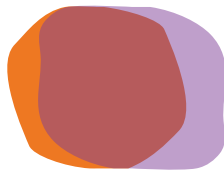


LOVE *and* ASPERGER'S

**Practical Strategies
To Help Couples
Understand Each
Other and Strengthen
Their Connection**

Kate McNulty, LCSW

love and asperger's





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PRESS

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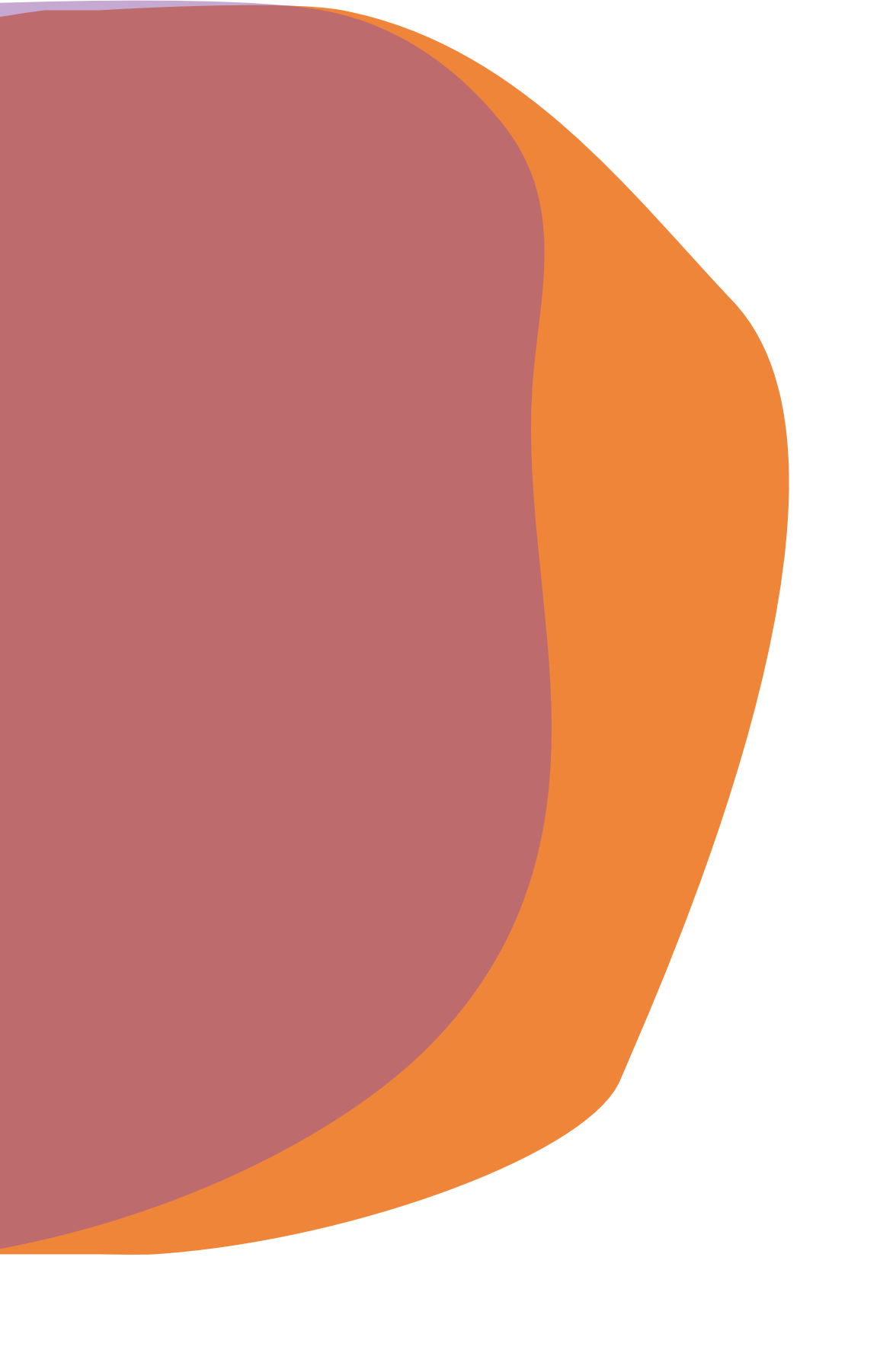
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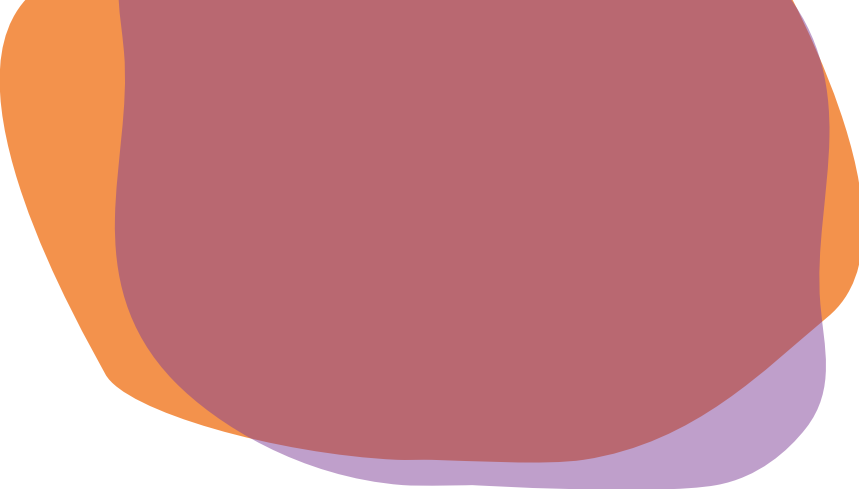
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Introduction

My original understanding of Asperger's Syndrome was a simple one. I thought of it as a term applied to men who worked in technology or engineering fields. They took pride in their problem-solving aptitudes, but didn't know much about the emotional world. But around 10 years ago, public awareness about Asperger's began to increase. More and more couples who were dealing with concerns related to Asperger's Syndrome (or Asperger's, as many people call it) began turning up in my private counseling practice.

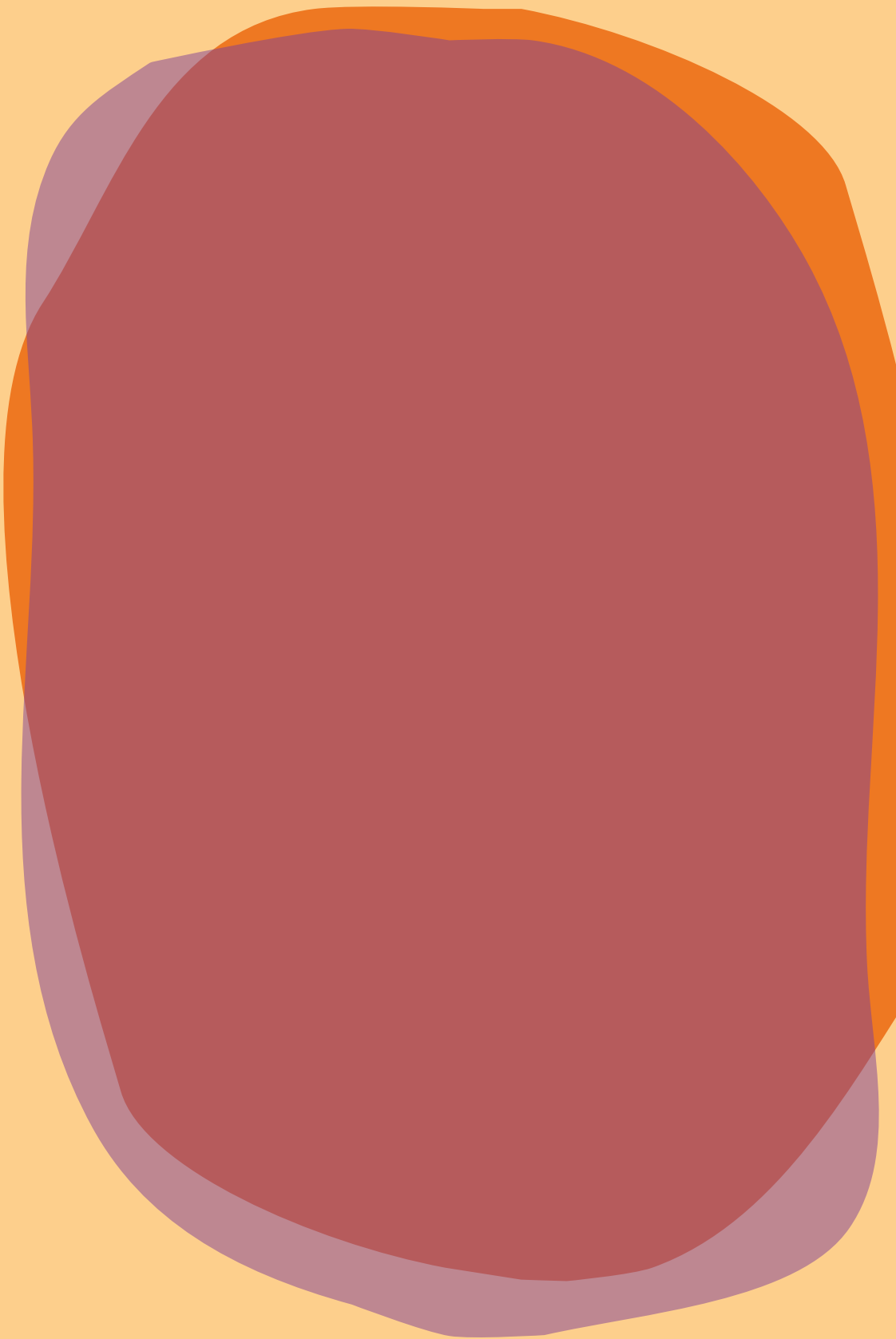
Usually I would hear from a couple when the neurotypical (non-Asperger's) partner, usually the wife, wanted to start therapy. She'd tell me she felt her husband was self-involved or unemotional. Sometimes the neurotypical partner thought the relationship was broken, and that she had married a robot. I needed to learn more about this condition. As I researched it, I felt concern and sympathy toward these couples. I became convinced that most of the time each person in the relationship was simply missing a lot of what their partner was trying to say.

When a member of my family told me they suspected they had Asperger's, I initially dismissed the notion that anyone in my family could be "on the spectrum." I mean, I'd had a lifelong career as a therapist; I didn't identify with the idea of being a robotic or unemotional person. However, once I began to educate myself about Asperger's and autism—the spectrum of conditions that affect communication and socialization—it was apparent that many in my family did in fact fit this diagnosis. Eventually I came to recognize that I myself am autistic. I believe my own personal experience with my diagnosis, coupled with my experience counseling couples where Asperger's is present, brings a unique and useful perspective to this book.



Many books on the subject of relationships and Asperger's are intended to support the neurotypical partner who's in the relationship with someone who has Asperger's. But in these pages, we'll consider and address the needs and perspectives of both partners. Whether the two of you are married or in a long-term relationship, there are themes related to Asperger's that come up for couples and present challenges I've seen again and again in my therapy practice. Stereotypes and misconceptions about Asperger's are widespread; many commonly accepted ideas about it that are inaccurate and end up causing harm in relationships. This book will help you sort through myths and facts so you can make the most of your life together as a couple. Whether you're the partner with Asperger's or the partner without, I aim to support you both in adopting helpful and constructive attitudes about your differences.

Creating a satisfying relationship does take effort. But the result of that effort is a sense of zest, vibrancy, and pleasure. Some of the "work" suggested in this book is about sharing fun and playfulness and simply enjoying each other's company. You'll gain insight into each other's vantage points and learn the upside of partnering with someone who is different from you. By the time you've finished reading, I believe you will find that there's much to be thankful for in a relationship with someone who has neurological strengths and struggles that are unlike yours.



Chapter One

Asperger's and Your Relationship

All social relationships involve some degree of challenge. But life with a partner whose neurotype is different than yours will be filled with moments that are surprising, complicated, and sometimes downright baffling. If you're in a mixed-neurotype relationship, there's just no getting around this fact: The two of you think differently. That's a truth of your relationship, and it makes your partnership unique, a union that should be treasured and valued for its exceptional qualities. And often it means your partnership includes confusing situations.

There's one other truth to keep in mind about your relationship: As challenging as it may sometimes be, it's important to you. If that wasn't the case, you wouldn't be reading this book.

A Unique Partnership

Romantic partnerships with a person who has Asperger's can be complex to navigate, there's no doubt. If you're the neurotypical one in the relationship, you may find it frustratingly difficult to know what your partner's thinking. You may wonder why your partner doesn't pick up on obvious signals about your emotions or intentions. Maybe you don't get as much physical affection from your partner as you expect or want. Or you find that your companion gets stressed or irritable about things that seem inconsequential. And instead of turning to you for comfort, their reaction to stress could be to go away from you and seek solitude.

Frustrations in a mixed-neurotype relationship cut both ways. If you're the partner with Asperger's, you may sometimes be perplexed by your partner's needs and moods. You might wonder why your partner wants to talk so much more or less than you do. You may wish your partner would slow down and plan fewer social activities so you could have a respite from the noise, crowds, and stimuli of everyday life. On the other hand, sometimes your partner can't match your enthusiasm for your interests and passions.

If the situation seems discouraging, take heart. Though this book is focused on solving problems, we shouldn't lose sight of how the differences between you and your partner enrich both of your lives. Each of you brings different strengths and perceptions to your relationship. Your partner with Asperger's may make you laugh with odd or unexpected observations. Perhaps they're noteworthy in their intelligence, integrity, or dedication to a cause. For those with Asperger's, your neurotypical partner

can be a source of support, understanding, and intimacy that hasn't been available to you before. And you each may find that the other person steps in to handle tasks and responsibilities that they know you dislike.

The key to staying connected with your partner isn't to minimize your differences, but to understand them. Reading this book will give each of you a window into the inner world of your partner and the ways in which their experience of the world differs from yours. With this knowledge you can each better understand the other's needs and convey your own point of view more clearly. Reducing your frustrations and misunderstandings means you can enjoy more of your time together, deepen your connection, and manage the inevitable conflicts that come with any romantic relationship.

TERMINOLOGY

The term "neurodivergent" refers to any variation in the neural pathways of the brain. These differences occur in conditions such as Asperger's and other Autism Spectrum Disorders, as well as learning disorders, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and Tourette Syndrome. The term "neurotypical" refers to the common way that the brain develops. In this book, we'll use "neurodiverse" or "mixed neurotype" to describe a relationship in which one partner has Asperger's and the other is neurotypical.

What Is Asperger's?

To understand how Asperger's Syndrome can influence your romantic relationship, it's necessary to understand some basics of Asperger's itself. The medical community describes Asperger's as a developmental disorder that involves atypical patterns of communication and socializing. In other words, it's a condition that affects the development of the nervous system in a way that impacts speech and the ability to socialize and communicate. Broadly speaking, someone with Asperger's is inexpressive and socially awkward. But different people can be affected to varying degrees. Sometimes the effects are only apparent when the person is in an unfamiliar or stressful environment.

In medical terminology, a syndrome is a cluster of symptoms. It's not a disease or illness. As a shorthand, in this book we'll sometimes refer to a person being "diagnosed with Asperger's," but technically speaking, doctors consider Asperger's Syndrome to be part of a broader range of related neurological conditions called Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), rather than a discrete condition of its own. (This is where the expression "on the spectrum" comes from.)

When evaluating adults to determine an ASD diagnosis, the criteria considered by mental health professionals include:

- People who are not socially adept, who appear odd or unusual in their facial expressions, posture, movements, or word choice; those with a remote quality.
- Adults who tend toward intense interests in uncommon subjects, who are unusually quiet, or whose interactions focus on their passions or the self-directed studies they have pursued.
- Those who struggle to fit in or to achieve their social or professional potential.

Obtaining an ASD diagnosis from a medical or mental health professional as an adult can be a costly and lengthy process. There are some useful self-tests available online that may help you decide whether you want to seek an official diagnosis (see Resources, page 141).

Perhaps the most important point to understand in all of this is that terms such as “disorder,” “diagnosis,” or “syndrome” all imply illness, which doesn’t accurately describe what Asperger’s is. Referring to Asperger’s as a “trait” or “profile” may be the most neutral way to describe it. Asperger’s is really a way of perceiving and experiencing the world that diverges from the norm. And as researchers learn more about Asperger’s, they’re beginning to see the value of this different worldview. When it comes to solving problems and understanding life, the realization that human beings can perceive the world in such varied ways suggests that we still have undiscovered possibilities left to explore about ourselves and our behavior.

Many people assume that those with Asperger’s always communicate in a mechanical, scripted fashion or lack emotion, operating in a totally logical way that’s unaffected by any feelings. It’s true that people with Asperger’s may show minimal facial expression or speak in a monotone voice. But this outward appearance is misleading. For one thing, these qualities fluctuate based on the person’s energy level and comfort in a social situation, so they will often behave more expressively if they feel good and are at ease. (Neurotypical people do this, too.) Even in their quieter moods, though, people with Asperger’s experience emotions like anyone else. In fact, sometimes they have surges of intense emotion that become overwhelming.

Bottom line: Their different way of communicating doesn’t mean someone with Asperger’s isn’t a complete person with feelings. And although living with Asperger’s has its drawbacks, an increasing number of adults who have the trait accept it as part of their identity. They reject the idea that Asperger’s is a

ASPERGER'S BY THE NUMBERS

Although there's no known cause for Asperger's, we do know that it is a genetic condition; that is, it's inherited. Some researchers think Asperger's has always been present in the human species as a form of genetic diversity that holds some biological value. Data from the CDC shows that Asperger's occurs in about 1 to 3 percent of the population; Asperger's has been identified in all racial, ethnic, and social groups.

Asperger's appears to affect greater numbers of men than women, but there's ongoing controversy about the accuracy of this observation. Classroom teachers and pediatricians are more likely to assume that girls have learning disorders or problems with behavior and emotions rather than Asperger's. Standard diagnostic practices may also be prone to overlook people of color.

Among children and teens who receive psychiatric treatment because of expressing a wish to change gender, 8 to 10 percent have been diagnosed with Asperger's. In contrast, less than 2 percent of the general population identify as nonbinary or gender-divergent, meaning they reject or deliberately ignore the concept of male-female gender. There are also higher numbers of those with Asperger's in the LGBTQIA population than statistics would predict. This may be because people with Asperger's tend to have more flexible attitudes about both gender identity and sexual attraction than neurotypical people.

disease or a condition to be treated or “cured” and would not want to change who they are. Some take pride in this aspect of their nature and refer to themselves affectionately with the term “aspie.” That nickname relates to controversy about the Asperger’s name and reputation, as Hans Asperger conducted research under Nazi rule, and his role in that regime remains ambiguous. For this reason, some adults with Asperger’s traits choose “autistic” as their preferred term for self-identification, since Asperger’s is a form of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The Neurodiverse Couple

If you’re the neurotypical partner in a relationship, your friends and family may be surprised to know that someone with Asperger’s is interested in a romantic connection. But they shouldn’t be. When we think about popular media portrayals of people who have Asperger’s, the stereotypical depiction is someone who’s emotionally clueless and disconnected from other people. But although social awkwardness is indeed a hallmark of Asperger’s, most people with Asperger’s do want friendship and do try to develop a social life. In fact, a person with Asperger’s can be quite enthusiastic about sharing their interests and passions with others. It’s just that their different cadence for personal interaction makes them seem offbeat to neurotypical people, sometimes obscuring the fact that they’re reaching out.

Dating

In a dating relationship, both people long to feel deeply known and understood. Making a connection with someone who validates and affirms us is compelling enough that we risk opening ourselves up to rejection and disappointment.

The experience of dating someone with another neurotype is different for every couple, but some common factors include:

Differences in social temperament. An introverted person with Asperger's can fail to pick up on flirting cues and be generally unobservant about social norms and conventional roles in dating. They may be awkward by temperament or just have minimal dating experience to draw on.

Differences in communication mode. A neurotypical person tends to have a stronger preference for talking by phone than a person with Asperger's, who likely prefers written communication. This can mean fewer long phone calls and more connections through texts and shared memes, photos, and videos.

Learning each other's language. A person with Asperger's may be subdued, with minimal or subtle facial expressions or a flat tone of voice. People with Asperger's sometimes fail to appreciate sarcasm and may need jokes explained to them. Neurotypicals tend toward more abstract thought, whereas people with Asperger's favor concrete and practical thinking. Sometimes people in a neurodiverse couple process information at different speeds. Depending on the extent of these dissimilarities, you both may need to exert extra effort to be understood.

Going out vs. staying in. Those with Asperger's often prefer to hang out at home rather than go out somewhere, even in the earlier stages of a relationship. Their comfort and

confidence are highest in familiar surroundings, where they can control the environment and avoid dealing with unexpected situations. A neurotypical who's introverted may feel the same way. Otherwise, couples can compromise by planning bar or restaurant outings in advance so the partner with Asperger's will know what to expect. They might want to check out the menu first, or they might prefer to visit a place they've been before. Meeting in a quiet, low-key setting helps keep the partner with Asperger's from feeling overwhelmed.

Rapid infatuation. A partner with Asperger's who's more forthcoming and socially skilled can be fascinating to a new love interest. They're unconventional in the ways they express themselves and can show a sincere and focused interest in a partner who they find attractive. Extroverted, talkative types with Asperger's can dazzle with their energy and passion for life. Enthralled by the refreshing attention and devotion of a newly smitten love interest, the neurotypical partner can end up unintentionally isolating themselves, letting other connections fall by the wayside as they're absorbed in this new romance. This isn't necessarily a negative, but it puts pressure on the new relationship, setting both partners up for disappointment when the honeymoon period ends.

Syncing up different timelines. Whereas a neurotypical person might find dating an entertaining and enjoyable social activity, for a person with Asperger's it can be a precious experience to find someone who seems to understand them. Because of this and their discomfort with social rituals, they may want to dispense with the dating phase and pursue a more serious relationship early on. However things progress, the couple may have different notions of boundaries, responsibilities, and commitment as the relationship develops.

Adjusting to limits. Some people with Asperger's enjoy spontaneity and are more flexible. But most prefer knowing what to expect and like to stick with plans you have agreed on, which makes last-minute changes difficult. Some rely on alcohol to help manage social anxiety. Many have sensory processing issues with sound, bright lights, or fragrances; this interferes with their comfort and concentration when socializing. Once both partners know to anticipate the limitations of a partner who has anxiety or sensory issues, they can still enjoy an active social life by making some adaptations.

Marriage/Long-Term Commitment

Infatuation sweeps us away in the early stages of a relationship; this state lasts anywhere from a few months to a few years. Despite the promise of new love, though, that first state of bliss will eventually fade. All couples inevitably encounter conflict, and over time it takes maturity and self-awareness to maintain a positive atmosphere in a relationship.

Whether it's a formal marriage or a mutual agreement of commitment, in long-term relationships couples interact in ways that continually strengthen their partnership and deepen their connection to each other. Those who enjoy the ongoing adventure of getting to know their partner report that their differences become a source of curiosity. They try to take an inquisitive approach when they disagree so that they can learn more about each other.

In a neurodivergent couple, those differences are sometimes energizing, sometimes troublesome. Typical issues include:

Disagreements about family events. Neurotypical partners can feel a need to pressure their significant other to participate in family or community gatherings. For the neurotypical, these

events are a way of affirming their relationship and sharing traditions, as well as spending time together. The partner with Asperger's may find these occasions exhausting or might simply prefer to spend their free time pursuing their own interests. They may not share their partner's sentimental attachment to holidays and special occasions. And their willingness to let the neurotypical partner attend and fulfill a social obligation alone can be interpreted as a rejection.

Communication breakdowns. Even though you understand each other better than when you first got together, there will be times when it feels as though the two of you are speaking different languages. That's an ordinary experience that all couples deal with, but it happens more often with partners of different neurotypes. With practice at communication skills, couples can learn to keep small misunderstandings from escalating into major disputes.

Isolation. Someone with Asperger's can appreciate and enjoy their neurotypical partner but still feel lonely and isolated. They may feel unseen or misunderstood by their neurotypical partner, who does not share their deeply held beliefs and values. And for the neurotypical partner, their significant other's need for solitude and dislike of socializing can undercut feelings of connection and togetherness.

A different understanding of closeness. Most neurotypical people rely heavily on verbal communication to show affection. They may feel neglected because their partner with Asperger's tends to feel close through proximity and shared activities rather than verbalizing their emotions. For their part, the partner with Asperger's can feel drained by a significant other who frequently requires verbal compliments or bouts of expressive emotion.

PEOPLE, NOT PUZZLE PIECES

Nonprofit and charitable organizations involved with Asperger's and autism often use a jigsaw puzzle piece as a symbol of their cause. That icon, well-meaning as it may be, is somewhat misleading. This image was first employed to symbolize children who were considered unreachable and in their own worlds following the first descriptions of the condition by pediatrician Hans Asperger. The symbol also suggests that people with Asperger's are a mystery to others, impossibly difficult to understand. Some interpret the symbol as a "missing piece," suggesting that Asperger's has taken something away or left the person incomplete. It's only in the last decade that we have received direct reports to challenge these depictions from adults speaking and writing about their own experience of Asperger's. Many adults with Asperger's prefer to represent themselves with the sideways figure eight, for infinity, rather than a puzzle piece or similar imagery.

The Neurodivergent Partner

When discussing the challenges of a neurodiverse relationship, it's important to remember that your mileage may vary. Not all characteristics of Asperger's are present for everyone, and when present they might not be active in all situations. For example, a person with Asperger's may only tolerate talking about emotionally challenging subjects in short stints. When they feel overstimulated, they might need to step away from the conversation to make sense of their own opinion and perspective. But not all people with Asperger's have that vulnerability, and those who do will likely have times when they have more stamina for longer discussions.

With that in mind, here are the aspects of Asperger's that tend to have the biggest impact on a romantic relationship. We'll address each of these repeatedly throughout this book.

Communication style. The partner with Asperger's may tend to communicate literally. Social nuances pass them by. When dealing with emotional situations, they might need to slow the interaction down and take more processing time than a neurotypical person expects.

Energy level. The neurotypical partner's level of energy, and in particular the energy needed to manage social engagement, can be markedly different from that of the partner with Asperger's. A social interaction that's undemanding for a neurotypical person can be quite draining to someone with Asperger's.

Routine and flexibility. A predictable schedule and advance planning help someone with Asperger's manage their limits. Sudden changes can be stressful.

Sensory issues. The partner with Asperger's may have abrupt reactions to fragrances, noise, or other stimuli. Even certain forms of touch can be bothersome. The neurotypical partner may need to make accommodations or agree to an exit strategy when conditions become intolerable.

Physical intimacy. It can be tough for either of you to predict when your partner is available and to know how to read their cues. Different patterns of attraction, a mismatch in desire, or simply a lack of sexual energy are tough issues for many couples, but these problems are more likely with an Asperger's and neurotypical pairing.

POSITIVE ASPERGER'S TRAITS

Asperger's is a complex condition. One of the habits we encourage for a neurodiverse couple in therapy is to take note of, and remark on, the positive qualities of an Asperger's profile.

Conversation. A person with Asperger's can be an engaging and entertaining storyteller. With a willing listener, they can enthuse and go into remarkable detail about their areas of interest.

Integrity. Honesty and loyalty are traits usually associated with Asperger's; people with Asperger's often possess strong convictions and moral beliefs.

Aptitudes. Most people with Asperger's are of average or high-average intelligence, and many have exceptional abilities with language and memorization, an expansive vocabulary, or a facility with numbers.

Intensity. Capable of riveting their attention to a subject of interest, people with Asperger's are unrelenting problem-solvers who genuinely enjoy learning and mastery as their own rewards.

Directness. You'll know where you stand with a partner who has Asperger's. And if you're not sure, they'll probably appreciate being asked.

The Neurotypical Partner

In my practice I've heard neurotypical people time and again raise poignant questions about their partners with Asperger's. Most notably they wonder if their partner is capable of love. The answer is a resounding yes! Granted, people with Asperger's have a general tendency to show caring through actions and gestures rather than verbal means. Nevertheless, they are fully human and undeniably capable of attachment and emotional expression.

As I mentioned before, I'm a therapist who specializes in working with couples, and I've counseled dozens who have mixed neurotypes. The neurotypical partner tends to seek therapy because they feel like they do a lot of the compromising. If you're the neurotypical in the relationship, you may not realize that your partner with Asperger's may also be unhappy due to feeling blamed. If a relationship is troubled, often the partner with Asperger's is frustrated with themselves and doesn't want to let their partner down. Below are some typical expressions of misunderstandings from the neurotypical point of view.

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

Craving interaction: "I like to have time to talk and get things off my chest. It doesn't have to be every day, but I think couples should sit down and talk regularly. My partner is always too tired, doesn't have the energy, or says talking makes them even more stressed."

Feeling overlooked: "Why do I have to put up with getting constantly interrupted? I listen to my partner go on and on, ranting about the news or whatever. But then when I'm talking, they come up with things that are on their mind from out of nowhere, totally unrelated. Do I even matter to them?"

Frustrated by their partner's sensory issues: "Can't we just go enjoy a meal at a nice restaurant or see a movie once in a while? If it isn't perfume smells or noises, something always comes up to spoil our good time when we try to go out. I never get to do anything fun anymore."

Tired of routine: "We started off with so much passionate attraction, we really couldn't get enough of each other at the beginning. Where did it go after moving in together? These days my partner just wants to cuddle on the couch and binge-watch one TV series after another. I need more excitement in my life!"

As you'll see in the coming chapters, resolving these kinds of complaints isn't a matter of deciding whose grievances are justified. Both of your intentions may be positive, but your signals can get crossed. In addition, many people who have Asperger's deal with additional difficulties such as anxiety or ADHD that put more stress on your relationship. With so many complicating factors in your lives, it's no wonder your needs can clash.

Strengthening Your Commitment

By the time a couple comes in to meet with a therapist, it's likely that at least one person is ambivalent about their commitment, and they may have some serious questions about the future of the relationship. Similar concerns may have led you to pick up this book. But as in therapy, odds are there are still possibilities to explore for strengthening the bond between you and your partner. A good first step is for each of you to consider your own point of view and behavior before concluding that your partner is the cause of the problems.

For the neurotypical partner, strengthening your commitment to your relationship means thinking flexibly, considering alternative explanations for the behavior of your partner with Asperger's. Maybe they're not being difficult when they resist participating in social commitments; maybe as a couple you just need to scale back on your plans to a more realistic schedule. Maybe they do care about your work hassles, but their neurological needs make it impossible to listen to you until after they've had some post-work downtime or taken a shower to soothe their overstimulated senses.

One fundamental difference that contributes to misunderstanding each other is that as a neurotypical, you have a built-in ability to filter information from the environment and ignore what's not relevant. This is effortless for you, and you're not even aware you're doing it. This capacity acts as a kind of environmental buffer system, allowing you to get through the demands of the day with some degree of stress but retain a reservoir of energy. When you get home from running errands or attending a social event, you might be tired, but you can still focus, remember things, and manage your emotions to some degree.

Your partner with Asperger's lacks this capability. After a busy day, a person with Asperger's can be like a drained battery, operating in reserve mode until they can rest and recharge.

For the partner with Asperger's, strengthening your commitment includes remembering that although it's frustrating when a neurotypical partner doesn't understand your needs, their needs are just as valid. Take responsibility for explaining your subjective experience, even if it seems unnecessary to you, rather than assuming your partner already knows what you're experiencing: "Hey, could we check in after I change my clothes? I got really hot in the traffic out there." Show your partner your investment in the relationship by regularly asking,

“How do you think we’re doing? When would you like to catch up?” Then prepare yourself to listen and share your impressions.

A big part of relationship therapy is teaching couples to make fewer assumptions and get into the habit of putting more of their experiences into words. This doesn’t require lengthy or emotionally complicated explanations. You can think of this as adding a caption to a cartoon: Often, what we see doesn’t tell the whole story, and it takes a few words to fill in some key details. For both partners, a willingness to try new ways to communicate your needs is fundamental to strengthening your relationship.

Progress Is Possible

Even though much of our behavior is hardwired—we all have innate instincts and tendencies and attributes—there’s wiggle room in all of us to improve and become better people. If you have Asperger’s, that diagnosis doesn’t predetermine your actions. People with Asperger’s are just as capable of making changes in their romantic relationship as anyone else.

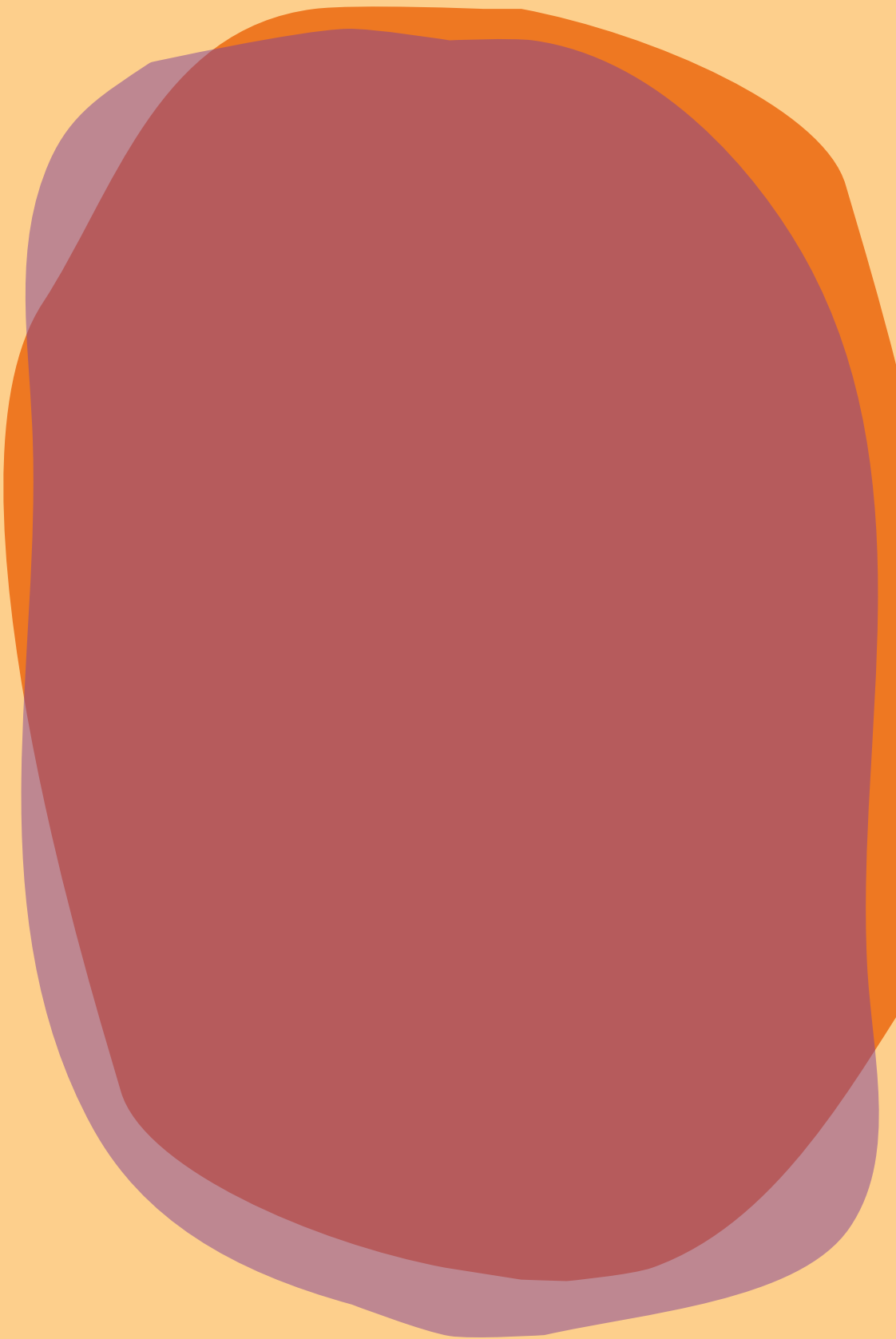
Some of the steps in this book to improving your relationship will be surprisingly easy and even enjoyable. Techniques for reaching agreement, communicating effectively with each other, and getting to the heart of the matter take practice, but anyone can learn them. We’ll also talk about practical solutions such as using calendars and reminder systems, designating space at home for focus or recuperation, and managing domestic tasks. As you peruse the upcoming chapters, keep in mind that you can adapt these strategies to your own life however you need to. You may not need to deploy every option that you read about, but learning about them will make it easier to try them out if the need arises.

I hope this book will bring you a new perspective, which I offer with kindness and compassion. The neurotypical reader may find that some of their views about Asperger's are challenged here. And if you have Asperger's, you may learn something new about your partner and yourself. Most of all, I want your relationship to be satisfying and successful, and that might mean dismantling some outmoded ideas.

Each of you can learn to consider alternative explanations for your partner's behavior, rather than assuming the worst. Please keep in mind that this is a struggle for couples of all kinds, not just those with different neurotypes. Human brains of all varieties are configured to come up with explanations for why things are the way they are. Once we come up with a story about why our partner acts a certain way, it can be hard for us to question that version of reality.

People with Asperger's amuse themselves by dreaming up a variety of solutions to any problem; it's one of the many ways they can expand the world of their neurotypical partner, making each day feel fresh, new, and full of possibilities. If you're a neurotypical who's struggling to think differently about your relationship, your partner just might be able to convince you that it's fun and worthwhile to speculate on other possibilities.

A final note before we move on: It saddens me to say that some mental health professionals endorse the idea that the neurotypical partner should expect to suffer in a relationship with someone who has Asperger's. I'm here to tell you that idea always comes from someone who's uninformed about Asperger's. It's a wrongheaded notion that implies that a partner with Asperger's is a less than desirable partner, or even a burden. I say otherwise. And I know many happy couples who agree with me.



Chapter Two

The Rules of Engagement

Throughout this book, we'll see how empathy and reciprocity work by reviewing examples of couples who use those practices with excellent results. To start, this chapter will lay the groundwork—and in effect, the ground rules—that enable more direct, clear, and satisfying communication between you and your partner.

Getting Started

Now that you're up to speed on the basic truths about Asperger's, it's time to start applying this awareness to your relationship. Before we look at specific aspects of a neuro-diverse relationship, let's cover some basic practices that both partners can learn. You'll find that two important qualities are key for positive, healthy interactions and negotiations with your significant other:

Empathy: Trying to understand your partner's point of view.

Reciprocity: Acknowledging that you both deserve the opportunity to express your needs.

Even if your relationship feels like it's strained right now, there's good news: Many of the foundational skills that you need to manage your issues as a couple are surely already in place. The fact that you've picked up this book means you're open to observing your own emotions and curious about your partner's inner world. Those are invaluable assets that will help you build and strengthen your connection to the one you love. In my experience, what most couples need is education or other forms of support that will help them build on those strengths so they can handle emotions when addressing their issues.

Relationships are complex at the best of times, and if yours has been on shaky ground for a while, you may feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to start making things better. So let's begin by reviewing three simple but powerful guidelines for communicating that either partner can turn to when the going gets tough.

Start Small, Stay Focused

Every journey starts with a single step, as they say. Your goal of a closer, stronger relationship with your partner won't be achieved in any one conversation. Rather than trying to fix everything at once or tackle a major issue that feels overwhelming, your best bet is to start small. Pick a recent incident that's bothersome; not the biggest issue you have, but something manageable that's fresh in both your minds. Over time, as you and your partner experience successes in navigating problems together, your growing confidence and skills will enable you to tackle bigger issues.

Whatever the bone of contention may be, it's important to raise it with empathy (expressing that you understand your partner has their own feelings about it) and to be concise (sticking to the point and not bringing up unrelated matters or poking at sore spots). Here's a helpful template to follow:

Begin with positivity. Bring up a topic by acknowledging some kindness or contribution by your partner. The goal is to signal that your grievance doesn't mean you don't appreciate or care for them.

Focus on the problem. Reassure your partner that you're only bringing this up to make things better—it's a discrete problem to be solved, not a referendum on your relationship. Describe the issue and let them know how you would like things to be different in the future.

Don't blame or judge. Avoid generalizing ("You always do this"); describe a particular situation that illustrates the problem ("I needed the car yesterday but you didn't tell me you were taking it for the afternoon"). Make one or two specific requests that you think would solve the problem.

State your case, then listen. Avoid repeating what's not working for you or justifying why this is a problem. We all have needs, and both of you deserve to express them. Refrain from coaching your partner on how to communicate; instead, stay with a simple message to get your point across. Then give your partner space to respond.

For Example, Vince and Sierra

Vince, who has Asperger's, and Sierra came to me for therapy because their bickering and snapping at each other had gotten out of hand. It was so bad that her sister teased them about acting like Chandler and Monica on the sitcom *Friends*. After a few sessions, they were using more straightforward techniques for conveying their needs to each other.

Sierra wanted Vince to put their television remote in a drawer when he was done using it so she wouldn't have to go looking for it. Here's how she addressed the problem:

"Hey Vince, I wanted to use the TV for my workout routine this morning, but I couldn't find the remote. It turned out it was way under the couch. I know we have different habits about organizing stuff. I really appreciate you putting everything in a consistent place lately when you unload the dishwasher like we talked about. Could you try to do the same with the remote?"

Sierra didn't spend a lot of time explaining this request and didn't say it was Vince's fault. She talked about the problem directly, yet made it clear this was no big deal, stating her need clearly without making it an indictment of Vince's behavior.

Although a partner with Asperger's may be more reactive or easily upset than their neurotypical counterpart, anyone can get defensive when criticized. Based on previous experience, Sierra knew condemning Vince for being disorganized or inconsiderate would provoke him. He would insist that it didn't matter

where he put the remote or accuse her of being controlling. They would end up derailed from the request she was making.

This time, she avoided a conflict by briefly making her point and keeping to the issue at hand. For his part, Vince was able to see how this caused a problem for Sierra. He suggested that they keep the remote on top of the coffee table, thinking that the extra step of opening and closing the drawer would tempt him not to bother. Sierra agreed to the compromise and they easily moved on to another conversation.

Seek Buy-in from Both Sides

Many people end up in relationships without ever having frank conversations about what they want and expect of each other. Yet it's vitally important for each person to share how they'd like to handle the business of life. When you understand each other's expectations of partnership or marriage, you avoid a lot of future problems.

Sierra learned how to talk with Vince by getting through a series of conversations that did not go well at first. She learned that if she talked to him in a harsh way he would get prickly. In the example, instead of presenting a one-sided scenario in which she determined the solution, she offered a resolution for Vince to consider and comment on. This enabled a frank conversation in which each person was free to share their input. Though this was a small-stakes issue, discussions such as this build an important habit of considering both points of view.

For the relationship to work, both partners need to engage in addressing the issues. Keep these pointers in mind to reach a consensus that you both can buy into:

Present your concerns effectively. Approach your partner with the assumption that they mean well. Stick to one problem at a time, and be as clear as possible about what you

need. This is important for both of you, but the neurotypical partner is probably more prone to make inaccurate assumptions about their partner's motives.

Ask your partner for help. Sometimes a complaint, justified as it may be, can feel like an attack. This is especially true for people with Asperger's, who tend to be self-critical. One way around this defensiveness is to present the situation as a problem your partner can help with, as Sierra did. When you're both in problem-solving mode, you're working toward the same goal instead of arguing opposite sides of a dispute.

Focus on listening. It's natural to want to justify why you do things. But it's more important to hear what your partner is saying and understand their complaint before responding. In the example, Vince may have had his reasons for not returning the TV remote to its place. But by listening to Sierra, he understood that she wasn't questioning or criticizing his habits; she simply wanted to avoid a problem.

ASPERGER'S AND EMPATHY

At first blush, it may seem that in a romantic relationship, the person with Asperger's would come to the table with the least amount of empathy for their partner. But that's not necessarily true: People with Asperger's do feel love for their partner. The communication gap is caused by how they express these feelings, which can be different than what their neurotypical partner is used to or expects. But the partner with Asperger's may also have considerable aptitude for learning ways to overcome such obstacles, perhaps more than their neurotypical partner would expect, for there is a logic to how relationships work.

Balance the Concrete and the Abstract

A computer programmer told his wife he was headed to the supermarket to pick up some groceries. As he walked out the door, she called out to him: "Hey honey, be sure to get a gallon of milk, and if they have eggs, buy a dozen." When he returned home an hour later and started unloading the car, his surprised wife asked him: "Why on earth did you buy twelve gallons of milk?" The man answered: "They had eggs."

That's an exaggerated, though not completely unrealistic, example of concrete thinking: interpreting something literally rather than abstractly. We all fall into this sometimes, but for people who have Asperger's it's a common mode of thought. This tendency isn't because someone with Asperger's isn't capable of abstract thought, nor is it a matter of immaturity or lack of intelligence.

But there do seem to be some assumptions about using verbal communication symbolically that are widely understood by neurotypicals but not obvious to people with Asperger's. If you're the neurotypical in the relationship, you've likely noticed this. If you're the partner with Asperger's, your predisposition to think concretely may have led to confusion or misinterpretation of things your partner's said. The two of you may have experienced some "buy a dozen" moments of your own.

Here are some ways to manage the differences in your communication styles:

Allow for Clarification

For the neurotypical, know that your significant other won't always get what you're saying, even if your meaning seems

obvious to you. Do your best to be clear and specific, especially on important matters; when they ask for more detail or clarification, provide it without being condescending or impatient. If you're the partner with Asperger's, be willing to ask questions if you think you may be drawing the wrong conclusion. ("Uh, do we really need twelve gallons of milk?")

Recognize Misunderstandings for What They Are

It's important that you both accept that these situations aren't due to anybody's conscious choice to make communication more difficult. In fact, some researchers who study speech believe that people with Asperger's develop ways of expressing ideas that are different from the patterns of the neurotypical brain (Hubbard et al 2017). In a relationship with someone who thinks quite differently than a neurotypical partner does at times, communication challenges can't always be anticipated. Sometimes the possibility of a misinterpretation simply doesn't occur to either of you. When a snafu occurs, don't blame each other or engage in unhelpful self-criticism. Simply accept that it happened and move on.

Find a Starting Point

In a mixed-neurotype couple, each person can use their strengths to create a collaborative conversation that feels productive. The partner with Asperger's might have a lot of thoughts about the topic yet be at a loss for words. The neurotypical partner can break things down into manageable chunks by prompting them.

For example, Vince and Sierra agreed to visit his family and make it a road trip. Sitting down to plan over coffee, Vince was preoccupied with logistics. Sierra soon felt like she was doing all the talking. Rather than trying to guess what Vince was

thinking, she invited him to talk, saying, “Honey, I know this trip is important to you; I don’t want to take over here. What are you thinking about it?” Vince paused and said he wasn’t sure where to start. She asked, “Do you want to figure out the car stuff first? Or should we look at where we can stay?”

This gave Vince something to react to, and that started a shared conversation: “Yeah, let’s make a list of who has guest rooms. If we stay no more than one night anywhere, that gives us a lot of flexibility, and the rest of the time we can do our own thing.” Once Sierra offered him a path to start sharing his ideas, Vince had plenty to say. By helping him structure his thoughts, they were able to pin down the specifics together.

Appreciate Your Differences

Sometimes your different ways of seeing the world will produce challenging moments. But for both of you, your partner’s unexpected point of view can bring new surprises, insights, and creativity into your life. And it never hurts to see the humor in these situations, as long as you’re both laughing at the situation and not at each other.

Big Decisions

The preceding guidelines are important for managing relationship challenges of any magnitude. But when the stakes are high, it may take extra care to keep an empathetic, reciprocal dialogue going.

No couple sees eye to eye on everything. When it’s time for the two of you to make a big life choice—how much to spend on a major purchase, whether to start a family—there’s potential for disagreement. For a neurodiverse couple, your differing ways of thinking about the problem can add extra complication. Usually the neurotypical partner is prone to abstract statements that their

partner may need to decode. The partner with Asperger's may hold their opinions more strongly or have a more complicated view of how to arrive at decisions.

Use these best practices to help the two of you handle the significant decisions that all couples grapple with:

Set a Deadline

Sometimes a decision-making process gets bogged down because the partner with Asperger's tends to investigate and deliberate, wanting to gather as much data as possible. This can result in the neurotypical partner feeling increasingly frustrated that there's no conclusion in sight. Some situations, such as making an offer on a house, come with a built-in deadline, but others can drag on indefinitely if you don't agree on a time limit. Setting a cutoff date for making a choice will give the partner with Asperger's a clear parameter to work within. And the neurotypical partner will have to make their needs known and speak in explicit terms to keep the process timely.

Know the Territory

Couples that can identify when they're treading on emotionally sensitive ground have an advantage: They can back away from a heated discussion before feelings get hurt or emotions run high. When your decision touches on subjects that involve passionate opinions or deeply held beliefs, tread carefully. Be extra respectful and take breaks so you can cool down and return to a calm conversation. When you disagree about principles or values, it's important that both of you emphasize your respect for each other and concede that neither person is necessarily right.

Don't Wait for a Crisis

When it comes to the big stuff, such as work-life balance, parenting, in-laws, personal habits, sexuality, or finances, it

helps to talk these things over from a theoretical viewpoint *before* you're in the middle of making an important decision or dealing with a real issue. When you are in a situation that has a dollar amount or a deadline attached to it, invariably one or both of you will be invested in a specific outcome. Better to invite discussion of controversial topics and have lively "what if"–type exchanges when the stakes are not as high and it's easier to let things go. This also enables you to experience how your different communication styles might clash and work through the problems without the pressure of making a life-altering decision. Try engaging in conversations such as this as part of the time you spend together: when you go for a walk, as you clean up after dinner, or when in the car running errands.

Your Toolbox

Every relationship is a work in progress. You can think of the exercises in this book as a collection of tools that you and your partner can use to build, maintain, and repair your connection with each other, accommodating your differences and coming to understand each other's needs. As you move through the subsequent chapters, keep these principles in mind to make the most of the new tools in your toolbox:

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

No relationship can thrive without good communication, but couples in a mixed-neurotype partnership have extra challenges in this regard. You'll learn many classic principles of communication in this book. Deploy them as often as you can to keep small bumps in the road from becoming major obstacles. If things seem to be going off the rails, return to the basics of communication to get back on track.

Make Time to Check In

Your relationship will benefit greatly if you and your partner designate time in your schedules to share your thoughts and concerns and catch up with what's going on in your lives. Whether it's a daily talk over dinner, a Sunday morning hang, a weekly date night, or whatever fits your routine, deliberately scheduling time for this will serve you well during stressful times and strengthen your bond in the good times. Your check-in time is an opportunity for *attunement*, an especially close connection with each other that lends peace and harmony to your life. This shared experience of trust and comfort has long-lasting and beneficial effects for your health and well-being.

Structure Your Expectations

Lists are your friends. Create an inventory of mutually agreed-upon responsibilities, and you clarify who's taking care of which tasks, greatly reducing the potential for bickering and misunderstandings. A shopping list, a to-do list, a project checklist, and other lists improve productivity and focus. Lists help everybody, but are particularly useful for those with Asperger's, who often cope with sensory overload that makes mundane tasks difficult. In such cases, list-making can be a magic key that unlocks hidden stores of energy.

Use a Calendar

We're all very busy people these days, and many of us couldn't get along without a calendar that tracks our meetings, work agenda, social events, and other responsibilities. Whether it's a day planner in your bag or an app in the cloud, a reminder system can help you hit your deadlines and reach your goals in all aspects of life, and your relationship is no exception. This low-cost, high-yield tactic is so simple we sometimes downplay

its importance. We'll discuss how to set up your relationship calendar at the end of this chapter (see page 37).

Talk While You Walk

Many neurotypical people in a relationship with a partner who has Asperger's aspire to more closeness and a stronger romantic connection. For people with Asperger's, gazing at each other across a tiny table in a busy restaurant typically isn't a comfortable setting. Exercises in this book will show both of you how to experience more intimacy in your relationship. But one simple way to cultivate closeness is to spend time in motion together. Walking provides us a natural cadence that puts our bodies in rhythm and helps thoughts and ideas flow freely. Many people, not just those with Asperger's, find they have their best conversations when out walking side by side with their partner. For someone with Asperger's, removing the pressure to make eye contact can be especially helpful and facilitate open communication.

Remember There Are Two Points of View

Couples who seek me out often do so because the neurotypical partner has become frustrated. They feel like they're making a lot of accommodations, stretching themselves to meet the needs of their partner. The demands of the relationship may feel unfair. They wonder how they can set better limits because their partner seems to be taking advantage of their good nature.

It's true that Asperger's is a complicated condition. But if you're a neurotypical who's frustrated by your partner's habits, it's important to remember that your significant other likely has grievances of their own. A partner with Asperger's may feel harassed or shut out by their neurotypical partner; often they report they're confused about the reasons behind their partner's distress. I've found that for the most part, both partners in a

troubled relationship are trying as best they can or want things to improve, but they aren't sure exactly what it would take to please their partner. Despite whatever frustrations you have, both of you should keep in mind that it's highly likely your partner also wants you to be happy and to make the relationship work.

The Communication Matrix

As we've mentioned, if you're a person with Asperger's, you tend toward a direct, concrete style of communicating. Neurotypical people are accustomed to saying things in a more roundabout way, often because they intend to be polite; but then they wonder why the person with Asperger's misses the point they are making. In contrast, the Asperger's "tell-it-like-it-is" approach often comes across as blunt or insensitive to neurotypical people.

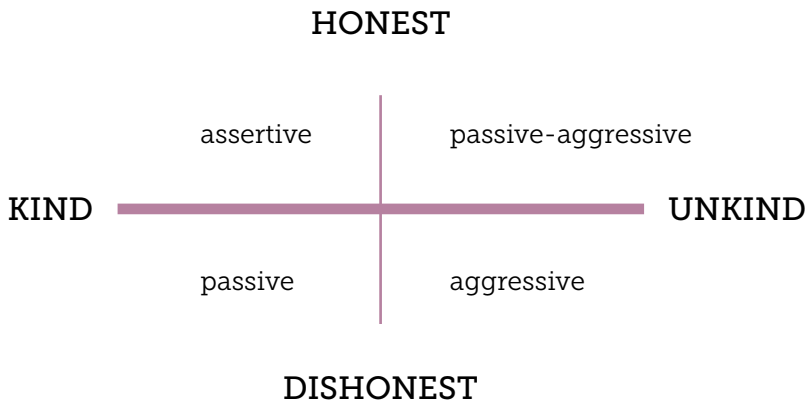
Sometimes a neurotypical person concludes that someone with Asperger's doesn't consider the consequences of what they're saying. But the truth is almost the opposite: People with Asperger's value honesty so much that they believe they can only honor their integrity by speaking literally and being completely forthright. They may also assume that others want them to speak with complete authenticity, and that to offer anything less would indicate a lack of respect for them. In a relationship, this commitment to unvarnished truth risks a harsh and hurtful tone and can cause a neurotypical partner to pull away in self-protectiveness.

The Communication Matrix is a tool that can help both of you develop more flexibility in your conversational styles. It's a system that classifies your speech according to two characteristics:

Honesty: How truthful is the statement?

Kindness: How compassionate is the statement?

The Communication Matrix



To use the Communication Matrix, consider which of the four quadrants a statement maps onto.

A statement that's kind and honest is *assertive*. It affirms a truth in a respectful, affectionate way.

Example: "I really appreciate you putting everything in a consistent place lately when you unload the dishwasher. Could you try to do the same with the TV remote?"

A statement that's kind and dishonest is *passive*. It avoids hurting someone's feelings, but also avoids the truth.

Example: "I guess it doesn't really matter where you put the remote. I don't care, never mind."

A statement that's unkind and honest is *passive-aggressive*. It's truthful, but also hurtful.

Example: "Putting the remote back in the same place seems like a stupid waste of time to me."

A statement that's unkind and dishonest is *aggressive*: It uses an untruth to inflict damage.

Example: "You don't put the remote back because you're selfish and lazy."

A person with Asperger's will benefit from practicing greater tact and softening their approach as shown on the left side of the diagram. The neurotypical partner often can get their point across more readily if they're explicit and direct in the way they say things, focusing on the upper half.

Here are some ways to make use of the conversation matrix:

Start with self-evaluation, trying to take note of where your statements fall during conversations on a typical day. Practice awareness of these concepts in your casual conversations with various people in your life, then progress to applying it to conversations with your partner.

Share with your partner. Reflect on your attempts at this exercise, and invite your partner to discuss your evaluations of your own speech. If you're both comfortable with it, share feedback on how the matrix applies to both of you during casual conversations. With a light mood, you can have fun referencing the matrix in your day-to-day exchanges: "Hey, careful, that sounds like upper-right-quadrant talk." "Thanks for sticking to the kind side of the matrix, babe."

Keep your eyes on the road. Much like when driving, in a conversation you need to stay aware of where you're going and steer continuously to avoid veering in the wrong direction. In the example earlier in this chapter (page 24), if Sierra had told Vince, "You never put anything away because all you think about is yourself!" she'd be moving the conversation into the aggressive, lower right quadrant of the matrix.

If she had said, "I guess it doesn't really matter, never mind," she'd be moving to the lower left, passive but not truthful.

The goal for both partners is to steer things into the upper left quadrant as much as possible, refraining from unkind or dishonest communication. When in doubt, try to exercise tact by staying in the realm of kindness. The wise approach is often to be a little less honest and offer more kindness.

Your Relationship Calendar

Couples with mixed neurotypes often face challenges relating to memory, organization, and expectations. Differences in communication style can lead to misunderstood messages, mistaken assumptions, and disagreement over responsibilities. Creating a calendar that's tailored to your relationship is an elegant solution that can serve as an objective witness to commitments you make to yourselves and each other. The format of your calendar is up to the both of you; it could be a paper calendar posted on the fridge or a shared digital calendar that you both access online. The only requirements are that both partners can view and update it, and that you both agree to use it.

Your calendar is a collaborative, dynamic document that both partners continually adjust and update as needed. It can be as detailed or streamlined as you like; over time, you'll find which activities benefit from being represented. Here are some possibilities to include:

Homemaking tasks, such as cleaning, organizing, grocery shopping, cooking, and home repair. List recurring chores as well as one-off projects, such as hanging a shelf or painting a room. Note who's responsible, and place it on a target date for completion.

Self-care practices, such as doctors' visits, therapy appointments, spa days, and gym visits.

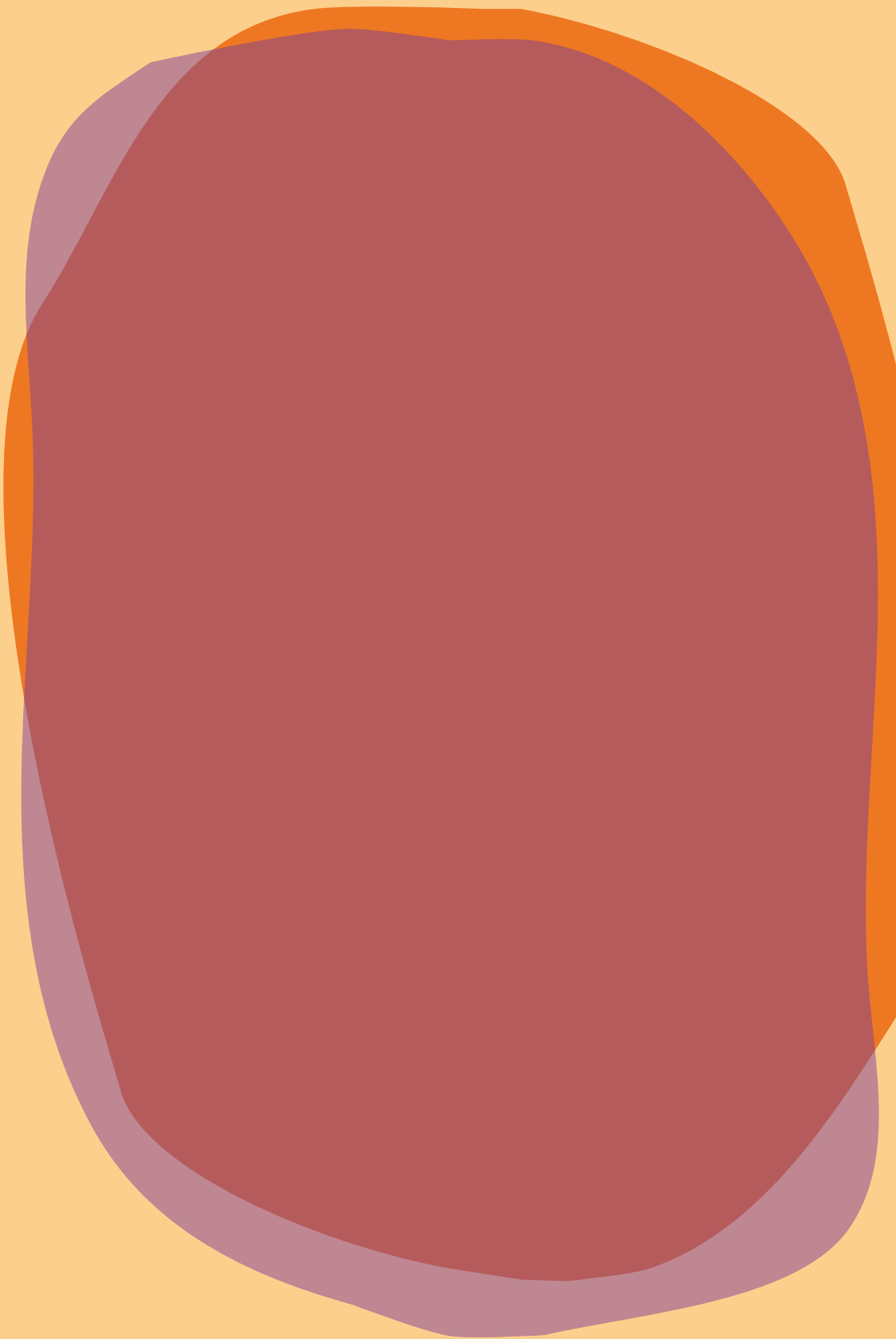
Social events, such as family dinners, parties, holiday gatherings, and date nights.

Recreation, such as practicing music or art, taking a walk together, book club meetings, and vacation trips.

Messages of encouragement and affection for your partner. Wish them luck before an important work event, remind them you'll be thinking of them, and thank them for handling the day's tasks.

Requests. Sometimes a neurotypical partner would like their partner to surprise them more often with gifts or give compliments. Adding notes such as "text me what you're up to this afternoon" or "bring home some ice cream" may not feel spontaneous, but it can fill a need for connection.

You'll find a sample relationship calendar in the appendix of this book (see page 138).



Chapter Three

Improving Basic Communication

For a mixed-neurotype couple, learning how to communicate clearly with each other is a crucial ingredient—perhaps *the* crucial ingredient—for a satisfying relationship. This chapter includes a variety of exercises to help you improve communication between you and your partner, illustrated with real-world situations. The techniques are intended to be practical and actionable so you and your partner can try them out right away. With a bit of practice, you'll likely find that they'll make a positive difference, perhaps sooner than you expect.

Communication Matters

With your different neurotypes, you and your partner bring different instincts for communication to your relationship. People with Asperger's tend toward extremes: Some are the laconic type who use few words to convey their meaning, whereas others tend to talk continuously with an unusual vocabulary. If you're the neurotypical partner, you may initially enjoy the verbal eccentricities, obscure word choices, and other communication quirks. But at times you might feel your partner is being deliberately peculiar, or you might resent their extensive vocabulary that you don't readily understand. Here are a few communication challenges that a neurodiverse couple often has to work through:

Awkward truths. The person with Asperger's often speaks bluntly, getting to the point without regard for emotional impact. Due to a tendency for extreme candor, they can say things in a public setting that their partner regards as private, such as disclosing how much was spent on an item or revealing why someone was not invited to an event.

How to handle it: The neurotypical partner can give private feedback about social missteps after the fact, which could prevent similar gaffes. Even so, their significant other's propensity for sharing inconvenient truths will remain. The best strategy is to expect these occasional faux pas and learn to laugh them off.

Mismatched tempo. Sometimes the neurotypical partner is frustrated by their partner's conversational pace. Some say their partner overshares and dominates conversations single-mindedly. Others wish their partner would talk more or respond more quickly.

How to handle it: Respectful feedback about each other's communication style can bring your speech patterns more in sync. This applies to both partners. Couples who stay curious about how their partner experiences conversations and ask each other a lot of questions as they go along can manage their differences capably.

Body language confusion. Lack of eye contact is often interpreted as unfriendly or disrespectful by neurotypicals, but for someone with Asperger's, it's a necessary mechanism for managing overstimulation so they can collect their thoughts. Someone with Asperger's also tends to have less animated expressions, especially in stressful circumstances; this is another way to conserve energy and maintain focus during social interactions. In addition, keeping a neutral facial expression is less likely to cause reactivity in other people.

How to handle it: The neurotypical person will feel more in tune with their partner if they rely on their partner's overall demeanor to read their mood instead of isolating any one factor such as facial expression. For the most part, if your partner with Asperger's is not complaining about anything, you can assume all is well from their perspective. And since facial expressions are hard for the partner with Asperger's to read, they may need to ask questions to assess their partner's state of mind.

Corey and Lisa

Corey and Lisa's weekend plan included tackling a landscaping project. While stopped at a traffic light on the way home from the garden center, Lisa noticed an attractive yard nearby. "Corey," she said. "Look at that yard, it's really pretty. Do you know what kind of tree that is right in front?"

Corey, who was driving, didn't look or respond. The light turned green and he moved the car along with the traffic. As they got closer to home, Corey asked Lisa, "What's for lunch?"

Lisa snapped back, "How should I know? You're an adult. Fix something yourself if you're hungry."

After they pulled into their driveway, Lisa walked off and left Corey alone to take their plants out of the car by himself. They didn't talk to each other for the next several hours.

So What Just Happened?

Lisa's feelings were hurt by Corey's unresponsiveness to her question. But what Lisa didn't realize was how tired Corey felt while they were driving home. Because he has Asperger's, Corey often feels mentally exhausted during an ordinary outing such as their garden center trip. Going to the store, moving through the aisles, navigating around people, making decisions—all these seemingly mundane activities require an intense amount of concentration on Corey's part. Just to hear Lisa's comments in a public place, Corey has to deliberately try to block out all the sounds of the people around them.

As the cashier rang up their purchases, Corey was remembering their credit card balance. On the drive home, he was calculating the best strategy for paying off their debt. Fatigued by the excursion and focused on his calculations, Corey lacked the bandwidth to answer, or in some cases even be aware of, Lisa's questions. He didn't know what made Lisa disappear for

the rest of the afternoon but figured she had other things to do. He knew by Lisa's harsh remark that something was wrong but didn't have enough information to make sense of it. He felt uneasy but became absorbed in other worries. Meanwhile, Lisa kept replaying the car ride in her mind, feeling resentful that Corey ignored her and sad that the weekend was not turning out as she'd hoped.

This experience of missing each other's intentions in everyday conversation can happen to any couple, but it's an ongoing challenge when one partner has Asperger's. When couples are neurologically different, both must be willing to do some extra learning and observation to keep such incidents from turning the mood suddenly sour. Read on to see the techniques Corey and Lisa used to turn this situation around.

Reconnect After a Clash

It's hard to know how to recover from a spat and resume a pleasant mood. When researchers John and Julie Gottman looked at what couples do after an argument, they discovered that talking things over after an unpleasant interaction, instead of stewing in silence, is pivotal for a healthy relationship. Misunderstandings and crossed signals are inevitable in couples with mixed neurotypes, so it's important that both people understand this concept. One plus for the neurodiverse couple: With their level-headedness and loyalty, the partner with Asperger's may be able to move on from difficult moments even more readily than the neurotypical partner.

Later that day, Lisa found Corey in the kitchen working on his laptop and approached him with a reconnection attempt. "Hey," she said softly. "You busy?"

Corey answered, "I think we qualify for this lower rate card, and that will allow us to stay on top of the student loans. But we

still really need to cut back on the online spending. I know it's not just you; I do it, too." He looked up from his screen.

Lisa replied, "That's so great that you're staying on top of that stuff. Thank you, really. You know I hate dealing with it."

She continued, "Look, I know I bit your head off in the car before. I thought you were ignoring me on purpose. I've been stewing about it."

Corey replied, "Yeah, I didn't know what that was about. I just thought maybe you were in a bad mood or something."

This brief conversation eased the tension Lisa had been feeling, and they went on with their weekend plans. Lisa was able to put her hurt feelings aside and consider that Corey hadn't intentionally disregarded her. For his part, Corey connected with Lisa with his comment that he too spends impulsively. This kept his remarks about their finances from sounding harsh to Lisa and triggering another round of bad feelings.

Small interactions such as this not only reduce negativity but also prevent a minor tiff from growing into major resentment.

Here are some tips for reconnecting after unfortunate incidents:

TAKE TIME TO COOL DOWN. If a conflict has left you feeling heated or upset, take a few minutes, or hours, to cool down and catch your breath so you can address the situation calmly. When you're both feeling relaxed, start the conversation with your partner in a comfortable setting, such as on the couch, or go for a walk together so there's less pressure to make eye contact.

REMEMBER PAST SUCCESSES. Think back to other times when you two have been able to make things better after a fight. Recall what worked then, and use the same approach. For example, does your partner respond to humor at times such as this, or will that cause defensiveness? Do they like to be approached by a touch on the back or shoulder, or is that off-limits until the tension recedes? Does your partner

appreciate if you get right to the matter at hand, the way Lisa did, or would they prefer you to offer them a cup of tea or a snack as sign that you want to renew your connection?

CREATE A VOCABULARY. If either or both of you find it hard to get post-conflict discussions started, see if you can agree on a phrase or two that signals a willingness to try resuming a conversation: “Can we start over?” “Let’s revisit that.” It doesn’t even have to be done in words—you could use the aforementioned cup of tea as a signifier.

Share Your Complaints

Complaining has a bad name in our positive, upbeat culture. Many people pride themselves on their easygoing attitude, glad that they don’t let things get to them. For people with Asperger’s, who are so prone to saying exactly what they’re thinking, holding back complaints is an unrealistic expectation. And if your home isn’t a place where you can complain about uncomfortable or annoying things, where is it safe to bring our not-so-pleasant feelings?

I always encourage my clients to complain to each other. The goal is for the relationship to feel like a haven where each person is free to bring grievances to their partner when feeling bothered or out of sorts. Keeping the focus on external irritations or threats offers a bonding experience for the couple; these conversations need to be treated as a time to commiserate together and give each other plenty of support. This means complaining to your partner, but not *about* your partner. (You can have those conversations another time.) When you share the experience of confiding your worries, burdens, and troubles, it builds trust and deepens your connection. The idea is not for your partner to come up with solutions for all your problems. Rather, it’s healthy for a couple to mutually confide in each

other, share vulnerable feelings, buffer each other from outside stresses, and reinforce mutual caring and sympathy.

And being able to speak freely with each other builds trust. This is incredibly important to people with Asperger's, for whom honesty is paramount. Feeling confident that their partner cares when things are upsetting and wants to know what's on their mind is even more critical for them than it is for neurotypical people.

I suggest to the couples that I counsel that they establish a ritual or routine that gives both partners a time and a place to complain. Think of it as a necessary stress valve. When life turns up the pressure on you, it eases the burden to know that you can count on time with your partner to talk about anything you want to get off your chest.

For Lisa and Corey, Sunday afternoon in the kitchen is the time when each of them gets to share their worries. In a recent conversation, Lisa used her time to let Corey know she's having trouble sleeping because she's worried about her sister's diabetes.

Corey used to try to help Lisa by telling her things weren't really that bad or by problem-solving—telling her what she should say to her sister, for example. But those conversations led to Lisa arguing with him, frustrated that Corey thought he knew better than she did. And this only made Lisa feel even more alone with her problems. Over time, Corey has learned to comfort Lisa by affirming and validating her concerns instead. In this case, he replied, "Yeah, I get it. Your sister really isn't taking good care of herself. It's scary to hear it's getting worse. I knew you weren't sleeping as well, and I totally understand why. I just hope she will keep trying to manage this better."

Lisa felt her shoulders drop as she sighed with relief. Sharing with Corey eased her burden. And Corey, now that he knows how to help Lisa, feels more relaxed in these conversations than he used to. Instead of dismissing her concerns in an

attempt to get rid of the bad feelings, now he shows her that he's on her side.

Here are some parameters to follow when making time for supportive conversation with your partner:

- Turn off your phones. Plan for each of you to have about 10 minutes to talk so you can both share without dwelling too deeply on the details. You can have longer discussions another time if needed; the goal here is to air your complaint and feel supported.
- Decide who will speak first; the other is there to listen and provide comfort and support but shouldn't interrupt.
- The first person can use their 10 minutes to say whatever they need to about stresses or troubles caused by something in the outside world.
- The listener offers comments that show concern.
- Then trade roles for another 10 minutes.
- In both cases, the listener should avoid giving advice or trying to solve the problem.
- Do not second-guess your partner or try to point out things they may be missing. Stick to offering support and expressing solidarity.

Remember, your partner is coming to you for emotional support because they already feel helpless or defeated. You can offer your perspective at another time, but not now. This is a particular caution for the partner with Asperger's, who is probably prone to dispensing advice, especially when under stress. If you have Asperger's, you may feel you have a more rational way of looking at things, so be careful not to question

what may seem like excessive emotional intensity on the part of your neurotypical partner.

Walk It Off

Stress and conflict create a domino effect in our bodies, triggering the fight-or-flight reaction. Our blood pressure rises and our heart rate goes up. Our chest tightens and we take shallow, rapid breaths. Our body is getting ready for conflict, and it becomes harder to think clearly.

Lisa went into this state when Corey seemed to ignore her on their drive home. Thinking he was being deliberately rude, she was seething with hurt feelings. By the time they got home, she just wanted to get away from him.

Fuming, but not wanting to spoil the weekend with a fight, Lisa remembered a discussion in therapy about the need for movement when she got physically agitated. She decided to take a walk and took off at a brisk pace. As her body got into the rhythm of walking, she felt like she was moving away from her hurt feelings. She distracted herself with people-watching and spotting cute dogs as she went through the neighborhood. She burned off the energy and agitation brought on by the flight-or-fight reflex, and her body and mind calmed down.

Keep the Ball in the Air

People who are in happy relationships make comments to each other that show interest and availability. For example, if your partner says, "Gosh, can you believe how bad the traffic is? They're doing so much construction, it's crazy," you might respond with, "I know, it's really getting to be too much," or "I thought it was even worse last summer. Remember when we tried to take that trip to the lake, and we ended up turning around and going home?"

Neurotypical people fall into this conversational cadence without thinking about it much. But if you have Asperger's, you'll often need to make a more deliberate effort. Sometimes, as Corey was, you'll be so preoccupied with your own thoughts that you fail to respond. Or you may be unsure whether your partner is communicating relevant information or even expects a reply. As you sift through possible reactions and associations to formulate a reply, your neurotypical partner may get radio silence.

It can be helpful to think of conversation as a game of volleyball or tennis: the ball has to keep moving for the game to continue. When we react with silence or dismissal, it discourages our partner from making further attempts to connect. Your reply doesn't need to be perfect; sometimes you just send the ball back across the net with a signal that you're listening: "Uh-huh." "I know." "That's right." The ball bounces back and forth, and the result is a nice rhythm that feels satisfying to both of you. The topic may be a trivial one, but the unspoken conversation you're having is: "I listen when you talk. The things you think about matter to me. You can count on me; I'm here to pay attention to you."

For the neurotypical partner, it's important to remember that your significant other may need extra time to respond. The conversational rhythm may be slower, but it's there. Both parties should avoid snapping back at the other when frustrated with a conversation; people with Asperger's can be especially sensitive and reactive to this, since they may have grown up with a history of ostracism or bullying.

Over time, the conversational volley can become such a powerful habit that couples persist in this nurturing behavior even in the middle of an argument. They continue making comments that maintain their connection and goodwill toward each other. Because of this, their fights are much less likely to become destructive or to disrupt the rapport between them.

Sheila and Jill

Sheila and Jill came to meet with me at Sheila's initiative. Sheila was working full-time in the tech industry. Her wife Jill was recently laid off, and the couple agreed Jill would be the full-time stay-at-home mom for their two children.

They sought therapy because Jill, who was self-diagnosed with Asperger's, was having difficulty holding up her end of the bargain. She would get the kids off to school but then wouldn't do any household tasks or errands during the day. The disorder in the house was becoming intolerable for everyone.

Soon Sheila and Jill were caught in a stalemate: Jill would promise to do more work around the house but instead would spend most of the day playing card games online. Sheila would come home to everything in a shambles and then find that she had to prepare the family's dinner. As Sheila tried to problem-solve and offer helpful suggestions, Jill shut down and wouldn't talk. Sheila tried coaching Jill, giving her feedback on how to handle her defensiveness, but this only made matters worse.

So What Just Happened?

Jill found online card games fascinating. She loved the challenges of trying to outsmart the computer. Her Asperger's gave her the ability to hyper-focus and concentrate deeply; this used to be an asset at her job, but it was not helping in her new role as a stay-at-home mom. It caused her to completely lose track of time, leaving her household tasks unfinished.

Jill grew increasingly frustrated with Sheila's attempts to resolve the situation, feeling as though Sheila was trying to control her every waking hour, but she was unsure how to voice her resentment. In therapy, Jill was able to push back in a

healthy, assertive way. Speaking with kindness and honesty, she said, "Sheila, I know you are trying to help me, but you have your hands full with your own job. I want you to back off and let me do this my way. I'm starting to feel like your third child. Please, get out of my business of running the household. I'm determined to turn this around."

One strength of this couple was that they hadn't become bitter toward each other during this challenging situation. They remained capable of cooperation and continued trying to act as a team. They both knew Jill did not deal well with guilt, and that Jill's own self-criticism was keeping her stuck. And Jill could see how her habits were creating an added burden for Sheila, which motivated her to take action and stick with her commitments. Jill made changes not out of duty or obligation, but because she was moved to express her caring and affection for Sheila.

Set a Calendar

Jill and Sheila agreed to try creating a calendar together to see if it would help Jill keep on track while allowing her the autonomy she needed. As discussed in chapter 2 (page 21), a shared calendar provides clarity, structure, and accountability. It becomes a record of conversations and decisions that the couple can refer back to, reducing confusion and misunderstandings. Our objective was to give Jill a system that would set her up for success, taking her habits into account and providing better alternatives.

Reviewing her agenda on a calendar made it easier for Jill to spot the challenges in her schedule. For example, Jill identified that she was a nervous driver, making it stressful for her to get the kids to school. She also disliked the crowded, noisy hallways at the school and felt socially uncomfortable while waiting there. Returning home afterward and feeling stressed and

overwhelmed, Jill would tell herself she deserved a little downtime. But once on her laptop playing poker or bridge, she couldn't pull herself away. The challenges of her morning routine made Jill feel incompetent, so she ended up soothing herself by playing games, where she could experience mastery.

Jill came up with a new ritual for her return from the school drop-off. She would keep her laptop in a drawer, with the battery stored in a closet, so she would have to go through several steps if she wanted to use it. This inconvenience disrupted her routine enough to enable her to focus on a different task instead of starting a card game. She used her calendar to identify one task at a time, with a small reward for completing each, such as fixing a tasty snack or taking a 30-minute break to sketch or do journaling. It took a while for Jill to shift habits, and she had some setbacks. Eventually, though, Jill mastered her new role, resulting in a reduction in the couples' arguing and improvements for the whole family.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

In some ways, the problems associated with Asperger's are related to expectations in modern society, rather than limitations imposed by the condition. There have always been those who function better when they can pace their day and manage the amount of noise and stress they are exposed to. But most people in contemporary culture are expected to do a lot of activities in a day, briskly and efficiently, which is an unattainable expectation for many people with Asperger's.

Make a List

People with Asperger's lack the ability to block out stimuli. This is a hallmark of the condition, and while it waxes and wanes depending on each person and their current circumstances, it never goes away. It's a limiting factor that neurotypical people do not have to deal with, and that's hard for them to comprehend. When your brain doesn't naturally make a distinction between what's essential and what is irrelevant, the act of concentrating takes exertion. That means for those with Asperger's, productive activity typically requires extra cognitive effort. This is evident in adolescence, when teens with Asperger's often struggle with ordinary activities such as learning to play sports or drive a car. It continues into adulthood, when people with Asperger's need to leave noisy places or have trouble with group conversations. Although Jill could focus intensely on her card games and other computer-related tasks, more often in other situations her attention was diffuse. In most settings, she'd notice a lot of stimuli at once without being able to block out the unimportant stuff.

A list is an especially helpful tool for coping with overstimulation because it serves as a visual anchor. When you have Asperger's, you may have trouble remembering what to pick up at the market because you're distracted by the sensation that your hair needs washing. You might intend to sit down with the monthly bills but feel your attention pulled away by a whining sound coming from the refrigerator. Having a list to work from helps your brain focus. Checklists are particularly calming for the Asperger's mind because they reduce decision fatigue: With a list of steps to follow, you can get into action without overthinking. A list enables you to place your attention where it's needed.

Lists aren't just for groceries. List-making is a strategy you can apply toward all sorts of purposes. Jot a quick list of ideas for things to do this weekend. Make a detailed checklist of the steps it will take for you to start that side business you've been

dreaming of. Keep an ongoing list of new hobbies you'd like to try, classes you're interested in taking, or books you want to read. Your lists can follow whatever format you prefer: scratch it on the back of an old envelope, draw it carefully with colored pens, or create it digitally with an app on your phone or device.

Jill and Sheila came to realize that they had to find time to make plans and update lists while the children were occupied with online activities. They agreed to be a bit more relaxed about screen time for the kids because they required the opportunity for adult conversation. As conscientious parents they did not find this ideal, but they decided the trade-off was worth it. Here are some examples of the types of lists Jill and Sheila relied on:

- Places to donate unwanted items
- Gardening dreams and plans
- Rainy-day outings and activities for kids
- Pets and family-friendly breeds to research or adopt someday

Get the Quiet Partner to Talk

Some people with Asperger's talk a lot, almost incessantly. They have a need to make sense of information by hearing themselves say things, verbally trying ideas on for size. Others may be quiet most of the time or speak only briefly when prompted. This may be due to a tranquil inner state, or the person may have too much going on internally to add words to the mix. Many Asperger's types fluctuate between states of silence and loquaciousness depending on mood, energy, and level of stimulation in the environment.

Neurotypical people may also be notably talkative or quiet, of course. But their manner is usually not to the same extreme or for the same reasons as the manner of people with Asperger's. A common concern raised by the neurotypical partner is: "I don't like having to ask all the questions. How do I ever get them to open up? I feel lonely a lot."

In Sheila and Jill's story, we saw that Jill's withdrawal was frustrating for Sheila, making it harder for the two of them to discuss their problem. It's a situation that I often see during my sessions with mixed-neurotype couples: The neurotypical partner asks questions and tries to keep the conversation going, but it feels one-sided.

Here are some options for handling this:

PULL BACK ON THE QUESTIONS. A good starting point for a neurotypical partner is to reflect on their attempts to invite more conversation. Asking numerous questions may feel like a reasonable way to draw out someone who's uncommunicative, but this can be overwhelming to your partner, especially after a fight. Usually confrontation causes someone with Asperger's to minimize what they say or even shut down completely so they can process the situation. In addition, your partner may have grown up in a family that didn't rely on talking to feel close or didn't model how to express emotions verbally.

SPEAK IN SMALL BITES. I find myself frequently reminding neurotypical clients to try to speak to their partner in paragraphs, not pages or chapters. If your partner's on the quiet side, it's easy to get in the habit of filling the silence by holding forth with long monologues, especially when upset. Expecting your partner with Asperger's to listen attentively as you speak for a prolonged length of time is unrealistic. You'll likely exceed their capacity for concentration, especially when the conversation is emotionally demanding. And

though it's less common, the garrulous partner with Asperger's should also rein in this tendency and try to make their points succinctly.

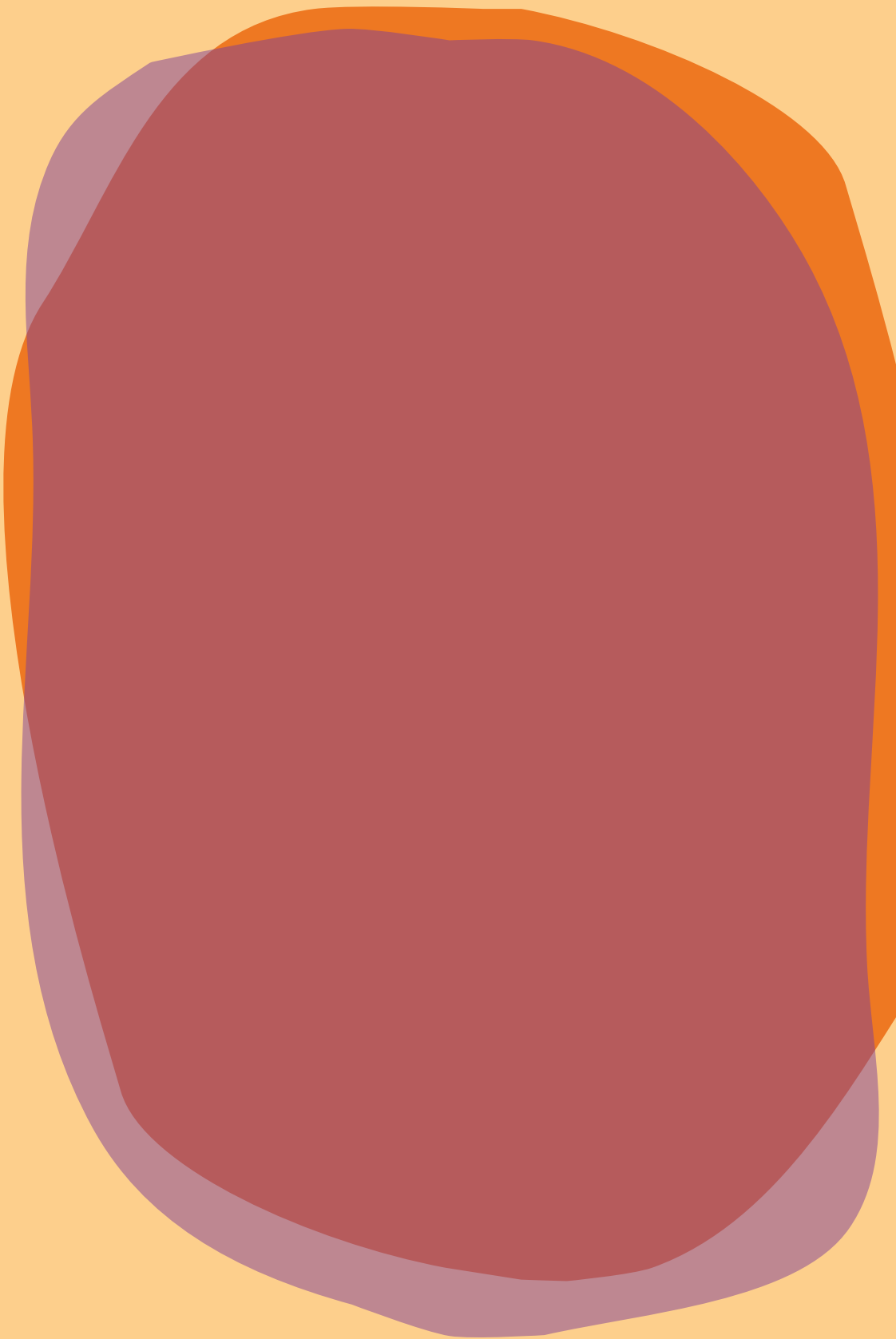
LEAVE ROOM FOR REPLIES. Whether you're feeling calm together or are having an intense talk about significant issues, it's important to allow the quieter person some room to react. Try saying no more than two to three sentences, then invite your partner to respond with a phrase such as, "I'm wondering if this makes sense to you," "What do you think about this?" or "Could you give me any feedback?" Pause and give them the time they need to answer. Pausing your speech and expressing genuine interest in your partner not only draws out the quieter person but also gives them time to reflect and consider their reaction. Sometimes it's best to put the conversation on hold with questions such as, "Do you want some time to think this over? When would be good for us to get back to this?"

Play the Music of Conversation

Have you ever noticed that descriptions of conversation and discourse often borrow musical terms? Someone's words may "resonate" with us; their speech may have a certain "rhythm." A good conversation promotes "attunement" and "harmony." This crossover of terminology is not just a poetic way of expressing a human experience. Neuroscience research by Daniel J. Siegel affirms that we do resonate with one another; in fact, our brains respond to one another much like instruments in a duet or musical ensemble. Some experts even think that humans developed rhythm and song before we developed purposeful language.

When dialogue with your partner is difficult, it can help thinking of conversation as music. Just as not every piece of music is a symphony, not every conversation needs to solve a

problem or impart advice. Try asking questions and steering the conversation toward the answers, allowing your significant other to take their time and let their guard down. The partner with Asperger's may not want to relate on this level as frequently as a neurotypical person, but when it happens they can find this kind of conversation deeply reassuring and emotionally nourishing. It can even strengthen the immune system and add to cardiac health. Spending time together so that we have opportunities to connect with conversation is a lovely way to calm and soothe our bodies and minds.



Chapter Four

Nurturing Your Bond

For a healthy couple, their bond with each other is paramount. They prioritize the well-being of the relationship over competing factors such as career demands, financial or medical crises, or even the needs of other family members. For a couple for whom Asperger's plays a significant role, this sense of security and connection is especially important because people with Asperger's often experience a lack of social support. Many have been rejected or overlooked when seeking friendships and have had difficulty making romantic connections. The couple's relationship can provide a source of steadiness and encouragement.

Why Your Bond Is Important

Healthy relationships deliver more than just psychological benefits such as contentment and security. They also bring improved physical health to both partners. Just as eating, sleeping, and exercise habits affect our well-being, the status of our relationship is a critical factor that influences cardiac function, immune function, insulin regulation, and other parameters of wellness. In other words, if your relationship isn't healthy, it's harder for you to be healthy.

What does a healthy relationship look like? Couples with a strong bond genuinely enjoy each other's company. Rituals, in-jokes, and stories about their shared past reinforce the ways that they cherish each other. But unlike the relationships we associate with romantic songs and rom-com movie plots, this doesn't mean the duo are "everything" to each other. In a healthy romantic partnership, both people recognize that their partner needs breathing room and opportunities to pursue their own interests.

For many of those with Asperger's, finding a stable, partnered relationship is a dream fulfilled. A history of social difficulties makes the sense of a solid and reliable bond with a partner especially important. Nevertheless, some aspects of a mixed-neurotype relationship do add a level of challenge to bonding in a couple. A study performed at the University of Birmingham in the UK examined rapport and communication across neurotypes. It found that when two neurotypical people did tasks together, both reported satisfying interactions. And when two people with Asperger's were paired for a task, the results were similar: The exchange went well and was enjoyable for both people. When they paired a neurotypical person with a person with Asperger's, there was reduced rapport, and the task was not completed as successfully compared to the other scenarios. One prominent UK autism researcher,

Dr. Damian Milton, reviewed this study and concluded, “When people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathize with each other.”

Couples with mixed neurotypes probably experience more misunderstandings than couples who are naturally on the same wavelength. But it’s also true that couples who go through some mutual struggle can learn and grow from it. A difference in the way you and your partner communicate doesn’t guarantee a failed relationship. In this chapter, we’re going to look at the ways that you can safeguard the connection between you and your significant other, keeping it strong enough to weather any discord brought on by your differences.

Isabel and Mateo

Isabel and Mateo had been together for five years and felt proud of their relationship. Isabel had Asperger’s, and although the condition created some challenges for her, one of her strengths was an aptitude for managing the couple’s budget. Over time they made progress in their financial goals and built up their savings for a down payment on a house. When Mateo got the news that he was being promoted to project manager, it looked like they’d soon be able to start looking for a home of their own. He planned a celebration dinner the following weekend.

The couple had agreed for the last several years to avoid restaurant spending, which was made easier by how much Mateo loved cooking. Savoring the sensory experience of fixing a lovely meal was one of life’s pleasures for him. He decided to make a shrimp dish and an elaborate risotto. When Friday evening arrived, Isabel helped with the kitchen prep. Once they sat down to dinner, though, she only picked at her plate, leaving Mateo disappointed. She told him she was going to eat a bowl of ramen noodles instead of the dinner he had

made for the two of them. "What do you mean, you're going to make ramen?" he asked her. "I made all this, and you aren't having any? I thought we were going to have a nice time. Now I don't feel like eating. I don't even know what to say."

So What Just Happened?

Isabel knew Mateo was excited, and she wanted to please him. Still, throughout her life, she's gone through periods of eating certain foods exclusively and repetitively. In the two days before Mateo's dinner, she'd reverted to an old habit of relying exclusively on beef ramen for her meals. This irregularity with appetite is not unusual for people with Asperger's, especially in childhood. Some get stuck on eating certain foods repeatedly, then abruptly lose their taste for them. No one knows why this happens. The behavior is so widespread that the Asperger's community has a name for it: "samefoods."

Mateo knew that Isabel had experienced this pattern in the past but hadn't noticed this time because he'd been working long hours. Even when he realized what was going on, his feelings were still hurt. Mateo had gone through all this trouble so they could share this special occasion, and Isabel only wanted ramen.

Focus on Closeness

Isabel knew this celebration was important, and reached out to take Mateo's hand. She reassured him that the meal looked beautiful, but she couldn't force herself to eat. Through their couple's therapy, Mateo had learned not to take things personally, because he knew that some aspects of Isabel's habits were beyond her control. He understood that part of loving her was accepting her oddities despite the momentary frustrations they may cause. Even though Isabel wasn't dining with him, she

was still present. They were able to quickly recover the mood of the evening.

Couples who can exercise this kind of flexibility and be willing to make the best of it when things don't go according to plan will have an easier time maintaining a strong bond. This applies to both parties in a neurodiverse couple. The partner with Asperger's, who may have mentally rehearsed a specific situation in their mind many times to prepare for an event, will need to pause, regain their composure, and reconstruct the scenario in their minds before they can manage a change. Similarly, the neurotypical partner may have their heart set on something, as Mateo did with the dinner, but they need to be able to roll with a change in plans brought on by the needs or anxiety of their partner.

What enabled Isabel and Mateo to get past the glitch in their plans was their awareness that what mattered was their time together, not the activity they were doing. Special meals or celebratory occasions are an opportunity to affirm your connection with each other. Whether an event goes as planned or jumps off the rails, connection is still possible.

Here are some suggestions for cultivating feelings of closeness:

USE EVERYDAY MOMENTS. Date nights and celebratory dinners are great, so by all means have them. But you don't have to wait for special occasions to reconnect. Happy couples take advantage of ordinary events to feel closer to each other. Perhaps you share coffee together for a few minutes in a chaotic morning before heading out to your jobs. Maybe you end every evening by preparing food for the next day's breakfast or lunch. You might go together to the laundromat or the supermarket. Moments such as these can do double duty, helping make the logistics of life more manageable as you strengthen your bond with some informal time together.

KEEP UP TO DATE WITH EACH OTHER. Even when you're apart, you'll feel closer to each other when you know what's happening in each other's lives. Make it a rule to know something about your partner's day before you go your separate ways in the morning. How did they sleep the night before? What's worrying them about today's agenda? What are they looking forward to? Even if you're rushed, get in the habit of asking your partner at least one question before you dash off. The goal is to keep your finger on the pulse of events in your partner's life and tune in to whatever is on their mind.

LINK CHECKING IN TO AN EXISTING EVENT. Neurotypical people tend to be chattier about themselves and to ask others about their thoughts and plans. If you're the partner with Asperger's in the relationship, you might not be naturally inclined to update your partner or ask them what's going on in their life. If that's the case, try linking this kind of informal check-in to a designated time or some daily activity you do routinely. For example, Isabel is often slow to wake up and a bit dreamy in the mornings; she'd typically get swept up in her tasks and wouldn't think to reach out to Mateo. So the couple decided the most convenient time of day for catching each other up was upon their return home from work, before dinner.

These simple moments of closeness may sometimes seem like "work" in the sense that they require a bit of planning and commitment. But relating the events of your day can be a great stress buster, as you share funny stories and get things off your chest. These moments add reassuring predictability that's especially helpful to people with Asperger's. Incorporating comfort and familiarity in the mundane parts of life strengthens the connection between you and your partner and allows you both to save energy for more creative possibilities.

Find a Shared Goal

Relationships are meant to be enjoyed; fun, romance, and mutual delight are the stuff of life. But a relationship only flourishes over time when you share a goal, a sense of common purpose. When you look at the future, what would you both like to improve or achieve over the next five years or so? What about long-range life plans, ambitions that will take time to master, or goals you want to save toward?

Sometimes a mixed-neurotype couple can get excited by a shared goal because it provides them with a focus. Rather than talking about the relationship or emotions, with all the challenges those conversations can have in a neurodiverse relationship, the two of you can get into action mode and feel a sense of purpose. This often feels particularly gratifying to the partner with Asperger's, who may be less verbal or prefer mutual activities instead of talking.

Shared goals you can consider as a couple might include:

- Remodeling or home improvement projects
- Career or financial aspirations
- Doing more cooking at home
- Becoming parents or spending more time with your parents and siblings
- Carving out more time for fun, such as athletic activities, concerts, or entertaining at home
- Planning major vacations, travel, or celebrations
- Seeking out a spiritual practice or deepening your commitment to one
- Making a civic or community contribution through donating or volunteering

Keep these points in mind as you talk about your goals:

NOT ALL GOALS NEED TO BE SHARED. What goals do each of you want to pursue on your own? It's okay for the two of you to have different interests; you can still support each other in your individual goals, such as achieving a career milestone, competing in a sports league, or mastering an artistic or musical skill. It's healthy for both partners to have some parts of their life that are shared and some interests or activities that are just for themselves.

TRY FOR A HEALTHY, CHANGEABLE MIX. We all need a mix of short-term and long-term achievements to look forward to, from mundane projects (paint the back porch) to big dreams that motivate us (buy a beach house). It's fine to keep changing and shifting your goals as the years go by. That's part of the fun; setting goals is a dynamic process. As you learn about yourself through a variety of experiences, you keep modifying and adapting your intentions. What's important is that you and your partner enjoy talking about your dreams and ambitions: What do you want to accomplish? What would be meaningful or worthwhile? Which are the interests and passions where you and your partner overlap?

KEEP A RECORD. You can take notes on your goals in a journal or create a vision board if you're visually oriented. Break some of your bigger plans down into steps (as discussed in chapter 3, checklists are very helpful for neurodiverse couples) and figure out what it would take to make them real. Chart your progress as each milestone brings you closer to your objective.

Engage in a Weekly Activity

It's exciting to observe your partner absorbed in an activity they enjoy. We become intrigued when we see a loved one in a state of liveliness, their attention swept up in what they're doing. Many people report added attraction to a partner when doing a thrilling activity together, such as hiking an exposed section of trail or riding a roller coaster. Whatever your preference for adrenaline level, a shared interest offers a departure from ordinary life. This reinvigorates both partners, bringing zest to the relationship. Whether you have mastered the activity or not is unimportant because learning a new skill together provides a bonding opportunity.

Reserving the same time slot every week for a to-be-determined activity allows some degree of spontaneity, which the neurotypical partner may appreciate, while providing some predictability that makes things easier for the partner with Asperger's. Agree on a plan B before leaving the house so if conditions are not what you expected, you can move on to your alternate destination without having to make decisions on the fly.

Examples include:

- A weekly movie night
- A game night with friends
- A class or workshop you take together
- Worship service or spiritual activity
- Household maintenance

An outing in nature can be a good option, whether it's a walk in the park or a full-blown camping trip. To reduce stress, especially for the partner with Asperger's, when setting out to a new park or trail, make sure you know exactly where you are going beforehand. Check up-to-date descriptions online to help you find a secluded spot that offers reduced stimuli.

Allow Alone Time

The person with Asperger's usually needs more downtime than their partner. This may involve reading, watching media, gaming, or just sitting around. It's a necessary break from the exhaustion that the partner with Asperger's contends with as they manage their moods and behavior while attending to the daily tasks and expectations of adult life. But this can cause concern for the neurotypical one in the relationship, who may feel ignored or have complaints that the household workload is not shared evenly. The partner with Asperger's can lose track of how much time they spend on self-directed pursuits, which eventually leads to resentment by their partner.

The best strategy for this problem is to schedule alone time for whatever length is appropriate with an agreement that the partner with Asperger's will use an external cue to remind them when it's time to wrap up. Something such as an alarm on your phone or a shutdown timer on your laptop should do the trick. Agree in advance on what actions the neurotypical partner should take if their partner ignores the alarm, such as sending a text or message or knocking on the door.

Mark and Gabby

Gabby was becoming frustrated with going to bed by herself. She and Mark had moved in together, and everything had been going well. They both felt satisfied with their jobs and were planning their wedding for the next year. Gabby worried, though, when she noticed that once again, as she kissed Mark goodnight, he said, "You go ahead, babe. I'll be along soon." He sounded sweet when he said it, but she knew he may stay up on the computer for several hours. She was beginning to have trouble falling asleep because she was feeling lonely.

Absorbed in his laptop, Mark wasn't aware of Gabby's distress. He had gotten a little carried away with a new computer game but was ready to scale back on it because the challenge had worn off. He toggled between Reddit and the game, knowing he was giving up some sleep time to do it. Already this week, he had been late to work once and barely dragged through a couple of the other days. But it just felt good to have the house to himself for a few hours and focus on something he wanted to do.

So What Just Happened?

Because his Asperger's was identified while he was a child, Mark already knew he might come across as oblivious. To counter this, he took extra measures to show his caring and concern in his close relationships. But by the end of the day, his concentration was used up. He needed a distraction so he could turn his mind off and wind down.

Mark was depriving himself of sleep to attend to another need. He loved living with Gabby, but did miss his bachelor days, when he could follow his own inclinations without taking anybody else into account. When he confided this in couples therapy, he almost whispered it, as though it was shameful.

Gabby looked surprised by his comments but moved closer to him on the couch, her eyebrows furrowed in concern.

I encouraged Mark to let Gabby know more about what need he was trying to take care of by staying up late. He responded, "I don't know, it's just something I've always done. When everything is quiet, and nobody is interrupting me, I get really calm and can just be with myself in a way I don't get to during the daytime. Believe me, it's not that I don't want to be in the relationship, I love her like crazy, I just . . . I don't know. I can't stand disappointing her like this. I'm an idiot." He shrugged his shoulders.

Once Gabby and Mark incorporated some wind-down activities into their evening routine, Mark found he could usually get to bed around the same time as Gabby. Occasionally he would stay up alone for a while. As they got into the habit of taking a walk after dinner and then reading side by side, there were more nights when they felt in sync and kept the same schedule.

Create Closeness through Conversation

In a somewhat-famous study published in *Autism*, a group of sociologists conducted an experiment to identify conversational topics that would quickly develop emotional intimacy between two strangers. This project was an academic study, not a therapy exercise, but it yielded some interesting suggestions for couples who want to draw closer through conversation. The researchers identified a series of questions most likely to create a bond. Below is a selection from their list that you can ask each other. These questions can provide an example of gradually developing trust through increased disclosure, something that a partner with Asperger's may not have experienced. If nothing else, they can spark interesting discussions. There are no right or wrong answers, of course.

- Before making a phone call, do you ever rehearse what you're going to say? Why?
- What would constitute a perfect day for you?
- Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
- If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
- Complete this sentence: "I wish I had someone with whom I could share . . ."
- What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
- Share a personal problem and ask your partner's advice.

7 HABITS OF CLOSE COMMUNICATORS

Communication skills are key for a successful relationship, as discussed in chapter 3. Here are seven simple but important communication techniques that signal closeness and connection during a conversation. Although people with Asperger's may find the list more enlightening, it's not a bad idea for neurotypicals to brush up on these practices.

- Pausing and giving the other person plenty of time to talk.
- Using sounds to show you are listening: "Mmhmm," "Yeah," "Wow," "Aww."
- Reflecting back and affirming your partner's statements: "That sounds scary/sad/disappointing/intense."
- Softening your face; allowing your breathing to relax.
- Leaning toward your partner; showing curiosity and interest by facing them in an open posture (arms not crossed).
- Extending kindness to your partner: "I'm sorry that happened." "It's impressive that you did that."
- For mixed-neurotype couples in particular: Taking it slow. The neurotypical person may be naturally disclosing and confident about putting feelings into words. But the partner with Asperger's may be less practiced and want more time to concentrate and process what's being said.

Share the Obsession

A unique option available to neurodiverse couples is for the neurotypical partner to engender closeness by participating in the intense interests of the partner with Asperger's. Even their bona fide concentration issues can be riveted by a subject that they find appealing. Sometimes this passion is one of the things the neurotypical partner appreciates about their significant other. When someone with Asperger's gets charged up about a favorite subject, this can be a way for them to express affection and feel a bond. If their partner can join in and the couple can enthuse together, it's a fabulous and powerful means of connection.

If you're a neurotypical whose partner's interests aren't entirely on your wavelength, be respectful and affirm their excitement. Treat the subject with patience and tact so your partner doesn't feel rebuffed. If you give it an honest effort but find you really cannot get interested, encourage your partner to seek out others who will find joy in the topic along with them.

Make Time for Recreation and Renewal

The benefits of play and physical or imaginative activity in our lives are often overlooked, crowded out by errands and obligations. Couples need to carve out time when they can step away from life's pressures and appreciate each other.

Mark and Gabby found that gardening, going on a bike ride, or playing a simple, active game such as Frisbee led to pleasant

chatting or just enjoying a shared sensory experience. Some couples are energized by stimulating activities, and others prefer to spend more subdued time together. It's important to remember that people with Asperger's vary significantly in their sensory needs. Some are sensation-seeking, others sensory-avoiding. Other factors can affect your partner's ability to tolerate input as well. For example, attending a music performance may ordinarily be a delightful experience for a neurodiverse couple. Yet at the end of a particularly difficult work week, the same event might be a source of dread for the partner with Asperger's, who's too worn down to handle the crowd, sensory input, and late hours of such an event.

Keep these points in mind when planning activities together:

SOMETIMES PLANS HAVE TO CHANGE. The sensory profile of a person with Asperger's will fluctuate according to some factors they can control and others they cannot. This understandably confuses the neurotypical partner: "Why did we have such a great time at this event last time, and yet when we tried it again, my partner hated it?" I often hear this type of comment in therapy. The partner with Asperger's should do what they can to manage their capacity: scheduling a low-stress day before a high-stimulus outing, for example, if that helps. And the neurotypical partner should be understanding when their significant other isn't feeling up to attending an event that might overwhelm them.

A ROUTINE HELPS. Maintaining a familiar routine—going out to dinner every Wednesday, spending time outdoors on Saturday afternoons, going to the beach on the first week of June every summer—helps a person with Asperger’s be prepared, reducing the frequency and intensity of their sensory reactions. If you have Asperger’s, it also helps to pace yourself, limiting the number of tasks and activities you expect to do in a day so you conserve energy for events that take more stamina. You might schedule some days off as Thanksgiving approaches, for example, lightening your mental load to prepare for noisy, jam-packed, overstimulating dinner at your in-laws’ house.

NOT ALL RECREATION NEEDS TO BE EXCITING. If you’re the neurotypical partner, you may find that deliberately reducing stimulation for a while benefits you as well as your significant other. Slowing down the pace of life and noticing what it’s like when the two of you have quiet time together can be relaxing and refreshing. It could be an opportunity to learn a stress-reducing wellness practice, such as yoga, meditation, or tai chi. You might discover a meditative oasis you’ll want to return to, such as a library, museum, or public garden. Or try letting yourself settle into the comfort of your partner’s presence, which could offer more gratification than you would expect.

YOUR OVERLOAD AID KIT

When a person with Asperger's is having difficulty with sensory stimuli, they may have a hard time articulating it or even recognizing that sensory overload is why they feel the way they do. They may just have impulses to run away, hide, yell, or lash out. The best way for a neurodiverse couple to prepare for this is to agree on a game plan before attending a potentially problematic event, including coming up with a nonverbal signal such as grabbing the neurotypical partner's hand or coat and squeezing to convey distress.

Usually the obvious solution is to leave, but you can't always count on doing that immediately. As a backup, you can bring some items that will help the partner with Asperger's interrupt the escalating discomfort or panic and focus on something else. Carry a few of these items, depending on what helps:

- Noise-canceling headphones
- Sunglasses
- Bottle of water
- Bandana to cover their face
- Neck scarf to feel protected
- Cotton gloves
- Squeezable ice pack
- Gum or hard candy
- Fidget toys or other familiar items to squeeze or fiddle with
- Sachet or small bottle with peppermint or lemon oil to gently sniff

Learn Each Other's Love Language

We tend to give affection in the same form we would like to receive it. If we thrive on hearing compliments from others, for example, we're likely to gush about a friend's clothing choices, good taste, and enviable qualities. Those who crave hugs and physical closeness will physically extend themselves toward those they're close to and reach out for frequent contact. When these attempts to seek or offer love go unacknowledged in an intimate relationship, both partners feel disconnected, and the relationship suffers.

In *The 5 Love Languages* (Northfield Publishing, 2015) and its sequels, author Gary Chapman, PhD, posits that each of us has one or two preferred habits we use for showing affection. To know our partner well, we need to be good at observing which kinds of actions please them the most. The "languages" include compliments, touch, gift-giving, acts of service, and spending quality time together.

In a neurodiverse couple, the partner with Asperger's may be uninformed about how to name, or convey, the kind of attention they need. And even the neurotypical partner may not have given thought to which expressions of affection mean the most to them and work best for their significant other. When Gabby found an article on the *Love Languages* books and suggested Mark read it, he realized most of all he liked Gabby to sit near him and to hug him tight. He also appreciated when she would do things for him, such as pick up his favorite snacks or bring takeout home. On the other hand, he was uncomfortable about receiving gifts or compliments. These things made him feel awkward, like he was being put in the spotlight.

Whether or not the five categories that Chapman identified resonate with you, it's worth having conversations about how you and your partner like to communicate affection to each other.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

NOT EVERYONE LIKES COMPLIMENTS. For a person with Asperger's, receiving compliments and admiration can be a surprisingly complicated experience. Hearing someone say they are proud of you or that you are good at something usually gives a sensation of pleasure to neurotypicals. But someone with Asperger's doesn't necessarily experience praise in the same way. It can imply being evaluated and scrutinized, which many with Asperger's find distressing. It can also stir a sensation of dishonesty, or misrepresenting oneself, if the compliment does not match their self-image.

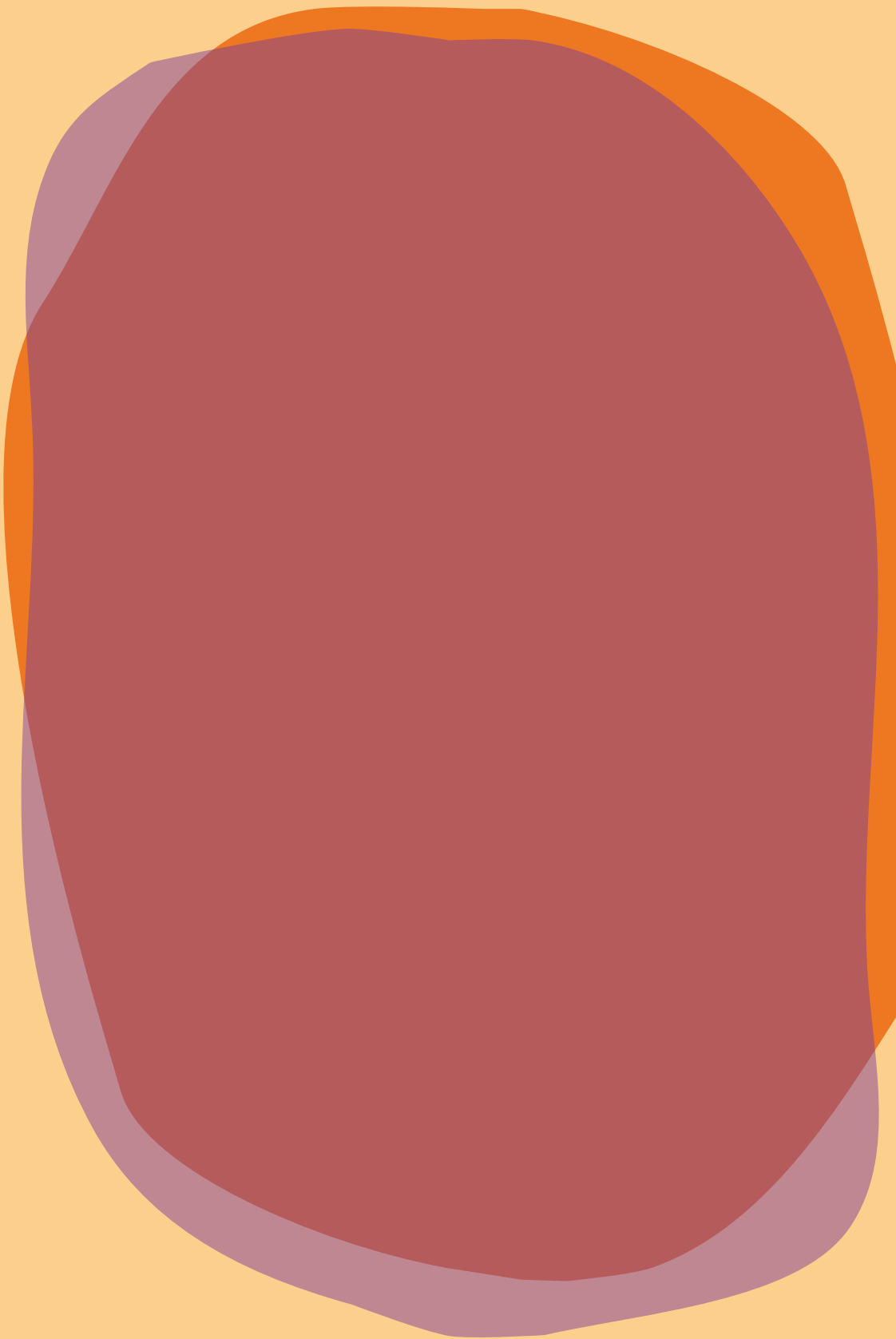
IT HELPS TO ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED. The neurotypical partner is likely to assume that their partner knows what they like without any explanation required. For example, Gabby appreciated varied expressions of love from Mark, such as buying her a massage or bringing breakfast in bed. She thought he would know how much she enjoyed these gestures because of the excitement she would show. But when they talked over this idea of love languages, Gabby learned she needed to point these things out to him. Mark didn't realize that his actions were extra-special gifts to her. At first Gabby felt frustrated that she had to spell this out to Mark, as if she were writing directions for him to follow. But in therapy she agreed to accept his efforts as genuinely loving and try not to analyze his motivations.

TOUCHING IS NOT ALWAYS TABOO. The cultural stereotype of Asperger's is of an aloof, chilly person who may even be phobic about touch. But this is inaccurate. Although they may find certain types of contact unwelcome or irritating depending on their ability to handle sensory input, some people with Asperger's delight in their partner's touch. Many people with Asperger's express themselves quite comfortably through touch or pressure. Sometimes these people tend to be less verbal and require regular movement and exertion.

They might habitually crack their knuckles, chew gum, or seek out athletic pursuits that provide intense physical sensations. Frank and patient conversations can help a neurodiverse couple determine the role of touch in their expressions of ardor.

SOMETIMES AN EXPLANATION IS REQUIRED. The neurotypical partner usually shows how much they care about their relationship by researching subjects that their partner values. Some examples would be finding out different cat breeds if their partner expresses interest in cats or locating an obscure vintage store to feed their partner's obsession with 1950s collectibles. But in response to that sign of affection, the partner with Asperger's may express their gratitude in a way isn't perceived as romantic. If you're the neurotypical partner, be open to your partner's unorthodox methods of expressing affection. If you're the partner with Asperger's, know that sometimes a seemingly obvious way of showing that you care may require some extra explaining.

ALLOW FOR SOME SEPARATION. After tension or an argument, most neurotypical partners tend to respond with a hug or kiss or casual conversation. But the partner with Asperger's may seek alone time to reflect, process, or soothe themselves. They may also prefer to work on the problem that caused the argument to identify concrete plans about how to handle it. For the mixed-neurotype couple, each partner needs to be willing to trust that the other person means well and is trying to make you happy. Chances are, if you do the things your partner seems to like, then they will feel cared for and reciprocate. Even if this doesn't precisely correspond to the behavior you are offering, you're still being loved, and that is worth cherishing.



Chapter Five

Focusing on Family and Social Life

Navigating relationships is more challenging for someone with Asperger's than it is for the general population, and this difficulty can extend beyond romantic relationships to include friends and family. But the extra challenges are more than worth it. People with Asperger's often rely heavily on family connections because they are less likely to sustain outside social contacts. Ideally, their family brings them close and trusting connections—a sense of being united that buffers them from the unkindness they may experience from the outside world.

Why Family and Social Events Matter

When people talk about what constitutes a good life, having time to be with family and friends is always near the top of the list. Enjoying time with our inner circle allows us to relax and be accepted and valued for who we are. This is all the more true for those with Asperger's, who may feel unwelcome in the wider social world or find themselves overloaded by the cacophony of public spaces. People with Asperger's use the term "masking" to describe what they must do to fit in or appear normal in the public realm. For many, living with Asperger's means having to stay vigilant, monitoring one's behavior, mannerisms, facial expression, and voice to avoid uncomfortable events. Among family, in an atmosphere of acceptance and calm, the mask can be dropped.

We identify our family by biological ties, but often we expand that definition to include people we have chosen to invite into our lives as adults. Our social network of family and friends forms the hub of our lives. Celebrating with and entertaining their friends and family affirms the home a couple has created together as a place of refuge and emotional safety. Annual or regular events mark the passage of time and help us build shared memories with intimates and close friends. These benefits might not be apparent to someone with Asperger's, especially if they come from a family that didn't function well. A neurodiverse couple will need to balance the discomfort with socializing and need for solitude that are often part of Asperger's with the long-term benefits we get from our social connections.

Molly and David

Many people think of Asperger's as something that affects children without really considering that the condition continues to affect people's lives into adulthood. It's not unusual for a child to be diagnosed with Asperger's, then in short order for one of the parents to also be identified with the diagnosis. This was the case with David and Molly when they came to me for couples therapy.

When their seven-year-old son Abe was evaluated and found to be autistic, Molly's mother raised the question of whether David might be on the spectrum as well. As Molly discussed this with friends, others in her inner circle raised similar questions, saying things such as, "You know, now that I think of it, this does sound a lot like David."

David was employed as an engineer, a career path that tends to attract people who have Asperger's. He worked with colleagues who had either been diagnosed with a spectrum-related condition themselves or who told good-natured jokes about it. In David's workplace, the condition was accepted and even affirmed. Thanks to this familiarity, their son's diagnosis didn't come as a shock, and both parents were motivated to get him any support he might need. But the guess that David shared his son's condition caused Molly to take a fresh look at her husband's parenting skills.

David had been increasingly abrupt and critical with Abe since he started elementary school in the past year. He pressured Abe to learn to tie his shoes—something their son was having difficulty learning—and frequently scolded him to pick up his toys. David insisted he was holding his son to a high standard, and that this would do him good. David would refuse

Molly's influence even when Abe cried or protested. Molly was concerned that David's behavior was creating setbacks for Abe instead of encouraging his independence. She expressed her concerns to David. He made an appointment and talked with his doctor about his irritability and Abe's new diagnosis. He was referred for testing and found he was also on the spectrum and was diagnosed with Asperger's.

So What Just Happened?

When Molly questioned David about all this, he acknowledged that his own father had been harsh, even militaristic, once he entered school, declaring that the time for "babying" was over. It became apparent that David was operating from this older model of what a good father did for his son. He didn't know how to nurture Abe while still having expectations for him. The couple agreed they would use therapy to find ways to collaborate on parenting. One goal was to find workarounds for David's rigidity and his fear that Abe might fall behind unless pushed. The couple later speculated that David's father may also have some of the traits of Asperger's.

David's parenting style was related to his experience of growing up in his family. However, his stern manner was not a result of Asperger's. Because he didn't have other models to refer to, he copied his own father's critical disciplinary approach. In mixed-neurotype couples, the neurotypical partner may look to Asperger's as the explanation for their significant other's choices about parenting. However, it's impossible to generalize about parenting style or ability based on an Asperger's diagnosis. Parents with Asperger's have a broad array of parenting styles and capabilities and are quite capable of being loving and empathic. The neurotypical parent who respects and loves their partner with Asperger's and values their role in their child's life is most likely to enjoy a great marriage and a happy child.

Share Your Family Story

When people come to recognize they have Asperger's as adults, many go through a retrospective of their entire lives. With the element of Asperger's now a part of their identity, they review key events with a new understanding. Often the trait explains experiences that they hadn't previously understood. The diagnosis behaves like foreshadowing in a movie. It's a continuous thread running through every scene, hinted at on the periphery, until finally you discover it was present all along.

For the neurotypical partner in a relationship, witnessing or participating in this kind of retrospective can help them experience more patience and compassion for their partner who now knows they have Asperger's. Integrating Asperger's into your life as an adult is a labor of recognition, so to recount that to one's partner means sharing intimate emotions and vulnerabilities.

This works both ways, of course; either partner can feel welcome to tell their story. The neurotypical person has their own experiences to relate as well. The neurodiverse couple will likely find commonalities in their histories despite the difference in their neurotypes. The more we learn about our partner's background and the influences in their life, the better we can understand each other.

Sharing your life story is an ongoing conversation rather than a single sit-down session. But here are some questions for both of you to consider that can spark thoughtful dialogues about the past:

- What is your earliest memory? Do you have any specific sensory recollections that come to you as you remember it?
- Do you remember being a child with specific interests that did not seem to appeal to others, unique interests that were not shared with other children?

- Did you have many friends and enjoy socializing as a child or teen?
- What do you recall about any difficulties with coordination or problems learning or imitating? For example, did you have problems with tying shoes, doing athletic activities, or learning to swim, dance, or ride a bicycle?
- Do you have any memories of feeling cut off from other kids your age or thinking your peers were dull or uninteresting?

Map Your Similarities

Don't let your differences dominate the conversation. What are the parts of a conflict that you can agree on? To help sort that out, try creating this visual reference:

- Draw two circles side by side, partially overlapping in the middle (a Venn diagram). One circle represents your ideas, the other your partner's.
- What can you name as areas of agreement? Write those in the space where the circles overlap. Talk it over until you can list at least three items you agree on.
- Take a break if you need to. Then move on to the separate areas of the circles with each of you noting where you do not see eye to eye.
- Discuss your areas of disagreement, and see if you can find more common ground to add to the center of the diagram.
- When the discussion runs its course or one or both of you starts feeling defensive, thank each other for sharing and move on to something pleasant or distracting you can do together. You can take a fresh look at the diagram later when you're ready for more discussion.

This exercise helps you and your partner calm down, realize you're not in direct opposition, and reaffirm your shared values and mutual interests. For example, if an argument started with your mother-in-law making critical comments about your parenting during a visit, the two of you might write this in the center of the diagram:

- We want our home to be a place of respect.
- We are both doing our best as parents.
- The children behave well most of the time.
- Each partner should have the other person's back.

Having agreed on these points, it's easier to calmly share opinions that the other partner disagrees with: "She doesn't respect me; she shouldn't have said that." "She means well; she's entitled to share her opinion." Further discussion could yield another affirmation for the center of the diagram: "We'll decide for ourselves how to raise our kids, even if others have different ideas."

Putting all of this on paper gives you a bit of distance from the problem so you can get a clearer perspective. A visual reference helps put the discussion on even footing if the partner with Asperger's has any difficulty with auditory processing or comprehension. Recognizing and recording that you agree on at least a few items will reassure you that you are connected and motivate you to seek further agreement.

Defuse Defensiveness

Everyone knows what it feels like to become defensive; it's a universal experience. When we enter a defensive state in a conflict, we tend to focus on the differences between our position and that of our partner. This drives a wedge between

us, making it harder to agree on a solution. And it undercuts our ability to offer compassion and curiosity to our partner.

Defensiveness can become a habit for anyone. For many people with Asperger's, their defensiveness is rooted in a trauma response. So many have experienced bullying and being socially shunned that they're highly sensitized to being rejected. Researchers for *Biological Psychology* have identified an amplified fear response in people with Asperger's when they perceive disapproval. Their experiences of being excluded make them primed to pick up on any hint of rejection. The antidote to defensiveness is for partners to soothe each other and provide frequent reassurance. As a result, both people feel confident that they are on the same team.

Arguments about children and discipline are a common topic of contention for parents. When contested decision points come up, each of you needs to know how to examine your thoughts and state them clearly so your partner can consider and respond.

Here is a strategy for moving past disagreements and enabling collaboration.

TALK IT OVER SOONER, NOT LATER. If you tackle sensitive topics—such as opinions about child-rearing, finances, spiritual beliefs, etc.—when the stakes are not so high, it gets easier to take on real-life struggles. Use some of the time you spend together to speak hypothetically about these things so any disagreements won't be so heated. Be sure to review the communication techniques discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

PARENTING AND ASPERGER'S

Depending on their temperament, a parent with Asperger's can be more likely than their neurotypical partner to have trouble with the stamina that parenting requires. The delightful day-in, day-out that small children bless us with—crying, yelling, door-slamming, messes and spills—can try any parent's patience. But they can be especially rough for the highly sensitive parent with Asperger's, who's constantly expending effort and energy to filter out the stimuli in their environment. A parent with Asperger's may also have trouble adjusting to the spontaneous changes and unexpected events that children can trigger.

In every couple with children, each partner is better at some aspects of parenting than others. When disagreements over parenting methods come up, neurotypical parents should remember that their partner with Asperger's may have a neurological basis for wanting to do things differently.

Discuss Emotional Labor

I often talk with couples about the concept of *emotional labor*. This term, originally popularized online, refers to the tasks required to manage life at home, maintain social connections, and ensure adequate caretaking for everyone. Many of these activities are done behind the scenes without anyone naming them, and most often these things are done by women. Examples of emotional labor include:

- Setting appointments for dental check-ups
- Getting flea prevention medicine for pets and administering it monthly

- Remembering to buy birthday cards for friends and family members
- Getting the dryer cleaned annually for fire prevention
- Communication with classroom teacher and PTA representative

Every couple should consider the nuts and bolts of what it takes to operate a household and attend to the needs of two adults or a family, from meal planning to remembering birthdays and medical appointments. Men are not typically raised to see themselves as responsible for activities of homemaking and caregiving. If you're a woman married to a man who has Asperger's and believe his condition is at the root of your concerns about the division of responsibilities in your household, it's worth talking to other women in similar relationships with neurotypical men. Your partner has some limitations that are unique to Asperger's, such as social awkwardness or being preoccupied with certain subjects. Apart from those traits, though, you are likely to be surprised at the number of women who complain about the same things you do.

If it seems as if your partnership has an unequal distribution of emotional labor, here are some ways to address the situation:

MAKE A LIST. For people who want to make changes to the balance of responsibilities in their household, it's worth listing the tasks and duties you routinely take on and sharing the list with your partner. Use it for a discussion to consider the best use of your time or to figure out how your household can do things more efficiently. Refrain from venting your frustrations or raising your voice; the conversation will be most productive if you treat it as a meeting, a time to share information and problem-solve together.

ASK FOR CHANGE. Make explicit requests of your partner, rather than complaining about the situation. Start with a few specific changes that you'd like to make, ask your partner how they'd prefer to continue the conversation, and make a plan to follow up.

THINK EQUALLY. Express your need for your partner's presence and involvement, and avoid using terms such as "help" or "support" in this conversation. You are two adults cohabiting, and each has responsibilities, so working this out is a mutual benefit. You're not in an arrangement where one person is helping the other.

CONSIDER THE ALTERNATIVE. If you're the partner being asked to step up your contribution, try to imagine what would happen if your significant other just stopped doing the tasks being discussed. What effect would that have on day-to-day life?

MAKE CHANGES IN STAGES. If the situation requires one partner to take on a lot of new responsibilities, they can start by adding one new role or task, integrating that into their routine, then taking on the next. Negotiate and share feedback to figure out the best way to transition to a new status quo.

TRY LETTING GO. The person who feels like they are carrying a heavier load may experiment with giving up some of the duties they've taken on. It could be that in some cases you're overdoing things.

The ordinary duties of contemporary life can be considerable, and most people are managing a lot of demands. A neurodiverse couple may find that once a new division of labor is agreed on, the partner with Asperger's may change their habits quite easily by following an updated list or template. Their preference for organization, routine, and systematic procedures makes people

with Asperger's uniquely positioned to tackle a new set of responsibilities.

Take Leisure Time as a Couple

Leisure time can be hard to find in contemporary life, and yet we all require time to refuel and to find our equilibrium. Couples with mixed neurotypes are likely to have some different needs for leisure time. Sensory issues, varying energy levels, and conflicting preferences for recreational activities can result in the need to make compromises. But with the right attitude, you can make differences work in your favor by introducing each other to new and enjoyable ways of relaxing and having fun.

Keep these practices in mind as you and your partner plan leisure time together:

STAY FLEXIBLE. Along with effective communication, being flexible with each other is an indispensable tool for the neurodiverse couple. Your partner's physical sensations and experience of an event may be quite different from yours, so both of you need to be willing to respond to changing circumstances and adapt your plans accordingly.

ACCOUNT FOR ALONE TIME. The partner with Asperger's in the relationship—who's likely more introverted or sensory-sensitive—may require more alone time than their neurotypical partner. This should be taken into account when budgeting time for recreation. During long trips or vacations, try to build in time when the two of you can be separate for a while. Fitting in solitude amid work demands and social or parenting obligations can be challenging; there may be times when one partner can parent solo to give the other some solitude. Trading child-care time with friends or relatives can help you carve out some me time.

DON'T FORGET DATE NIGHT. It's easy for parents to let their relationship as a couple become secondary in importance. Neurodiverse couples are no different. Use your relationship calendar (chapter 2, see page 37) to make sure you spend time together on a regular basis, away from the responsibilities of home and childcare.

BE A COUPLE FOR YOUR KIDS. Children benefit from learning that they need to allow their parents to have some uninterrupted time together at home. It's vitally important for children's development that they get to see you and your partner enjoying each other's company; seeing their parents laughing at each other's jokes, hugging, or sitting close is reassuring for them. If the children take center stage most of the time, there's no room for these moments of pleasure for the couple.

Starting at an early age, encourage your children to develop an age-appropriate capacity for independent activity: A ball of clay will entertain a four-year-old for 10 minutes or so; a six-year-old can keep busy with a library book. Children age eight or older often value their own alone time to pursue their interests.

Bob and Claire

Claire knew Bob was close with his family, and that he looked forward to their winter getaways every year. But here they were on another holiday trip, and she found herself wishing she could generate some enthusiasm. Claire, who was diagnosed with Asperger's when she was a child, had no space to herself in the crowded vacation house other than the couple's bedroom.

The presence of the large-screen TV in the living room was intrusive. She adored her own children, but found their cousins loud and annoying. Claire missed the comfort of her familiar routine at work and home. Worst of all, she was getting snappy with Bob. Her bad mood was becoming a pattern on these trips, and she could tell it was upsetting her husband.

Taking their two kids to spend a long weekend in a rental home with Bob's parents, plus his sister's family, was just too much for Claire. Her sensory issues were usually manageable, but the marathon experience of airline travel and then staying with a full household of people in a strange place was taking its toll.

So What Just Happened?

Claire felt guilty for acting so unpleasant. Because their work in couples therapy had been progressing, Claire knew she should seek Bob out and let him know what was bothering her. She didn't know what they could do to ease the situation, but trusted that together they could come up with some ideas or at least get on the same page. It was awkward with so many people around, but Claire resolved to give it a try.

She invited Bob on a walk and confided, "I know I'm acting really unpleasant. The house just feels super crowded to me. I don't know how to take breaks or handle this." They deliberated about a few ideas and concluded that adding some routine would be worth a try. They agreed Bob would take care of the kids for the two mornings that remained of the trip so Claire could have some time to prepare for the day and listen to music or write in her journal. If she needed an afternoon break as well, Bob would arrange for his family to watch the kids so he and Claire could nap together.

The rest of the visit still was not Claire's ideal vacation, but she felt better. She appreciated the support that Bob had given,

both by listening to her and by following through to address her concerns. Bob knew how to take responsibility for his share of emotional labor in the relationship. He committed to letting his relatives know that he and Claire wanted to be involved with planning the next holiday. He told Claire he would offer suggestions for future trips and approach his parents about trying something new next year without making it a conversation about Claire needing accommodations.

Explore Your Roots

We're all a product of our upbringing. Reflecting together on your respective family histories can be an illuminating exercise for a couple, bringing you closer together and providing insight about how and why your partner interacts with their family. One of the reasons that Claire participates in holiday trips with Bob's family, even though they're difficult for her, is because she knows it's been a tradition for him for almost his whole life. As you learn more about your partner's history and background, you'll develop a more three-dimensional understanding of the context of their life and the events and attitudes they've experienced. This includes aspects of their family life they would prefer to leave behind. You will develop greater empathy for each other as you share your stories, including the mundane, the hilarious, and the painful.

Here are some ideas for sharing and exploring each other's histories:

USE YOUR SENSES. It's easier to connect with old memories if you engage your senses, whether it's looking at old photos or handling an old toolbox that belonged to your grandfather. Both partners can benefit from this, but people with Asperger's are particularly likely to recollect more easily through interaction with physical items. Visits to a parent's house or your old neighborhood are good opportunities to spark

reminiscences by retrieving mementos from the attic or exploring old haunts.

CREATE A CHRONICLE. As you share your stories and remember more about your families, consider having your partner record your memories in an audio, video, or written journal. Capturing recollections and family stories will enable you to preserve and share them with your relatives and with your own children. Here are some questions you can use for reflection:

- Who was your family as a group? How were they viewed by others?
- Are there similarities between your family growing up and your current family? What aspects are different?
- What stories have you heard about your parents when they were younger or about previous generations?
- What three words would you choose to describe your relationship with your family?
- Now that you are an adult, do you feel proud of your family? If not, what changes would it take to experience your family as a source of pride?
- How would you prefer your spouse's family to relate to you?
- What type of relationship would you want your children to have with their grandparents?

MAKE A GENOGRAM. A diagram that represents family relationships, a genogram help us see patterns and connections across family members or generations. It can help your partner learn who's who. You can make your genogram as simple or elaborate as you wish.

1. Start with a plain sheet of paper. Beginning at the bottom of the page, draw symbols that represent yourself and your partner, writing your full names below the shapes. The genogram system typically uses circles for women and squares for men. Now add your siblings, if you have them.
2. Then above your own names, use the same shapes for your own set or sets of parents and their siblings. Draw a line to show the connections between you and your parents, then work upward on the page to include their parents. Keep adding levels to the page until you reach the limits of your knowledge of family history.
3. Thinking about Asperger's, add details to the diagram. Note brief anecdotes and any eccentricities or difficulties you've heard of in your family background. Add other details that round out the stories, such as level of education, job history, and health history.
4. Revisit this genogram periodically and use it to affirm your legacy as someone with Asperger's in your family. Although Asperger's is a variation from the norm, you may find that it was associated with some of the more fascinating and innovative members of your family—maybe even some notable inventors or creators.

Ask for Input

If you have a therapist or support group, you can get ideas for talking to your children by checking in with other people and finding out how they communicate their feelings when the words are difficult.

It also may be worth checking out whether your children or other family members are longing to hear you say, "I love you."

You can write the words down on a card and ask them to talk about it with you. You can add it to a text message and say, "I know I don't say it, but I hope you know I do love you." These

are some small ways to get the message across and build up to telling them so in a conversation if you're not comfortable with that yet.

ASPERGER'S AND THE FAMILY

People diagnosed with Asperger's are often motivated to identify family members, including those of previous generations, who probably had Asperger's as well. Sometimes during discussions of family histories, a neurotypical person may come to realize evidence of Asperger's somewhere in their own family background. Because it's only in recent decades that Asperger's has been closely studied, in many families the presence of Asperger's (diagnosed or not) has been associated with struggle and being disadvantaged. But history suggests a proud legacy of inventors, creators, and innovators who had or are suspected of having it. With the right support and sufficient kindness, people who have Asperger's can thrive and form extremely happy families.

Say "Good Morning"

What's the morning routine in your household? Some families are orderly, while others manage with a higher degree of chaos and fluctuation. Whatever the circumstances, most people appreciate the acknowledgment of a greeting in the morning. Make a point to say "Good morning" to your family and inquire if they slept well; it's a simple but meaningful way to connect at the beginning of your day. It shows recognition

that you are under the same roof and that you have a sufficiently close relationship to see each other in your pajamas.

In a neurodiverse couple, the neurotypical partner is sometimes disappointed by a sensation of loneliness. The neurotypical person often expresses a concern in therapy that their partner might not notice them or care how they feel. If you have Asperger's, making a point to share a morning greeting and inquiring throughout the day about each other's well-being may seem superficial. But doing so can soothe your neurotypical partner's worries about connecting with you. It's an important way for everyone sharing your home to show that you value one another.

This practice also helps children with managing any anxiety or distress they may feel about the day ahead. It shows our kids that home is a place to receive support and connection, a trustworthy place that's predictable. This fortifies them so they can better handle whatever duress and challenge awaits them on the schoolyard or the athletic field. For a child with Asperger's, these small moments of connection and acceptance can be even more valuable, since the outside world is more socially challenging.

If you're not in the habit of verbal salutations or you and your partner don't always see each other in the morning, you could write a message on a card and leave it on the bedside table. For a young child, you might set a favorite book by their bed, as a promise that the two of you will read it when you get home from work. You could use your phone or device to send a morning greeting with pictures. The words themselves are a placeholder for the feelings you're transmitting. Whether they're delivered tenderly or humorously or groggily is much less important than taking the initiative and just saying something.

Say “I Love You” to Your Kids

When someone with Asperger’s who’s emotionally subdued becomes a parent, they should try to extend their emotional range. If your neurotypical partner is concerned that you’re not verbally expressing love to your kids, they’re correct about children’s developmental needs and parental bonding. Your children need that explicit affirmation of love from you, and because of your unique role in their life, nobody else can say it to them with the same significance.

Either partner in a neurodiverse relationship may have grown up without hearing the words “I love you” and may need to make a deliberate effort to build up the habit. Some parents are simply embarrassed to say something that feels vulnerable or soft, even to a child. If you have Asperger’s, you probably find it important to be genuine and hesitate to express affection unless you know in your heart of hearts that the feeling is sincere. And although most parents do love their children, they may not feel loving toward them every single moment.

If you’re not in the habit of saying “I love you,” you may find it’s not as difficult as you thought once you start doing it. But if you find it challenging, here are some ideas for making a change of habit:

ASK YOURSELF SOME QUESTIONS. If you’re feeling resistant to saying “I love you,” some reflection may help. Consider these questions.

- Why do you suppose you haven’t been saying it?
- Are you from a cultural background where affection is communicated less directly?

- Did your parents or family express love verbally? Was it exceptional or a regular event?
- Was love withheld in your family? Was it conditional, only given when you performed to a certain standard or completed something?
- Would you say you have any resentments or hurt feelings from your past that interfere with saying this phrase?
- What are the times you have felt closest to your family?
- How do you know when you're feeling that way? Can you identify thoughts, emotions, body sensations, or visual images that give you this sensation?
- What do you enjoy or celebrate about your child?
- What have you been doing to demonstrate your caring or appreciation for your children if you haven't been saying I love you?

START A DIALOGUE. Discussing those questions and your responses with your partner will be worthwhile and may help you experience some vulnerability. This kind of conversation can help you express what kind of atmosphere you both want in your family and what influences have shaped the people you are today.

TALKING WITH YOUR KIDS ABOUT ASPERGER'S

As a couple, you can consider together the question of whether and how to discuss Asperger's within your family. Young children only need to hear a simple explanation; avoid medical terminology, which a child may take to mean the parent is sick. Because their brains are not fully developed, they have limited ability to think beyond themselves. So put your explanation in terms of the immediate effect the parent's condition has on the child: "You know how I got upset about the video game being loud? I'm sorry, I have trouble handling loud noises, it wasn't that I was mad at you. It just hurts because my ears are so sensitive. If you can keep your door shut, I will try not to yell about it."

If You Have Kids, Ask About Homework

Homework is a leading cause of tension in many homes with school-age children, especially those with children who are autistic or have learning disorders. Similar to saying good morning, inquiring about homework appears to be a superficial gesture. Yet it demonstrates caring and interest on a level the child can understand. Ideally, when parents ask their child about homework, the message the child receives is, "You and your world matter to me. I want to feel connected to you. If I can help, I want to."

In a mixed-neurotype couple, managing the homework situation typically requires planning and structure. Bob and Claire, after discussing ways to address it and sharing their perceptions, worries, and observations about their children, decided that Claire would take the point. She would actively track how their children were progressing and keep Bob updated.

You may prefer to divide the work in your household, with each of you supervising on certain days of the week. Alternatively, you could each help your children with the subjects you specifically enjoy or have a knack for. A great way to give your child organizational skills is to use your relationship calendar, or some other system, so you all know what needs to be completed and which parent is on duty. This will ease things between you and your partner and teach your child how to manage themselves.

Conversations with kids about their homework can be fraught, especially for a parent with Asperger's who's not verbose. To show active caring and involvement and prompt a discussion rather than an interrogation, try asking questions such as these:

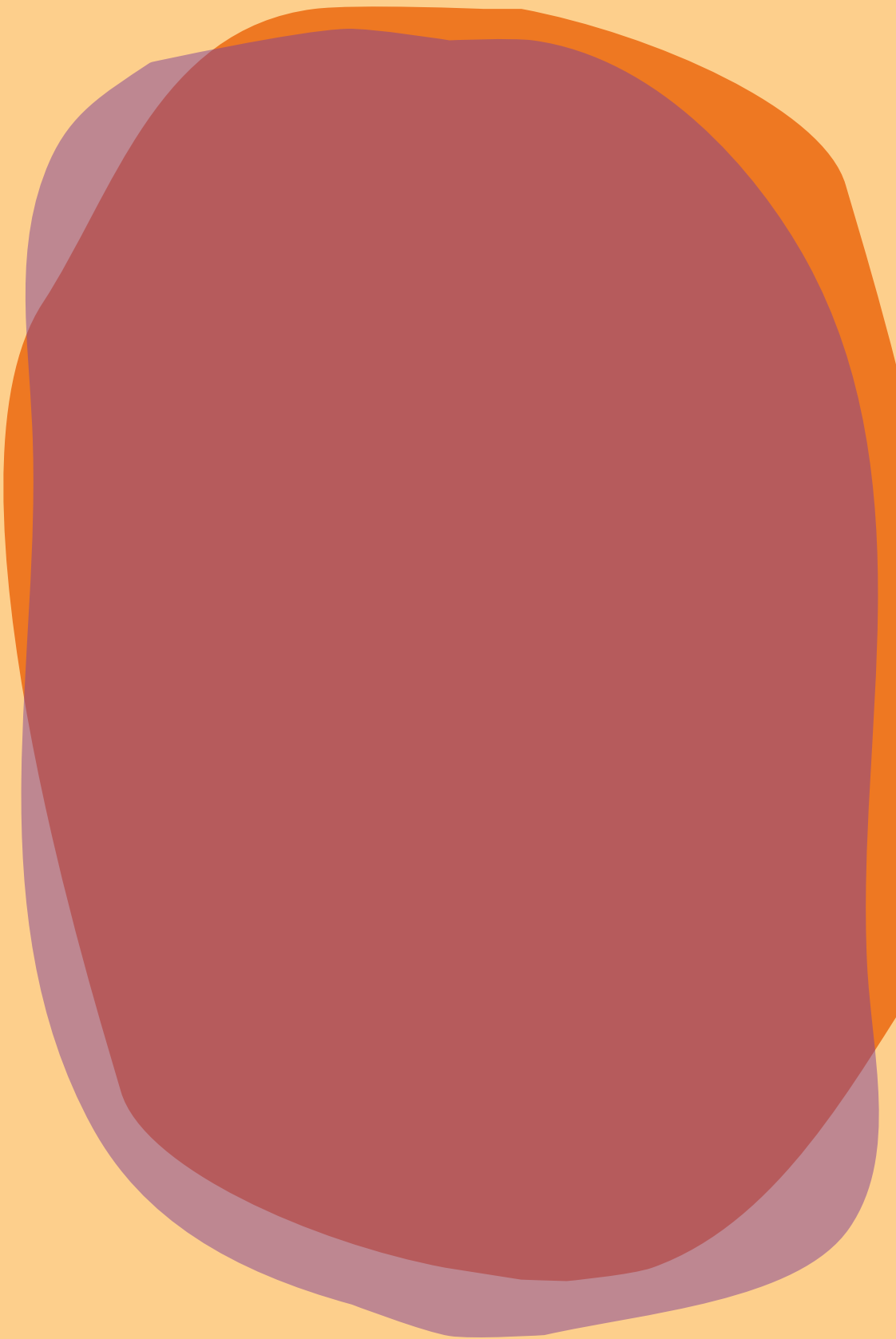
Ask kids of any age:

- Is there anything we can do to help you have an easier time with homework?
- Do you think the homework is helping you learn?
- How's everybody in your class doing with their homework lately?
- Would it help you get homework done if we thought of a reward you could look forward to?
- Are we helping not enough, too much, or just about the right amount with your homework?

Ask middle- and high-schoolers:

- What do you think of your study habits?
- What are your thoughts on your academic future based on how homework is going?
- How is your homework load feeling this year compared to last year?
- Would you like me to back off more about homework? Should I move in closer and keep tabs on you? Give me some feedback on this anytime, even if you don't know what to say about it right now.

When both of you show your child that you will always be on their side, homework stress is reduced, and the home is a more enjoyable place for everyone.



Chapter Six

Cultivating Emotional and Physical Intimacy

For most couples, emotional and physical intimacy acts as the glue that holds them together. But these feelings of closeness can ebb and flow during long-term relationships. Mixed-neurotype couples in particular may go through periods when their focus shifts away from sexual energy, and they must find other means of affirming their connection. In this chapter, we'll consider some methods of preserving and restoring the intimacy that's at the heart of your bond with your partner.

Why Intimacy Matters

Expressing intimacy and the special closeness of your relationship provides each partner with validation and security. The resulting trust, emotional safety, and comfort help buffer stress and make life worthwhile.

Although both partners in a mixed-neurotype relationship can treasure their connection, problems around intimacy can arise because of different expectations about affirming that connection. The neurotypical partner may need and expect repeated assurance and expression of their value in the relationship. The partner with Asperger's may find this unnecessary and feel as though it goes without saying that they want to be with their partner. After all, they're here, right? What more proof is needed?

Addressing Mismatched Expectations

If you're the neurotypical partner, the reason you value compliments, gifts, surprises, and other expressions of affection is that these things affirm that you make a positive difference in the life of your partner. But your partner doesn't think that way, and silently hoping they'll figure it out will probably increase your frustration. Often the partner with Asperger's has participated in this type of behavior at the start of your relationship, but at some point feels, "Well, that's settled." They don't recognize the value of or feel the need to continue bestowing these tokens of appreciation.

Rely on direct communication instead. When you make specific requests, your significant other will be unlikely to refuse and in fact may be genuinely pleased to know how they can make you happy.

Here are some examples:

- “Would you be willing to take charge of planning one night out for us every month? I’d like some more romantic time together.”
- “Remember when we were first dating and we took that spontaneous trip to the beach? How soon do you think we could do something like that again? I need a getaway to look forward to.”
- “My nerves are frayed. I’d love it if you would give me a massage. If you feel like going a little further, I’d probably be up for that, too.”
- “I need to hear you say you love me more often. It’s important to me and would make me feel secure.”

If you’re the person with Asperger’s in the relationship, consider rituals or reminders to prompt you to let your neurotypical partner know you care about them. For example, you might set an alert on your phone so that you’ll send a friendly message to your partner in the middle of a workday. You might make it a rule to bring home flowers or a favorite snack on the first day of every month. If it’s genuinely unrealistic for you to send off an email or make a call when the two of you are separated, let your partner know why. That way, they’ll know not to expect to hear from you.

One more note about this for neurotypicals: Although pragmatism and lack of sentimentality can be present in your partner with Asperger’s, what looks like complacency can be comfort and ease. Your partner takes considerable pleasure in simple companionship. Their love may be quiet, but whether you are hauling sleeping bags to the laundromat after a camping trip or picking out new patio furniture, they just enjoy having your company. Any experience can be exceptional, as long as you are there with them.

Robin and Jake

Robin (who uses they/them pronouns) and Jake had grown up together as young adults and married shortly after high school. Over the previous year Jake, the neurotypical partner, had made several remarks about his “hetero-flexible” curiosity. At that time Robin, who has Asperger’s, acknowledged to Jake that they’d experienced gender dysphoria since before puberty. After taking some time to reflect with Jake on this theme in their life and spending several months in individual therapy, Robin began the process of medical care for female-to-male gender transition. They sought couples therapy in anticipation of major changes to come. Both were on board, but Robin was feeling increased urgency about the transition process. With Robin’s sensory needs and heightened emotions in anticipation of their gender confirmation, the couple was having some difficulty managing their complicated reactions.

Due to discomfort with their body, Robin had become uneasy with expressions of affection and physical closeness. Jake was an understanding and accepting partner and remained attracted to Robin, but he told them in a therapy session that he felt lonely. “I want to support you, but when I’m just leaving you alone, it doesn’t seem like I’m doing anything. I still feel confident about us. I know you’re going through changes, but you’re pulling away, and I’m turning into a bystander here. How can I show up for you?”

So What Just Happened?

Robin had always been a bit stoic, and they would sometimes go through episodes of being nonverbal that lasted a day or two. Jake had felt comforted by and drawn to that quietness. But it was unsettling for Jake that Robin was so internally focused with such a huge change going on. Jake wanted to be

patient, but he understandably had some of his own uncertainties about the future. He wanted Robin to be more forthcoming, but knew that if he pressured them to speak, it would only make things more awkward.

Robin acknowledged Jake and his need for connection, saying, "I hope our marriage is stable, but I can't think that far ahead. I appreciate your commitment, but I am just feeling kind of torn. I don't want to expect promises about the future from you when things are changing. I know I am expecting a lot of you to go through this with me. This isn't a choice for me anymore. It's taking everything I've got to just hang in there and wait for my surgery."

In therapy, the couple agreed to take more time to hang out and communicate, even if it didn't involve any emotionally deep or revealing conversations. I suggested they do simple activities together, such as watching movies or TV shows that they both enjoyed. This would give them something external to focus on while they spent time together. Having a shared experience during times of stress helps a mixed-neurotype couple; they can bond by distracting the partner with Asperger's, taking them out of their internal experience of overthinking. Such relief from internal tension gives the partner with Asperger's the ability to verbalize more, even if briefly. This is reassuring for both people.

Having shared that the circumstances were stressful for both of them, the couple found ways to relieve tension with humor, quoting TV programs they liked or referring to favorite inside jokes around the house or when on errands. Robin was a talented mimic and took this as an opportunity to have more playful moments with gender roles, deliberately deepening their voice and adopting conventionally male mannerisms to make Jake laugh. Even as they faced an unknown future, the couple created shared experiences. They used their favorite shows and their shared humor as a reference point to enjoy everyday life. This helped reassure them that their bond was solid.

Make Small Connections

There's a widespread belief that people with Asperger's don't have the ability to perceive their own or other people's feelings. This idea came from research that's since been invalidated. The current thinking is that people with Asperger's use language differently than neurotypicals do, which is why they can seem emotionally distant. The truth is, people with Asperger's possess a full capacity for emotions and may be highly sensitive. Those who aren't can improve their emotional skills, just as neurotypical people do.

The partner with Asperger's in a relationship can seem inattentive to their neurotypical significant other because, for them, the purpose of communication is to convey information. Someone with Asperger's can be puzzled at all the talking that goes on around them, which seems unnecessary; they wonder what the point of it could be. In a secure relationship, the partner with Asperger's is likely to assume if there are no complaints, everything is alright. On the other hand, the neurotypical mind is attuned to communication serving many purposes, such as establishing status and power or acknowledging things one prefers not to state directly.

Case in point: Jake told Robin in therapy that he'd really appreciate it if they would check in more frequently during the workday. He said it would make him feel more connected as a couple. Robin didn't particularly share this need and on the face of it saw no practical value. But they began sending a GIF or meme at lunch or forwarding something they'd been reading about surgery, transitioning, or other timely topics.

This required minimal effort on Robin's part, and they could see that it gave Jake some happiness and satisfaction.

At first, when Jake had raised concerns about their lack of closeness, Robin insisted that they weren't doing anything wrong and that Jake was being needy. With time to reflect, Robin was able to appreciate his requests and accommodate them. After that, when Robin was preoccupied, even at home, they also learned to let Jake know what they were thinking about and what he could expect. They might send a text such as this if Jake was requesting a conversation when Robin felt unable to concentrate or fully participate:

Jake: I want to catch up w u

Robin: rn I need space-out time on phone
pls nudge me in 15-20?
I do want to connect

Leave a Thoughtful Note

When Robin and Jake realized how much stress they were experiencing, they returned to a check-in system they'd used earlier in their relationship by leaving Post-it Notes for each other. One evening Robin tucked a note with a winking emoji-type doodle in Jake's wallet. When Jake opened it to buy lunch the next day, it gave him a sweet feeling and revived a fond memory from when they were much younger.

If you need help remembering to post a note to your partner, use your calendar to schedule a time.

STRESS AND ASPERGER'S

When overwhelmed by stress or emotion, a person with Asperger's may withdraw because they need time to knit themselves together neurologically. People with Asperger's report becoming drowsy or confused prior to these episodes, referred to as "shutdowns." It's not a state someone chooses, and they rarely have the means to stop it. They can also experience meltdowns during intense times, which are similar to shutdowns, but with the person's energy directed outwardly instead of inwardly. They may yell or throw or break things, but not out of anger; these experiences come from a state of feeling overwhelmed. During times of stress, the neurotypical partner can offer support by coming up with activities to do together to provide diversion, as well as by finding their own solo occupations so their partner can have some time alone.

Cultivate Loving Thoughts

Per *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, most of the problems couples deal with are ongoing. Only about one-third of the topics couples argue about finally get resolved, while the remaining two-thirds are issues that occur repeatedly, usually relating to personal beliefs or differences in temperament, inborn traits, sensitivities, and habits. That doesn't mean that these difficulties must take up all your time or ruin your relationship. They're just an inevitable part of life when you're in close connection with another person.

With a partner who has Asperger's, the inherent traits that come with their neurotype often contribute to disputes within

the relationship. But like other issues, these challenges are part of the landscape you inhabit together. One of your most powerful tools for handling your conflicts is to cherish your partner and stay mindful of all the ways they contribute to your life and make things better. Too often, partners lose track of this appreciative attitude, eventually coming to take their partner for granted. This is another relationship vulnerability often related to the Asperger's temperament. The loving emotions may be fully present in the partner with Asperger's, but they can stay mostly submerged. It doesn't occur to the partner with Asperger's to speak these emotions out loud or remind their partner of their love for them.

An effective way for both partners to fortify good feelings for each other and their relationship is to try a journal exercise for recording positive memories. Each of you should spend 60 to 90 seconds writing down answers to these questions:

- What do you enjoy about your partner's company?
- What do you remember noticing about your partner when you first met?
- Which conversations with your partner have been engaging for you, either recently or in the past?
- What are your shared interests?
- Name something particularly endearing about your partner.

You can share these mini-journal exercises with each other if you wish. On the other hand, it can feel good just to know that each of you is doing the exercises. A person with Asperger's may feel self-conscious about their writing style and might enjoy the exercise more if they know their neurotypical partner won't read it.

Damon and Natalie

Damon, who'd been diagnosed with Asperger's in middle school, was an ardent lover with Natalie in the early stages of their relationship. But after their marriage, he became single-minded about his work. Natalie felt concerned that the intimate aspects of their relationship had fallen by the wayside.

Damon acknowledged he could be hyper-focused in his work as a designer at a marketing firm. But he had won several industry awards and was confident he could handle pressure in his work life.

In therapy, Damon was reticent to talk in much detail about their sex life. He did acknowledge he would enjoy reviving their physical attraction and that he also missed it. Natalie felt alienated and discouraged about their marriage, saying, "I can only assume Damon is no longer attracted to me. I tried wearing lingerie and fixing nice dinners back when this started, but he is just a cold fish. He says there is nobody else, but sometimes I wonder what he does with his sexual energy. I'm still young, though, and I don't want to go on living this way."

So What Just Happened?

With patient questioning and the opportunity to speak privately, Damon disclosed that certain kinds of touch were not only a sexual turnoff to him but were quite irritating and bothersome. He described that when they attempted sex, Natalie usually started with stroking his body lightly and gently. Although he would conceal his reaction, this caused him to want to squirm away from her. Damon didn't know why he had this response and felt guilty about it. He loved Natalie and wanted to be close, but at times it was so uncomfortable for him that he lost focus and couldn't maintain his sexual excitement. He found these interactions embarrassing. Over time the

couple had enough awkward attempts at sex that they just got out of the habit. Damon explained it this way: "The way our marriage is now, it doesn't fit with who I am, but I didn't want to upset her. I don't understand what happened. I know she has been trying. I have a lot of problems."

Sex involves all our senses simultaneously, and many with Asperger's find it is a powerful "stim." Stimming is any movement that people with Asperger's do to calm or reassure themselves or just to enjoy pleasant sensations. This is usually nonsexual in nature, such as rubbing one's hands or fingers together, moving or jiggling feet and legs, or fiddling with keys or fidget toys. Everybody occasionally uses stims to cope with sensations of frustration, boredom, or pressure: Tapping a pen, jangling keys, or twirling a lock of hair are ordinary stim behaviors that are considered socially acceptable. People with Asperger's stim more regularly than neurotypicals and go through times when it's intolerable to refrain from stimming. They may do more noticeable full body movements or make more noise than a neurotypical person does.

Some people with Asperger's crave bodily pressure and love to give or receive various kinds of massage. Others appreciate certain kinds of touch, but only under some conditions and not others. It can be confusing to sort out your partner's criteria for pleasurable touch, but this is a matter of their unique neurological system, not a matter of choice. The increasing popularity of weighted blankets to help with sleep or just relaxation is evidence of how, even among neurotypicals, different people crave varying types and degrees of physical contact.

It's good for a neurodiverse couple, as it is for any couple, to get in the habit of talking about physical reactions and needs in a matter-of-fact way. Over time, you can learn to share this just as you might share opinions about the foods or types of music you like. Couples who are highly satisfied with their sex lives give each other plenty of guidance and feedback. They learn

not to take it personally when they encounter differences or find they need to make adjustments. Learning about the reactions your partner has to touch and other stimuli can be one more way you get acquainted. This may open up new possibilities for either person in terms of seeking out novel sensations or experiences.

Explore Games and Apps for Couples

Many people with Asperger's really don't understand how neurotypicals have fun. Rather than socializing or engaging in shared activities, their experience of enjoying something is more likely to be solitary or related to an intense interest. Sensory limitations often interfere with their ability to participate in groups or public gatherings. Asperger's fun tends to be away from the crowd. Someone with Asperger's may enjoy attending an event with other people but feel depleted afterward.

Often, a person who has Asperger's enjoys collecting something or finds organizing and categorizing to be inherently soothing activities. This can help them manage anxiety or give them a sense of control; for some, even sorting and handling cards or game pieces offers a pleasant sensation. For this reason, a deck of cards, apps, and other games designed for couples can be a good investment (see page 121). These games revolve around questions that you ask each other or simple experiential activities with the aim of helping you get to know each other better. Using your phones together or sharing a deck of cards can ease the pressure the partner with Asperger's feels in a face-to-face conversation.

There are plenty of these types of games to choose from. Some examples to look into:

52 Questions Before Marriage or Moving In (Gottman.com): A card deck of questions to help couples develop friendship and intimacy.

Best Self Intimacy Deck (BestSelf.co): A collection of 150 conversation starters for developing deep connection.

Happy Couple app (HappyCouple.co): A free quiz-style app for couples that asks each of you daily questions and compares your answers.

Lasting app (GetLasting.com): A relationship counseling app.

You can try this out by printing or hand-writing your own questions on index cards and, taking turns, asking each other a few questions over dinner. On a car trip, the passenger could read questions aloud to the driver. You could sit on the porch with lemonade or a beer and talk these over.

Here are some questions to start with:

- What is your favorite thing I do for you?
- How would you like me to support you in maintaining your physical and emotional health?
- Is there something I can do to show appreciation to you?
- How do you think we balance each other out?
- What do you think about us making apologies to each other? What does forgiveness mean to you?
- What do you enjoy about our sexual expression?
- Are there any sexual activities you miss that we used to do?

The probing conversation facilitated by these activities allows each of you to pay attention to your partner and be observant. You can learn how they think, and this will help you both become more articulate about emotions. A game format invites you to share interests and opinions without needing to debate or solve a real-life problem. Most importantly, these interactions facilitate a habit of talking and learning about each other, not as a special occasion or separate event, but as a natural part of your shared life.

Here are a few other questions that might provoke deep conversation:

- What is your view on how couples can have a good life?
- What is the best present anyone ever gave you?
- Tell me about what you would like for us when it comes to weekend time or vacations.
- What about holiday times?
- What's the best date we ever had?

Learn What Each of You Likes

Affection can be expressed in many ways, but most people expect an intimate relationship to involve plenty of touch and physical closeness. As with so many Asperger's traits, there is a wide range of reactions to touch among people with Asperger's. Someone with Asperger's may have quite an appetite for physicality or, as with Damon, may have specific preferences and needs. A less sensitive (or "hypo-sensitive") person might welcome hugs, but still dislike being approached at random. Some people with Asperger's are startled by a touch without

warning, even if it's just their partner slipping in for a well-meaning embrace from behind. This is rooted in the nervous system and is an involuntary response.

After opening up about his responses to physical contact, Damon agreed to explore his likes and dislikes. He experimented with setting a weighted blanket on his lap when relaxing at home and found that this calmed his nervous system. After a friend invited him to a jujitsu class, Damon decided to take up the sport. As he practiced grappling over the next several months, he realized he was enjoying Natalie's overtures of spontaneous affection more often. His body had gotten more accustomed to making contact, and his automatic defensive responses had lessened.

For her part, Natalie shared that her feelings were hurt when she sought affection and Damon didn't respond well. She began paying closer attention to their interactions and noticed that when Damon was relaxed and sitting on the couch, he would invite her to snuggle up so they could hold hands or rub each other's shoulders. But if she approached him when he was concentrating on a task, using his phone, or otherwise preoccupied, it didn't go well. Natalie began making a point of talking to him first to get his attention if he seemed immersed in something. That gave him a moment to shift his focus to her.

Under the right circumstances, people with Asperger's can enjoy playful hugs as much as anyone else. Even so, they may not consistently show facial expression in the neurotypical way, another aspect of lacking sensory integration. The neurotypical person may not be able to tell what their partner is experiencing because of this lack of expression. Natalie and Damon were able to have more satisfying connections by both developing awareness of their habits.

Consider these suggestions for exploring each other's preferences for physical contact:

ASKING YOUR PARTNER FOR FEEDBACK is the best way to learn what they like. If your partner needs encouragement, let them know you would really appreciate specifics. Keep in mind that not everyone has the verbal skill for a matter-of-fact talk about physicality and intimate touch. So what's the best way to get to satisfying physical intimacy? Practice.

TRY HAVING A NONSEXUAL SESSION to share physical intimacy when you're both relaxed and have some undistracted time. Take turns with one of you as receiver and one as the giver. You can get undressed or leave some clothes on, whatever helps you feel comfortable. Experiment with various levels of pressure and types of contact: caressing, firm stroking, soft tickling, kissing. This should be playful and fun, with no judgment or criticism.

ONCE YOU'VE LOOSENED UP TOGETHER, GO FOR EXTREMES to see how much sensation it takes to get a strong reaction; the goal is not to cause pain, but to explore and observe what feels particularly good and what is "meh." Think about Damon and his jujitsu practice, which involved rugged wrestling techniques and happened to be the kind of contact that helped him sense the boundaries of his body in a new way. Add touching with scarves of various fabrics, a loofah, or other textures if this appeals to you.

DON'T TAKE "EVERYTHING FEELS GOOD" FOR AN ANSWER. Ask your partner to let you know exactly how much they like the sensations you are giving them. Try using a one to five-type scale if that makes description easier. When you get some practice with this exercise, you can continue giving each other feedback about hugs, kisses, or other types of touch during everyday moments.

SENSORY INTEGRATION

Some people with Asperger's have heightened sensations and find touch unpleasant or have unusual reactions to touch. This is related to the general hyper- and hypo-sensitivity many people experience with Asperger's. When confusing or aversive sensations become debilitating or interfere with daily life, people with Asperger's can seek treatment from occupational therapists, who refer to these difficulties as issues of "sensory integration." Examples of sensory integration problems include issues with balance or coordination when using escalators or elevators; nausea or panic related to driving, crossing bridges, or air travel; and restlessness and chewing on fingernails or objects such as pencils. People with Asperger's often learn to live with these limitations, not realizing that help is available. Your doctor can help you find a therapist who specializes in this condition.

Address Issues of Physical Intimacy

We seek intimate relationships out of eagerness to feel heard and deeply understood by another person. In the initial excitement of infatuation, everything seems right. As the hormonal intensity fades away and a couple becomes more familiar with each other, it's typical to encounter complications with sex and intercourse. So never feel embarrassed or abnormal because your shared sex life has hit a rough patch; difficulties around these issues are by no means exclusive to neurodiverse couples.

For Damon and Natalie, we were able to move toward solving their problems when we identified that Damon did like the sensation of deep pressure. When Natalie expressed how she

liked to be touched, we learned that his type of contact didn't feel sexually stimulating to her. They were both willing to change their interaction pattern once they realized that each of them needed something different. As the couple experimented with gradually resuming more physical contact, they did so without the expectation of intercourse. Eventually, they learned to talk in more specific terms about their desires and preferences and were able to resume a sex life that they both enjoyed.

Here are some guidelines to help you and your partner maintain healthy and mutually satisfying physical intimacy:

TRY CHILLING OUT. An environment with reduced auditory or visual stimulation will allow the partner with Asperger's to focus more on body sensations, making it easier to feel close and intimate. A romantic prelude could be reclining on the couch together or listening to music without distractions. You could also talk about your preferences for lighting a few candles, reading poems or stories to each other, sharing a shower or bath, or choosing bed linens and fabrics. Keep in mind any allergies or aversion to scented products and other sensitivities that the partner with Asperger's may have. And remember that the neurotypical partner may have their own sensitivities and predilections that should be part of the conversation.

FUEL THE FIRE. Along with toning down distractions, be sure to discuss what will turn up the heat. Some couples find that erotic talk, or reserving certain words for intimate exchanges, adds an extra level of arousal. Hand-over-hand feedback or nonverbal sounds such as groans and sighs can let your partner know when you are turned on. Changing the pace can help if one partner has a shorter attention span or takes more time to climax. And be open to the possibility that the partner with Asperger's, who experiences the world differently, might introduce imaginative, creative lovemaking techniques to your repertoire.

RETHINK WHAT SEX IS. As with other matters, the mixed-neurotype relationship will benefit from flexibility about sexual attitudes and expectations. Many couples consider sex to mean intercourse, but plenty of activities include intense sensation without involving intercourse. Expanding your notion of what constitutes sexual satisfaction or completion can be a game changer. Dispensing with the expectation that intercourse or orgasm is mandatory every time you have sexual contact can be incredibly freeing. As long as you're both enjoying affection and pleasure, that counts as having sex and offers the opportunity for both partners to feel satisfied.

SEX AND ASPERGER'S

We've mentioned that the stereotype of the emotionless, affectionless person with Asperger's is inaccurate, and this is also true with regard to sexual matters. Some people with Asperger's enjoy a lot of sex and report that no other experience compares for helping them reach a deep state of contentment and well-being. Some have a low sex drive or are asexual, meaning they do not desire sex and engage in it only for procreation. Others can fall anywhere between those extremes, and their interest can vary at different points in their lives, same as a neurotypical person. In a mixed-neurotype couple, it's particularly important to have frank conversations about sex to prevent stereotypes and assumptions from interfering with a healthy sexual relationship.

FREELY GIVE AND RECEIVE AFFECTION. In my practice, I always remind couples that sex should not involve leverage or

be used as a reward. It's fine to have expectations or longings, and it's good to clarify those with each other. Still, intimacy or specific sexual activities should never be used as a bargaining chip. Relationships work best when each person is willing to make commitments and keep agreements without fearing punishment. People need these conditions for intimacy so they feel assured that both are acting in good faith.

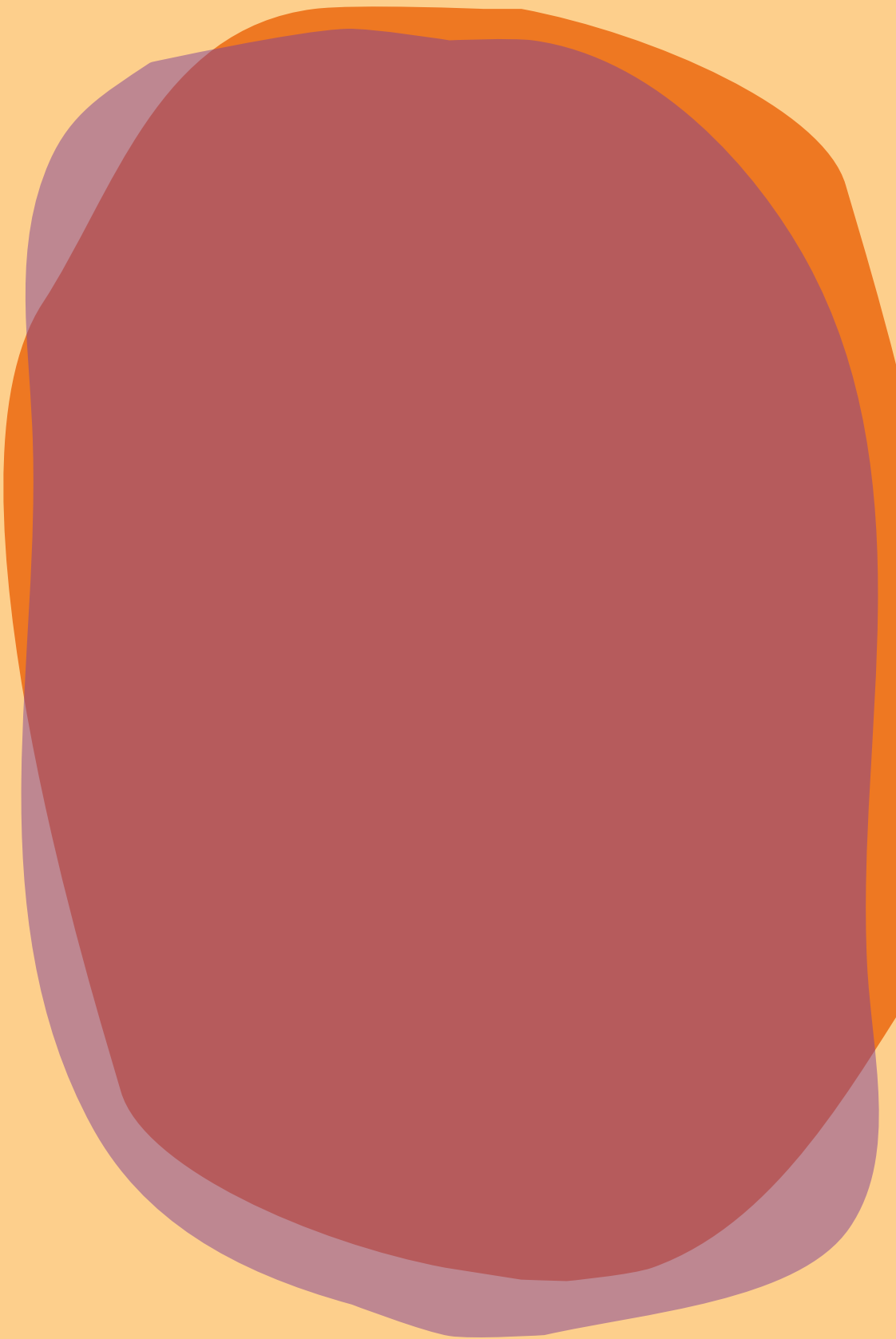
Consider these additional strategies when the two of you are discussing and addressing problems related to intimacy:

Begin by expressing caring and friendship to your partner. To enjoy good sex, as with any negotiation, you must sort out plans and problems with your partner from a position of mutual respect.

Discuss sexual concerns in a neutral location, such as in the living room, or take a walk somewhere that offers sufficient privacy. If you are expressing disappointment or frustration to your partner, be sure to convey plenty of reassurance and appreciation as well.

Allow yourselves time to wind down at the end of the day before tackling this delicate subject. Relax together so you can detach from the day's stresses.

Keep the bedroom conflict-free. If you are trying to enjoy a sexual encounter and something isn't working, guide each other or give brief feedback. If tension develops, avoid over-talking things; stop or go to sleep and discuss things later when you're both relaxed. Avoid challenging topics at bedtime in general; disputes and contention have no place in the bedroom. Instead, treat it as a space of comfort and solace, reserved only for rest and private time.



Chapter Seven

Maintaining Education and Commitment

Change takes patience and tenacity. As you work to maintain, strengthen, and grow your relationship, you and your partner will inevitably find yourselves slipping back into old habits now and then. This is normal. Don't berate yourself; you can get back on track. In this final chapter, we'll review and summarize the major points of the book so you can return for a refresher whenever you need it.

Why Commitment Matters

Neurology—the way our brain and nervous system work—has a profound influence on every aspect of our lives. It shapes the way we sense, interpret, and remember events. So it's only natural in a neurodiverse couple that each of you can be perplexed at how the other can perceive things so very differently. Learning the causes of your partner's behavior and emotional reactions makes it easier to navigate your differences. But don't underestimate the importance of working to accept things that are unlikely to change. Acceptance is an ongoing practice, and as long as you're both committed to it, you'll be empowered to protect and nourish your connection to each other.

A Brief Review

As you and your partner explore ways to implement the practices described in this book, you can think of the possibilities as fitting into three categories:

Environmental changes involve altering your routines and the way that you use space at home. This includes creating personal space so your partner can have alone time and diminishing stimuli and distractions to create a respite from feeling overwhelmed. Both partners can benefit from considerations of your "sensory diet"—that is, the sensory experiences built into your day. Depending on your needs, you might begin a day with a calming touch or pleasant music; plan time for hands-on activities and the use of digital devices; alternate periods of movement and exercise with time spent sitting or resting; and plan time to wind down at the end of the day to ensure restful sleep. Consider how much stimulation you want from social events, media in your home, and your need for physical activity and variation in your day.

Skills and awareness are the actions and knowledge base that diminish conflicts and strengthen your feelings of connection and closeness. Over time, these become helpful habits, such as creating a predictable routine; keeping engaged with a relationship calendar; and designating times for discussions, household tasks, and simply enjoying each other's company. Communication underlies many of these practices. When you notice an increase in tension or misunderstandings, check that both of you are being explicit in stating your needs and requests. Remember, what the neurotypical partner considers an obvious necessity may not be so evident to the partner with Asperger's.

Never underestimate the power of acceptance. It's a powerful feeling to know that whatever your differences, your partner accepts you for who you really are and will act accordingly. For example, both of you may need to accept that the partner with Asperger's will sometimes reach the limit of their energy supply and cognitive capacity and need time to regenerate. For their part, the partner with Asperger's can accept that their neurotypical partner may want more conversation than they do, or have more of an appetite for entertaining and activities.

Helpful Reminders

You're nearing the end of the book, and now you have some choices about what to do next. Where to focus? How do you know what strategies may be most important for your relationship?

For those who encountered a new perspective or unfamiliar information in these pages, it could be beneficial to return to chapter 1 for an overview of Asperger's.

If you and your partner are struggling to get on the same page and have the sensation that you are missing each other's intentions, try revisiting chapter 2's basic practices.

In chapter 3, you'll find techniques to support you in your communication. These are foundational methods to help you invite your partner into greater closeness and vulnerability.

If your relationship is cooperative and you are both satisfied with your communication, check out chapter 4 for strategies and activities to deepen your connection and enrich your time together while allowing room for each partner to express themselves and seek renewal.

Sometimes a couple is doing well but has trouble dealing with family pressures or the demands of domestic life. If that fits your situation, you should check chapter 5.

To reconnect when your physical or emotional intimacy isn't where you want it to be, turn to chapter 6.

If you're looking to deepen your knowledge, refer to the Resources section. There you'll find books, organizations, and links to the vibrant network of ideas and insights by adults who have Asperger's. These writers and social media commenters are often prolific and eager to share their lived experiences.

Couples Therapy

Are you and your partner always getting caught in arguments where one thing leads to another and you can't stay on topic? Do you spin your wheels in debates about how to communicate? When conflict and disagreements have become exhausting and unproductive, couples therapy is worth considering. In couples therapy, the therapist will be active and involved in the sessions and will teach you skills for handling conflict and talking to each other with new levels of honesty. This can make an enormous positive difference in your relationship, and it doesn't need to take a long time before you see improvements.

Other signs that a therapist could be helpful include:

You're frustrated with repetitive problems and suspect your partner's Asperger's is the root cause.

You feel isolated in your relationship, and you don't really have much in common with your partner anymore.

If you want to look into therapy for your relationship, start by asking friends, family, or your physician for referrals. If you prefer to search privately, you'll find many resources online by searching for relationship or marriage counseling or relationship therapy. When evaluating a potential therapist, it's fine to expect the person to give you some information by phone for 10 to 15 minutes at no charge or share details via email.

Some questions you might ask include:

- How much of your practice is working with couples?
- Is there a particular type of training or approach you rely on?
- Do you give homework or suggestions for skills we can practice in between sessions?
- Do you have a background with, or have you done any reading about, adults with Asperger's?
- How many sessions do couples usually have with you?

Also consider practical questions, such as if weekend or evening appointments are available and whether the therapist can bill your health insurance provider. Most of all, you and your partner must both feel comfortable talking to the person and have a sense that you can let them in on the private aspects of your life together. It might take an introductory session to determine that.

Final Thoughts

All relationships include some problems. Even when your worries or concerns are high, if you still have the sensation that your heart swells when you see your partner, this is a good sign. Whether you're the neurotypical partner or the partner with Asperger's, you have reason for hope if you can accept some quirks or even feel that your partner's eccentricities are part of their charm. It helps tremendously if both of you genuinely wish to understand your partner better.

I hope this book contributes to a foundation of caring and friendship for you and your partner. From a platform of respect and high regard, couples can almost always sort out problems and work toward solutions.

Relationship Calendar

Here's a sample relationship calendar, as described in chapter 2 (page 37), with examples of events and reminders that will help you and your partner connect. If you already have a calendar in place, start by adding a few new items or reminders, and make a note on the calendar to reevaluate in a couple of weeks.

This calendar is for a couple named Blair and Jamie. Notes from Blair are in brown; notes written by Jamie are in orange.

GMK: Good Morning Kiss. Start each weekday with mindful connection before you go your separate ways. Taking a moment for a warm embrace to wish each other well has lasting effects.

Txt: Text a Quick Message. Unless your work prohibits this, get in the habit of updating your partner on the events of your day. Even if there's no news to share, your partner will appreciate knowing that they are in your thoughts.

SC: Supportive Conversation. Set aside about 20 minutes regularly for you and your partner to sit together (or take a walk) and share your current thoughts and concerns. Offer each other uninterrupted attention and mutual support.

RT: Relaxing Time. It can be difficult to tear yourselves away from tasks that must be done, but you deserve some recreation, too. Save at least one afternoon or evening every week to chill out and enjoy downtime together.

C: Cleaning Project. These can range from cleaning out closets, to weeding the garden, to scrubbing floors. Carve out at least one morning on the weekends to make progress on long-term projects. Working together fosters a sense of closeness—and accomplishment—as you cross off these tasks on your to-do list.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2 GMK 3:30 Txt	3 GMK	4 GMK 2:00 Txt	5 GMK RT: Yoga class	6 GMK 3:30 Txt	7 10 am: SC
8 Kids at Mom's today ... it's just us! Let's go antiquing!	9 GMK Good luck with your interview today sweetie!	10 GMK 2:00 Txt	11 GMK 2:00 Txt Please bring home my favorite takeout!	12 GMK 3:30 Txt RT: Movie night	13 GMK 9 pm: SC	14 C: Help kids clean their room
15 Alone time for B this morning!	16 GMK C: Drag old dishwasher to curb for trash day	17 GMK 3:30 Txt	18 GMK J at all-day seminar, home late. I'll miss you!	19 GMK 3:30 Txt RT: Movie night	20 GMK 3:30 Txt	21 10 am: SC Afternoon: Take kids somewhere, J decides!
22	23 2:00 Txt	24 Trip to beach (thru Sat.)	25 Can't wait to sit in the sun with you!	26 RT: Beach walk!	27 J.L.'s birthday dinner, 7 pm	28 10 am: SC
29 RT: Bike ride	30 2:00 Txt	31 Surprise me with flowers!				



Resources

Websites and Organizations

Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education AASPIRE.org

Aspie Quiz (Self-Test) RDOS.net/eng/Aspie-quiz.php

Autistic Self Advocacy Network AutisticAdvocacy.org

Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network (AWN)
AWNNetwork.org

Emotional Labor Checklist MetaFilter.com/151267
/Wheres-My-Cut-On-Unpaid-Emotional-Labor

Spectrum (News Site) SpectrumNews.org

The Thinking Person's Guide to Autism
www.ThinkingAutismGuide.com

Welcome to the Autistic Community AutismAcceptance.com

Books on Asperger's and Relationships

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Hendrickx, Sarah. *Love, Sex and Long-Term Relationships: What People with Asperger Syndrome Really Really Want*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008.

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- Craft, Samantha. *Everyday Aspergers: A Journey on the Autism Spectrum*. Cumbria, UK: Your Stories Matter Publishing, 2018.
- Dale, Laura Kate. *Uncomfortable Labels: My Life as a Gay Autistic Trans Woman*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019.
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Books on Marriage and Relationships

Gottman, John, and Nan Silver. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Crown Publishing, 1999.

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