



By Eva Mendes, LMHC, NCC, Asperger/autism specialist, couples counselor, author, and presenter.

**“I don’t see it as dysfunctional. I just think of it as an alternate mindset.”**

Jerry Seinfeld on being on the autism spectrum

Neurological differences like Asperger’s and autism can be seen as necessary evolutionary adaptations rather than pathologies. An alternate mindset rather than a disorder. As an Asperger/autism specialist and couples counselor, I work with individuals with neurological differences such as Autism Spectrum Difference (ASD) and Asperger Syndrome partnered with a non-spectrum partner (NS). After seeing recurring challenges that these neurodiverse couples face, I developed the following strategies that they’ve found useful:

### 1. PURSUING A DIAGNOSIS:

Many couples and individuals come to me seeking a diagnosis. A diagnosis can be important to acknowledge ASD traits that might be causing marital problems; however, it is not required to apply these strategies. Understanding how ASD traits affect the relationship can remove the blame, frustration, shame, pain and confusion felt by one or both partners. A diagnosis can be obtained from a clinician skilled in identifying adult ASD. They must also have a thorough understanding of the neurodiverse dynamic.

## Marriage with Asperger’s and Autism: 15 Successful Strategies for Couples

It is especially helpful if the evaluation includes an interview with the spouse.

### 2. ACCEPTING THE ASD DIAGNOSIS

While evaluating the relationship in light of the diagnosis and accepting it, seeking information is key. An ASD-specific couples counselor, and Spouse-and-Couples-Support Groups can be really helpful. Individuals with ASD can be loyal, honest, intelligent, hardworking, generous, and funny. Accepting their strengths and weakness can lead to a more balanced picture of the marriage.

### 3. STAYING MOTIVATED

Sometimes the NS partner may be so depressed, angry, and completely disconnected from her partner, that she might not desire to salvage the marriage. It is always helpful when both partners are motivated to address and change the issues in their marriage.

### 4. UNDERSTANDING HOW ASD IMPACTS THE INDIVIDUAL

Understanding that ASD is a biologically-based, neurological difference vs. a psychological mental disorder is key. Psychoeducation is an important part of sorting out the challenges in ASD marriages. Books, movies, and workshops can help the both partners better understand ASD. They can then implement ASD-specific strategies to their relationship. Due to its complex nature, learning about ASD is lifelong.

### 5. MANAGING DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, OCD, AND ADHD

People with ASD are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It is vital to diagnose and treat these mental health issues with medications and therapy. Untreated they can have serious negative consequences for both partners. NS spouses can often experience their own mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, Affective Deprivation Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as a result of being in a relationship with an undiagnosed ASD partner. In these cases, the NS partner should also receive treatment.

### 6. SELF-AWARENESS FOR THE NS PARTNER

The NS partner can often be a super nurturer, and manager. She may have also have her own issues, and sometimes even ASD traits, and other neurological differences such as ADHD, dyslexia, mood and anxiety disorders. Self-awareness for the NS spouse can also help her understand why she chose her partner with ASD, the part she plays in the conflicts with her partner, and what she can do about it.

### 7. CREATING A RELATIONSHIP SCHEDULE

A calendar is an important tool for any marriage. Due to the executive functioning and social-emotional reciprocity problems that adults with ASD have, keeping a calendar is even more crucial in a neurodiverse marriage. Additionally, a relationship schedule can help the couple plan for conversation, sex, and leisure activities in order to stay connected.

### 8. MEETING EACH OTHER’S SEXUAL NEEDS

The partner with with ASD tends to either want a lot of sexual activity, or too little. Scheduling sex to accommodate the needs of both the spouses can help regulate their sex-life. The partner with ASD may also be mechanical and unemotional in bed, or he may struggle with sex due to sensory sensitivities. The partner with ASD may need to be taught how to maintain a daily emotional connection—both inside and outside the bedroom.

### 9. BRIDGING PARALLEL PLAY

A partner with ASD may go days, weeks, or even months engrossed in his own special interest, and not spend time with his partner. This “parallel play” can leave his partner feeling lonely and abandoned. Common activities that might have brought the couple together whilst dating can abruptly stop after marriage. This is in part due to his challenges in initiation, reciprocity, planning and organizing. Scheduling playing together—long walks, boat rides, hikes, and travel—can help bridge the parallel play gap.



### 10. COPING WITH SENSORY OVERLOAD AND STRESS

Sensory sensitivity is a core trait of ASD. A person’s senses may be either hypersensitive or hyposensitive (diminished sensitivity): a caress can feel like burning fire, or a needle prick can have no effect. Strategies can help prevent meltdowns triggered by a sensory overload. Individuals with ASD can also be more susceptible to stress than their non-autistic counterparts. Planning time to self-care and relax is crucial.

### 11. DEVELOPING THEORY OF MIND (TOM)

The partner with ASD tends to have a weak TOM—he may have trouble understanding, predicting and responding to a person’s thought-feeling state. He may unintentionally say and do things that can come across as insensitive and hurtful to his partner. He can develop a better TOM by becoming more aware, of how he is likely to offend his partner. He may also be able to express more complimentary and affirmative speech.

### 12. IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

A core feature of ASD is communication challenges. The partner with ASD might have difficulties in picking up facial cues, vocal intonations, and body language. He can often monopolize, or have difficulty initiating conversations, and keeping them flowing. His partner might feel frustrated by the lack of communication and reciprocity. Scheduling daily conversation time, and direct communication strategies can be useful.

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### 13. CO-PARENTING STRATEGIES

Individuals with ASD can be very good parents when it comes to concrete tasks, such as helping children with homework, teaching them certain skills, or taking them on outdoor adventures. In order to meet his children's emotional needs, he might need cues from his NS partner. Working with a parenting coach can also prove valuable.

### 14. MANAGING EXPECTATIONS AND ASSUMING THE POSITIVE

Adjusting expectations based on ability and neurology is important for both partners. Working hard to improve the marriage with the strategies listed here can bring about real change. Resetting entrenched patterns of interaction can often be challenging. Personal growth can often be arduous and slow; however, both partners must

assume the positive of each other.

### 15. COUPLES COUNSELING FOR NEURODIVERSE MARRIAGE

Neurodiverse couples report that working with a counselor, unfamiliar with ASD harmed their relationship. An ASD-specific couples counselor can teach both partners about ASD, and interpret the neurodiverse points of view. Counseling can help a couple brainstorm and implement strategies to better their relationship.

The issues and challenges that some neurodiverse couples face can seem similar, but every individual with ASD is unique. Couples have to solve their marital challenges in a manner that is best suited to their situation and needs. The full article, can be found at [www.evmendes.com](http://www.evmendes.com).

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