

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

Chapter 5:

Navigating the Maze of Neuroscience and
Neuroplasticity
From Enemy Mode to Joyful Foundation

Chapter 5

A brief discussion of neurological differences, why they matter and the HOPE that neuroplasticity brings to ND relationships.

Left brain-logic and details 5hz

Right brain-identity and relationships 6hz

Can neurodivergence predispose someone on the spectrum toward enemy mode?

...people with any kind of disturbance in the development of the posterior cingulate, amygdala, or PFC are going to be very easily dragged into enemy mode. The autism spectrum is at high risk of overloading the posterior cingulate with even “normal” intensity input... (Wilder 2022)

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If we forget who we are, that has to be figured out again.

Left brain is great at the details but does not see the whole picture (sees the tree, not the surrounding forest)

In the moment, this can turn another person into an interruption or problem to be dealt with instead of someone that we want to have a relationship with

So left brain alone can create a lot of relationship damage (even as we get a lot of tasks done)

End justifies the means

Violating our own values

The left hemisphere of the autistic brain is dominant in knowledge-building, to the detriment of the right hemisphere (Girgis Et Al. 2007)

Left brained Christianity misses out on the relational attachment to others including God

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Dans Neurology Primer

Left Brain	Right Brain
Logic	Creativity
Process Driven	Relationally Driven
5 times per second	6 times per second

- We understand and react to relational dynamics faster than our conscious thought processes can keep up
- When the relational aspect of your thinking is interrupted, the left side of the brain continues functioning, but it does so without the influence of your relationships, or whom and what you hold dear
- If alarmed, your brain can become relationally harmful-this is enemy mode

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How to Counter Enemy Mode

The Four Soils: A Framework for Growth and Connection

1. Joy—I am happy to be with you
2. Hesed—Loyal Love
3. Group Identity—Who Are My People?
4. Healthy Correction—Propelling Towards Betterment

More on Joy and Hesed

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Joy (someone is glad to be with me)

The foundation of maturity and growth, it supports increasing resiliency and managing stress; it also helps combat toxic shame

Joy is centered in the right orbital prefrontal cortex that is different in AS/ND and NA/NT brains

Four parts of the Autistic brain that are different:

1. Cingulate gyrus
2. Left frontal cortex
3. Underdeveloped neural networks in the right frontal cortex associated with social connectivity
4. Amygdala central to expressing emotions and how one evaluates threat or experiences fear

These differences result in suppressing feelings of emotions in autistic people, and might even result in differences in how the right and left hemispheres develop, further confounding the brains relational circuits

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Joy (continued)

- Knowledge, new activities, and intense, passionate interests are important to the autistic brain and person
- However, moderation is needed in order for relational circuits (RCs) to improve.
- The authors of this book advocate the need for passions and interests and alone time, *but not to the detriment of relationships*
- Both joy (high energy) and shalom (rest or quiet are needed)
- Special interests, passions, and hobbies have their place in restoring peace or a resting state in the brain, but there must be vigilance that these do not replace relationship or relational joy-building, or there will be neurological and relational consequences

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Joy (continued)

The good news: *neuroplasticity!*

The orbital prefrontal cortex is a part of the brain that continues to learn and grow over one's lifetime

Building joy and relational skills require our effort and work and practice

We should also pray for resources and opportunities and the right coach or mentor to support this hard work

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Hesed (loyal love, secure attachment)

Hesed is about attachment

Attachment is described as ‘knowing you exist in someone’s mind when you are not present

We can learn to change our attachment or bonding style from fear bonds to love bonds

To do this we need to retrain our brains out of the automatic strategies for attachment that we learned in our earliest years

Many have family backgrounds that have resulted in trauma

Trauma A: Absence of good or necessary things such as secure attachment

Trauma B: Bad things that happen to us and exceed our ability to cope

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Hesed (continued)

Trauma A triggers common to ND Christian marriages

- Not being cherished by a spouse
- Not experiencing delight in your spouse's presence
- Not having a spouse who sees you or will hear your pain
- Not receiving large amounts of daily, non-sexual touch (hugs, embrace, touch)
- Not having time together for fun
- Not having access to resources
- Being made to feel dependent or that resources are scarce
- Not doing hard things together
- Not resolving conflict
- Not making plans together
- Not having the agency to use one's gifts, talents, skills or abilities to develop one's potential.

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Hesed (continued)

Continued trauma can turn of relational circuits resulting in the couple entering ‘enemy mode’

Because of neurological differences autistic brains can easily slip into enemy mode with their spouse and others they love

Enemy mode can be contagious-one spouse in enemy mode can trigger it in the other if they are not mindful

You are in enemy mode if you see a person whom you usually *want* to be with as a threat, interruption, or problem to be solved

We can learn to spot enemy mode in ourself and restart our relational circuits

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Become 'Horsemen Spotters'

The Horsemen:

1. Criticism
2. Contempt
3. Defensiveness
4. Stonewalling

Even one of these 4 can destroy a marriage if allowed to run wild.

If one of these horsemen recurs in your relationship, check your relational circuits and become intentional about getting out of enemy mode.

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Repairing an ND marriage takes intentional effort and is a long term commitment.

There is no fast track to reducing trauma, building joy, and hesed.

Mind and heart transformation is Your long-term goal, not short-term behavior modifications

Enlightenment Thinking transformation equation:

transformation = truth + good choices + power

But there is no love in this formula and “developments in modern brain science have made it clear that any model of transformation and character change must be anchored in the development of a love bond with God and His people” (Wilder and Warner)

Their revised transformation equation:

Transformation= attachment(hesed) >truth> good choices > power.

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The Holy Spirit can empower us to seek the truth

Transformation requires us to move from reading the word to doing the word as motivated by love (hesed) for one another

Hesed: Showing special kindness, love, mercy, etc., beyond what is expected or required

Without love (hesed) you cannot be transformed, and your marriage cannot be transformed.

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There is Hope

Your neurodiverse Christian marriage can be joyful and fulfilling, if you:

- Each do your work
- Each Remain intentional
- Each remove trauma
- Each learn communication and relational skills

Remember: The AS/ND spouse will always be AS/ND

Chapter 5

Outside the Maze: Stephanie's Insights and Hindsight Learning

How I found my way out of the maze in which I (and my marriage) was trapped

Two separate marriage experiences: I felt completely miserable and trapped, while Dan felt fine and content

Proverbs 13:12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick

JOY = Jesus and Others and You (*not* joy but something else entirely)

Not good enough

Church contributed to my toxic shame

A very dark place

My dad started calling me 'Joy'...

Chapter 5

Outside the Maze: Stephanie's Insights and Hindsight Learning (continued)

How I found my way out of the maze in which I (and my marriage) was trapped

I began to look past my difficult circumstances and see who God really was and that God was *for* me (no exclusion clause to Jeremiah 29:11)

I realized that my identity, hope and future are in the Lord, God is happy to be with me and is for me!

Shift away from traditional marriage roles and instead used our God given strengths to complement the weaknesses of each other

Hesed: Removed the Trauma A triggers

Group Identity: Realized that Dan was for me and for us

Joy Building: Doing things together that we both enjoyed, sabbath, recreation together, devotionals together, at-home date night,

Healthy Correction: Feedback without character assignation

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Outside the Maze: Stephanie's Insights and Hindsight Learning (continued)

How I found my way out of the maze in which I (and my marriage) was trapped

Marriage improvement begins with each individual doing their own work to become emotionally and spiritually healthy

Alone Time: We each have interests and passions, and we give one another space to pursue those. The difference now is that we *talk* about it

Communication and intentional planning provide the alone and couple time we need to rest, travel together, or simply “be” together

Learn how to Repair: Not caring enough to resolve conflict, and not being willing to devote time, energy, and effort to the relationship is a type of betrayal that scars and does collateral damage

Toxic Shame—a belief that you are bad or flawed

When you apologize or confess, you are making an admission of fault but do not have to absorb *shame*

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Outside the Maze: Dan's Insights and Hindsight Learning

Taste and See-experiencing something different and realizing that different is better

Stephanie was one more interest to pursue for *my* sake

I was curious about facts, data points, and other things in her world that interested *me*

I missed being interested in *her*: her nature, character, dreams, disappointments, joys, and woes.

I did not show genuine, altruistic interest in *her*; any interest I showed was typically self-serving.

I cared about her, our girls, and our relationship, AND I wasn't good at showing it

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Outside the Maze: Dan's Insights and Hindsight Learning

Taste and See-experiencing something different and realizing that different is better

As we started 'growing together' I noticed a richer, more abundant relationship.

I changed from curiosity about things around Stephanie that interested ME to interest in seeing and knowing HER

I turned toward her and saw her without trying to dig for more facts, I learned to put her first and validate her needs (responding to bids of affection)

Learning to be curious about the right things and *believing* her

Learning to value my wife and children above my preferences

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Outside the Maze: Dan's Insights and Hindsight Learning

Taste and See-experiencing something different and realizing that different is better

'I want to want to' changed to 'I want to'

Spend time with God

Grow our relationship

RARE Leadership (a book by Wilder)

- *Remain Relational:* Keep relationships bigger than problems
- *Act Like Yourself:* Does your current behavior align with your group identity?
- *Return to Joy:* Be your own referee – stop play when problems become bigger than relationships; refocus on what's important, then continue
- *Endure Hardship Well:* Continue to grow your emotional and relational maturity during challenging moments

Remember: *You only grow if you want to*

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Outside the Maze: Dan's Insights and Hindsight Learning

Taste and See-experiencing something different and realizing that different is better

Remember: *You only grow if you want to*

Once you experience what *can* be, you will likely want to continue

What can you start doing that will create a deeper desire to be with God?

What are some preferences that you can let go of?

Who can you start 'seeing' and being there for *them*?