

Emotional Healing must come from other sources

During this past month I have been busy with many conversations and counselling sessions with partners.

A couple of common threads continue to stand out to me. I will talk about one of them here.

It is our “natural” response to become emotional with our ASD partners when we are hurt or offended by them (which of course is natural in any relationship). As offences and conflict build up over time and are not resolved (which tends to be the pattern in relationships affected by ASD), we naturally become more upset and emotional, which is a normal response on our part. It is “normal” to need resolution, not to just go on as though the issue doesn’t exist anymore which is what the partner with ASD seems to do.

What is hard for us to come to terms with is that in a relationship affected by ASD, the more emotional and verbal we become, the more likely it is that the ASD partner will shut down or retreat, or the opposite, emotionally or verbally “out-escalate” us even to the point of aggression so that we are overwhelmed or frightened and we back down.

Thus, the situation is then restored to what they can cope with. And they go on as though nothing happened, while we are left more upset and distressed or traumatized, still with no way of finding a place of resolution or having our needs met.

This leaves us feeling very powerless, unable to address legitimate hurts, offences or even everyday situations, and all of us can relate to this feeling of sheer and desperate frustration and helplessness.

The fact is, the adult with ASD is unable to cognitively, emotionally or verbally meet us at a place of resolution. And displays of emotion by us are in fact futile in securing what we need from our partners.

What are our options? Not very many I’m afraid. But perhaps the first and most important one is to reclaim ownership of our own emotional state instead of allowing our partner to be in charge of it. When stress and emotional distress go on indefinitely our mental and physical health will definitely suffer, and prioritizing the relationship and our partner’s needs may not be worth the devastating toll this is having on us. We cannot look to an ASD partner to heal us emotionally.

You are a beautiful and worthwhile person. Your partner may be the one you chose to share your life with, but they are only one person in a vast world, and many of us have come to the conclusion that we wouldn’t even choose our partners as a friend if we knew what we now know about their attitudes and behaviours.

Are you therefore doing yourself justice by allowing them to be the one who has the most influence over your emotional well-being and also how you feel about yourself?

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Save your emotional energy. Change your expectations. Try to reduce the extent to which their contribution matters to you. Find alternative solutions. Look to your healthy and normal friendships and family connections for your emotional nurture. Channel your nurturing into yourself and those who reciprocate your care. Develop your independence and value yourself.

I know this is not what any of us really or ultimately want for our relationships, but perhaps this is the only way to ensure our own emotional survival. And one never knows, if we back off and just quietly step away from them emotionally, they may notice the change and move back towards us just a little.

Carol Grigg, August 2016