



## Husbands behaving badly...about autism

### Challenging Our Way of Thinking Series

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[www.autismcommunityconnection.com](http://www.autismcommunityconnection.com)

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/autismcc/>

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There are many outstanding husbands who are enthusiastic and well informed about their child's special needs. Several of them are here in our group and they should really be commended for their input and desire to learn more. For many families there is a different home dynamic. The wife takes on all or the majority of special needs issues while the husband remains in the background. Before we all go "husband-bashing," we have to understand some key differences regarding how men and women respond to stressors in our lives and how this affects our abilities to cope with an autism diagnosis.

#### **GRIEF**

*Mark Anthony Ramirez admits it was [his wife] who accepted [his daughter's] disability before he did, the comedian said in the Holiday issue of Spectrum magazine (Curing Autism One Joke at a Time - <http://www.spectrumpublications.com/>). He says that while she scrambled for information and dove into what she needed to do for their daughter, he was still in denial. "She got right on top of it," he says. "She told me to read this and read that. It was overwhelming and I became reluctant."*

A study on coping difficulty in men following their partner's miscarriage found that men had a much higher level of difficulty with coping and despair than the woman. "This indicates that while women have a harder time coping immediately with a miscarriage, men may have a harder time in the long run coping with the loss." (*Coping Difficulty in Men Following the Partner's Miscarriage: An Evolutionary Explanation* by Lisa Rauschmeier <http://www.oswego.edu/~rauschme/Evolutionary3.doc>)

Tom Ellis, a grief and family counselor, states that "the expectations and requirements upon our roles as men and women....has an effect on their grieving process." (*Forbidden Grief: Pain in Men* by Tom Ellis <http://www.lupusmn.org/Education/Articles/ForbiddenGrief-MeninPain.htm>) Some of these societal demands for men include: remain emotionally and physically strong; do not publicly mourn; do not ask for support or affection—remain self-sufficient; remain as non-expressive as possible; provide, not nurture; fix it, do not accept it.

If you ask what a miscarriage has to do with autism then you are missing the point. Grief is grief, no matter what the circumstance. What of the father who has been raised to “provide” and “fix it”? How does the husband cope with the fact that no matter how much money he earns for his family, he can’t “fix” this child? For some men the only way to cope with a diagnosis of autism is to not accept it because to do so would violate those very societal demands. Women have the coping skills to go through the grieving process that leads to acceptance. Tragically, many fathers remain stuck and grieve internally everyday. Not coming to terms with the diagnosis becomes the best coping skill.

### **PROBLEM SOLVING**

*Ramirez’ wife begged him to read up on autism, often force-feeding him articles, according to the Spectrum article. He says his ex-wife fought “tooth and nail” to get not only him, but his family as well, to accept the word autism into their lives. “My ex-wife, a goddess, was sitting up late nights, waiting for me to come home and she’d tell me, ‘We’ve got this autistic child you need to learn about.’”*

Michael Conner, PsyD, in Understanding the Difference Between Men and Women

(<http://www.oregoncounseling.org/ArticlesPapers/Documents/D.ifferencesMenWomen.htm>) writes that for most women, “sharing and discussing a problem presents an opportunity to explore, deepen or strengthen the relationship with the person they are talking with. Women are usually more concerned about how problems are solved than merely solving the problem itself.

“For women, solving a problem can profoundly impact whether they feel closer and less alone or whether they feel distant and less connected.” On the other hand he states, “For most men, solving a problem presents an opportunity to demonstrate their competence, their strength of resolve, and their commitment to a relationship. How the problem is solved is not nearly as important as solving it effectively and in the best possible manner.”

On the subject of autism, treatments, therapies, IEPs, behavioral strategies, etc., most men are out of their element. Seeing our own exuberance in tackling these issues, our husbands see us as effectively working on the problem. While we don’t look at it this way, he is showing his commitment by letting us do what we do best. We want a shared experience while our husband looks at two people exhausting their energies on the same work as inefficient.

### **WHAT WE DO BEST**

So what do we do best? Here is where we drive ourselves crazy. Conner notes, “Women tend to be intuitive global thinkers. They consider multiple sources of information and... come to understand and consider problems all at once. They take a broad or ‘collective’ perspective, and they view elements in a task as interconnected and interdependent. Women are prone to become overwhelmed

with complexities that exist, or may exist, and may have difficulty separating their personal experience from problems.

Women with special needs children are the ultimate multi-taskers. We're reading books on autism, getting information off the Internet, trying out behavior strategies with our children, acting as project managers to our child's educational support staff, finding articles on various treatments, making notes on what our child said or did, questioning, considering, forming opinions, seeing correlations and having many "aha!" moments in regards to autism and our child.

And what of our husbands? "Men come to understand and consider problems one piece at a time. Men are prone to minimize and fail to appreciate subtleties that can be crucial to successful solutions," said Conner.

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

Even the relationship we have with our spouse and children are structured differently. Women, "feel closer and validated through communication, dialogue and intimate sharing of experience, emotional content and personal perspectives. Many men tend to find such sharing and involvement uncomfortable, if not, overwhelming," said Conner.

It is no wonder that the 400+ members of our Yahoo group are nearly all women. It is a perfect venue to share and discuss the good and the bad days, ask for help and give guidance if we can. Perhaps we are drawn to these venues because we need to converse, but are unable to have such an open dialogue with our husbands.

And how do men bond? Conner answers that, "Men feel closer and validated through shared activities. Such activities include sports, competition and outdoor activities." Considering the characteristics of the child with autism, some fathers must feel absolutely alienated in their relationship with their ASD child.

In December I wrote of holiday expectations in the ASD family (Holidays, Autism and Tolstoy

[http://www.autismcommunityconnection.com/files/holidays\\_autism\\_and\\_tolstoy.mht](http://www.autismcommunityconnection.com/files/holidays_autism_and_tolstoy.mht)).

We may feel sad at the limitations of our child during this time. Expectations can be particularly difficult and far-reaching for the father of a son with ASD. There is an expected joy and pride for fathers of living vicariously through the son. One can only imagine the unspoken thoughts that go through our husband's head when he looks out the window and sees the neighborhood kids playing a game of football, hearing co-workers talk about their sons' sporting events or not having the shared experience of watching Super Bowl together. I think, as women, we would have a good cry, maybe get consoled by a friend and move on from there. Our husband may beat those feelings down with a big stick and never say a word to anyone. Where is his outlet?

## **BEHAVING BETTER ABOUT AUTISM**

So how do we get our husbands more involved? How do we not drive ourselves crazy? First, if we can accept our ASD child is wired differently than we can accept that men and women are also “wired” differently too. Just as we work hard to see things from our ASD child’s perspective, we need to do the same with our spouse.

1. If you are the information gatherer in your home, accept that role. Your husband will not read all the books and articles that you are reading. But you might earmark or highlight a section of a book for some “bathroom reading.” Don’t just leave it as a hint. Tell him it’s important that he read that piece and tell him why it’s important.
2. Think of yourself as the Special Needs Manager of the home. As manager you do not need to take on all tasks yourself. Learn to delegate. Your husband may simply not know how to get involved. Give him one component that’s built to his strengths. Don’t be vague. “I need you to show \_\_\_\_\_ how to use a public urinal.” “I need you to work with \_\_\_\_\_ on his addition.” “I need you to help \_\_\_\_\_ read a story at bedtime every night.”
3. Give your husband the chance to be supportive. Discuss a plan for when you are overwhelmed ahead of time. At a non-stressful time of the day tell your spouse, “Sometimes I get overwhelmed. If I reach that point I’m going to tell you and you are going to take care of the kids while I go out for awhile.” Help him recognize the times that you are over stressed before you reach your breaking point. You need to take that break whether it’s for an hour, the rest of the evening or a planned night out with a friend later that week.
4. Find opportunities for shared activities with your ASD child and your husband. Sometimes there is a disconnect because a father might not know how to interact with his child. Make it your job to find that shared connection. Perhaps they can watch a DVD or movie together. There might be a model train show in town, a local club or special needs sport program. Look for ways to find meaningful moments between your husband and child.

And what of Ramirez? Spectrum writes that Ramirez realized he had been focused on all of the nightmares of learning about the diagnosis and the denial that came after it. He said while accepting the diagnosis of autism was a stunning blow, he started to get it and assumed a bigger role in the lives of his children. He now organizes comedy events to raise money for Cure Autism Now.

### **WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN MORE?**

Here are some additional links that you might find interesting:

[www.spectrumpublications.com](http://www.spectrumpublications.com) - an excellent magazine with monthly features by UPI senior editor Dan Olmsted and Eric Chessen, founder of Theraplay-ny, fitness and wellness strategies for individuals on the autism spectrum.

<http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Listen-Women-Cant-Read/dp/0767907639>

Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps: How We're Different and What to Do About It by Allan and Barbara Pease

<http://www.fathersnetwork.org/585.html?page=585&SESSION=18275e6ed88fe34ca89bd80a1012cdd0&s=0>

Healing Broken Dreams: When your Child Isn't Normal – written by a father

<http://autism.blog.co.uk/>

Father of Child with Autism blog

<http://www.fathersnetwork.org/>

Support fathers and families raising children with special health care needs and developmental disabilities.

<http://www.dadsaregood.com>

A local area support group for fathers (not special needs specific) where dads can talk anonymously.

<http://www.autismthoughts.com/fathersbook.htm>

Autism: Heartfelt Thoughts from Fathers – this book is due out in 2007

<http://www.amazon.com/Breaking-Autisms-Barriers-Fathers-Story/dp/1853029793>

Breaking Autism's Barriers: A Father's Story by Bill Davis

Chronicles Bill's fight to overcome the physical, emotional, public, educational, and therapeutic obstacles to his son's disorder. An honest, direct account from a father's point of view of bringing up a child with autism, and the pressures and pleasures this brings to him, his wife Jac and his daughter Jessica.