

How Can a Neurotypical Partner Support an Autistic Spouse?

By Minni K. Ang, Ph.D. Autistic Self-Advocate

Speaking as an autistic spouse with a truly amazingly supportive non-autistic partner (we are coming up to our 8th anniversary soon) who nevertheless doesn't always get it right, I believe I am in a position to answer this question.

I think the number one characteristic of my beloved and the single most important quality that a spouse of an autistic individual needs to have if the marriage is to be a success, is teachability. And of course, they must love each other enough, that goes without saying, as inter-neuro marriages can be challenging due to the extreme disparity in how either brain actually works.

A teachable person is someone who genuinely makes an effort to learn when faced with an issue - they seek to understand problems by acquiring knowledge and then applying that knowledge to change their own perceptions and reactions to circumstances.

My spouse urged me to get a formal diagnosis just over four years ago when I responded (in her mind) extraordinarily intensely to some bad news I had received at the time. That bad news actually led to an exceptionally rough two years for me personally, where my autistic traits dominated my behaviours, and I would never have emerged to achieve my current success and wonderful life today if not for her unwavering and genuinely supportive actions. What set her apart as the kind of spouse that an autistic person really needs is the fact that once my diagnosis was confirmed, she took the trouble to read all the literature she could find on autism, to support me, and didn't just keep it all as head knowledge but made actual changes in how she behaves around me, and how she responds to me when my behaviour or response seems weird to her. She's better and better at anticipating my triggers and preempting meltdowns (yes, I can still have those if I get overwhelmed) - the key takeaway you as a non-autistic reader and spouse of an autistic individual should have from this is "better and better". Not perfect. But always improving. Because she keeps learning, because for some weird reason she thinks I'm worth all this effort. The bottom line is, if you love your spouse enough, you CAN do this. It's hard work, but all it really takes is teachability. Understand that when your (autistic) spouse behaves in a way that seems uncaring or temperamental or dismissive or any other way that you feel negatively impacted by, they are most likely not intending to communicate that message at all but are rather facing some (most likely unrelated to you) internal challenge that is overwhelming their ability to respond "normally". Keep in mind that us Autistics are unable to wear those "masks" that neurotypicals have that allow you to keep it all together and interact acceptably with other people even when you yourselves are experiencing inner turmoil. We can't do this. Learn. Adapt. That's genuine support!

About the Author

Let me introduce myself - my name is Minni, and I was diagnosed with Level One Autism only a few years ago, although I have of course been autistic all my life - autism is not something you catch or develop: it is rather a non-neurotypical wiring of the human brain that some of us are born with. Today I am employed full-time as a software developer by a great Canadian company, Kinaxis. I love my job - it is interesting, sufficiently challenging, and the company culture is amazing and inclusive; I was hired through their “autism at work” programme, intermediated by another great Canadian non-profit human resource agency that specializes in work placements

My backstory is pretty complex. I emigrated to Canada in 2009, although I was here for several years as a young child when my dad did his doctoral and post-doc studies at the University of Waterloo. I have a Ph.D in Computer Applications, but also have degrees in Music and in Physics. I have worked in exceptionally diverse fields including academia, as a professional musician, in broadcasting, as a youth worker, ran my own music production start-up company, as a freelance iOS developer, as a consultant for academic and research development, and even spent a year driving a big yellow school bus!

I live in Ottawa with my spouse Sofia, our teenage daughter and our three dogs. To relax I love doing puzzles of any sort, playing one of my many musical instruments, reading or watching science fiction or fantasy, and woodworking. I have many special interests, but especially love learning how things work and creating new things for others to enjoy.