

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

Chapter 7:
Navigating the Maze of
Communication:
Social Language Pragmatics

Chapter 7

Communication is a simple idea (right?) until things go wrong.

Misunderstandings, unexpected or no responses lead to confusion, lack of validation, and misunderstanding.

What is going on?

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Background

The author is an NA/NT female married to an AS/ND male

She is a retired speech and language pathologist educated before Asperger's Syndrome (now Autism Level 1) was widely known

She worked with preschool through high school aged children-communicatively handicapped/communication and language challenged

She fell in love with her husband because of his intelligence, vocabulary, quiet nature, creative dating, and their shared interests.

Communication challenges started about 6 months after their marriage.

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Background (continued)

Learned about Asperger's in 1994.

Noticed that kids who were identified on the autism spectrum sometimes acted like her husband

- Jokes that did not fit the situation
- Use of very specific language
- Focus on their interests
- Lack of understanding of others

Autistic children passed most language tests and could not generalize to real life communication situations

The author still did not connect Aspergers and her husband

‘You act just like my kids at school’

I should use my therapy materials on my husband

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Background (continued)

Working together and communication/learning styles

- The author learns by seeing and asking and doing
- Her husband learns by reading and trying and adjusting
- He is focused and She asks lots of questions
- He experiences her questions as interruptions and a problem to be solved (no relational circuits going)

She was trying to communicate and He was focused and trying to accomplish a task

She got frustrated and He got overloaded

We would have an 'issue'

- We experienced years of '\$80 issues' due to our differing communication styles and differing neurology

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An Example

Working together and communication

I asked a question and He answered...but the answer was unclear to me so I tried again

He left in frustration and our Son then explained what my husband had be trying to say

Our son used a different (calmer) tone and different words to explain the same thing

The author understood and felt related with through her Son's explanation

A few days later the author realized that her husband is 'on the spectrum'

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Language

The purpose of communication is to give someone else information or to connect

True communication requires a receiver to understand you

Spoken language is only a small part of communication

Mehrabian (1971): 7% of meaning is communicated through spoken word, 38% through tone of voice, and 55% through body language (non-verbal behavior) (This study focused on communication of feelings and attitudes and not all communication in general)

The main point is that much of our meaning is conveyed non-verbally

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Language (continued)

Language has five parts:

1. Phonology
2. Morphology
3. Syntax
4. Semantics
5. Pragmatics

Autism mainly affects semantics and pragmatics

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Language (continued)

Semantics: the meaning of the words both on the surface and the underlying meanings including

Labels

Definitions

Associations

How things are related (compare and contrast),

Multiple meanings, antonyms, synonyms,

Inferences

Literal vs. implied meaning

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Language (continued)

Pragmatics: use of language, social communication

Intended meaning of what was said

Topic maintenance

Turn taking

Social norms

Perspective taking

Flexibility with language

Gradients of emotions

Humor

Non-verbal communication (reading body language, reading the situation, reading facial expressions)

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Language (continued)

Receptive Language: what we take in and understand

Expressive Language: what we speak, our expression

Inner Language: what is in our heads and the internal conversations that are not spoken

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Pragmatics and Autism

DSM-5 Hallmarks of Autism involving pragmatic language

1. Difficulties in social and emotional reciprocity, including trouble with social approach, back and forth conversation, sharing interests with others, and expressing/understanding emotions.
2. Difficulties in nonverbal communication used for social interaction, including abnormal eye-contact and body language, and difficulty with understanding the use of nonverbal communication like facial expressions or gestures for communication.
3. Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships with other people (other than with close family members), including lack of interest in others, difficulties responding to different social contexts, and difficulties in sharing imaginative play.
4. Stereotyped speech, repetitive motor movements, echolalia (repeating words or phrases, sometimes from movies or television shows or from other people), and repetitive use of objects or abnormal phrases.

Social communication deficits are a large part of the diagnosis, and also have a large impact on relationships

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Frequency, Intensity, and Duration

Frequency: how often it happens

Intensity: how strong of a reaction it is or how forceful the words

Duration: how long the reaction goes on, if there is a meltdown, or if the person won't let go of an issue or get the issue resolved

Many autism traits are recognized occasionally in NA/NT people

It is the frequency, intensity and duration of the resulting issues that set ND relationships apart from NT relationships

Two Languages: The AS/ND communicates literally while the NA/NT communicates from perspective (multiple meanings and inference)

The literal vs. perspective modes contribute to the frequency of issues experienced by ND couples

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Frequency, Intensity, and Duration Growth Tips

Remember that the AS/ND and NA/NT spouses use language differently

- If the listener (AS/ND or NA/NT) isn't sure what the word means, ask for clarification.
- If the speaker (AS/ND or NA/NT) is asked for clarification, give a meaning or a different word, realizing that not everyone has the same vocabulary.
- Both parties can come to accept that the other person may use different words for the same situation and that asking for clarification is not being critical – it is to create mutual understanding.
- Both parties should realize that they process differently. AS/NDs should consider that they are saying the word a different way to clarify and process, rather than to just correct the other person. NA/NTs should realize it is so the AS/ND can process and clarify and not necessarily to correct you.

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No Communication

Lack of communication can lead to making (faulty) assumptions

Lack of communication may result from the AS/ND needing additional processing time and/or inner communication when the processing stays in the AS/ND mind and is not shared

Growth Tips

- It is ok to say that you really do not know what to say or that my mind is blank
- Can we start again more slowly?
- I need a 10 minute (or however long) break—and you must return to the issue then

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Minimal Communication

Some communication but not enough to convey the AS/ND partner's full meaning-especially when attempting to work together

Growth Tips

- Before starting a project, sit down to discuss the project.
- Draw a picture so you know each of you have the same vision.
- Write out what each of you are responsible for.
- Set up break times to assess how it's going.
- If one has a question in the middle, ask if it's a good time to talk.
- Set up code words if necessary. (For our project we ended up using single words as he poured the concrete such as 'start,' 'slow,' 'stop,' and 'finished.' These were simple and we were able to communicate quickly.)
- Realize one or both people involved may need a break from overstimulation. Usually, it's the AS/ND person. Planning for breaks in general instead of plowing ahead is a good idea.
- Our mantra became "Relationship before task."

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Body Language

Communication without words

Especially used by NA/NTs to communicate emotions, feelings, moods and attitudes.

AS/NDs usually miss or misread these non-verbal cues

Learning to read body language can take years of effort by the AS/ND to put together the setting (room or location, number of people in the conversation, number of people in the area), activities and body language and tone of voice of others in the conversation.

Growth Tips

- It's always good to clarify your interpretation of body language. Be able to give your interpretation and accept it when the other person wants to clarify.
- If there is confusion, often one person may have an unspoken rule. If you have such a rule, understand that everyone does not automatically know what it is

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Social Norms

Communication should change with the situation

AS/NDs may use one type of language/word choice for all situations due to not reading situations well

Humor

There are many types of humor, often requiring subtle nuances or implied situations

AS/ND minds may not understand such humor due to not recognizing these attributes

The AS/ND mind might try to repeat things that are received well the first time, this can become tiresome quickly

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Conversations

The peak of the communication experience, with transitions, pauses, interjections, and humor

AS/ND conversation challenges

- Knowing when it is ok to enter in without interrupting
- Responding quickly to an unexpected question or word play
- Listening and responding instead of dumping related facts

If used by the AS/ND partner, scripting can help but can also result in a shut down if the other party does not follow the script

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Conversations (continued)

Listening

Required for a conversation to take place.

Lack of signs of listening can lead to annoyance and eventual dysregulation of the speaker

NA/NTs are usually very good at gauging the interest of their listeners, while AS/NDs may not be good at showing their interest

This can lead to mutual dysregulation and a communication issue

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Conversations (continued)

Considerations for Conversations

- Is this a topic of special interest?
- Has this subject come up before?
- Does a decision have to be made?
- Is there blame involved?
- Is this feedback?
- How long will this conversation last?
- Is the person in the middle of another task and needs to be interrupted?

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Conversations (continued)

Growth Tips

- There are many considerations and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to having a good conversation.
- If you find you have had a good conversation, talk with your spouse about what was good about it. Give helpful feedback about what you appreciated about the conversation.
- Recognize that when an AS/ND person is speaking, he/she is often translating in his head. This can cause the processing to be slower.
- To practice a conversation, set up a time (like at dinner time or after) and beforehand, each person can find a topic to talk about, think of a few interesting things to say about their topic, and formulate three questions to ask the other that are not yes/no questions. Practicing conversations helps to understand how they work.
- Practice active listening. Find a time when there are minimal distractions and start with a short conversation. Remember that practice will initially seem clinical (that is, it might be stilted/uncomfortable/choppy at first before it eventually becomes more organic and fluid.)

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Final Thoughts

An ND relationship will always have communication challenges

There is hope! Communication and your relationship can improve with consideration of you and your partners strengths and challenges and a desire to grow and change.

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Connection Challenge - Greg's Experience

An attempt to share something and then get back to his routine

- Attempted to connect as a task

- Did not follow 'Relationship before Task'

Unintentionally started a conversation (attempted to share but not do the work to connect)

Carol was left frustrated

Greg eventually repaired

Greg is learning that building connection and relationship is not a task, but an interactive experience that needs to be followed to completion