

choice

the magazine of professional coaching

NEUROSCIENCE & COACHING:

*Separating myth
from reality*



How can I connect with a neurodivergent client?



The Situation:

“I have a neurodivergent client who is on the autism spectrum. They are very engaged in coaching and say they love it, but I feel like I just can’t tap into a real emotional connection to their topics. How should I approach this?”

By Suzi Pomerantz, MT, MCC

Considering that our brains all work differently, aren’t we all neurodivergent to some extent? This was my first question upon reading your sticky situation, which sent me down a research rabbit hole where I learned that “neurodiversity” comes from Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist who coined the term back in 1998 to recognize that no two brains are exactly the same and all our brains develop in unique ways.

We all have our different strengths and struggles, abilities and challenges. In today’s culture, the term has evolved such that neurodivergent is an identity stake, much like gender-fluid, and perhaps it is offensive to those who identify as neurodivergent to suggest that we are all neurodivergent to some degree.

You mention the autism spectrum, which adds a layer of complexity to this conversation since no two people with autism are the same – meaning there is even more neurodiversity within the autism spectrum. We can’t pigeonhole our clients’ brains into any one coaching approach or methodology. There’s no specific coaching methodological approach specific to autism. That means, on some level, that your approach when coaching your client with autism is not really any different than your approach with a more neurotypical client, in that you will:

1. Meet your clients where they are;
2. Remember, it’s their agenda, not yours;
3. Be present and authentic in connecting with your client;
4. Learn about their world (perhaps by researching autism and neurodiversity).

It’s interesting that you feel a need to “tap into a real emotional connection to their topics.” Why? Can you only coach those who are like you in terms of values, interests, world views, etc.? Perhaps this is something to explore with your own coach, because there may be a blind spot or limiting belief there about your need to have any emotional connection to client topics whatsoever.

Have you ever successfully coached a client whose topics you didn’t care about at all, or perhaps even strongly disagreed with? For example, if you are a personal advocate of gun use and your client was an activist for strict gun laws, could you still coach them? Do you have to connect to their topics to help them identify blind spots and shift limiting beliefs they may hold?

Or are you perhaps assuming that the client’s autism or neurodiversity is what is causing their topics to be disconnected for you? Do you have a belief or judgment about their topics? Does that serve you as the coach? Does that serve them as the client for you to have that belief or judgment? Is it true? What shift would serve them better?

My neurodivergent clients and friends are my favorite people, because I get to play in their world – which often includes magical brilliance not found out here in the so-called “normal” world.

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®, CEC

As coaches become more aware of avoiding ableism and understanding neurodivergent clients, a definitive set of skills is necessary to tap into the brilliance of someone with autism, into their unique needs, strengths, and challenges.

Communication is crucial and must be customized to your client's preferences. What conversations are you having with your clients about their preferred way of communication? That may help you tap into your client's deeper emotional feelings.

You must have the flexibility to recognize that a neurodiverse person may have different processing speeds and may need more time to process information or make decisions. Are you collaboratively setting achievable and realistic goals? Break down larger goals into smaller manageable steps and celebrate success with sincerity.

I am getting into the weeds rather quickly in my answer and wish to acknowledge that each neurodiverse person is unique. There is not one straight-on answer to this sticky situation. In my research to answer your question, I referred to the book, *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum* by Temple Grandin and Richard Panek. In it, Grandin not only discusses her own first-hand experience with autism but also provides background and scientific research into the subject.

What is most appealing about this book is the light Grandin shines on neurodiverse people. It gives the reader a robust understanding of the condition. This understanding is critical to mentoring neurodiverse individuals. Grandin successfully argues that the strengths of people who are autistic require flexibility, empathy, and will require a willingness to adapt your coaching approach.

Neurodiversity coaching is a niche practice in which training is available. I also recommend further research and reading to become more educated and aware of the subtle differences that make us unique. As with all clients, treat them with gentleness and respect through coaching.

Besides saying that they love coaching, what other feedback are you receiving? If you provide a survey for your client to complete, you may get written responses that elevate your understanding of their insights. Also, reach out to the coaching community and get first-hand accounts of neurodiverse coaching examples.

Use caution and remember that all neurodiverse clients are unique. Avoid labels and stereotypes, and bring your best to your coaching client. Best of luck helping your client's brilliance shine – and yours as well!

By Craig Carr, BCC, PCC, CPCC

After my first draft response to this question, I had to pump the brakes and begin again. In that initial draft, I wrote, "Why must you have an emotional connection to their topics? As a coach, you need to connect to the person."

One of the first presuppositions of the coaching paradigm – the client is naturally creative, resourceful and whole – posits that the importance of making a human connection far exceeds any need to connect emotionally to the topic the client wants to discuss. I also know how difficult it is to explain a sticky situation in three sentences. So, since you say, "they're very engaged in coaching," I will assume you have the connection-to-the-person part handled.

The sticky part is that the topics your neurodivergent client wants to talk about are confounding to you, or, even worse, you find them irrelevant and uninteresting. To be clear, working with autism is a specialized skill that may not be for you. It's also a broad term because the spectrum spans behavioral and psychological territory far too wide to

cover here. You are right to question your approach rather than label your problem as the client's neurodivergence.

Still, I want to express appreciation for bringing from the shadows a question that I suspect many coaches ignore and override. Namely, "What do I do if my client puts me to sleep? I go on automatic to get through the session, then beat myself up afterward for compromising my integrity?"

The truth is that boredom and disconnection can happen to any coach. And if you see many clients over time, it will happen to you eventually!

If you're not the right fit for this client, who seems to be benefiting from coaching, find a way to make a referral to someone you trust who has experience and knows what to do. It's okay if you like faster-moving, more fo-

cused, and less "remedial" clients (as Thomas Leonard used to say).

Many people have spectrum-like qualities that are subclinical. A person may be a genius in one arena and hopeless in another (I know I am!). And the coaches I hire must be patient enough to see my quirks and talents, and include them in my journey to getting what I want. So give yourself some slack and slow down for a minute. It's not essential – until it is – that you "emotionally connect to their topics." If you stick with this client, you don't know when their focus could turn to something you work with brilliantly.

One thing is for sure: If you wait but remain in judgment, you won't be serving them or yourself. And it would be better to cut yourself loose now and coach the action-takers who are more like you. •

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

You don't have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to submissions@choice-online.com and put "sticky situations" in the subject line.