

Adapted from Doherty, M., McCowan, S. and Shaw, S.C., 2023. Autistic SPACE: a novel framework for meeting the needs of autistic people in healthcare settings. *British Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 84(4), pp.1-9.

Adapted SPACE Framework: Understanding risk to partner and children

This resource should be used in conjunction with ‘Supporting Neurodivergent clients: a guide for practitioners facilitating domestic abuse perpetrator interventions’. It is not intended to replace assessments/tools already in operation within domestic abuse perpetrator interventions/organisations. It is a complimentary tool to understand and assess risk, challenges and (competing) needs in the home environment in the context of neurodivergence and domestic abuse and impact on the partner/children.

Specifically, it should be read alongside the following sections in the guide:

- 5.3 Understanding risk to partner and children
- 5.3a Understanding specific challenges in the home environment.
- 5.3b Identifying coping strategies in the home.

Note: **not all these questions should be asked at once**. It is intended as a guide from which practitioners can prepare and choose which to explore with their client and can be returned to at various stages during the intervention, as and when required (e.g., when Neurodivergence becomes apparent for the first time, the practitioner/client relationship is strengthened). The questions should also be asked in line with guidance on variability in communication and processing differences set out within the main guide (e.g., asking fewer questions, allowing processing time, pauses).

Identifying challenges and coping strategies in the home during the first conversations with clients will help practitioners to appropriately challenge clients who attribute their use of violence/abuse to being Neurodivergent and how to take responsibility for developing non-abusive coping strategies to manage their own anxiety/dysregulation (see section 5.5 ‘Addressing coercive structural control in behaviour change work’).

NEED	DESCRIPTION	EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING ASSESSMENT STAGE AND/OR REVISITED
SENSORY	Sensory sensitivities are common amongst Autistic and/or ADHD people. These relate to five external senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, temperature, and three internal senses; proprioception, vestibular and interoception, plus pain awareness and the sensations and physiological experiences of emotions. Sensory stimuli can disrupt and distract	<p>Exploration of sensory challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening question: How does anxiety, dysregulation present for you in the home?* • What sensory challenges do you experience? (consider sensory sensitivities by asking about specific noises, smells, etc)

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	<p>attention. Sensory overload(s) can lead to communication difficulties and distress, and nervous system dysregulation resulting in meltdown and shutdown.</p> <p>Sensory issues may vary across environments, including in the home. It is important to understand what sensory needs and challenges are experienced in the home, particularly when there are likely to be competing needs amongst family members (some of whom may also be Neurodivergent).</p> <p>It is also important to obtain detailed descriptions of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • times when these challenges have resulted in violence and/or controlling behaviours • what coping strategies have been developed by the person using violence to prevent and/or manage dysregulation culminating from sensory needs/challenges • what expectations (inadvertently or not) are placed on the partner and/or children to accommodate his needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise these challenges? • Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children? • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner? • How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce). • What expectations do you place on your partner to manage these challenges for you? • What say does your partner have in this?
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this fair/realistic? • What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong? • What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children? • What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable? • You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For you to have fairer expectations • Manage how you respond when you're experiencing sensory discomfort/distress • To try to understand their experience better • To prevent causing harm.
<p>PREDICTABILITY</p>	<p>Unfamiliar and unpredictable environments and events can be a source of increased and/or extreme anxiety, particularly if changes are made at short notice. In home environment, this could include unexpected visitors, change in work patterns and/or children's extracurricular activities and or day to day occurrences that disrupt established/familiar routines (e.g., a child is sick and needs to be cared for at home, the car breaking down requiring the use of public transport).</p> <p>Predictability and routine can reduce anxiety, and many Autistic and/or ADHD individuals develop routines as a coping strategy for managing an unpredictable</p>	<p>Exploration of predictability challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges do you experience in respect of predictability? (consider routines, care, family plans, work schedules, children's activities, recreational activities). • What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise these challenges? • Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children?

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	<p>and/or chaotic world. It is important to understand/be aware of individual coping strategies within the home environment.</p> <p>Practitioners will need to obtain detailed descriptions of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coping strategies for maintaining predictability in the home environment • When these strategies become coercive and controlling and/or used as a form of manipulation (e.g., intersecting with other motives/intent) • The impact that this has on the partner and children (e.g., fear, loss of autonomy, isolation from friends/family) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner? • How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce). • What expectations do you place on your partner to manage these challenges for you? • What say does your partner have in this? • Is this fair/realistic? • What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong? • What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children? • What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable?
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For you to have fairer expectations To manage how you respond when unpredictable situations arise? To try to understand their experience better To prevent causing harm.
ACCEPTANCE	<p>It is important not just to have awareness, but to be accepting of Neurodivergence and the different ways that Autistic and/or ADHD people experience, process, move in, and communicate with the world around them. For example, some Autistic people may stim for joy, hyper-focus on a specific topic, express empathy and experience distress in different ways. Someone with ADHD may engage in repetitive movements (foot tapping), struggle with time keeping (time blindness), or need support to keep focussed on or transition between tasks.</p> <p>No two Neurodivergent individuals are the same, and each person will have their own unique profile and characteristics which should be respected.</p> <p>Respecting differences within family compositions which are made up of different/multiple neurotypes is likely to present with some challenges that will require</p>	<p>Exploration of acceptance of difference/different needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is your partner neurotypical/Neurodivergent? What are your partners specific needs/challenges? Is/are your child/children neurotypical/Neurodivergent? What are your child's/children's specific needs challenges? What challenges do you experience as a family? (consider communication with partner/children, care, planning, emotional control, space, task initiation, flexible thinking). What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise your challenges? Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children?

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	<p>understanding and compromise to ensure all needs are taken into consideration equitably. However, where there are unequal power dynamics within a relationship, equity of needs can be eroded. The person who has used violence/abuse may exploit and extend abuse to have their needs met above those of their partner and children. Challenges could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A neurotypical/Neurodivergent partner's needs are not understood/considered • The children's (neurotypical/Neurodivergent) needs are not understood/considered • Partner/children are expected to prioritise/understand the needs/challenges of the person who has used violence/abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner? • How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce). • What expectations do you place on your partner to manage challenges for you? • What say does your partner have in this? • Is this fair/realistic? • What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong? • What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children? • What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable?
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For you to have fairer expectations ○ To manage how you respond when you don't feel accepted/feel misunderstood? ○ To try to understand their experience better ○ To prevent causing harm.
<p>COMMUNICATION</p>	<p>Neurodivergent people may have different preferences and styles of communication, including articulating present state or needs, can be impacted by sensory overload. Some individuals with ADHD may struggle with reciprocal discussion (turn taking), which can (often unintentionally) lead to dominating a discussion.</p> <p>Communication across different neurotypes can be challenging and can lead to a breakdown communication and in misunderstanding (see Crompton, 2025; Milton, 2012). In the context of domestic abuse, communication across neurotypes is likely to present additional challenges, particularly due to communication and emotional regulation differences, and misunderstandings in meanings.</p> <p>It is important that practitioners obtain detailed descriptions about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication differences and challenges 	<p>Exploration of communication differences/challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What communication challenges do you/your family experience (consider day to day and in times of conflict)? • What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise these challenges for you? • Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children? • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment?

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating needs and reciprocity in addressing these • How situations with the potential for violence/abuse/control are resolved/prevented • Expectations placed on the partner to prioritise the needs/challenges of the person using violence and the impact this has on them/children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For you to have fairer expectations • To manage how you respond when you're feeling misunderstood/there are miscommunication challenges • To try to understand their experience better • To prevent causing harm.
EMPATHY	<p>Empathy and how this is expressed can look differently across neurotypes. The double empathy problem (see Milton, 2012) highlights that empathy may present in different ways, and that communication and interactions can breakdown when these are mutually misunderstood.</p> <p>It is important to be able to listen to and understand the emotions and feelings of your partner and empathise with their position. However, this may present additional challenges in the context of domestic abuse, where the person using violence may simultaneously be motivated</p>	<p>Exploration of empathy/understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges do you/your family experience in understanding how each other feels (consider day to day and in times of conflict)? • What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise your challenges/that you are understood? • Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children?

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	<p>to and exploit unequal gendered relations so that they can have their own needs met.</p> <p>It is important for practitioners to explore whether and to what extent the person using violence is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritising their own needs above those of their partner/children • Enforcing/demanding that they are understood without reciprocating this • Using Neurodivergence as a reason/excuse to have their own needs prioritised • Using Neurodivergence as an excuse for using violence/abuse because they did not feel understood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner? • How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce). • What expectations do you place on your partner to manage challenges for you? • What say does your partner have in this? • Is this fair/realistic? • What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong? • What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children? • What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable?
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For you to have fairer expectations To manage how you respond when you're feeling misunderstood? To try to understand their experience better To prevent causing harm.
PHYSICAL SPACE	<p>Attention to physical space is important as some Neurodivergent people may find it difficult to tolerate being in close proximity to others. This could be challenging in intimate relationships, and particularly in the context of domestic abuse.</p> <p>Practitioners should explore if there are any specific challenges in respect of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical space Touch Other 	<p>Exploration of challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What challenges do you experience in relation to space (this could be shared space in the home, negotiating space, sleeping arrangements) What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise your challenges/that you are understood? Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children? Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours).

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner? • How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce). • What expectations do you place on your partner to manage challenges for you? • What say does your partner have in this? • Is this fair/realistic? • What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong? • What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children? • What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable? • You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For you to have fairer expectations
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To manage how you respond when you need space? • To try to understand their experience better • To prevent causing harm.
PROCESSING SPACE	<p>Neurodivergent people process information in different ways and pace. Some may require additional time to process new information and may need additional contextual information if this has not been clear.</p> <p>Processing space is important when considering communication and preventing and resolving conflict, particularly in the context of domestic abuse. Practitioners should seek to understand how processing space might be relevant in the home, as this will aid developing/tailoring intervention activities to the specific needs of men attending an intervention (e.g., conflict resolution tools, de-escalation strategies, communication skills) that considers the needs of families where there are multiple/differing neurotypes.</p>	<p>Exploration of challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges do you experience in relation to time/space to process information when communicating/interacting with your partner/children (e.g., consider general day to day planning, future planning, in times of conflict) • What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise these challenges? • Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children? • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control?

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What different choices could you have made?• What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner?• How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce).• What expectations do you place on your partner to manage challenges for you?• What say does your partner have in this?• Is this fair/realistic?• What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong?• What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children?• What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable?• You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What strategies have you developed<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ For you to have fairer expectations○ To manage how you respond when you need time/processing space?○ To try to understand their experience better
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To prevent causing harm.
EMOTIONAL SPACE	<p>Differences in identifying, processing and managing emotions – particularly when these are not understood – can be challenging.</p> <p>Sensory overload or overwhelming emotions can lead to Autistic meltdown or shutdown. Differences in expressing emotions and overwhelm should be expected.</p> <p>This can be challenging in relationships made up of different neurotypes, and particularly in the context of domestic abuse. Increased time and space to process emotions (whether that space is required for the partner/person using violence) may be necessary when resolving difficult and emotive situations.</p> <p>It is important for practitioners to develop an understanding of how processing emotions may play out within the home, and whether:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This presents specific challenges for the person who is using violence • The partner requires emotional processing space • The impact this has on the partner and children • Whether emotional processing needs to be considered within interventions to scaffold/integrate with programme tools that will be used in the home (e.g., time out, self-talk) and how the partner will know/have a role in this 	<p>Exploration of challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges do you experience in relation to processing emotions at home (e.g., consider what this looks like when communicating/interacting the partner/children day to day, in times of conflict). • What expectations do you place on your partner/children to prioritise these challenges? • Has this ever led to you harming your partner/your children? • Tell me about a time/s when this happened (elicit rich description about what happened before, during and after the event). • What exactly happened, what did you do, and to whom? (this can include abusive behaviours - verbal abuse, physical abuse, self-harm, or non-abusive behaviours). • What choices were you making in that moment? • What did that enable you to avoid / control? • What different choices could you have made? • What were things like for your partner/children after that incident? <p>Exploration of awareness of/impact on partner/children*</p>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you communicated these challenges you experience to your partner? • How did/do you communicate your needs/challenges to your partner? (Equitably, shout, demand, coerce). • What expectations do you place on your partner to manage challenges for you? • What say does your partner have in this? • Is this fair/realistic? • What are the consequences if your partner gets it wrong? • What do you want to be different/the same at home/with your partner/children? • What would that be like for you/your partner if you are being more equitable? • You tell me how this will work. <p>Exploration of coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies have you developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For you to have fairer expectations • To manage how you respond when you need emotional processing space? • To try to understand their experience better • To prevent causing harm.
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*This opening question can be asked/repeated for each need