

You are the NT and your Aspie spouse speaks harshly to you, the words are hurtful. What is really taking place?

A neurotypical may speak words that feel blunt, curt, cruel and those words may be deliberate. However, when an ASD person says hurtful words, these are usually the result of neurological differences, and not intentional.

Either way it is understandable that the pain is real. Let's find out what's really going on and what we can do.

“The communication mismatch”

Here's what may happen when an Aspie partner's words cause hurt:

A "no filter" approach:

Autistic people often say what they are thinking directly, without the social filter that neurotypical people use to soften comments. They may not realize that their statement will be hurtful and are simply stating a factual thought.

Difficulty with nuance:

Autistic individuals may struggle to understand subtle social and emotional cues, such as tone of voice, body language, and context. This can cause them to miss the "unwritten rules" of social communication and say something inappropriate.

Literal interpretation:

Autistic people tend to interpret language literally. Common expressions like "Hold on" or "I'm tired" might not convey the emotional weight or subtext that a neurotypical person would infer. This literal mindset means they don't pick up on the unspoken emotional message.

Processing differences:

During emotionally charged conversations, an autistic person may need more time to process their own feelings and what is being said to them. If rushed, they may blurt out a poorly thought-out statement that comes out wrong and causes hurt.

Executive function challenges:

Difficulties with executive function can affect how an autistic person plans, organizes, and regulates their emotional responses. This can make it hard for them to slow down and consider the social impact of their words.

The double empathy problem:

This concept suggests that misunderstandings in neurodiverse relationships are a two-way street. Just as an autistic partner may not intuitively understand their neurotypical partner's feelings, the neurotypical partner may misinterpret or feel hurt by their partner's autistic traits.

Strategies for both partners:

To bridge this communication gap and reduce hurt feelings, both partners can take proactive steps.

What can be done?

Communicate needs directly:

Rather than relying on non-verbal cues, be explicit about emotions and needs. Try to use specific, concrete language. For example, instead of saying, "You're being rude," try, "When you said X, I felt hurt because Y".

Explain feelings logically:

The partner may better grasp emotional concepts if they are related to logical or physical sensations. For example, "When you talk to me that way, it gives me a pit in my stomach, and I want to withdraw."

Don't assume intent:

Remember that the hurtful comment was likely not intentional. The partner is not trying to be mean; they are operating with a different communication framework.

Take a time-out:

If a conversation becomes heated or there's a feeling of being misunderstood, suggest taking a 15-minute break. This gives time to regulate emotions and process what was said."

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