

## Is It Time to Go See A Couple's Counselor?

Dear Readers,

One of the most insightful counseling professionals I've met in years is Eva Mendes. Enjoy her great article about counseling NS (nonspectrum)/ASD couples.

*Does every conversation with your husband turn into a battle, leaving you bewildered? You express your emotional needs to your wife, but she just doesn't get it? You try talking things through with your partner, but that only makes him angrier? You know your wife is a good person, but she does and says things that really hurt you? You feel more like your husband's mother, than his wife? No matter what you do, you feel it's never enough for your spouse? You can't remember the last time you felt happy?*

If you answered yes to more than one of the questions above, it might be time to go to see a couple's counselor. If answered to yes to one or more of the questions above, it might also be that your spouse, partner, husband, wife, girlfriend or boyfriend has Asperger's Syndrome or is on the Autism Spectrum (AS). The new DSM-5, released in 2013, has eliminated the term Asperger's Syndrome, and those with this neurological difference are now be identified by the healthcare community as being on the Autism Spectrum. In this article, I will use the acronym AS to include both Asperger's Syndrome and Autism Spectrum.

### **Asperger's Syndrome/Autism Spectrum and Marriage**

AS is a difference in neurology as opposed to a psychological or mental disorder. The latest Center for Disease Control statistics for prevalence of Autism are currently 1 in 55, but the actual figures might be much higher. Tony Att-

wood (2007), the world's foremost authority on AS, says that up to 50% of adults with AS remain undiagnosed. Since the 1990s, ever since AS was established as a neurological diagnosis in DSM-IV, the medical and mental health community has primarily associated with it children. AS in adults wasn't really a consideration until just a few years ago, and even now, getting a diagnosis can be challenging. Another reason many adults remain unidentified is because they might be misdiagnosed with ADD/ADHD, anxiety, depression and/or OCD – which are common comorbid diagnoses for adults with AS. Schizophrenia and personality disorders are other incorrect diagnoses associated with AS.

Associated mainly with children, with celebrities like Daryl Hannah, Dan Ackroyd and Susan Boyle coming out as having AS, the focus on adults is steadily increasing. The media and entertainment industry are featuring characters with AS more and more, helping break stereotypes and increasing the visibility of AS. AS is a largely invisible disability. It's difficult to tell if someone has this neurological difference from their outward appearance. People with AS have deficits in mainly three areas: interpersonal communication, relationships, social imagination (What is asperger, n.d.). The difficulties in communicating and relating that characterize AS are also the very skills that are important to make long-term marriages and relationships work. So, it's easy to see how having AS can make for challenging romantic relationships.

Individuals with AS also tend to love routines and dislike change or transitions. They also have an average or higher-than-average IQ. People with AS also have very focused areas of interest which can sometimes include their careers, often

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making them very successful in their chosen fields. Financial success and a high status can make many men with AS very attractive marriage partners. Many people with AS have significant sensory sensitivities, which can cause some couples to have physical intimacy issues.

No two people with AS are alike. Each individual is unique and the manifestation of traits varies from person to person contributing to the confusion and challenges in getting a diagnosis.

As a couple's counselor specializing in AS, couples tell me that finding out about AS is a huge relief. The spouse without AS or the non-spectrum (NS) partner feels they can finally stop blaming themselves for not being a good enough spouse. The NS partner often tends to blame her/himself for the unemotional, neglectful and even abusive behavior of their partner. One minute their partner may seem like the kindest person in the world and the very next, they may have an explosive reaction to the slightest provocation. The partner with AS can also relax knowing that there's an explanation for their behaviors.

The average couple is distressed for six years before seeking professional help (Weil, 2012). Given that AS is pervasive, affecting a couple's communication, social and emotional life, sex, finances, and parenting, couple's counseling or some form of problem-solving within the AS framework seems to be a necessity, and well before the six year mark.

### Selecting the Right Couple's Counselor

Finding a couple's counselor who specializes in adults with AS is often a challenge, and couple's counseling without the AS lens can be

detrimental. A therapist not familiar with AS might attribute the negative patterns in the marriage to things other than AS. While looking for a couple's counselor who understands AS, it is advisable to ask the counselor about their AS-specific training and experience. Couples counseling where one or both partners have AS, is most useful when concrete, action-steps, and 'to-do' strategies are implemented within the AS framework. Identifying AS traits that are contributing to problems in the marriage is key. Untangling the NS partner's own issues from their partner's AS is also important.

In my experience, using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to identify distortions in thinking for both partners is very helpful. CBT has been the only therapy that has been clinically proven to be beneficial for adults with AS (Gaus, 2007). It is important that counseling be clear, direct, nonjudgmental and collaborative in creating solutions in your marriage (Cully & Teten, 2008). It is also important that conflicts arising in sessions are well managed by the therapist (Weil, 2012). Moderating both personalities, reframing perspectives and assigning action-steps to work on between sessions is a necessary part of the couple's interventions (Weil, 2012). Recommending books and articles to the couple, can also provide valuable psycho education.

### What Can You Expect from Couple's Counseling?

To find out, let's witness a couple's counseling session between Kurt and Aalia:\* When they first came to me for counseling about a year ago, Kurt and Aalia were both unsure

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about what to expect from counseling. They had been to couple's counseling before, as well as, individual counseling to figure out the issues in their marriage. It was Alia who had recently heard a program on the National Public Radio about AS, and her suspicions about Kurt having AS had resurfaced.

In our first session, Kurt was open to hearing about AS, but he was not convinced he fit the bill. Aalia on the other hand, was eager to see me and instantly enumerated all the issues in their marriage. She said that they had been married for 2 years and that Kurt had changed into a completely different person upon marriage. He was constantly on-edge, stressed out and would fly off the handle at the smallest slight. She wanted to know where the man, who had been courting her with flowers and weekend trips, had gone. She said that she thought that Kurt had OCD and that he got really angry, if she left even the smallest crumb on the kitchen counter. He had gone from the handsome suitor, who constantly took beautiful photographs of her to a battling, abrasive, grumpy recluse. Even sex was always on his schedule: every three days. If she reached for him any time before that, he told her that he didn't want to, and that was that! Aalia expressed feeling hurt, rejected, and exhausted from the constant fighting that had become commonplace in their marriage.

Due to the unhappiness that couples feel, they bring a sense of urgency to the counseling sessions, hoping to address all their relationship challenges in one go. While it is natural to want to solve everything at once, it is important to focus on one or two pressing issues in each session. In Kurt and Aalia's case, that the problem

that Aalia was struggling with the most was that Kurt would have a meltdown over the smallest things. His tone became sharp and he raised his voice, thereby causing his wife to feel traumatized and emotionally stung. I asked Kurt what his perception of the issue was. He said that he was only bothered by the crumbs on the kitchen floor as he stepped on them. He said that didn't realize that he had sounded angry, when he had voiced his discomfort.

In this case, it was important for both Aalia and Kurt to learn that some adults with AS struggle with hearing their own decibel level and tone of voice. The NS spouse may experience them as shouting and rude, but the spouse with AS might not hear the loudness and edge in their own voice. Kurt would have to work at increasing his frustration tolerance for the day to day annoyances that can come from living with another human being. He would also need to become aware that his tone of voice sounded rude and that his volume gave the impression that he was yelling. He would have to work on slowing down his response time, and really think before he said anything, so as to not hurt his wife's feelings so frequently.

Using CBT helped Kurt to reframe his thinking and increasing his knowledge about spouses needing a margin of error. Teaching the partner with AS to honor the NS partner's emotion-based values and how their actions affect their partner is important. For many adults with AS, who tell me that they just don't know what to say or how to react to a particular situation, I experiment with scripts, role-playing and action-steps to use for different situations.

Thus, I helped Kurt articulate, "I just stepped on the crumbs on the floor and my feet feel

## Eva Mendes, cont'd

gross now. And I feel upset that I've to now find the mop and clean the floor again," as opposed to "Why did you leave crumbs on the floor?! This house is so dirty!" Overtime, Kurt would also learn that he didn't always need to verbalize these minor annoyances and that he could work off his upset by taking their dog for a walk in the woods instead. Her knowledge about AS would help Aalia recover more easily from Kurt's angry outbursts. She could also be Kurt's ally in making him aware of the tone and decibel level in his voice. In this way, both partners could learn to express themselves in ways that built their relationship rather than tearing it down. Both Kurt and Aalia learned about AS and how it was affecting their marriage and instituted new ways of relating.

*\*This case study, based on several couples I've worked with over the years, is fictitious.*

Many adults with AS have their own well-formed perceptions and theories on their partner and relationships. Most of them tend not to discuss or talk about what's on their mind with their partners, or shut down as they feel that they are being constantly criticized. In comparison to their non-spectrum counterparts, who might consult with friends or family members to get another point of view on the situation, adults with AS tend not to discuss such things with others. Initiating conversations and processing relational matters can be highly challenging for those with AS. Counseling provides a much-needed forum for the couple to dialogue with each other, and come up with solutions for long-existing problems. The partner with AS is also more likely to hear the counselor's unbiased and moderate perspective on things. Therefore, even a few couple's counseling sessions can make a world of difference.

It is crucial that the couple's counselor have a good grasp on AS to be able to connect with both spouses – especially, to the spouse with AS – in a manner that motivates him/her to make positive changes. Understanding and working within the context of the AS framework is key to successful couple's counseling when AS is a factor in the marriage.

As both partners become aware of AS and better learn to communicate and cope, they naturally begin to see positive changes. The saying, *Two minds are better than one*, is appropriate in this context. Inviting a couples' counselor's mind to collaborate in troubleshooting AS-related marital issues can be very useful.

### **How Long Can Couples Expect to Be in Counseling?**

I often say to couples that watching a marriage improve is like looking at a tree grow. We are unable to see a seed sprouting into a plant, but if we used a time-release camera to take a picture of the growing sapling every day, in a year's time, we would be able to see each millimeter of progress.

While it's true that for some couples, even just one or two sessions can make a big difference; for many, the process of resolving their marriage can take regular weekly or bi-weekly sessions over several months. Patterns of interaction formed over years can take time to reset. Some couples continue counseling indefinitely to have the accountability, motivation, and space for marital connectedness. They settle on coming once a month for maintenance and to work on new strategies. Other couples taper off regular sessions and come on an as-needed basis during a particular life-stressor or event.

Marriages and romantic relationships where AS is a factor can often have different models, from non-spectrum marriages. For example, some couples choose to live apart even though they remain committed to each other. While relationships challenge us to grow and expand our capacities, the patience, understanding and hard work required in an AS marriage is often extreme. Couples might find their coping abilities and energy levels constantly depleted. Therefore, it's important for both partners to take really good care of their health and wellness, on a daily basis.

Managing stress, with mindful meditation, yoga, exercise, medication (if needed), walks in nature and downtime, is important for both partners. Hiring professional help for executive functioning issues relating to financial planning, child care, job searching, organization and time management, and home projects also helps a great deal.

Even so, some individuals may feel that they do not want to be married to their spouse anymore. AS is a pervasive disability – affecting many aspects of a couple's life – often making the NS-AS gap too hard to bridge. Counseling during the separation and divorce can provide the couple with a safe space to process issues around the split. The therapist or a parenting consultant can also help with strategies and systems around co-parenting children, if there are any.

The longevity of an NS-AS marriage, often depends on finding Asperger's-specific help, the continued growth and development of both partners, and the unique circumstances of each couple. The hard work, tenacity and persistence of every couple I've worked with has been

humbling, and has sustained my own hope in the work I do.

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