons why we are in counseling

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An AS/ND-NA/**NT** marriage will not become an NT-NT marriage

The goal is to develop a relationship where both spouses feel marital satisfaction

The ND/AS spouse feels satisfaction when

- Absence of conflict
- Encouragement to pursue interests
- Sharing interests with spouse
- Receiving appreciation for accomplishments
- Acceptance of differences without pressure or expectations



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The ND/AS spouse is dissatisfied when

- Feeling criticized and blamed
- Not having enough alone time
- Having their autism blamed for marital challenges

The NA/NT spouse wants

- Better emotional intimacy and connection
- Better and more frequent communication
- More quality time doing shared interest activities
- Sharing the mental load and household chores
- Coparenting and shared responsibility with the children
- Their spouse to initiate time with him/her and the family and less time in restrictive interests and doing things alone
- To feel pursued
- For the AS/NT spouse to be curious about them, seek to understand them and be open to collaborative negotiation and problem solving

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There are basic differences between what brings satisfaction to the AS/ND and NA/NT spouses

*There are competing needs*

Self Determination Theory: Three key elements are

1. Autonomy
2. Competency
3. Relatedness

Autonomy is especially highly valued by those on the Autism spectrum (pathological demand avoidance—PDA)

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Regarding Autonomy, the PDA Society: the autistic person may not only avoid demands or situations that trigger anxiety or sensory overload but avoid anything that disrupts routines, involves transition, involves something of no interest, or is deemed pointless, or any ask or suggestion that is perceived to be a demand

Demands are manifold and include asking for time, making plans, asking questions, requesting a decision, uncertainty, praise, transitions, expectations, sensory overload, presence of others, and preferences

The NA/NT wife's binder and demands...

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PDA can result in typical NA/NT communication such as suggestions, ideas, or alternative solutions being received as attempts to control or demand by the AS/ND spouse

The NA/NT drive for more connection and relatedness within the marriage can be interpreted by the AS/ND spouse as a restriction of autonomy

The resulting AS/ND defensive reactions and accusations of being critical or controlling result in hurting the NA/ND spouse and create confusion

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## Dan's Perspective and Prayer for the Worn and Weary NA/NT wife

### Dan's Message for the AS/ND Husband

- His role in the family dynamic wasn't absent but it was passive
- Silence/passive approach robbed Stephanie of a partner in navigating the storm
- Lack of interest and curiosity exacerbated the divide
- We must actively invest in the lives of our loved ones
- Neurology makes things a challenge but you can still strive to learn skills to build joy and attachment in your home.