

## THREE



# Appreciating Your Neurodiverse Relationship

*No matter how hard I try, I can't do things well  
enough for my partner to be happy with me.*

—Autistic point of view

*I understand my partner does these things  
because they're Autistic; I just wish they could  
try harder to do things like most people.*

—Neurotypical point of view

**Y**ou fell in love and want to build an even closer, more intimate relationship. As you get to know your partner, you learn more and more about their habits, personality, and experiences, and they learn more about you. Somehow you have to combine your lives and bring your experiences and different perspectives all together in loving connection. Sounds easy, and it's anything but. Putting it all together to create a lasting bond is the work of a lifetime.

Sometimes Autistic people are so competent in their careers and seemingly in their relationships that people may not realize or even believe they are on the autism spectrum. Neither of you may have anticipated the breadth and depth of the differences you were

dealing with. Many neurodivergent people have always felt different but had no idea why. They may have been told they are lazy or strange or definitely wrong just because they're different and people don't understand them.

Changing the way you look at your partner and your relationship, as we have been talking about here, helps to redefine the possibilities between you and the person you've grown to love. It changes your beliefs about your partner and about people in general who are different from you. Whether you knew it from the beginning or not, your differently wired brains played a part in your attraction and growing relationship. It also plays a part in your struggles and will be important to solutions.

Some common complaints in living day-to-day in a neurodiverse relationship have to do with the main differences between Autistic and neurotypical adults: communication, social interaction, sensory differences, patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. These are defining issues in the differences between you as partners. Many misunderstood behaviors from both partners get in the way, along with differences in things like self-expression, social needs, and overall strengths and limitations.

Most people come into relationships with certain expectations that can include some very specific ways of expressing love and other feelings. When their expectations are not met, these people often feel surprise and disappointment, and can become angry and resentful over time. Often all it takes to change a pattern is letting your partner know your specific expectations more clearly or directly. Sometimes, however, it takes more than that because it can be difficult for people to change their core ways of being and believing. We'll be exploring various expectations and accommodations that can help each of you be a better partner in your relationship.

One of the most important things to remember is to embrace your differences rather than trying to correct, control, or change them. People can and do change over time, but you can't hold out love for a person who's not the one in front of you. Imagining that

you will love them when they change is not realistic or desirable. It's much more productive to change the way you see yourself and your partner. It doesn't mean change isn't important or necessary. If we're all honest, we can all work on ourselves, and while not everything can change, everyone can change something. Change can also take a lot of time. No need to wait a long time to enjoy and feel satisfied in your relationship.

Here are some things you can do now to begin improving your relationship day-to-day (we get even more specific in future chapters).

## Embrace Your Differences

When couples accept differences, they can shift from perceiving them as flaws or annoyances to seeing them as qualities that make their partner, and partnership, unique. When this shift happens, both partners can be more tolerant of differences and the good intentions they have for their relationship.



**New perspectives matter:** Alice and Bo, a couple I saw on the verge of divorce, began to learn some of these concepts in our first session and started realizing their misinterpretations had led them to overreact. They wanted a chance to try again. There's baggage to sort through, such as some unhealthy communication dynamics based on misunderstandings that developed over the years, but they are getting closer week by week.



Here are some ways you can work to embrace your differences:

1. **Change the way you look at them.** Differences are often judged as better or worse than or stronger or weaker than. If one of

you prefers to sleep on a silky pillowcase, and the other prefers cotton, or one of you enjoys black coffee and the other drinks lemon and pineapple juice every morning, these do not have to be opportunities for disrespect. Make these traits endearing instead of opportunities to mock your partner.

**2. Honor and respect each other's preferences.** Remember that having two different types of brains comes with tons of benefits, including creativity in thinking and problem solving. Let it be okay that your partner loves to sleep near their stuffed unicorns or gets upset when you buy the wrong brand of chips. A shift in the way you view your partner can help you see your differences as something you can accept and work with (not work against or try to change).

**3. Acknowledge your differences and your partner's struggles.** Neurological differences may not change significantly over time; however, most of us can learn to change or compensate for unhelpful behavior. Failing to acknowledge these efforts can lead both partners to feel unappreciated, or to think their partner doesn't realize all of the things they do to compensate, accommodate, and try to please them.

~

**Acknowledging the effort:** Acknowledgment from both of you about what you are each struggling with and the efforts you're making toward each other goes a long way. Sometimes people can't see that their partner tries hard to please them, but this is often one of the biggest takeaways in the couples intensives that I run. Both partners come to see and acknowledge how hard the other works to love them and show it, even though they have both been missing the cues. You may not have realized that your partner shows love by doing chores when you're not home, by cooking you dinner, or by texting you while you're at work.

Sometimes these seem like small expected things or even annoyances and the caring message is lost.



**4. Think beyond your own beliefs or point of view.** You and your partner probably see many of each other's behaviors and interactions very differently. For example, one of you may find doing things on the spur of the moment fun and exciting, whereas your partner may see spontaneity as chaotic and out of control. As a result, one of you may see the other as rigid and inflexible if you don't prefer spontaneity, or as irrational and unable to plan ahead if you do. You're both right about how you feel, and your relationship needs to both acknowledge and accommodate these facts for both of you. It may seem impossible, but this truly can be done.

## A Model for Changing the Way You See Autism in Your Relationship

To accommodate unique partnerships we have to rethink love, relationships, and romance. This book is about changing your ways of thinking about neurodiversity, and therefore changing yourself, your relationship, and how you act and feel with your partner. Changing your way of thinking can help you change how you solve problems together and how you love and honor each other. One useful framework for moving in this positive direction was created by Dr. Stephen Shore to influence society's overall perspective on autism.

In the *Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine*, Dr. Shore advocates for what he calls the *four A's of autism*: awareness, acceptance, appreciation, and action. He originally created this schema in response to autism awareness events because he believes that awareness is not enough. He's right of course. This is particularly true in the context of having a successful relationship in which one partner is Autistic.

Here is how you can put Dr. Shore's four A's of autism to work to help both of you move into a different way of relating.

### **Awareness**

We're all familiar with autism awareness—there's even a month every year dedicated to it. If you or your partner is Autistic, one month each year means little. In your relationship, autism awareness means recognizing the signs and impact of autism in you, your partner, and your relationship, every day.

Awareness may be the stage at which you currently find yourself as a couple. Awareness may bring new ideas and knowledge and an ability to grow, but stopping at awareness leaves the problem at Autistic. "Oh, they're Autistic," one might say. "Now I'm aware; autism is the problem." This doesn't work. Autism is not the problem. Neurodivergence is the issue, and awareness is the beginning of understanding that builds a solid foundation for working toward solutions to differences that arise. We'll get there.

### **Acceptance**

Often couples come to therapy at the beginning of this stage. This usually means "We accept that autism lives with us. We accept the autism as our problem." Naturally, nobody says it exactly like this. They say something more like, "One of us was diagnosed with autism, and we've been reading and learning about it [awareness]. We totally accept autism in our relationship. So now that we understand *the problem*, we know what we need to focus on to improve the relationship. What do we do?" Often the goal at this point is to take autism out of the relationship now that we know it's there.

Again, this leaves the problem with autism. Acceptance is not enough. This may still leave the neurotypical partner trying to help an Autistic partner change, and the Autistic partner trying harder to suppress their Autistic traits. A neurotypical partner may feel

strongly that their Autistic partner should change certain behaviors that embarrass or annoy the neurotypical partner, not realizing the important purpose many of those behaviors serve. However lovingly you may approach the need for someone to change, it can still feel unloving for the person who wants and needs to be loved as they are, just like everybody else.

Several things need to happen here. First, the couple, both individually and together, needs to accept autism as both an integral part of the identity of the Autistic partner and an important part of the relationship by working *with* as opposed to against their characteristics. Only once this occurs can we begin to answer the question about what should be done, which is part of acceptance. The answer to “What do we do now?” is key. The answer is “We learn to appreciate.”

## Appreciation

At this point we learn the strengths and challenges of our partner and take a closer look at our own personal strengths and challenges and those of our relationship. We more than accept neurodivergence in our relationship or tolerate that one of us is different. Neurotypical partners come to actually appreciate their Autistic partner for who they are and what they bring; they value their perspective and their contributions to the relationship. Autistic partners also come to value their own differences instead of trying to hide them, and appreciate the differences their partner brings as well.

In this scenario, your voices and opinions hold equal weight. You both learn about the things that may change and the things that are unlikely to change. You learn to embrace the various parts of neurodivergence, such as greater possibilities for creative problem solving based on different perspectives, and to compensate for potential misunderstandings.

To get to a place of true mutual love and understanding, it's crucial to move to appreciation in your neurodiverse partnership.

This doesn't mean you have to appreciate every annoying thing your Autistic partner does that irks you. It also doesn't mean that your neurotypical partner is off the hook for all of the annoying and frustrating things they do that you find equally irksome. What you both have to appreciate is neurodiversity itself.

### **Action**

Once you appreciate and embrace your relationship neurodiversity, you can take positive action in many ways. Acting from any other point of view leaves the problem with autism. Until you appreciate the Autistic traits or characteristics, your progress will be limited. There can be a ton of strength in difference. It doesn't mean you love everything your partner does, but you love them through all of it. You can still want and work for changes in yourself, your partner, and your relationship. The rest of this book is about how to take the actions needed to change as we look for the strengths in your relationship and work to highlight them, while accepting limitations and working on the challenging parts. The four A's of autism and your relationship are summarized in the table on the facing page.

Moving into appreciation and action can involve a long process of researching, reflecting, talking, learning, and coming to terms with a different kind of relationship than the one you might have imagined. It begins a major shift that changes relationships.

At first, you may grieve the loss of some of the ways you hoped you could share and relate to a partner. At some point you take the critical action of creating a partnership that honors the neurodiversity in your relationship. This deeply changes the relationship and moves it to new levels of understanding, with greater authenticity and well-being for all. Beginning now, you can dream new dreams and create a wonderful life with your significant other. Your relationship may grow closer and stronger than you imagine.

The stages of awareness, acceptance, appreciation, and action are not "one and done." Each new point of awareness can send you

### SUMMARY OF THE FOUR A'S OF AUTISM AND YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Stage	What it means	What you know	Your reaction
<b>Awareness</b>	You're aware that one of you is Autistic. You may have known this already, or it may be new information.	You're informed about autism and understand some of the traits of autism in you or your partner.	You hope autism can go away or that you can suppress signs of it well enough to make it look like it doesn't exist.
<b>Acceptance</b>	You accept that you or your partner is Autistic and that your relationship is neurodiverse.	You know that the differences between you are the result of your being fundamentally different.	You want to work <i>with</i> as opposed to against your differences to fit in as a couple.
<b>Appreciation</b>	You're getting to know yourself and your partner more deeply. You appreciate the things that make you alike and those that make you different.	You know your differences bring strength in having different perspectives and different approaches to things.	You feel grateful that your relationship is not like everybody else's, and you love your partner deeply just as they are.
<b>Action</b>	You want to do more than feel good; you want to do something.	You continually work to understand yourself and your partner more fully and to find ways to make sure you both feel loved and fulfilled.	You believe that your relationship is better for its neurodiversity, and you advocate for Autistic people and against neuro-ableism.

back to trying to accept it before you can take it all in and appreciate what it means for you and your relationship. This process can happen over and over again as you get to know each other more deeply and figure out what makes you both happiest in relation to each other.

## Authentic Understanding

Authentic understanding in a neurodiverse relationship is built on the four A's of autism. To begin to understand a perspective different from your own takes a willingness to drop your defensiveness and listen to a point of view, however strange it seems, until you really get it. It's hard for anyone to fully understand someone else's mind. Yet it's exciting to experience a new breakthrough in understanding. It's what psychologists call an "Aha" moment—when your personal lightbulb turns on. It creates a very intimate moment when your personal lightbulb turns on toward your partner.

We could create a similar schema of stages with a chart about neurotypical people to help Autistic adults appreciate them more too. The reason this is not presented here is that Autistic people have been taught all their lives to accept and appreciate the neurotypical world and the neurotypical people in it. If you're Autistic in a relationship with a neurotypical person, you now have to undo some of your prior learning and assumptions just like neurotypical people do. You too have to learn to accept and appreciate your own strengths and challenges and not hold neurotypicality as the gold standard. It's also important not to hold neurotypicality against your partner. Your partner was born that way.

No doubt, you each have strengths with which you can lead the way and bring something special to your relationship. It may not be what you or your partner hoped or expected, but it can become something even better. Over time, giving your partner what they

need or helping them figure out how to get it, as well as getting what you need for yourself, will help you feel closer and more fulfilled. Stay open to life's journey.

What is hopefully abundantly clear by now is that neither of you is less than, or wrong, when you don't measure up to relationship ideals the other one holds. Couples usually come to therapy with a lot of obvious love and commitment yet needing to grow quite a bit in understanding. Look for ways in which you and your partner can work best together rather than focusing on limitations and what you fear you may never receive from them.

## Ways to Start Making Change Today

You can start making changes in your relationship immediately by using what I've come to consider the seven C's of relationship change. By focusing on ways to work together with mutual respect you can begin to change the way you relate and connect with each other today. The seven C's are caring, cooperation, collaboration, compromise, communication, creativity, and checking-in. All of these are important at almost all moments, although I've left checking-in for last since that needs to come not just during but after all the rest. There's a lot to think about when you relate to a partner, and with time and practice much of it becomes a part of good relationship habits that carry relationships through good and hard times.

### **Caring/Concern**

Paying attention to your partner and caring about their health, welfare, and the things that are important to them helps you when you feel frustrated or challenged by them. Care includes things like respect and compassion and helps partners feel closer to each other. Caring for your partner and believing they care for you will help

you both get through difficult conversations, events, or challenges. Showing concern and interest in your partner and their point of view makes a big difference in helping them to trust and work with you in mutually beneficial ways.



**A bonus C = Consensus:** Decisions in a romantic partnership need to be shared so that there is general agreement about what happens in the relationship and household. All decisions don't have to be made together, but there must be agreement about which decisions will and will not be made jointly. Sometimes one of you may feel burdened by having to be the sole decision maker. In other areas, you may prefer it that way. There's no right way; however, whatever way you choose to get things done has to take both of you into account and be negotiated so that you both agree.



## Cooperation

Of the many things partners must be to and for each other, someone to help you become your best self is a big one. Appreciate and encourage each other. Cheer your teammate on. You may compete with others, but you must cooperate with your intimate partner in ways that will help you both reach your personal and shared goals.



**All-or-nothing thinking:** It's hard for some people to see gray. Sometimes things seem to be all or nothing, which can make brainstorming or cooperating together difficult. If one of you is more of a black-and-white thinker and one of you is better at seeing the grays, see how you can work together toward your common goals.



## Collaboration

Either of you may have a strong interest in keeping things a certain way (the way you prefer or need them to be) and may be very strong and persistent about it. Take a closer look at how you can change things to make your relationship work more smoothly. Work together as a team to collaborate about who will do what and when. Creative solutions come in handy every day.



**C is for collaboration:** Use some of the strengths we started building in the last chapter. If you are an Autistic person who tends to think logically and may not allow feelings to cloud rational decision making, you may be just the person your relationship needs to deal with the landlord over the roof that still leaks. If you are a neurotypical partner who becomes more emotional about certain issues, learn to step back and let your partner handle some of those difficult issues if and when they can.



## Compromise

All of the important issues in your relationship can be negotiated. When there are differences of opinion, neither of you is necessarily right or wrong. Many issues require compromise for the good of the relationship. Most things can be compromised, but if you come up against something that means too much to you to do so, that's a time to stand your ground a little more. This doesn't mean both of you will be completely satisfied with every outcome. It means you will negotiate and compromise so that you both get as much as possible of what you need and want. Compromising, even a little bit, toward your ultimate relationship vision gets you closer to it than holding so tight to one vision that it gets muddled.

## Communication

Communication is one of the most important issues in any relationship and one of the most difficult issues in a relationship between an Autistic and a neurotypical partner. For this reason, more than one chapter in this book is dedicated to communication challenges and how to overcome them. For now, it's important to just keep this in mind and to try to take a look at ways you communicate and miscommunicate in your relationship. Consider what you might want to change. We go through all of these ideas in later chapters.

See the summary of the seven C's in the table on the facing page.

## Creativity

Be creative and open to thinking outside the box. This helps immensely in problem solving or attending to your partner's needs. It can also help in all of the situations in which collaboration, compromise, and communication are necessary to get you through a tough time. Creativity is necessary for arriving at unique solutions that work for you and offers you both fresh perspectives and new ways of relating.

## Checking-In

Part of communication that is necessary throughout your relationship maintenance and growth is checking in with each other all along the way. One of the main ways you'll know whether something is working, how you're each feeling, and what you're each thinking is by checking in. Assuming what your partner means or thinks or feels most often does not work out well. If you want to know, you have to ask. Checking back in with your partner after trying something new or after they share something with you also helps them feel validated and cared for by you.

### SUMMARY OF THE SEVEN C'S OF RELATIONSHIP CHANGE

<b>Caring</b>	Show interest, compassion, and concern; make vulnerability feel safe and make solutions seem possible.
<b>Cooperation</b>	Help each other reach personal and shared goals; support your partner rather than working against them.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Work together on shared tasks or goals; move in the direction of a shared vision.
<b>Compromise</b>	Find a way to come to a mutually agreeable solution even if you both have to give up something to get there.
<b>Communication</b>	Practice being able to talk to your partner about what you need or want from them and vice versa.
<b>Creativity</b>	Stay open to ideas and possibilities; brainstorm together in a way that keeps your hearts and minds willing to accept new perspectives or solutions.
<b>Checking-In</b>	Check in with your partner about how they're doing, about how things are working for them, and about how they see the relationship working. The other six C's depend on checking in to make sure everyone is feeling positive about the changes.

### Show Your Appreciation and Keep It Light

The last couple of things to think about in creating a generally improved outlook and positive feelings in your relationship include a culture of appreciation and humor.

## Show Appreciation

*Honor and respect your partner and your relationship by building a culture of appreciation.* Sometimes all partners hear is criticism and the things they do wrong. Even if you try to be more balanced, the negative may outweigh the positive to your partner. Highlight the positive, or at least point it out when you see it. It makes critical moments a little less hurtful. Instead of asking “Why didn’t you do what you said you would?” ask “What happened?” Or “What made doing that thing for me hard for you?” Ask with sincere curiosity, rather than annoyance or impatience.

Being thoughtful, such as by saying please and thank you to each other, also helps immensely to create a positive home culture. Express gratitude for positive qualities or things your partner does. Making dinner, filling the car with gas, taking out the trash, and performing any other household chore feels just a little lighter when acknowledged or appreciated, even when it’s your agreed-on job and you do it every day or weekly.

Find ways throughout your day to show appreciation in ways that your partner enjoys—possibly a smile, a compliment, a hug, or other small actions like a text or email from work. Building a culture of appreciation involves using things you know about your partner to show you care. We all need love and appreciation. These things help couples build a stronger and more loving connection. If you’ve lost sight of them, let’s get it back on track.

## Keep It Light

This means not making things overly serious. Sometimes humor is the best solution, although you have to be careful here. Your humor may not sit well with your partner, and if you know this, drop the humor. For example, sarcasm usually has a bite, and some people feel only the sting. You can appreciate the endearing ridiculousness of your partner’s quirks without joking about them. You know your

partner and whether or not this is something that can be shared helpfully. If you make a mistake, apologize rather than becoming defensive because “it was only a joke.” Sometimes it’s better to let small things slide. By all means, don’t joke with your partner if you’re the only one of the two of you who thinks the joke is funny.

### Practice Your Healthy Relationship Habits

#### SELF-REFLECTION

1. Visualize your ideal relationship. Think about stuff from who does which chores to intimacy and time spent together and apart. How would you like your day-to-day life to go?
2. How does your relationship vision compare with your relationship as it is now? What works and what doesn’t? What are you hoping to change?
3. Think about the things you can do starting today that you don’t already do. Is there at least one thing you can begin to do, such as working harder on compromising or showing appreciation, in some way every day?

#### CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Share your relationship visions with each other. What are the similarities and differences in the ways you describe and envision your ideal relationship?
2. What strengths do you each bring to create your vision? What challenges do you each have? Please don’t try to cover all of this in one conversation! These are relationship-building conversations that will be ongoing.
3. What do you both want to start doing right now that might begin a cascade of change in your relationship?

## ACTION PLANS TO BUILD CONNECTION

Besides being neurodiverse partners, you are first and foremost simply partners in life. Find a simple activity you both enjoy and do it together. It doesn't have to take a lot of time. Here are some examples:

- Find 15 minutes for a walk or a cup of tea or coffee.
- Play a video game or a board game together.
- Watch a TV show.
- Look up a list of words related to neurodiversity online.

Get back into (or make sure to stay in) the habit of spending positive time with each other, doing even little things you both enjoy. No need to focus on neurodivergence while you do it, but you can if that's fun for you.

**Wrap-Up**

Diversity, even in a relationship of only two, is valuable for bringing new ideas and perspectives to the mix. Two heads are better than one mainly because they're not two of the exact same head. As we discuss specific relationship issues throughout the book, we also look at how Autistic and typical strengths and challenges help or hurt and what can make it better.

Always remember you're on the same team. This doesn't mean everyone does the same thing. Think about the team sport you know best. Each one has various positions, all of which are critical to the game. Some players do more on the field or court than others. The game still depends on every single person on the team plus several on the sidelines and others behind the scenes. Making changes in your relationship that help either you or your partner usually ends up helping you both. For example, any

changes in your communication that make things clearer will help make things clearer for both of you, and you will both benefit.

It's time to reimagine your partnership in new ways and create a relationship about which you both feel good. Be as flexible as you can while still maintaining boundaries and routines that are important to you and your partner. Being open and honest with your partner isn't always easy but, if done effectively, it results in a stronger and more intimate partnership.