

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

Chapter 6:

Navigating the Mazes of Change and
Growth in Neurodiverse Marriages
Motivation, boundaries, Acceptance and Healing

Chapter 6

This Chapter will help the reader

- Understand the considerations and steps needed change, grow, and heal.
- Learn practical “how to” strategies for growth.
- Embrace boundaries and identify obstacles that may be in the way.
- Recognize the connection between change and repentance.
- Align expectations with their individual and joint realities, while keeping hope in sight.
- Develop greater resilience and compassion for oneself and one’s spouse.
- Embrace the power Christ gives us to mature.

Chapter 6

Understanding of Neurodivergence and its effects on marriage are not widely recognized or understood

One partner (usually the NA/NT spouse) becomes dissatisfied with the relationship

Trauma, relational/emotional neglect, frustration, and/or hopelessness

This leads to suspecting neurodiversity and seeking effective help

Effective help will lead to identifying the need for change

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Stages of Change Model

1. Precontemplation—No awareness of the need or ability to change
2. Contemplation— Aware of the need to change and weighing the options and counting the cost of change
3. Preparation—Beginning to get the resources and self ready to change
4. Action—commitment to change: noticeably different actions, thinking, expectations, and behaviors
5. Maintenance—preventing backsliding

Change is not a linear process

Change is God's plan for us

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Identifying What Needs to Change

After discovery of neurodivergence we must let go of past expectations and lament what was lost

This is needed as part of acceptance and adjustment

Education and support from informed capable helpers is a must

We can only change ourself (we are not able to motivate, change, or fix our spouse)

“first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s/sister’s eye” (Matthew 7:5b, NIV)

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Making a Personal Decision to Grow

Autism is a *self-referencing* condition

Highly functional autistic people can struggle with a limited *theory of mind*

Each person must find their own curiosity and courage to explore their possibilities

Only when a partner willingly enters the *contemplation* stage do they begin to focus on their own opportunities for growth

Each spouse needs to mind their own business and learn the difference between what they can – and *cannot* be – responsible for

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Growth Tips For Change

- Assess how you are handling the knowledge that you (or your spouse) are neurodiverse.
- Evaluate what Stage of Change you think you are in (be honest).
- Consider what stage your spouse may be in (again, be honest).
- Get wise counsel and prayer support from safe, trustworthy and, ideally, qualified people.
- Learn about how neurodiversity can present, and what challenges it brings to relationships.
- With these insights in mind, revise your expectations for what change might mean in your life and your spouse's.
- Write out your personal growth goals, and submit these to the Lord in prayer.
- Build a support team, and get into action!

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The What and Why of Boundaries

Identifying what *you* need take responsibility for will require defining *boundaries*

What do I need to be healthy?

What can I actually control?

What must I let go of?

Christian teachings over the centuries have actually generated guilt around having healthy individual boundaries

Offer each other *grace and space*

Any habits of fighting, criticizing or controlling should cease, and

Both spouses should shift their attention away from what they dislike in the other to working on *themselves*

What am I doing that contributes to the tension, confusion or dysfunction?

What do I need to learn about my neuro-profile and how it differs from my spouse's?

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The What and Why of Boundaries (continued)

Change in a neurodiverse marriage is a marathon requiring both partners to take personal responsibility

Identifying your partners needs and limits is a way of loving and letting go of past criticism and control

Needs are basic requirements for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health.

Desires are just what we want and are optional

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The What and Why of Boundaries (continued)

A boundary: This is what I will do, or will not do

A boundary script (love sandwich)

1. Affirm the other and the relationship.
2. Explain what needs to change (the “Citation”) without blaming or shaming
3. Offer another affirmation of love.
4. Suggest what the change might look like (the “Invitation”).
5. Close by again affirming something hopeful and positive about the other or the marriage.

If the desired change is repeatedly not made add a consequence at Step 4:

If you continue to ... then I will ...

Chapter 6

The What and Why of Boundaries (continued)

While not intended, any abuse (verbal, emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual or financial) is unhealthy and ungodly and must stop

Boundaries are a protective (not punitive) way to protect the grace and space needed to recover and heal

Appropriate consequences for the continuing behavior can be difficult to identify

- Start with a warning

- Identify the consequence

- Escalating consequences

Effective boundaries can help motivate change

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Boundary Growth Tips

- Spend some time listing out your true needs vs. your desires.
- Stop complaining and expecting your spouse to change; stay in your lane!
- Think about how your family of origin did (or didn't) have healthy boundaries.
- Identify unhealthy boundary habits that you can change.
- Use the Love Sandwich template to write out your boundary messages.
- Consider sharing a boundary in writing instead of verbally: this helps make sure you share it in love and gives your spouse grace and space to understand and respond to it.
- Cultivate curiosity and humility when presented with your spouse's needs and boundaries.
- Prayerfully evaluate how you may unintentionally be enabling or even abusing your partner; get input from wise and informed advisors.

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What's Behind Resistance to Boundaries and Change?

People Pleasing

Fear of confronting and hurting someone's feelings

Fear of rejection

Guilt over causing conflict

Insecurity and Shame

AS/ND brains can function in ways that result in hypersensitivity to rejection and shame (rejection sensitivity dysphoria)

This impacts the AS/ND sense of identity and can lead to fear and insecurity based behaviors

Change is Hard

“You can't talk yourself out of a problem that you behaved yourself into.” (Stephen Covey)

We have to rethink our motive and behave in a new way, repeating the new behavior until it becomes our new habit

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We can all learn and grow if the obstacles of insecurity, fear and shame are identified and removed

Past trauma or neurodiversity is never an excuse for sinful, unloving behavior

Godly sorrow: remorse a healthy conscience produces

Worldly sorrow: blame-shifting, self-pity and “death” that comes from unhealthy shame

We cannot force others to repent and change, we can only choose to do so ourselves

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Growth Tips for Overcoming Resistance

- Prayerfully evaluate what ways you may be stuck in behaviors motivated by insecurity, fear and/or shame.
- Think about your family growing up; assess if you learned healthy boundaries and conflict resolution or if you learned how to people-please, hide, stuff your feelings and even blame-shift.
- If you discover that shame has motivated you, practice reforming your sense of identity in the grace of Christ. An excellent resource for this is *Victory Over the Darkness*, by Neil Anderson.
- Reset your goals to improving yourself (in Christ), and the marriage will most likely improve, too! If it doesn't, you will have developed the character strength and support you'll need to make wise decisions about moving forward.

Chapter 6

Final Thoughts

Change in a neurodiverse marriage requires

- Understanding and accepting your neurological differences

- Adjusting expectations

- Learning new strategies for communication and conflict resolution

Healing starts with the individual and their commitment to learning and growing

Christ's teachings must be applied not just remembered and admired