

## Neurodiverse or Neurodiverse?

Same word, different use. One is an adjective, one is a noun. One describes, one names or labels. One describes the nature of a situation. One applies an external label or category to that situation.

Why am I writing this? I sit here, fingers poised above the keys, and I feel tension, conflict within – my head is looking for words, my heart is concerned about the meaning those words will create for those who read my words. Sitting with that tension, I am seeking to find the place where head and heart connect and can together choose what words will most accurately express what I want to say and what I feel you the readers would value reading.

I want you to experience compassion, I want to help you to experience validation that what you have been experiencing is real, it has form, it did happen or is happening now, it can be described, it can be touched, it can be understood, it is known, it is shared by others and I see you.

Living in a “neurodiverse” marriage for 20 years taught me so keenly that the soul I was sharing life with had a deeply and comprehensively wounded self-life within and he approached our relationship through a filter of perceived offense in every conversation, no matter how diplomatic I trained myself to be. It was exhausting. But my intent was never to wound – my intent was to reason with, to appeal to, to explain, to beg for mercy, justice and cooperation. It wasn't to be. He wasn't able to move through or past his own internal frameworks to be able to hear the meaning of what I was trying to convey. And he wasn't secure enough within himself to do the vulnerability needed to work with professional help. His views were fixed, and terror ensued if he were to consider that any other possible view could be valid other than his own. I had to leave. That is not a relationship in any meaning of the word.

So, “neurodiverse” – what am I trying to say? “Neurodiverse” is a term that has been coined relatively recently to describe the range and variation in human brain function that create differences in how we think, learn, express and function, etc. Why am I using the term and writing about it? Because it's being used to describe our marriages, my former marriage, and I have some deep misgivings and discomfort about elements of this, which brings me back to the title of this piece – neurodiverse or neurodiverse?

For 25 years knowingly and for 17 years unknowingly prior to that I have been writing about relationships affected by one partner/spouse exhibiting the characteristics of Autism, formerly Asperger's Syndrome. These days these relationships have been labelled “Neurodiverse”. A helpful description. A useful word, as a description, an adjective. Yes, it helps me to understand that ever-present difference in how my ex-husband and I were thinking, learning and functioning. The word or term puts it somewhere. Perhaps it puts it out into a sphere where others are more likely to accept that it actually exists. Use the term Asperger's Syndrome back then, or Autism Spectrum Disorder today, and people's eyes glaze over, or they become defensive or protective, or make invalidating comments. The stigma. It's still there. And the deficit in capacity to know what we're talking about unless the listener has

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lived experience. Perhaps “neurodiversity” finally helps us leap over the stigma and see it as a legitimate and valuable functional group within society who bring diversity of thought, learning, functioning and perspective to this kaleidoscopic and eclectic experience we are all having with life. As an adjective.

The electric shock I feel deep within though is when the term “Neurodiverse” is used as a noun, a label, in relation to a marriage or relationship, my former marriage, other people’s marriages. Many new counselling enquiries that I receive these days start off with the words “I’ve realised I’m in a neurodiverse marriage/relationship”, or words to that effect. Ok, neurodiverse describes it (adjective), and shortens the explanation, no need to spell it all out, we now “get it”, I can use my knowledge, my lived experience, my support group experience, my education, my counselling experience to interpret this very accurately. I just need the personal nuanced variations so I can help support and guide the dear soul seeking help.

I guess the word has done us many favours but the problem I have is with the tendency to use it as a noun. I’m in a “Neurodiverse Relationship” – as a noun, a name, a label. Who gets to label my relationship? I feel indignance rising within. I own my relationship, it’s my experience, I’m grateful to have a word that helps describe what it was like within it, but assigning it a label is just too neat and clinical, and it’s no-one else’s place to assign a label or category to an experience that belongs to me, that wasn’t lived with mutuality of acceptance between my former husband and myself.

I guess that’s my point really – I was living a relationship with someone whose behaviour can be described by the word neurodiverse but he wasn’t accepting and living the truth of his own neurological difference and was not taking responsibility to manage the interaction and impact that created within our relationship and family life.

Why do I have a problem with this, and what is the point of me writing this? Two things. The matter of disclosure, and the matter of consent. Disclosure and Consent. You are in, I was in a relationship with someone who did not and could not disclose that he was neurodiverse because he didn’t know. In fact, and this is with full compassion for those on the Spectrum because we all know someone neurodiverse who we love and care for, but it is a known fact that people on the Spectrum mask. It’s sad that they have felt they had to, but neither they nor society handle well what or who we don’t understand, so masking becomes an essential survival tool. But the mask comes off in the privacy of home, so partners live with a very different version of the person they developed a relationship with or consented to marry or commit to.

The internal conflict this creates is catastrophic. But we stay. We are loyal. We search for knowledge. We are highly empathic, caring, responsible, we have love for them, we know they’re a “good person”, we deeply value our own soul’s investment, and at many levels we know the partner has functional gaps that they can’t help. It challenges us morally and deeply to consider abandoning someone who can’t help their deficits, so we stay. And somehow over time our role evolves into that of a carer or even a parental figure, and we don’t know what to do or how to change this. A sense of powerlessness sets in, or an inability to influence things for the better.

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These days consent is a vitally important component of every aspect of life. It must be sought, and it must be obtained before anything can happen that impacts another person's life. I did not consent to being part of a Neurodiverse Marriage. I consented to a "normal" life with a human being who I believed had differences of personality, gifts, experience, strengths, values, etc, etc, like anyone, but "for better or for worse" just doesn't cut it when it comes to the actual differences I experienced behind closed doors, and the unmitigated dysregulation that sent earthquakes through the foundations of our lives and continuous fault lines and tears through the fabric of our family's life. We didn't know it was neurodiverse. Who would have? I just knew I didn't consent to what I was expected to accommodate, manage and function within.

And neither do any of my clients, or any of the dear souls who attend our support group contexts. It's retrospective knowledge. Knowledge in hindsight. There is love, how beautiful is the human heart to rise above in the ways we do? But being called on to learn extraordinarily detailed psychology, to accept, to accommodate, to function on behalf of, to carry, to compensate, to be supply, to strategise, to re-interpret our own personal needs, hurts and wounds, to feel alienated from the human networks that we used to belong to, to doubt our own sanity, to cry out for some sort of validation, connection with others who "get it" and some sort of easing or resolution of the daily confusion and conflict that naturally arise due to the existence of neurodiversity that is typically not embraced by the one partner that is being accommodated and danced around.

I did not consent to that. And no-one else gets to apply that label to any relationship where the neurodivergent partner is not owning their own neurology and actively learning ways to honour and support the relationship they have committed to.

If my ex-husband had taken on board and accepted/embraced his neurodiversity, committed to learning and growing in the ways that were possible, I more than likely would have then been a willing participant in a "Neurodiverse Marriage/Relationship" (noun), while we continued to learn and grow, together. I dare to suggest that many other spouses/partners would also feel so inclined. Perhaps this can be called retrospective consent. One very prominent theme in nearly all situations is the reality that the "neuro-typical" spouse/partner wants to find a way through, a way to stay, but without some "buy-in" from the "neurodivergent" partner, their strength can only hold out for so long. It's a tragedy. It breaks my heart. And it nearly broke my mind and body.

Carol Grigg, 6 April 2026