

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

Integrated Support Services Resource

Understanding risk to partners and children where the person using violence is Neurodivergent

What is neurodivergence?

Neurodivergence is an umbrella term that is used to describe differences in neurocognitive processing, ways of being and experiencing the world which includes (but is not limited to) those who are Autistic and/or ADHD.

The neurodiversity paradigm rejects the notion that neurodivergence is a disorder, deficit or problem that needs to be fixed. Instead, neurodivergence is viewed as part of natural human diversity. To read more about this, see below and part 2 of the main guide.

About this resource

This resource is for advocates working with women whose partner or ex-partner is Neurodivergent and has been referred to a domestic abuse perpetrator intervention. It is designed to be used alongside the supporting guide and the existing assessment tools already in use within your service.

It is not a replacement for existing assessment. It is a tool to help you explore, alongside the survivor, the specific challenges and competing needs that arise in the home when the person using violence is Neurodivergent - and to understand the impact of that on her and her children.

This resource should be read alongside sections 5.3, 5.3a and 5.3b of the accompanying guide.

How to introduce the framework

You might introduce this by saying something like:

“There are eight main areas where a Neurodivergent person can have particular needs and challenges. I’d like to go through them with you and explore what they mean for you and your children.”

The questions in the table are a guide. Use them in a way that fits naturally into your conversation with the survivor.

Area	What this means	Questions to explore with the survivor
SENSORY	<p>Our senses take in the world around us – what we see, hear, smell, taste, and feel, including heat and cold. We also have inner senses that tell us where our body is in space and what is happening inside us – like a racing heart, tension, or a sick feeling when stressed or afraid.</p> <p>For a Neurodivergent person these senses can feel much more intense than usual. Certain sounds, textures, smells, or levels of light can quickly become overwhelming, making it hard to think clearly, talk, or stay calm.</p> <p>Sometimes a partner's sensory sensitivities can become something you and your children have to fit around in a way that isn't fair to you.</p>	<p>Are there times when you think your partner gets overwhelmed by their senses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What does that look like at home? – Does the way your partner tries to manage it involve pressuring or controlling you – for example, insisting on silence, certain routines, or particular conditions in the home? – What do they expect of you or your children to keep things the way they need them? – Do you or your children feel you have a choice, or do you feel you have to go along with it? – If you don't go along with it, are there consequences? – What is the effect of this on you and your children – practically, emotionally, and socially? – Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?
	<p>Unexpected changes can cause a Neurodivergent person serious anxiety – especially when things happen with little or no warning.</p>	<p>Does your partner struggle with things not going to plan?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Can you give me an example of when this has happened at home?

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Area	What this means	Questions to explore with the survivor
ACCEPTANCE	<p>At home, this might include an unplanned visitor, a child being off sick, or something going wrong that means plans have to change at short notice.</p> <p>Having a predictable routine can help manage that anxiety — but it can also become something you and your children have to fit around in a way that isn't fair.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What happens when routine is disrupted – how does your partner respond? – Do you find yourself managing the home environment, or your children's behaviour, to prevent that reaction? – Do you feel you or your children have to keep things a certain way to avoid a reaction from your partner? – What is the effect of this on you and your children? – Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, are not being met because of this?
	<p>Awareness means knowing someone is Neurodivergent. Acceptance means understanding that the way they experience the world is valid - not a problem to be solved.</p> <p>Every Neurodivergent person is different. When a family includes people with different needs, everyone's needs should be considered fairly.</p> <p>A partner who uses violence or abuse may use their neurodivergence - whether deliberately or not - as a reason why their needs always come first.</p>	<p>Does your partner's neurodivergence lead to yours and the children's needs being unmet?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Do you feel your partner accepts your needs and your children's needs as equally important as their own? – Are you and your children expected to always put your partner's needs first? – Do you feel able to raise your own needs with your partner? – What is the effect of this on you and your children? <p>Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?</p>
COMMUNICATION	<p>Neurodivergent people may communicate differently - including how they express how they're feeling or what they need. Sensory overload can make communication harder in the moment.</p> <p>A Neurodivergent person may find it difficult to take turns in a conversation, which can mean they unintentionally dominate a discussion.</p> <p>When people with different neurotypes communicate with each other, misunderstandings are more likely - and this can make it harder to prevent or resolve conflict at home.</p> <p>But the way your partner communicates can also become something that silences you or your children.</p>	<p>Does your partner struggle with communication in ways that go beyond what you'd usually expect?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What does communication look like day to day? – What happens when there is disagreement or conflict? – Do you feel heard by your partner? – Do you find yourself adjusting how you communicate to manage their reactions? – What is the effect of this on you and your children? – Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?
EMPATHY	<p>Empathy doesn't look the same in every person. A Neurodivergent person may experience and express empathy differently - and when two people have different neurotypes, they can each misread the other.</p> <p>In the context of abuse, there is an important question about whose needs are actually being met and whether the</p>	<p>Do you feel that your partner understands how you feel?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Do you find yourself constantly trying to understand or make allowances for your partner's feelings? – Does your partner show the same understanding towards you and your children?

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Area	What this means	Questions to explore with the survivor
	<p>burden of understanding falls mainly on you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you feel that your needs, and your children's needs, matter as much as your partner's in the home? - What is the effect of this on you and your children? <p>Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?</p>
<p>EMOTIONAL SPACE</p>	<p>It can be harder for a Neurodivergent person to identify, process, and manage emotions. If they become overwhelmed, this can lead to a meltdown - where they react in a way that is difficult for others - or a shutdown, where they become very withdrawn.</p> <p>A Neurodivergent person may need more time and space to process difficult emotions before they can engage with a problem.</p> <p>But the way your partner manages - or doesn't manage - their emotions can also become something you and your children have to absorb or protect yourselves.</p>	<p>Does your partner have difficulty managing their emotions at home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does that look like - with you, and with the children? - What happens when there is conflict or stress? - Do you feel you have to manage your partner's emotional state? - Do you or your children change your behaviour to avoid triggering a reaction? - What is the effect of this on you and your children? - Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?
<p>PHYSICAL SPACE</p>	<p>Some Neurodivergent people find it difficult to tolerate being in close proximity to others, or have particular needs around shared space, physical contact, or how the home is organised.</p> <p>But your partner's needs around space and contact can also become something that overrides your needs and your children's needs.</p>	<p>Does your partner have particular needs around physical space or physical contact?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does this affect shared space in the home - for example, sleeping arrangements, use of rooms? - Does this affect physical affection with you or the children? - Do you or your children feel you have to accommodate this in a way that isn't fair? - What is the effect of this on you and your children? - Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?
<p>PROCESSING SPACE</p>	<p>Neurodivergent people process information in different ways and at different paces. Some may need additional time to take in new information, or extra context to understand what is being asked of them.</p> <p>This can mean that the thinking, planning, and managing falls mainly on you.</p>	<p>Does your partner have difficulty processing information at home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does this look like day to day - with planning, decisions, conversations? - What happens in times of conflict? - Do you find yourself having to take on more of the thinking or planning to avoid problems? - What is the effect of this on you and your children? - Are there ways your own needs, or your children's needs, aren't being met because of this?

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An equal and caring relationship

It is possible to have a home where everyone’s needs are met in an equal way, even when a partner is Neurodivergent. Neurodivergence does not make a person abusive.

The questions below invite the survivor to think about what a fair and caring home could look like, for each area of the framework.

This includes exploring how their partner does or doesn’t manage their needs in different contexts and raises the question about both capacity and willingness to manage behaviours.

This does not mean their Neurodivergent needs are not real. It means that the home and the relationship may be the place where managing those needs is seen as the survivors and the children's responsibility.

You might introduce this by saying:

“It is possible to have a home where everyone’s needs are met. What would need to be different — or could stay the same — if your partner was managing their [needs in this area] in a way that made your home feel safe and caring for everyone in it?”

Area	At home/in the relationship	Outside the home/with others
Sensory needs	If your partner was managing their sensory needs in a way that was fair to everyone, what would that look like at home?	Does your partner manage their sensory needs differently in other situations — for example, at work or in public? If so, what do you think makes the difference?
Predictability	If your partner was managing their need for routine and predictability without it controlling the household, what would need to be different?	Does your partner cope with unexpected changes differently in other situations — for example, at work? If so, what do you think makes the difference?
Acceptance	If your partner accepted that your needs and your children's needs matter as much as their own, what would be different about life at home?	Does your partner accept other people's needs more readily than yours and your children's? If so, what do you think that tells you?
Communication	If your partner was communicating in a way that was fair and respectful — including in difficult moments — what would that look like?	Does your partner communicate differently with other people — for example, at work or with friends? If so, what do you think makes the difference at home?
Empathy	If your partner was making a genuine effort to understand how you and your children feel, what would that look like in practice?	Does your partner show more understanding towards other people — for example, colleagues or friends — than towards you and your children? If so, what do you make of that?
Emotional space	If your partner was managing their emotions in a way that felt safe for you and your children, what would be different about how your home feels?	Does your partner manage their emotions differently in other situations — for example, at work? If so, what do you think makes the difference at home?
Physical space	If your partner's needs around physical space and contact were managed in a way that considered your needs and your children's needs too, what would that look like?	Does your partner manage their needs around space differently in other situations? If so, what do you think makes the difference at home?
Processing space	If your partner was taking responsibility for their own processing needs without that falling on you, what would be different day to day?	Does your partner manage planning and decision-making differently at work or in other situations? If so, what do you think makes the difference at home?

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