

Embracing *the* Autism Spectrum



Finding Hope & Joy Navigating the
NeuroDiverse Family Journey

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WORKBOOK
for Individuals, Couples, or Groups

You are not alone on your journey!

Rest and Reflections On Your Spiritual Journey

Rest and Reflection Stop 1:

Our hope for you, the reader, depends on who is doing the reading. If you have experienced something in the chapter that resonates, we hope you pause and reflect where you are.

For Those on the Unforeseen Journey:

We will invite you to ponder, then spiritually reflect, then take a next step. What action can you take right now? There are many themes that are reflected in each chapter and perhaps not all apply to you or your situation. It may seem overwhelming but pick one theme or question and start there.

For Caregivers: Passengers and Roadside Assistance to those on the unforeseen journey

If you are someone who is reading this because you work with marriages and families, are an educator or pastor seeking to understand, what is your next step so that you can best equip those who may be needing help in their next steps? What gaps might you need to fill? What are the questions and themes teaching you about what a family is encountering on their unforeseen journey?

Part of Stephanie's journey, encouraged by her pastor who was there to support her when her faith had crashed and seemed wrecked and beyond repair (to her), was to focus on who God is and *not* how *she* saw Him. Part of this was a study of "names" or, more accurately, characteristics of God. God only has one name of which He named Himself. Each workbook chapter will have a characteristic or trait of God to ponder and reflect upon. If you cannot see or hear God clearly, it is not Him that has changed but your vision or hearing from Him may be skewed because of your pain or the challenge of your situation right now. There is no judgment or condemnation for those who are in Christ. But we invite you to clean your lenses and look at God through new vision through His Word and reflect upon when God has been there for you more than the pain or challenge you may be in now. We have heard a lot about triggers and what can trigger past pain or memories. But we are learning more and more about glimmers. Some call these God winks or hugs, but

they are gratitude reflections on who God is and how He has a plan for you and hope for your future!

An incomplete vision of God may skew your vision or understanding of Him. You will be invited to reflect on a course correction or to meditate or appreciate the goodness and nature of God.

You will have places to reflect in gratitude or add glimmers where you see or feel God even in difficult challenges.

Chapter 1: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Unrealistic Life Maps: Trusting God's Guidance on an Unforeseen Journey

Reflection: Do you still need resolution, healing, or help? Are you stuck in how you view God?

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- Trusting God in difficult circumstances
 - Reflect on personal situations where you've struggled to trust God and consider how He has been faithful in your life.
 - Write down any doubts or fears you have and bring them to God in prayer.
 - Reflect on any negative thoughts or beliefs about God or yourself that may have emerged during times of struggle.
- Coping with loss: infertility, plans and dreams
 - What losses do you recognize in your life? It doesn't have to be life and death to be considered a loss. Loss is loss.
 - What have you lost? How did you handle it or is it still handling you?
 - What are you doing about that loss? Did you give yourself permission to grieve? Do you need to give someone else space and time to grieve?
- Finding empathy and compassion for others
 - Reflect on any situations where you may have struggled to empathize with others and consider how you can develop a more compassionate heart as you encounter those with losses different than your own. How may God minister to others through you and this loss?
 - What statements that you intended to be well-meaning could have been interpreted as shallow or judgmental?

- Strengthening your relationship with God
 - Commit to reading Scripture daily, focusing on passages that highlight God's faithfulness and love.
 - Set aside regular time for prayer and worship, and consider joining a small group or Bible study to grow alongside other believers.
 - Reflect on the unexpected blessings in your life and consider how they have shaped your journey.
- Abandonment
 - What does abandonment look like in this chapter? Have you experienced some form of abandonment?
 - What long term effects do you think happen as time goes on?
 - Looking back, have you contributed to any abandonment issues in your family?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

What was your take away from this chapter? What was a glimmer or trigger?

Seeing God for Who He Is.....

El Roi: The God Who Sees

Genesis 16: Hagar's Story

Do you believe God sees you and knows your circumstances? Does He care?

What is your view of God? Who is He to you?

If the view of God is incorrect, invite correction and renew your vision of Him.

If you already recognize God as El Roi in your life, appreciate, meditate, give thanks and journal of how He has been El Roi to you. What is your belief on how God sees you?

What does this verse mean to you?

Isaiah 43:1

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

What was a take away from the book chapter or the devotional in the book for you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 2

Chapter 2: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Divine Intervention and New Direction: The Path of Preparation and Spiritual Refinement

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- Reflect on times when you have faced uncertainty or challenges in your own life and consider how trusting in God's plan has helped you through these difficult moments.
- Consider how you can learn to accept and embrace the unexpected events in your life, trusting that God has a plan for you even when the path is unclear.
- How has adversity changed you? Do you run *to* God or run *away* from God or even blame God?
- Reflect on the role that prayer and faith have played in your own life, and consider how they can provide strength and guidance in difficult situations.
- The importance of support networks in times of need. Who is your support?
- Consider the support systems you have in place and think about ways you can strengthen these relationships, both in times of need and in times of joy.
- If you don't have support systems right now, what are your options?
- When Loss Resurfaces
- What is something you have hoped for and seen materialize only to watch it crumble? How did you handle that?
- Have you seen that happen in others? What kind of friend were you in those times?
- Compare and contrast how you handle loss with your spouse or family with that of your friends or coworkers? What contributes to those differences?
- Financial ebbs and flows Trust God with your resources and finances
- How have your financial means changed your perspective and influenced your faith in either good or not so good ways?
- How does the ebb and flow of finances affect your relationships both with family and with God?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God for Who He Is....

El Shama- the God who hears me/listens

Have you called out to Him? Do you believe He hears your cries for help and lament? Did you know lament is a form of a worship to God?

If you struggle believing God hears you, pause and reflect and invite correction into your view of God. Have you lamented to Him before? David shows us lament in the Psalms.

Psalms 3,13,22,42,44 & 60 are some of the Psalms of Lament.
Which Psalm of lament resonates with you?

If you already recognize God as El Shama in your life, appreciate, meditate, give thanks and journal on how He has been El Shama to you.

What is your take away from this book chapter or devotional? What resonates with you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 3

Chapter 3: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

When Hope Fades: Embracing God's Presence in Moments of Despair and Hopelessness

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- When has a sequence of answers come followed by a terrible season?
 - What was that like mentally? What did you question?
 - Did everyone around you experience it the same way?
 - If you are an observer to a situation like this, what do you do or say? If anything at all.
- Curiosity and Determination
 - Do you persevere? Is there something that needs changing that it is worth the cost to get that change to happen?
 - Do you look for motivation and reasons? Do you seek multiple perspectives?
- Pride
 - What does this look like in your life?
 - Do you have a relationship and a heart that would accept healthy correction in this area?
- Self-sacrifice
 - Is there such a thing as too far?
 - What does that look like to those that depend on you when you put a hypothetical before them?
 - Are you projecting your needs (as an adult) on others that aren't in the same place physically, mentally, or spiritually as you are?
- Abandonment
 - Does it always come with a physical absence?
 - Does disregard count?
 - Does it matter if you mean it or if it is unintentional?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is....

Jehovah Mekoddeshkem: The Lord who sanctify you, makes you holy, reveals himself unceasingly

In the pain, in the hardship, in the challenges when you cannot see or hear God, do you believe He is for you? Working on your behalf? He can use this situation for your good to grow you and sanctify you and continues to reveal Himself to you in many ways but He may also reveal areas in yourself that are untrusting and unyielding to Him. If this has been hard to believe, invite the Holy Spirit in for correction and to show you this revelation of God.

If you already believe or see Jehovah Mekoddeshkem in your life, appreciate, meditate on, journal a time God changed or sanctified you through a difficult situation or revealed Himself in a new way to you on your journey.

Reflect on the following verses. Does one of these verses speak to you? Which one? Why?

John 17:19

Philippians 1:6

2 Peter 1:2-4

I Thessalonians 4:3-5

What was a take away from the book chapter or the devotional for you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 4

Chapter 4: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Unchartered Territory: Diagnosis Day: We Never Planned on Being Pioneers

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- Returning from Anger
 - Take that self-assessment before you enter the situation and assess yourself and the situation. Every difficult moment can be a moment of discipline for yourself and discipleship to those observing. Are you reflecting Jesus?
 - Think about who you need to be at this moment. Be on purpose and intentional.
 - Reacting will not move your goals forward, so how do you respond versus react?
- Checking the facts first
 - Don't assume what you heard is correct. Take time to confirm the facts.
 - Confirm those facts and gain perspective from others.
 - Stay firm on those facts. Don't let the focus drift. What is the best we can do with the information we have now? What is the next best thing to do or step to take?
- Being a student of your family
 - Are you paying attention to play time and school time? What about when they are at church? Are you engaged and observant with your spouse and family? Are you curious about them and who they are?
 - Do you know your family members well? What are their habits? What sets them off? What do they like and not like? What are they good at and not as good at?
 - If you are married or separated, are you co-parenting? Are you on the same team regarding how to proceed and move forward?
- Creative problem solving
 - Based on what you know, what are some other options to the current situation? Is what was presented the best?
 - Are you willing to take the risk and present another option? Have you thought about how to present that option so it is more likely to be considered?

If you already believe or see God as Elohim and your righteous Judge in your life, appreciate, meditate, journal a time God changed or sanctified you through a difficult situation or revealed Himself in a new way to you on your journey.

Isaiah 30:18

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

What does this mean to you? Do you have another verse that you cling to when you need to remember He is the might or supreme one, God of justice?

What was a take away from the book chapter or the devotional in the book for you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 5

Chapter 5: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Unexpected Battles on the Journey: Adversaries, Foes, Friendlies and Unexpected Allies
Encountering Grace Amidst Challenges

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- Ephemeral Dreams
 - What do you do with those? Do you focus on those exclusively? Do you ignore them?
 - Did you tell anyone? Do you have someone you trust with that type of thing?
- Watching things play out the hard way
 - What's it like to watch your children constantly need to learn the hard way?
 - How is that different when the person is an adult?
 - Do you say "I told you so" or rush to rescue from consequences? Does that help or hurt?
- The ebbs and flows
 - How do these cycles treat you? Is it unnerving not knowing when the next trough will come?
 - Hyper analysis is watching for every clue on the horizon and postulating if the tide will turn for or against you. Is that a thought pattern? Is that exhausting?
- Is there help?
 - Who is around you that is really there to help?
 - Is there an organization or person you haven't considered?
 - Have you searched for help or respite in your state's local autism society chapter?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

What was a take away from the book chapter or the devotional in the book for you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 6

Chapter 6: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Two Steps Forward ...But into the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Moving Forward with God's Comfort and Strength

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- The ebbs and flows with a heightened amplification
 - This is like the prior chapter but raises the stakes. It can be one thing to navigate constantly shifting circumstances. What about when the size of the challenge seems insurmountable to you?
- What's going on that you aren't aware of? What is your blind spot?
 - How would you find that out?
 - If told, would you believe it?
- What is your befuddling reality?
 - Are there things you are troubled by that seem to defy reason?
 - Does someone else's discomfort create angst in you?
 - If either of those are true, why do you suppose that is?
- Do you recognize when your spouse is in distress?
 - Is that only physical distress? What about emotional distress?
 - What do you do about that? Are you interested? Do you engage? If so, what does engagement look like?
 - If you don't engage, why is that?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is.....

Yahweh Ra'ah: The Lord is my Shepherd

Write out the entire 23rd Psalm in whatever translation that is most meaningful to you below.

Rest and Reflection Stop 7

Chapter 7: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Beyond Despair: Discovering Renewed Hope... Finding Delight and New Joy... Side Excursions to the Journey

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- What is your assurance?
 - In your darkest of nights, what keeps you from giving up on God?
 - Can you believe God for others and not yourself?
 - Does God have you? All of you and not just 'your back'?
- Do you feel like you can't win and the cards of your past are always before you?
 - You do something right for a few days and then miss and the words 'always' or 'never' show up?
- Are you honest with yourself and with God?
 - Sure, He knows already but are you courageous enough to take your pains with Him *to Him*? According to Matthew 18, that is the proper approach.
 - If so, what would you say? Do you need a chair session with God?
- Life keeps coming. What does each wave do to you?
 - You are at or near the bottom and one more thing happens. Now what? March on or march out?
 - What keeps you in the game?
 - Who keeps you in the game?
- Anchors. Is your house on the sand or house on the rock?
 - You can live in a storm and in a house at the same time. Are you continuing to strengthen the house on the rock
 - Hebrews mentions the 'great cloud of witnesses. You are being cheered on during every season. Is that something that stays with you?
- Isolation and abandonment
 - What does that look like now? Can you still be alone and abandoned if your only support is spiritual?
 - Does this theme span more than one aspect of your life?
- Engagement
 - What does it take to get you engaged when what you value is threatened?

- Do you know when your treasure is threatened? Does it take near total loss or are you ready to fight for what is yours and the future?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is.....

Jehovah Rapha: The God who heals

When we think of healing we may jump to healing of the diagnosis or disease or disorder. When may seek healing in the physical realm and be disappointed when there is no healing in the now. What are other forms of healing? Where do you need healing from the unexpected challenges or hurts from this journey? If you have experienced some healing, celebrate and remember it here. Has God used someone to bring healing into your life or situation?

The Lord wants to bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, comfort those who mourn, and provide justice (Isaiah 61).

What is broken in you? Where do you not feel free but held captive? Are you mourning in grief? Where do you need justice?

What was a take away from the book chapter or the devotional in the book for you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 8

Chapter 8: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Count It ALL JOY?: Discovering Joy & Finding Delight in God's Promises

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- Overcoming challenges: Dealing with life's unexpected obstacles and learning to grow from them.
 - This is creative problem solving
 - Perseverance
- Building trust in God: Navigating through dark times and nurturing the faith to live in the times you feel invisible.
- Coping with loss: Processing the emotions and grief that come with losing a child or a dream.
- Adjusting to change: Learning to adapt to new situations, such as moving to a new city or dealing with a child's autism diagnosis.
- Strengthening relationships: Working on communication and understanding to maintain a healthy marriage and family life.
- Embracing personal growth: Recognizing the lessons learned from difficult experiences and using them to grow in faith and resilience.
- Finding joy and hope: Rediscovering happiness and hope in the midst of trials, and learning to count it all joy.

At this point of the book, you have been able to find themes that could apply to everyone. This time think specifically about your role in the family. You might be in more than one role. Remember back over all the chapters and think critically about who you are, how you act and what needs to be true going forward. Find one or more of the roles below and get specific with change. How can changes you implement in what you do and say have a positive impact on your family? Write down each name in your family and write a few things that you have the ability to do that will positively impact each one. They don't have to be earth shattering changes. When each person in the family does this, the cumulative effect will be positive.

In your family system how does this work? What is your area of growth? What are you doing well? We have started you with some thoughts to consider but how do you see the roles or function of each member in the system? Do you need to redistribute some things to share the mental load?

Father's Role:

- Providing support and stability: Ensuring a secure and loving environment for the family.
- Nurturing connections: Fostering strong relationships between all family members, particularly with the child with autism.
- Embracing personal growth: Learning from challenges and growing in resilience and empathy.

Mother's Role:

- Advocacy and guidance: Actively advocating for the child with autism/needs and guiding them through various challenges.
- Emotional support: Offering comfort and understanding to all family members during difficult times.
- Balancing responsibilities: Managing various roles within the family and adapting to changes as needed.

Sibling(s)' Role:

- Fostering acceptance: Learning to understand and accept the sibling with autism, while promoting inclusivity.
- Developing empathy: Building empathy and compassion towards the sibling with autism and their unique experiences.
- Strengthening bonds: Cultivating a strong sibling relationship and supporting one another through life's challenges.
- Developing their own sense of self and identity
- Healthy expression of needs and feelings

Spectrum Child's Role:

- Embracing individuality: Learning to accept and embrace their unique qualities and strengths.
- Building resilience: Developing coping strategies and resilience in the face of challenges and setbacks. Learning regulation.
- Developing self-advocacy: Learning to communicate their needs and advocate for themselves within the family and beyond.
- Working on relatedness and balance of needs within the family

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is.....

Emmanuel: God is with us

We have been taught that God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. He is everywhere. He sees all, knows all, and will never leave us forsake us? What does that mean to you that God is with you? When have you experienced God with you? This can be any part of your life, not just your neurodiverse family journey.

When you are in a trial or hard times, can you count it all joy? What is it to count it all joy? What is the difference between happiness and joy? What is the difference between joy and toxic positivity or denial of the circumstances? How can you have Joy in difficult or challenging times? Is this a struggle for you?

What was a take away from the book chapter or the devotional in the book for you?

Rest and Reflection Stop 9

In this chapter, Sydney reflects on what she remembers as a child and receiving the autism diagnosis. She reflects on her self-identification journey and how friends, teachers and people at church treated her based on observable behaviors. This chapter of the book takes you from Sydney's elementary years through middle school. From elementary years she had "friends" but the teachers and administrators showed disdain or dislike for her. Then in middle school, her peers begin to distance but she has allies in the teaching staff. How might this impact the spiritual development and identity journey for someone on the autism spectrum?

Chapter 9: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

From Shattered Dreams to Renewed Hope
Sydney's Lived Experience on the Autism Spectrum

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- The struggle for acceptance: Sydney faced challenges in finding acceptance and belonging among peers, teachers, and classmates due to her autism and sensory issues. She desperately wanted to be seen as "normal" but faced stigma and isolation, leading to anxiety and feelings of being an outcast. Wanting to fit in and belong is a human need no matter your neurotype. If you are on the spectrum have you felt this way? As a parent have you checked in on your son or daughter on their need for belonging and acceptance? Where can they have this need met in a healthy way?
- Miscommunication and misunderstandings: Sydney's experiences in school were often fraught with miscommunication and misunderstandings with teachers and classmates. Her autistic thinking style sometimes leads to misinterpreting instructions and social cues, leading to conflict and punishment. How do you imagine it feels to be falsely accused or blamed or mal intention assigned to your communication differences?
- Coping with change: The transition to middle school presented significant challenges for Sydney, who thrives on routine and predictability. The new environment, with its changing classes, lockers, and social dynamics, causes extreme anxiety and makes fitting in even more difficult. How do you help your son

or daughter prepare and manage change? How do you prepare for the next grade or next transition?

- Bullying, Peer Rejection and Exclusion: Sydney experienced peer rejection and bullying in many forms. Losing a friend or best friend is devastating for many children, but when you do not have many friends the loss of any one friend can be painful. It is important to encourage multiple friendships and places of belonging. If your son or daughter has had a friend loss, consider exploring that in a counselor to check in on how they are coping with that loss.
- Seeking support and allies: Amidst the difficulties, Sydney found allies in some teachers and sought to overcome her anxieties by trying to participate in drama club and other activities, even though they don't always feel comfortable doing so. Where are places your son or daughter has allies? Someone who is happy they are there?
- Personal Growth and Moment of Triumph: Despite the difficulties, Sydney shared instances of growth and triumph and pushed herself to be uncomfortable at times to face fear and confront challenges instead of escape. While we want to not exacerbate our son or daughter on the spectrum, Dr. Temple Grandin encourages a “loving but gentle push” to try new things and try and fail and learn and grow in ways. We may want to protect our son or daughter from hurt and failures but this is part of learning and resiliency.

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is.....

Jehovah Shalom: The Lord is Peace

Sydney struggled with having peace due to her sensory overwhelm and anxiety. As a parent of a child on the spectrum or a child with exceptional needs, it can also be hard to have peace. As a parent you may struggle with many “what ifs.” What if they cannot live independently? What will happen when I am gone? What if they never find a friend? There are so many unknowns about the future. What are the things that most concern you? Where do you need peace that passes all understanding?

Sydney struggled with Psalm 139:13-14. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

If you are on the spectrum or have some sort of label or diagnosis, have you had this struggle? Have you as a parent struggled with this about your child? What did Sydney rediscover about this verse and her identity?

What is a take away or something you learned from Sydney's lived experience as a child on the autism spectrum? What will you take away as an action point from this chapter?

Rest Stop and Reflection 10

In this chapter, Sydney reflects on her experiences during high school and early college. She starts by expressing her excitement and anticipation for high school, hoping to find a place where she belongs and make genuine friends. However, the high school experience doesn't match her expectations as she faces disappointments and betrayals from a supposed "best friend." Despite the challenges, she eventually finds a true best friend. The chapter also covers other highlights of their high school life, such as her involvement in extracurricular activities and the challenges faced with some teachers. The chapter concludes with their transition to college, where she discovers personal growth and the fulfillment of their aspirations. Sydney's faith journey and identity began to grow and blossom as she accepted who she was in Christ and her autism label.

Chapter 10: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

High School Adventures and Everything After: (This is nothing like *High School Musical*).

Themes to Consider, Discussion Question or Journal Prompts

- How did Sydney's idealized image of high school differ from her actual experiences? How did she cope with the disappointments? How can you help set expectations and open communication with your son or daughter when they make a school transition?
- Reflecting on the "bestie" betrayal, what lessons do you think Sydney learned about trust and true friendship? Because autistic individuals are desperate for friends and often naive, they can easily be manipulated or miss social cues. How do you advise or help your teen when they are not seeing what is happening or missing social cues?
- Sydney mentions wanting to belong and have friends in high school. How important is social connection for you, and how do you approach making friends in new environments? Where can you coach or provide support to find connections for your son or daughter? Church? Activities? Scouts? Community programs? Online gaming is not sufficient for a social network. It can be part of a network (if done safely and under supervision) but learning social skills and interaction requires some in person learning with peers.

- How did Sydney's true best friend impact her life, and what qualities do you think make for a genuine and supportive friendship? Are you having conversations with your son and daughter about what makes a friend and how do you know if this person is a true friend or acquaintance?
- Sydney's transition to college was significant for her. How do you approach major life transitions, and what steps can you take to ease anxiety about the unknown? She found comfort in making an item registry for their dorm room. What are some strategies you use to prepare for new experiences or create a sense of familiarity in unfamiliar environments? What strategies need to be in place as you think about college, trade school or life beyond high school with your son or daughter?
- Sydney emphasizes personal growth during college. What were contributing factors? How did acceptance of her label impact growth?

Sydney's Blog Post reflect her growth as she accepts all of who she is and becoming:

Dear Younger Me (Or Those NeuroDivergent Like Me Still Trying to Figure your label out):

As I reflect upon my journey from high school to college as someone with autism, I'm reminded of all the challenges, triumphs, and growth I've experienced along the way. If I could offer you one piece of advice, it would be to hold onto hope and remember that your journey is unique, and your experiences will shape you into a stronger and more resilient individual.

High school, with its dreams of friendship and belonging, often did not live up to my expectations. The friendships I hoped for seemed to slip through my fingers like sand, and the betrayal I experienced from someone I thought was my best friend cut deep. The hurt and isolation I felt during those times were almost unbearable. I questioned why these things were happening to me, and like you, I wanted to belong so badly.

As I moved on to college, I brought my longing for connection with me. I discovered that the journey to finding genuine friendships and self-acceptance is a process, and it doesn't always unfold the way we anticipate. It took time, trial, and error for me to realize that I needed to accept myself first before expecting others to accept me.

One of the key turning points was finding a true friend who not only understood my challenges but also embraced me for who I was. She became my anchor during a time when I was struggling, and she taught me that real friendships are built on acceptance and

mutual respect. It was through her support that I found the courage to become more involved on campus and open up about my autism journey.

You'll face ups and downs, like the rollercoaster of roommates and the challenges of relationships. But remember, these experiences will be your teachers, helping you refine your understanding of yourself and others. It's okay to make mistakes and learn from them. You'll find that true friends will stand by you, even when things get tough.

As I embarked on my college journey, I stumbled into unexpected opportunities that allowed me to embrace my unique talents and passions. From being involved in clubs to advocating for autism awareness, I found a sense of purpose that fueled my growth. It's in these moments of passion and connection that you'll find the most authentic versions of yourself.

The road to self-acceptance wasn't without its hurdles. I struggled with blaming my Asperger's for my challenges and even questioned why I was made this way. Yet, through friendships, faith, and support, I came to realize that my label didn't define me; it was just a part of who I am. Embracing my label and sharing my story became empowering, inspiring others to embrace their own uniqueness.

Your journey may take twists and turns, but each experience will contribute to your growth and understanding. As I close this letter, remember that your future is bright, and your potential is limitless. Embrace your journey, learn from every experience, and above all, never stop believing in yourself.

Best Regards,
Sydney Holmes, MA

What is a take away from this chapter? Did Sydney's story bring hope or highlight challenges or concerns for your son or daughter? What is your take away from her second chapter? What do you hope for your son or daughter?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is...

Jehovah Nissi: The Lord is our banner or victory

In hard times it is difficult to focus on victories. Sydney's life verse remains Philippians 4:13 about "doing all things in Christ who strengthens" her. Take a look at a little bit more of Philippians 4: 8-9 & 11-13:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned] and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

What do these verses mean to you? Are you stuck on negative thoughts about your son or daughter's future? Are you anxious and afraid? Where do you need strength so that you can do the next thing on your journey?

Rest and Reflection Stop 11

Erica reflects on her journey as an individual with her own needs and neurodivergence often feeling alone or that her sister's needs and dysregulations overpowered or overshadowed her needs. As a child her perspective was one thing, but better understanding her family's journey has led her into a different view of her neurodiverse family. Erica shares her thoughts for parents and hope and help for siblings who often feel alone on this neurodiverse journey.

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Chapter 11: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Siblings are Passengers on the Journey, Not of Their Choosing
Erica's Journey

Themes to Consider, Discussion Questions or Journal Prompts

- Loneliness and Isolation: Being the younger sibling of someone on the autism spectrum can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. They do not feel like people understand their experiences and can feel emotionally neglected or unseen. Are you checking in on the non-autistic sibling(s). What are their feelings about their sibling? Where can they go to talk about their feelings?
- Coping and Self-soothing: Erica developed unhealthy coping strategies and learned to self-soothe to cope or deal with the challenges in the home. While there were some short-term solutions it led to becoming a peace-keeper or in the role of rescuing or trying to "fix" friends. What are your child's coping strategies? How do they cope with the stressors and challenges in the home?
- Relationship Dynamics: Erica's relationship with her sister felt one-sided and dictated by the needs, whims, emotional regulation (or lack thereof) of her sister.

How did this later affect her relationship with her sister? What did Stephanie wish she had done better or focused more on? How is the sibling relationship?

- Lack of Communication: Erica felt we (her parents) should have been more transparent and Stephanie wanted to not parentify her. What is the balance of sharing and transparency and parentifying the non-autistic sibling?
Miscommunication or lack of communication caused Erica to fill in narratives in her mind about herself and how her parents felt about her that was not accurate. Are you communicating care, concern, and love for your non-autistic child?
- Dual Perspective: Erica's experience is at first seen through a lens of frustration as she was experiencing these frustrations as a child or teen that led to bitterness and disconnection from her family. However, upon letting go of her anger and seeking her own support and help she can see things through grace and understanding seeing more of the complexities of the family situation.

What are your takeaways from Erica's lived experience as a sibling? What do you need to consider for the siblings of the autistic child?

Erica wrote a blog about having a dad on the spectrum copied below.

Navigating Love and Connection: Growing Up with a Dad on the Spectrum

**This was written as a 21-year-old reflecting on her relationship with maturity and better understanding.

Parent-child relationships are unique and often shaped by the ways in which individuals express love and build connections. Having a dad on the autism spectrum has provided me with a different perspective on love, communication, and connection. While unconventional, the journey of understanding my father's unique ways of showing affection has opened my

eyes to the beauty of embracing differences and finding genuine connection in unexpected places.

The Unconventional Language of Love

One valuable lesson I've learned is that the way an autistic person expresses affection can differ greatly from societal norms. My mother's insight that people need to ask individuals on the autism spectrum how they prefer to give and receive love struck a chord with me. What may appear unconventional to others can be a profound display of care and affection. My dad and I have our own unique ways of bonding that outsiders might find strange, but they hold a special place in my heart.

Embracing Quirkiness

One of my cherished memories is the goofy camaraderie my dad and I share. We revel in our "weird" moments, often at the expense of my mom. The mutual enjoyment of creating odd sounds, derived from scat music, allows us to share laughter and silliness. Similarly, we indulge in inappropriate jokes that leave my mom uncomfortable but create lasting memories. These unconventional bonding activities might not fit the mold of traditional quality time, yet they serve as our special connection.

The Power of Non-Verbal Communication

Growing up, I came to understand that quality time doesn't always entail deep conversations. Instead, my dad's unique form of connection often revolves around non-verbal interactions. Our "secret door language" for saying goodnight exemplifies this. These non-verbal exchanges have taught me that communication comes in many forms, each holding its own significance.

Love in Unexpected Gestures

My dad's frugality, although sometimes puzzling, takes on a different meaning in the context of affection. Whenever I'd request something seemingly random from the grocery list, he'd get it for me. This seemingly small act becomes a gesture of gift-giving, a way he expresses his care. Even his sporadic texts expressing love while I'm at school reinforce his deep affection.

Shared Activities as Bonds

As I journeyed through different stages of life, I noticed shifts in our relationship dynamics. The conversational gap that emerged as I grew older initially left me feeling disconnected.

However, I've come to realize that my dad's preference for silence is his way of fostering a connection. While he finds solace in quiet moments, my talkative nature has often interpreted this as disinterest. These disparities led to me internalizing doubts about his feelings for me.

Navigating Miscommunication

Our different ways of showing and interpreting affection highlighted a crucial point: understanding each other's perspectives is paramount. My dad's view that quality time involves shared silence directly contrasts with my inclination for conversation. Our divergent communication styles resulted in misinterpretation, with me perceiving him as aloof. This term, commonly associated with individuals on the autism spectrum, highlighted the gap between our emotional experiences.

Bridging the Gap

Confronting this communication chasm paved the way for positive change. As a family, we've embarked on a journey to harmonize our need for connection. Incorporating board games, movie nights, bike rides, and shared interests have become strategies to bridge our differences. These activities allow us to find common ground and create moments that transcend our contrasting communication styles.

Honoring Individual Preferences

The path to strengthening connections with a neurodivergent parent requires honoring their preferences and ways of thinking. Recognizing that my dad thrives in silence as a bonding mechanism has expanded my understanding of love. While it may differ from my extroverted nature, respecting his comfort zone has become essential.

Conclusion

Growing up with a dad on the autism spectrum has granted me a profound appreciation for the diversity of love languages and connection styles. Our unconventional bonding rituals have demonstrated that intimacy doesn't always require words; it can thrive in shared quirks and unique expressions. Embracing our differences, striving to understand each other's perspectives, and finding common ground have enabled us to build a stronger relationship. Through this journey, I've learned that love knows no bounds, and authentic connections are possible in the most unexpected ways.

Going back to Dan's hindsight learnings from various chapters realizing later in life his spectrum identification. What would Dan have done differently? If you are a parent and on

the spectrum, what do you need to be more intentional about with your autistic child and non-autistic children? Where do you need to bridge the gap in relationship to your children? What did you learn as a take away?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is...

Jehovah Jireh: The Lord will Provide

Erica struggled with finding healthy friendships and her own identity. She felt lost and alone at times. The Lord has been faithful and provided for through healing of her hurts and providing healthy, Christian friends and future spouses. In the difficult moments it is hard to see God's provision. But the way we build joy with God is gratitude and reflections on what He has done or brought you through. Reflect on the provisions of God in your life and note any area you are asking for provision now.

Erica said she struggled with bitterness and resentment. As a sibling or parent or spouse have you struggled with resentment?

Psalms 139-23-24

Search me O, God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Ask God to search you for bitterness and resentment? Is there any to confess and seek freedom from?

Rest and Reflection Stop 13

Part of the unforeseen journey included a late in life identification of autism for Dan. As a couple we did not begin to discover our neurodiversity until 20 years into the marriage. Then I (Dr. Stephanie) began working primarily with NeuroDiverse Christian Couples. The NeuroDiverse family journey can be enhanced or complicated by a NeuroDiverse marriage depending on when the identification took place, how do each feel about the diagnosis, and is the couple able and willing to work as a team in marriage and for their family system.

Chapter 13: Workbook for Self-Study, Coaching or Small Group Study

Trailblazing Once Again: New Challenges and Opportunities to Light the Path for NeuroDiverse Christian Couples

This is what I found out in my 10 years of working with NeuroDiverse Couples. This blog was written long ago, but I include it here for further discussion or journaling.

When ND couples reach out to me/us for counseling/coaching either in my office or on-line, they are weary, exacerbated, feel misunderstood, and are both hopeless and hopeful as to the prognosis of happiness and satisfaction in marriage. Asperger's/Autism as a label offers hope but also feels like a third wheel to the marriage. My first question to my couples was, "While dating, what were the qualities you admire in your partner?"

A compilation of NT wives answers include:

- His boyish charm/ nativity/ social immaturity/awkwardness around me
- He was quiet/shy/alooof/mysterious/reserved/stable/honest
- He was interested in me/Went out of his way to show me he like me/almost obsessed with me
- He wasn't like the other guys
- Intelligent/smart/kind of geeky in a cute way/felt he would go far in his line of work
- Felt he would stable/good provider/good father because he got along with children

AS/ND husbands said:

- She was kind, sweet, praised/encouraged me
- She saw potential or things in me I did not see

- She said accepted me for who/how I was
- She is bright/intelligent/ could carry –on heady or substantive conversations
- She was fun and liked some of the same things I liked (but with less intensity)

By the time a couple comes in for counseling after a few years of marriage they have a different view of those qualities.

NT wives say:

- He rude/cold/alooof/He only cares about himself/selfish.
- He is embarrassing often in social situations and does not seem to care.
- I feel like it was bait and switch; as interested as he was in me while dating, he ignores me now.
- He is so smart but cannot seem to progress at work and never seems to understand what I am communicating. He is stuck in a rut at work or cannot keep a job.
- He is not attached as a spouse or parent.
- Those stupid obsessions/interests/hobbies—he would rather spend money and time with those than me.
- I don't feel like I can rely on him or respect him.
- I feel alone/isolated/rejected/de-valued/unimportant to him.
- Whenever I try to have a conversation, he gets combative/he hammers me/he shuts me out/he says I am nagging/criticizing.

AS/ND husbands say:

- I thought she was kind/sweet, but now nothing I do can please her.
- Why can't she say what she means? Why does she expect me to guess her thoughts? Why is my being direct/honest wrong?
- She says we “don't connect” / ”have intimacy.” I have no clue what she means by these words
- I thought she knew my quirks/eccentricities/nuances/differences and accepted them. Now all she brings up is how I need to change and how terrible of a person I am.
- She says, “Why can't you do this or that like so- and so's spouse?”
- I feel nagged/bullied/criticized.
- I wonder, why bother trying? Nothing is right.

How did a couple who seemingly fell for each other based on the other's AS/ND or NT traits now feel so differently about those same traits? One of the first things I address is that NT's enter a marriage with expectations of an NT-NT marriage. When the wife hears about

Asperger's/Autism she may first feel elated that "this was not in her head" that "I've tried everything and thought it was all me" but there is a label or name for this. She may have to grieve the loss of the marriage she thought she was getting (NT-NT). But I make it clear that our goal is not to meet expectations of an NT-NT marriage, this is not what we have, the goals are to reexamine the expectations and goals in light of an AS/ND- NT marriage and strive to reach a relationship where both can feel marital satisfaction. The Neurodivergent spouse has mixed emotions usually depending on his/her age and their bias or belief about the spectrum. At first older gentlemen may feel like "I cannot have that I was a successful career person and went far in this area etc., I cannot possibly have that." Yet once we look at patterns of relationships, we see a pattern that fits AS/ND traits. Some upon hearing the criteria/traits say, "That explains so much of my life and makes so much sense."

As you reflect on the survey done on couples. Are you in a NeuroDiverse Marriage or if divorced, Were you possibly in a NeuroDiverse Marriage?

What are your thoughts and feelings as you reflect upon being in a NeuroDiverse marriage?

Do you feel hope or hopelessness? Why?

What is your take away as you read the book and read Dan's hindsight understanding of being a husband and dad on the spectrum?

What is your current belief about your Neurodiverse marriage? Are you Surviving or Thriving?

What education or support do you need? What is your next step? Is your co-parenting of your neurodiverse child complicated by your ND marriage?

Course Correction or Respite? What do you need right now?

Seeing God as He truly is....

El Shaddai: The Lord God Almighty

When couples come to coaching/counseling they are weary. They have many questions. Why did God bring us together? Why didn't we know about our neurodiversity sooner? Why was it missed? Will we ever connect?

God is still sovereign and is our Lord Almighty no matter what the status is of our marriage. Sometimes we put our identity and hope in the marriage instead of on God through our relationship with Jesus. Is your identity in your marriage or anchored in Jesus? What are healthy boundaries or goals for your marriage based on realistic expectations?

Isaiah 41:10

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

What does this verse mean to you?

If both people are willing to learn about the neurodiversity, adjust expectations, heal the ruptures and past pain of the marriage, we believe a NeuroDiverse Marriage can be healthy and fulfilling. What is your belief about your marriage? Are you stuck on old marriage teachings which apply to NT marriages? Are you or your spouse in denial? As you parent a

As a NeuroDiverse Couple of a NeuroDiverse Family we have some resources for you. In 2024 a second book specifically for marriage with contributing coaches and counselors in the field will be released.

For podcasts, blogs and group coaching/classes go to www.christianneurodiversemarriage.com

You will find:

- A link to the NeuroDiverse Christian Couple Podcasts with Rev. Dan and Rev. Dr. Stephanie Holmes
- Blogs by Dan and Stephanie and contributing bloggers.
- Referrals for coaches and counselors trained by the International Association of NeuroDiverse Christian Marriage, LLC.
- Updates on the upcoming book

If you are looking for courses for your family, courses have been reduced in price to help you get to your next step at www.HolmesASR.com. Services- Family Courses. There are courses available for those with an elementary child on the spectrum and teens on the autism spectrum.

We want to continue to remind you that there is hope for your future!

You are not alone on this journey!

**Scripture throughout the workbook is ESV unless otherwise stated.
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