

# THE AUTISM EFFECT *on marriage*

## Can Abuse be Attributed to an Autistic Spouse?

October was Domestic Violence Awareness month. (*And as much as I wanted to post this blog in the appropriate month, I couldn't quite make it happen.*) During October, survivors, advocates and allies come together in hopes of raising awareness, mourning the tragedy of lives lost, and discussing the trauma and experience of intimate partner violence. For many victims, abuse and neglect remain a hidden source of pain and shame. For neurodiverse couples, domestic violence is an issue that remains under-discussed, and VERY poorly resourced.

### **What is domestic violence?**

Domestic violence encompasses the perpetration of maltreatment that falls under categories of physical violence and psychological aggression. It includes emotional, verbal, sexual, economic, covert, passive-aggressive, reaction-seeking and deprivational abuse.

The function of abuse is to gain power and/or control. In abusive marriages, a

pattern exists in which a spouse uses tactics to intimidate, threaten, aggress, injure, humiliate, frighten, punish, retaliate, isolate, encroach, coerce, guilt, blame, shame, taunt, malign, slander, demean, gaslight, stonewall, scapegoat, stalk, thwart, withhold, deprive or restrict.



### **Can an autistic spouse abuse their partner?**

Yes. Any neurotype can be a victim, and any neurotype can be an offender. Just as allistic individuals can be an abusive partner – so, too, can an autistic spouse.

Cassandra spouses often wrestle with how to characterize harmful behavior from their autistic spouse. Since autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, and considered a disability from a medical and legal standpoint in the US, a neurotypical spouse may feel very conflicted about whether pernicious behavior can be termed abusive.

### **Isn't it more likely that autistic individuals are primarily in the position of victim, and not offender?**

It is absolutely true that ASD children are at [increased likelihood of](#)

**victimization**. Bullying and exclusion at school, inability to perceive predatory intent from others – many aspects of autism exacerbate vulnerability. **Higher levels of anger** in ASD children seem to correlate with increased victimization (perhaps increased maltreatment from frustrated caregivers, as **ASD children are more frequently reported to child abuse hotlines** for substantiated abuse or neglect concerns). **Sexual victimization is at a much higher incidence** compared to non-autistic individuals, and especially **pervasive among autistic girls and women**. It's also safe to say that abuse and neglect are likely under-reported in ASD individuals. **This** document outlines various complicated factors that disrupt accurate reporting, and also reveals findings from surveys conducted amongst caregivers and autistic individuals (with and without intellectual disabilities) regarding perpetration of abuse and violence.

**This study** used self-reporting to examine rates of violence against autistic adults without intellectual disabilities (ID), and non-autistic adults. Collectively, autistic adults without ID reported experiencing more violence than non-autistic adults. Autistic women without ID reported a much higher rate of violence in comparison to non-autistic women. TGNC (Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming) autistic adults also reported a high level of violence (but could not be compared against non-autistic counterparts). There was no significant statistical difference in victimization patterns when comparing the same-gender reports of autistic men without ID, to non-autistic men.

### **What features of autism create difficulty in discerning culpability for abusive behavior?**

Many neurotypical spouses struggle with wondering if mind-blindness, poor perspective-taking, social deficits, inflexible thinking, and propensity for emotional dysregulation, may exonerate ASD partners from being labeled abusive.

### **When are autistic deficits no longer a factor in determining abusive behavior?**

If a partner has been informed of perpetrating harm, then social-emotional confusion is mitigated. Choosing to persist in unwelcome behavior is no longer an issue of impaired social cognition. It is a willful choice to disregard the spouse's communication and needs.

Any autistic person, without co-occurring intellectual disabilities, is capable of grasping the following words and phrases: “stop,” “no,” “I don't like that,” “you're

scaring me,” “you’re hurting me,” “please don’t do that.” Consent language is not a mystery. Babies develop comprehension of the word “no” as early as 6 months old (and as late as 18 months old); it’s reasonable to expect an otherwise cognitively functioning autistic adult to grasp the meaning, too.

## **What is an autistic individual’s personal responsibility?**

The responsibility of any person is to stop harming other people when made aware of impact. Unintentional harm is still harm. Culpability exists when we know better, but choose not to do better, and refuse to consider impact over intention. If we lack the skills to prevent ourselves from harming others – such as poor impulse control, maladaptive coping skills, easily triggered anger, mood instability, executive function deficits – then it is a personal responsibility to find supports in which to compensate for those impairments that negatively impact our loved ones.

Autistic or not, everyone is tasked with understanding where personal freedom begins and ends, especially in our most intimate relationships. It is a misuse of our power to behave in a way that imposes harm, and then excuse the impact by insisting it is our right and freedom to do as we choose. Inflexible thinking might be a symptom of autism, but imposing a self-serving belief that agreement must be achieved before ceasing unwelcome behavior is not an autism trait. It’s an entitlement issue.

## **Does research reveal anything about abuse directed at an intimate partner by an autistic spouse?**

It is only recently that we have **empirical data regarding the incidence of physical and psychological abuse** present in ND relationships, specifically toward neurotypical women from autistic men. The results showed that “women with diagnosed partners, and women who suspect their partners to be on the autism spectrum, similarly reported being subjected to physical and psychological abuse at a significantly higher rate than women in a NT relationship.” The researchers also wrote, “according to the existent body of knowledge, women who are in Neurodiverse Relationships report a pattern of ongoing emotional and sexual deprivation, as well as physical and mental symptoms that are reminiscent of symptoms of trauma and post trauma. They describe a relationship categorized by domestic, physical and mental abuse, extreme challenges in communication and high levels of conflict.”

A [recent international study](#) focused on ASD & ADHD male offenders of domestic violence, and the limitations of current perpetrator programs that fail to serve their needs. Researchers interviewed ten practitioners, from around the globe, who specifically work with neurodiverse male perpetrators. Within the report, several quotes were shared concerning the special concerns for female survivors.

*One practitioner interviewed said, “I can very easily see how talking about somebody’s diagnosis or presentation could actually really encourage survivors to further remove the accountability, and the blame, for where that behavior is coming from in the perpetrator. That may encourage people to stay in relationships, whereas otherwise they wouldn’t necessarily have done so. Or, to make excuses, or to continue to blame themselves for triggering behaviors, because actually it’s not (the autistic partner’s) fault, it’s their diagnosis...”*

### **How can there be room for autistic behaviors alongside the consideration of others?**

Solutions that honor the needs of both partners can certainly be found. The key is that equal consideration is given to both parties. Might an autistic partner need a break during a difficult conversation, and perhaps it’s frustrating for the neurotypical spouse? Yes. Is it reasonable for the autistic spouse’s break to extend for hours, and turn into a nap, followed by phone scrolling, tv time and total neglect of household and childcare duties, while also avoiding the difficult conversation? No. It is not reasonable.

Autistic individuals are sometimes vocal about the imposing of limitations on autistic behaviors in marriage. Yet, we cannot ask either spouse to do the impossible. We cannot eliminate autism, and nor can we ask any spouse to endure abuse.

One example: meltdowns commonly happen when an autistic individual is overloaded. The function of a meltdown is to release overwhelm for the autistic person, but it negatively impacts those who witness it. Children simply cannot be exposed to a parent who is screaming, yelling obscenities, throwing things, hitting walls, possibly issuing threats, targeting them or their other parent, etc., and nor should any spouse be subjected to that behavior.

In 2019 at the World Autism Summit, Dr. Tony Attwood (world-renowned autism expert) spoke about the troubling issue of inauthentic meltdowns among autistic individuals. A true autistic meltdown is an involuntary loss of faculties due to overwhelm. A weaponized outburst may *look* like a meltdown, but the autistic person is in control of their behavior, seeking to coerce a specific outcome. Dr. Attwood referred to this as “domestic terrorism,” and then repeated his sentiments in later formats. As imaginable, the term “domestic terrorism” has been met with outrage from the autistic community. Yet, what else should we term behavior that is an intentional, imposed hostage situation for spouses and children? The message of, “if you don’t comply with what I want, then you will suffer my calculated screaming, throwing things, aggression, verbal intimidation, property destruction (etc),” is abusive. It is domestic violence.

An autistic individual with consideration for his or her family is willing to cope ahead, by creating a behavioral plan, and seeking consultation to help minimize harmful exposure of problematic behaviors to loved ones. This approach is true for any autistic behavior – sensory overload, shutdowns, rigid or repetitive behaviors, executive functioning deficits. The autistic partner must be permitted to caretake himself, but not at the expense of others. Middle grounds must be found that take into consideration the needs of both partners. One set of needs does not outweigh the other, and some measure of sacrifice is involved for each person.

### **What if the autistic partner insists that their behavior is not abusive?**

For neurodiverse marriages to work, there must be an inherent trust that both partners are communicating with integrity. If a spouse identifies behavior that is harmful to their sense of safety and well-being, then the other spouse responds with attunement and effort to shift behavior. We don’t need to concur that something is harmful in order to change behavior that infringes upon personal safety or well-being; we just need the willingness to respond with accommodation.

When an autistic spouse tells me it isn’t fair to be held to neurotypical standards of communication, I remind him or her that these aren’t neurotypical standards. It is a human standard that we cannot emotionally or physically injure those around us, whether we have interactional challenges or not. The truth is that we all have areas that require extra effort, many of which are not by choice, and life is sadly not fair. We can look to individuals born with missing limbs, lack of eyesight, impaired hearing. We can consider the sufferings acquired from car accidents, sports injuries, assaults, combat service, or other various circumstances. Is a deaf parent

less accountable for keeping their child safe, just because they can't hear a train or car coming? Are the experiences of childhood trauma an excuse to enact the same abuse upon our own children, just because that's what was modeled to us? No.

When we choose to get married, or when we choose to have children, inherent behavioral expectations come alongside those decisions. The neurotypical spouse accommodates her neurodivergent spouse on many levels, including the cultivation of her own self-control when frustrated by his behavior. But we cannot expect anyone to walk on eggshells with a misplaced sense of responsibility for preventing it, nor indulge harmful behavior.

### **Why might an autistic person view harmful behavior as non-abusive?**

Limited perspective-taking can contribute to difficulty in taking ownership of behavior. An autistic spouse might emphasize intention over impact when defending objectively abusive behavior. Most adults with autism have adverse childhood experiences that negatively impact their perception of appropriate social behavior (in addition to acting as triggers and increasing reactivity). Malice may not be the intent, perception of normalcy might be distorted, but harm is perpetrated. When we unintentionally harm someone, remorse is still necessary, along with a commitment to not repeat the behavior. Unintentional harm becomes abusive when a spouse persists in continuing the behavior, even after being informed that it is unwelcome and unacceptable.

Sometimes an autistic partner may view negative interactions through the lens of fair exchange. If he feels slighted, provoked or mistreated, then he may justify retaliatory behavior that he acknowledges is wrong – but believes it is deserved.

Highly controlling behaviors of autistic individuals are often a maladaptive coping mechanism for managing distress. Autistic spouses may vigorously defend their belief that the controlling behaviors are good, necessary and right. However, seeking toxic control in a marital relationship becomes an infringement on the rights of a spouse. Healthy coping is certainly available to learn, and should be used as a replacement for managing anxiety.

An autistic partner may insist that a behavior is not problematic unless he or she agrees it is harmful. This attitude can quickly become dangerously entitled behavior, with the underlying message being: *"I will treat you this way until you convince me to agree that it's harmful, because I like the benefits of this abusive*

behavior more than I care about honoring the standard of how you prefer to be treated.”

## **Can mutual abuse occur in a neurodiverse marriage?**

Reactive abuse is often an issue in dysfunctional neurodiverse marriages. It occurs when a victim is being abused or neglected, and then responds to the occurrence with self-protection. It may be singular incidents, or a slow-burning contempt that develops over time.

Episodic reactive abuse can look volatile. It may come with screaming, yelling, sobbing, accusations and insults toward the ASD spouse. Chronic reactive abuse is less volatile and more of an attitude that has developed over years of being mistreated. It's a combination of self-protection (distancing), despair and anger. Grief and fury live just beneath the surface of a battered neurotypical spouse. The unacknowledged impact of autism upon the relationship can sometimes lead to denigrating, belittling or demeaning an ASD partner's neurology. (Not character or integrity issues in regard to abusive behaviors, or autistic deficits that are weaponized as excuses – but shaming, condescending or humiliating a partner for true autistic impairment that cannot be mitigated past a certain ceiling.) It may sometimes lead to imposing impossible expectations that dismiss legitimate limitations. Autistic individuals cannot become neurotypical. Refusing to accept or accommodate reasonable adjustments for autism, is equal to autistic spouses refusing to accept or accommodate reasonable neurotypical needs.

A neurotypical spouse may apologize for their reactive behaviors and be met with the autistic partner viewing the apology as admission of full responsibility for the entire dynamic. The autistic spouse may not reciprocate apologies, believing that only one person can be wrong, and focus more on their own feelings of mistreatment in the current moment. It's not uncommon for an autistic partner to view themselves as the primary victim in a neurodiverse marriage, regardless of how and when the dynamic started. Additionally, they may focus on the current moment of conflict, versus recognition of the abusive pattern.

Both partners must be accountable for cultivating self-control, healthy coping, and personal safety, especially if a relationship is so dysfunctional that circular abuse patterns are the norm.

**What objectively abusive behaviors are commonly misattributed to the nature of autism, despite the spouse having been informed of the**



## **harmful impact?**

**Financial:** preventing access to funds, withholding account passwords, dictating spousal allowances, miserly or obsessive tracking of expenditures, punishing reasonable spending, inequality in spending privileges, lack of transparency with marital funds, indiscriminate spending, irresponsible financial behavior that places jeopardy upon the family well-being

**Physical:** rough touching, injury, restricting spousal movement, backing a spouse into a corner, aggressive posture toward spouse, slapping, kicking, hitting, smacking, grabbing, shaking

**Sexual:** rape, assault, coercion, unwelcome groping, disregarding consent, ignoring bodily autonomy, infidelity, secret porn use, compulsive masturbation to the exclusion of the spouse, pressure to conceive, controlling access to birth control, guilt-tripping, punishment when declined

**Verbal:** belittling, demeaning, denigration, name-calling, taunting, screaming, mockery, cursing or swearing at the spouse (or in front of children), harassment

**Emotional:** threatening, frightening, stonewalling, blame-shifting, gaslighting, revisionist history, pervasive rejection, instilling fear, discrepancy of attention toward spouse vs. other interests, investigative snooping without cause, slander, weaponizing executive functioning deficits, passive-aggression, retaliation, humiliation, inappropriate attachments or affairs, stalking, coercive control, choosing to weaponize children or household stability

**Reaction-seeking:** intentional provocation to trigger victim responses, weaponized demand avoidance, faux helplessness, or choosing to not monitor executive functioning

**Withholding:** sex, affection, communication, interaction, money, necessary information, cooperation, quality time, equitable household distribution of labor, shared parenting, self-monitoring, personal responsibility (relying on excessive prompt-dependency).

**Ultimately, what is the way forward when an abusive pattern exists in a neurodiverse marriage?**

1. Determining if mitigating autistic social-emotional confusion stops abusive behavior.
2. Determining if co-occurring mental health issues are in need of therapeutic treatment.
3. Determining if abusive behaviors are a function of entitlement.
4. Determining if the autistic partner is willing to seek and implement consultation for problematic behaviors and skill-building.
5. Practicing boundaries and committing to enforcement and prioritization of personal safety.

Abuse is fundamentally an issue of entitlement. It's not a neurology issue, and it isn't a marriage issue. We cannot expect anyone to accommodate abusive behavior, whether it is exacerbated by extenuating circumstances or not. The burden of change is on the person infringing upon the rights and safety of others.