

The Autistic Adult's Toolbox

Real tools for real
life—because “just try
harder” isn’t a strategy

Natalie Diggins

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info@everydaysuccesspublishing.com

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The Essentials:

My Husband Is an NT and I'm an ND

- *"I want, I need"* language clarifies where compromise is possible and where ND needs are non-negotiable.
 - A *no-fighting-dirty* rule protects trust, even during emotional conflicts.
 - Balancing ND and NT social needs requires deliberate strategies so that both partners' needs are met.
 - In a shared schedule, adding some structured check-ins and routines offers predictability for ND partners while allowing flexibility for NT partners.
 - Our differences challenge—and then enable—us to communicate more clearly, connect more deeply, and grow stronger as partners.
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My Husband Is an NT, and I'm an ND: How We Make It Work

On the surface, my husband and I couldn't be more different.

My husband is an NT; I'm an ND. He's tall and loud; I'm petite and quiet. He enjoys the frenetic energy of a crowd; I enjoy the calm of being by myself. When he shows love, it's like a pot boiling—exuberant and overflowing with intensity. When I show love, it's more subtle, like a dish of ceviche, cool and contained.

And yet, despite these differences, and many more, we love each other very much. Yes, we have our struggles, but what relationship doesn't? Our challenges may not be typically what couples encounter, but with a few tools, ours works for us.

Relationships, whether ND or NT, start with a strong foundation. Before addressing our unique differences, we built a solid base centered around clear communication, mutual respect, and trust.

Our Foundation

I Want, I Need

The most important element of our foundation is language.

To work through these differences, we've learned the importance of clear communication and compromise through the phrase *I want, I need*.

A want is something desired but not essential for comfort or well-being, allowing room for flexibility or compromise. A need is something essential for well-being or functioning, with little room for compromise.

For example, I may say that I *want* Thai food for dinner. It's a desire, and whether I have Thai cuisine or something else won't adversely impact me.

But I *need* to eat that dinner in a quiet, calm restaurant. If I dine in one that's the opposite, it will undermine my well-being and potentially bring on a down.

*Clear communication and trust are the foundation
of any relationship—ND and NT alike.*

On the other hand, my husband may prefer Italian food. In this case, we might compromise and dine in a calm, quiet Italian restaurant. We both win.

It works the other way around, too. As a child, my husband was mauled by a dog, which left him with an overwhelming fear of them. When we're walking and encounter a dog—no matter how friendly—he needs me to step between them to prevent him from panicking. Since I don't fear dogs, it's not an issue for me.

His panic is his version of a down. While my downs are caused by being on the spectrum, his panic attacks stem from his life experiences. Both are equally valid and require us to compromise for each other's mental well-being.

The phrase *I want, I need* gives us a clear framework for identifying where we can compromise and where we can't. It helps us prioritize and avoid unnecessary conflicts, so we focus on what matters instead of minor issues.

In addition to a language tool, we also have one unbreakable rule for conflict resolution: No matter how intense things get, we never fight dirty.

#1 Relationship Rule

Fighting dirty is when you know your partner's emotional vulnerability, and you use it against them.

- It's telling your partner they're acting like their mother/father/brother/sister or some other person your partner has a charged relationship with.
- It's using hurtful or degrading language aimed at something you know your partner is insecure about, like their job, their appearance, or a past mistake.
- It's bringing up something personal or sensitive that your partner has confided in you, like a fear, an insecurity, or past trauma, just to win the argument.

It's taking the trust your partner has gifted you and weaponizing it against them.

Don't fight dirty.

Building Trust

With the language of "I want, I need" and the rule of not fighting dirty, we've built a foundation based on mutual understanding and respect.

This foundation helps us resolve our differences. I never question my husband's motives—he's shown, time and again, that he only ever wants the best for me, even when we disagree.

Trust also helps us take risks in our relationship. It's why we can suggest new ways of handling challenges or try out each other's solutions, knowing we're both working toward the same goal of making life better for us both. Without trust, it would be much harder to grow and evolve as partners.

Our shared emotional bank account is full. Now, with this bedrock, we're ready for the reality of day-to-day life.

Managing Our Differing Needs

As much as trust and communication strengthen our relationship, daily life still requires us to manage the realities of our individual needs. Whether it's how we socialize, manage our communication styles, respond to routine, or handle sensory input, our approaches often diverge. But with a bit of thought and flexibility where each of us is able, we've learned to find common ground.

Managing Differing Social Needs

I already know how to balance my own social needs, but it becomes more challenging in a relationship when the needs of a second person are involved.

Social strategies like drop-bys, couple time, and quiet time for recovery balance our differing needs.

My husband loves being around people; it gives him energy. Me, I prefer being by myself, and when I am around people, it's draining. To manage, we've developed socializing tactics:

- **I attend joint social engagements that we jokingly call "command performances."** This is our lighthearted way of prioritizing the most important social functions. The idea came about early in our relationship, when my husband asked me to join him on nearly every social occasion, not realizing how draining it was for me. He thought I was like him and would enjoy the interaction.

- **Deploy the drop-by strategy.** Command performances are few and far between, but when they do occur, we might use the drop-by strategy. Ahead of the event, we identify the people who are most important to us. My husband will then arrive at the event before I do, I drop by to make an appearance and participate, I actively seek out and greet those already pre-identified, and then I leave while he stays and enjoys himself.
- **Use the meet-up strategy.** My husband might attend a social gathering on his own, and then we meet up afterward. For example, he'll often grab a drink with a colleague or group after work, and then we'll meet up later at dinner.
- **We schedule alone time for me, while my husband goes out and socializes on his own.** To stay emotionally connected, we have a practice where, if one of us is socializing without the other or traveling, the first one to go to bed texts the other goodnight, and in the case of travel, the first one awake texts the other good morning.

With these tactics for social engagement, my husband's needs are met, we as a couple maintain a connection, and my need for quiet alone time is respected.

Managing Differing Communication Needs

Some people believe that autistic people can't lie. I don't know if that's true or not, but in my case, it's that I don't know I'm supposed to; I lack a filter. If my husband asks me for my opinion—on his outfit, a decision he's made, or how he's handling a situation—I give him my honest answer, without sugarcoating.

This can be especially challenging when dealing with emotionally fraught issues. I mean no hurt or harm, but sometimes my directness can come off as blunt or insensitive, especially if he's expecting a more supportive or gentle response.

At the same time, I sometimes struggle to understand his emotions or even my own. It took me a long time to realize that my difficulty naming my emotions wasn't just a personal quirk—it's actually a common trait among autistic people. It has a name: alexithymia. It means I don't always recognize or articulate what I'm feeling right away, even when those feelings are strong.

It's not just that NTs don't always get me—I don't always get them either. That's what researchers call the "double empathy problem." Basically, it's a

two-way street: NTs and NDs each have their own ways of communicating, and misunderstandings happen because we see things so differently.

Recognizing this difference has been important for both me and my husband. It helps me be more intentional in expressing what I feel, and it helps my husband understand that my seeming lack of emotion doesn't mean I don't care—it's just harder for me to articulate or even identify what I'm feeling in the moment.

When dealing with sensitive topics, I apply a temporary filter while my husband engages in emotional reflection.

My temporary filter focuses on gentle framing and reassurance. Depending on the situation, I might start a difficult conversation with a script like, "I know you didn't mean to, but..." or "I love you, and we're okay," and then follow it with what comes naturally for me: direct feedback. This allows me to be honest while showing my intent isn't to wound. It keeps the conversation open and lets my husband know that even when I'm being direct, my support is constant.

In return, my husband engages in emotional reflection, which comes naturally for him but can be difficult when he's feeling vulnerable. When he feels hurt by my words, rather than reacting, he responds with, "Here's how what you said made me feel..." This helps us keep the conversation productive and prevents misunderstandings from escalating into an argument.

You might wonder why I don't install a "permanent" filter if I'm able to use one temporarily.

For me, it's a form of masking—suppressing or modifying traits to appear more neurotypical—which I try to limit. I focus my energy on using the filter during important discussions, especially when doing so ensures I won't hurt others. But for everyday interactions—especially on unimportant topics—it's too exhausting to maintain constantly.

Managing Differing Routine and Flexibility Needs

I find comfort in predictability, and sudden changes in routine can cause me distress. I rely heavily on mentally preparing in advance for new activities. My husband enjoys spontaneity and adapts easily to changes. If left on his own, he rarely plans and prefers ambiguity.

I like to visualize how we balance our differing needs:

As a couple, our day is like the outline of a box, with clear boundaries. Within

that box, my day is likely highly structured, while my husband's stays more fluid. The perimeter is where our styles meet and where we have common structure.

Practically, we accomplish this by having a daily "stand-up" meeting—similar to a quick check-in at work—where we review our schedules, any tasks we need from each other, changes to our usual routines, and what we might have for dinner. The most important topic is where our schedules intersect.

This helps set expectations and keeps things predictable for me while giving my husband the flexibility he needs. If plans change throughout the day, as they often do, one of us will text the other—we avoid surprises.

Truth be told, my spontaneous husband not-so-secretly has come to appreciate having some structure in his life. He now gets to go to that sold-out show (because his wife got tickets in advance), he's more productive (thanks to our daily stand-up meetings that keep him on track), and we avoid unnecessary conflicts (since the important things are discussed and planned ahead).

*With trust and thoughtful strategies,
our differences become strengths—
not barriers to connection.*

Managing Differing Sensory Needs

Managing our differing sensory needs (really, they're my sensory needs) is one of the most challenging and frequent issues we face in our relationship. We make it work mostly through compromise and scheduling, and the best way to explain how is through real-life examples.

- My husband enjoys playing music at full volume. We compromise by agreeing that he can listen as loudly as he likes (as long as it doesn't disturb the neighbors) when I'm not home. As I make my way back, I text him, and he lowers the music before I arrive.
- The sound of dishes being unloaded from the dishwasher, especially during quiet times, is jarring for me. We've agreed that my husband will unload the dishwasher when I'm in the shower, and in exchange, I make the bed, which is something he doesn't enjoy doing.

- The sound of our washer and dryer carries throughout our home—there's no escaping the noise. So, we've worked out a system: We run them when I'm about to leave the house.
- Movements in my peripheral vision can overstimulate me—whether it's my husband pacing while talking on the phone or bouncing his foot. To manage this, we've agreed that if he needs to pace or move around, he'll do it in a different room from me. To avoid arguments, we use a simple code word: "movement." This lets my husband know what's bothering me, signals that one of us needs to change rooms (first person in the room gets it), and prevents a fight from starting.

Stronger Because of, Not Despite, Our Differences

I believe our relationship works not despite our differences but because we've embraced them.

Our differences push us to communicate more, be more thoughtful, and challenge assumptions. And while it's not always easy, these very differences strengthen our bond. In navigating (and sometimes stumbling over) our challenges, we've built a deeper trust and respect for each other.

*ND or NT, the goal is the same—
making life better for each other.*

Once I shared with my husband that I'm autistic, it led to a better understanding between us. Now, when I ask him to be quieter, he no longer takes it as a personal attack. I'm not judging him. Quiet environments aren't just a preference for me—they're what I need and how I'm wired.

We may not approach our relationship like other couples, but it feels true to who we are as individuals and partners. We're still figuring things out, but we're growing together and getting better every day.

Interview with My NT Husband

This interview has been edited for clarity and flow.

Natalie: Thanks for agreeing to talk publicly about our relationship. Are you nervous?

Husband: Not at all.

Well, that makes one of us. Let's dive in. When we first got together, you didn't know that I was autistic. What were your first impressions of me?

Well, you were certainly very different than anybody else I'd ever met. You were completely logical, unemotional, and organized beyond any standard I was ever aware of. You were, of course, hot.

You know I'm going to edit that last part out. (Note: I was overruled.)

And you were deliberate in everything you did. Nothing is left to chance; nothing is left unplanned. It took some getting used to.

That's fairly accurate. How would you describe your own approach to life, and specifically, to relationships?

It's a good question. I would say up until that point, I was more reactionary and less proactive. I also planned a lot less. As far as relationships go, I would say I led more with emotion and less with reason.

In my previous long-term relationship, I was the less emotional one by far, though I was still very emotional. It was new for me to have that world flipped.

I remember one time, but I forget the exact details, when I reacted in a certain way, and you basically said, "You get to do that once, but that's not how we do our relationship." I'm like, wait, that's not how we do this? I thought that's how you did it. I learned a lot about how to have a better and stronger and more respectful and less volatile relationship from you.

I think I know the instance, and it was our first big argument. You sort of exploded. That's when I came up with the "never fight dirty" rule.

This brings up how we engage in relationships differently. How would you say that we each do so based on our individual neurotypes?

One thing jumps out immediately.

If we do have a fight or a difficult discussion, the fight helps me work through whatever I'm feeling and whatever is happening between us. Having the

discussion is not at all helpful to you unless there's agreed action at the end of it. You want it to end with a series of steps that will be taken so that the argument doesn't happen again.

And I view life as a series of these things. You can't keep them from happening, but you make them fewer and further between, you make them less volatile, you manage them better. But the goal of essentially eliminating conflict is new to me. Since I don't believe it's possible, I don't spend a lot of time worrying about it.

I wouldn't say that I am trying to eliminate conflict, although I wish I could—I'm more pragmatic than that.

I feel we're aligned on the outcome—a supportive, loving relationship—but how we get there is different. Talking about the issues makes you feel better, almost like a pressure release valve that lets off steam. It drives me nuts to keep having the same fights repeatedly—it's like the movie *Groundhog Day* where the same day repeats over and over.

If I go through the anguish and the emotion of having the conflict, I expect things to improve, and the only way in my mind things improve is if we agree to outcomes and to do things differently the next time.

Earlier, you said that you hadn't met anyone like me before, but I know you've had other experiences with autistic people. How has your perspective on autism changed since we met, if it has?

*The first autistic person that I knowingly talked to was Temple Grandin, the academic and ethologist who gave a TED Talk about autism. I learned from her that someone can have autism and be highly functional. Before that, what I knew about autism I learned from watching Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Rain Man*.*

Then, a friend's child was diagnosed with autism, and it gave me another example of what it can look like. All these people experience autism in different ways, and it validates why ASD is called a spectrum—autism doesn't look any one way.

What I've learned from you is how difficult it is for people with autism to live in a world designed for neurotypicals. Every day I watch you and see how hard it is. I appreciate it, although I won't ever truly know how hard it is because I haven't lived it.

Thanks for recognizing that and for not trying to “fix me.”

I’m very blunt, and I approach life in a scientific manner. Despite meaning no harm, I sometimes hurt your feelings. How do you handle situations where I’m too direct and analytical for your comfort?

I cry.

I know you do, and I’m sorry to put you through that. It guts me when I hurt you, and I’ve been trying to give you reassurance before saying what I think, but I know I don’t always get it right.

I mean, it’s hard. If I didn’t respect you, I wouldn’t care what you said, but I do respect you, and sometimes I disagree with you, but even if I do, I still respect you. I don’t ever want someone who I love to feel that I failed them.

Here’s a fundamental difference between us: If I’m giving feedback on you, me, or us, it’s not an indictment of you, me, or our relationship. I know that we’re not perfect, and I just want to be better. I can see that I’ve wounded you with my words, but because they weren’t meant or said harshly, I don’t understand why I’ve done so—I’m at a loss.

I look at both my intention and what I perceive to be a lot of hard work to accommodate you. Making your life easier is a big part of my everyday living. And when it’s not done right, or it just didn’t work, or whatever it is, it’s hard on me. It’s like the guy who goes up to bat at the World Series with bases loaded and strikes out. I mean, it’s just that feeling that I stepped up and took my shot and I failed.

You bring up the accommodations that you make for my autism, and I very much appreciate all the things that you do for me. One reason I think our relationship works is that you also appreciate the things I do for you.

Even if we were both NTs, which we’re not, we would be making accommodations for each other. The difference for us is that the accommodations you make for me are due to the way my brain is wired, whereas the accommodations I make for you are related to your life experiences. An example I use in the chapter on NT/ND romantic relationships is your fear of dogs and how I help you manage that. And that’s a common thread throughout this book. We’re all making accommodations in life, regardless of neurotype.

I agree.

What's something you've learned about yourself and our relationship, especially regarding how you handle differences?

I can manage life in general much better. I think that it's partly age and experience, but it's partly being with you and being in our relationship. I can take myself out of a situation better than I used to be able to, and I'm better able to depersonalize conflict. An example is if I get rejected professionally, I don't take it personally at all. I can be a bit more philosophical.

What is something you think we do better as a couple because of our differing neurotypes?

Each of us optimizes for different things, and each of us recognizes that the thing the other one optimizes for is worthy of doing. In the end, I think we end up having a better life because we balance each other. It would be boring if we were too similar.

Speaking of balance, balancing our sometimes contradictory needs is a big part of how we manage our relationship and lives. How do you make sure your needs are met while also considering my neurodivergent needs?

Early in our relationship, you taught me that you have to be a strong me to be a strong we. At first, I wasn't good at that, and then, over time I learned not to worry when you were being a strong me and I wasn't included. Now, I don't mind going to social events on my own if you want a night off or if you want to do something on your own. It took time, but I feel we do this well. It's probably because we're secure in our relationship.

I want to talk about something that's particularly challenging for me—my downs. While I've been able to manage my downs better as I age, they still happen. A few months ago, I had a major down, one of my worst ever. It took me weeks to recover. I know my downs don't just affect me but you as well. How do you approach navigating my downs as my partner?

I think the most challenging thing is to understand that at times there's nothing I can do to help. Certainly, if it's because of something I've done, I can cease the behavior. Or if it's a situation that's problematic for you, I can help to remove you from it, and then there are times where I'm not aware of what's going on. The downs are mysterious, and I really don't know what to do.

I think something you've done a great job with is anticipating crowds and what they do to me. If we must move through a crowd, which unfortunately is often, you sort of get a bubble going around me and try to find a path through the crowd for us that is less dense. I really appreciate that.

You see me in great anguish and distress when I'm in a down. How do you cope or manage your own emotions?

In the moment, I try to manage it. Managing crises is something I do in my job, and it's something I've done over my life with close family members who have various kinds of emotional and non-neurotypical reactions. And so being around that has allowed me to at least in the moment manage the situation and not make it personal.

What do you think we could do together to make these times less stressful for both of us?

The thing to do is to better anticipate the potential for downs. So, for instance, we recently decided to go to a big event, and before we bought tickets to the event, I looked at it and realized that it was going to be tough for you. We talked about what might happen, things we could do to mitigate problems, and then together we decided that based on all of that, the experience of the event was worth the risk. It was helpful that we had the conversation prior to attending so that we could be deliberate in our approach and prepared for what might happen. In the end, everything went well, and we had a good time.

I appreciate how you take the time to think through situations with me like that—it makes a big difference. Speaking of challenges...What are some of the most difficult things about being with me as someone on the spectrum?

I would say the most challenging thing is when we have plans, and some really awesome possibility comes up for a plan B, but because plan A exists, plan B is just rejected, especially if plan B comes up at the last minute. I understand we're prioritizing your mental health, but we live in New York City, and there's always something interesting happening. I do get FOMO.

I remember early on in our relationship, I would bring up issues I was having because I was on the spectrum and was surprised by your pushback. I might say something—music, a door closing, the heater running—was too loud for me, and you reacted almost as if I offended you personally.

One day, after the front door slammed on our way out of the house, I winced, and you thought I was being melodramatic. I explained that when the door slammed, it felt like I was being physically slapped. You stood there, looking shocked, and I felt like in that moment you understood. Since then, I try to describe what I'm going through in terms that I think you may be able to understand. For example, when I'm feeling overwhelmed before a down, I may say that it feels like a giant hand is squeezing my heart.

Certainly, that was a telling moment. I think that part of the challenge I was having is that, in my mind, you present as unemotional, and you don't react. And then certain things would happen and you would react very strongly to them, and that was inconsistent to me. I didn't know how to process that. Since then, I've learned that a strong reaction to noise, or a strong reaction to a physical environment, or a strong reaction to crowds provokes what appears as an emotional reaction in someone who I would generally describe as unemotional.

That makes sense—I can see how I may present as contradictory.

What advice would you give to other neurotypicals who are in a relationship with someone who is neurodiverse?

It was incredibly useful to me to access therapy. I learned to better understand how you're wired and to not have anxiety if you reacted in ways that were counter to what I expected. It helped me understand your sensory issues, why you sometimes lack a filter, your discomfort with certain types of socializing, and why you're less emotional.

I learned to take what you say in the spirit with which it was said, and to tell myself, that's just how she communicates.

On the flipside, I think about all the things you do for me, including your willingness to endure loud places and to socialize more. I realize that it's your way of showing love and that you're not about to break up with me. When you share what you're thinking in an unfiltered way, you're not criticizing me; you're sending me a message of how you want to make things better between us, and I need to take it in that spirit.

Anything else you'd like to add?

Yes. If you can understand where your neurodivergent partner is coming from and how the world affects them, and you can take yourself out of that, which is not always easy, but if you can do that and at the same time focus on the amazingness that comes into your life by being with someone who is on the spectrum, it's like you won the lottery.

This feels like a super intense therapy session.

I love you, sweetie.

I love you too, sweetie.

.. Tool: I Want, I Need Worksheet

This worksheet helps you and your partner clarify your wants and needs in specific situations, identify areas for compromise, and find solutions that respect both partners' well-being.

Situation/Topic	Briefly describe the situation (e.g., planning a dinner, managing social events, balancing alone time)
My Want	What I'd like but I can compromise on
My Need	What I absolutely require for my comfort, functioning, or well-being
Partner's Want	Your partner's preference that leaves room for flexibility
Partner's Need	What you partner requires to feel comfortable or secure
Compromise Solution	Brainstorm how you can meet both needs while still allowing for flexibility

EXAMPLE

Situation/Topic	Weekend Plans
My Want	To stay home and relax with a quiet activity like reading or a movie.
My Need	A calm, low-stimulation environment to recharge after a busy week.
Partner's Want	To go out for a spontaneous day trip with friends.
Partner's Need	Time to connect socially and enjoy an engaging, energizing experience.
Compromise Solution	We split the day: My husband goes on the trip in the morning while I recharge at home. We reconnect in the evening with a quiet dinner together.

YOUR TURN

Situation/Topic	
My Want	
My Need	
Partner's Want	
Partner's Need	
Compromise Solution	

Situation/Topic	
My Want	
My Need	
Partner's Want	
Partner's Need	
Compromise Solution	