

Planning ahead for social events

Whilst this article was written some years ago with Christmas and New Year events specifically in mind, the thoughts contained are as relevant now as they were then, and can also be applied to other plans, so I have generalised accordingly.

As a year comes to an end, and we face end of year events, celebrations and holidays (or at any other time of the year when plans and events are being anticipated) that don't always go smoothly, perhaps there are a few things we can remember to help us climb our way through this time a little more "intact".

Human contact

As Clinical Psychologist Jeroen Decates always reminded us in our support group meetings, remember and cherish your "neurotypical self" and seek contact, conversations and experiences that nourish your "neurotypical" needs. Our ASD partners cannot do this, as they are not socially wired or emotionally tuned in, so it is essential to remember that we cannot survive emotionally unless we take deliberate steps to create those opportunities with other neurotypical souls.

Pre-plan events

Many partners report that social events, etc, are more successful if there is a plan developed with their ASD partner prior to the event. Talk about where it will be, who will be there, what to wear, how you will travel, what time to leave, what time it finishes, how long you'd like to stay, what food to bring or what type of food is on the menu, etc. By talking about this stuff you can reduce some of the unexpected stuff that escalates an ASD person's anxiety and causes conflict and crossed-wires in the middle of everything. Some couples go in separate cars so that the AS person can leave as soon as their social energy has expired, leaving the NT partner to enjoy a bit more time with family or friends. Maybe talk about some "cues" too, pre-arranged signals if a plan needs to change, or if a discussion is needed, etc. Or if social events are a nightmare, go on your own, or be absent from the events where your ASD partner insists on going but historically behaves badly.

Consider what you can change, not what you can't

Most of us develop such a feeling of powerlessness around our ASD partners because they are so stuck in patterns of behaviour and expression, and can't change or adapt to the circumstances or needs around them. Of course, we continue to adapt around them which adds to the feelings of ineffectiveness, resentment, and also to a loss of a sense of self. We can't change or manoeuvre them. And we've changed so much about ourselves in order to adapt or avoid meltdowns that we can barely recognise ourselves anymore. So what can we do? We can take a moment to look at our responses to them, and how we may be able to adjust or alter these even just a little. It will take courage. Often the first time is the scariest. Start small, but gradually and calmly refuse to adapt, comply, enable or be present around any unreasonable expectation or behaviour. Often an ASD partner's bad behaviour is driven by a need to quieten us, align things with their ideals or control their environment so that they can cope. We can remove ourselves, or change the way

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we respond. Sometimes an adult with ASD is actually ok when we become a bit more predictable or clear about what we want or are going to do or not do. If it's a lack of predictability that causes most of their anxiety, then maybe they'd welcome some clearer signals from us.

I'm convinced that, out of consideration (which is an NT strength!) we often wait for the ASD person to acknowledge or give their approval or permission before we proceed with an idea or plan of our own. Can we just respectfully but firmly inform them what we are going to do? No debate. Give them time to process. Don't react to their reaction. Of course, everything is always an experiment, and so often we do what we do because we're afraid or feel intimidated, and want to avoid a meltdown at all costs. But the meltdowns often happen anyway, no matter how hard we try to facilitate and appease. It's scary to oppose someone's demands, or refuse to comply, but as an adult we are equal and can choose our responses and actions. It is always important for me to add that if you actually fear for your safety, it is essential to have an escape route planned or a safe place to go to, and someone to call. Make sure a professional has documented the presence of any abuse or violence in the relationship or family context.

Remember your dignity

Part of the grief we feel over our loss of a sense of who we are is that we have begun to behave in ways we never used to, and it feels so wrong, and causes us such sadness. But we must be merciful and forgiving towards ourselves. Our behaviour has been understandable as a result of having lived for so long in circumstances we don't understand, and which don't respond to our "normal", conventional or even creative attempts and efforts to create relationship, home and family with an ASD partner. It is hard to have to be the "bigger person" and accept our partner's reduced relationship and social capacity, but we feel better about ourselves when we know we have stopped punishing or shaming them for their deficits. Of course, we need to address any destructive behaviours they display, but this must be done with professional support, and with dignity, rather than by resorting to acts of emotional terrorism ourselves, which achieves nothing but escalation and emotional distress even for us. With knowledge and developing understanding, as well as regular support, we can begin to adjust our expectations and set out on the long journey back to restoration of ourselves as empathic, caring, patient and warm individuals who enjoy social interaction and human experiences, but we must begin to recreate this with other like-minded and like-hearted souls, rather than re-investing in the black hole.

Please take good care of you as you prepare for any upcoming plans and events!

Carol Grigg, 7th December 2016