

Neurodivergent Relationships: *Trust, Love Languages and Why Authenticity Matters*

Why some autistic and AuDHD people describe trust differently, why authenticity often matters so deeply, and why rebuilding trust can sometimes take longer than people expect.

Relationships are rarely simple. Every one of us enters adulthood carrying an invisible blueprint of how relationships work. Some of that blueprint develops through our earliest attachment experiences, some through later life events, and some through the unique way our nervous system experiences the world.

For neurodivergent people, particularly many autistic and AuDHD individuals, relationships can sometimes feel as though they operate according to slightly different rules. That doesn't mean they experience love more deeply or less deeply than anyone else, nor does it suggest that every neurodivergent person thinks or behaves in the same way. Neurodiversity is just that—diverse.

However, there are certain themes that appear repeatedly in research, within neurodivergent communities and in clinical practice. One of those themes is authenticity.

As a psychotherapist, I have lost count of the number of neurodivergent clients who have described feeling less concerned with social performance and more interested in whether another person's behaviour consistently reflects who they truly are. Again and again, conversations return to honesty, predictability and trust.

Perhaps understanding these experiences begins much earlier than we think.

Our first experience of trust

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory proposed that our earliest relationships teach us what we can expect from other people. Through thousands of ordinary interactions, babies begin developing what Bowlby called internal working models: unconscious expectations about whether other people are available, reliable and emotionally safe.

Mary Ainsworth later demonstrated that secure attachment develops through caregivers who are consistently responsive. Not perfect, but predictable enough that a child learns, "When I need you, you are usually there."

Those early experiences become the foundation upon which later relationships are built. Trust, therefore, is not simply an emotion. It is an expectation. It is the nervous system quietly predicting what is likely to happen when we reach towards another person.



THE BLOOM ROOM MK

*Psychotherapeutic Counselling
& EMDR Practitioner*

Those early experiences become the foundation upon which later relationships are built. Bowlby described them as *internal working models*; unconscious expectations about ourselves, other people and the world around us. In many ways, they become the templates our nervous system uses to predict future relationships.

Perhaps this invites us to think about trust differently.

We often talk about trust as though it is an emotion, something we either feel or we don't. Yet I wonder whether trust is actually something more fundamental than that. Perhaps trust is the nervous system's prediction that another person is likely to remain emotionally consistent. It is our expectation that their words and actions will continue to align, that who they are today is likely to be who they will be tomorrow.

If that prediction is repeatedly confirmed, trust naturally deepens. If it is repeatedly challenged through inconsistency, deception or unpredictability, the nervous system updates its understanding accordingly.

Different nervous systems, different experiences of safety

Although attachment theory applies to everyone, autistic and ADHD individuals often navigate a world that was not designed with their nervous systems in mind.

Many spend years masking aspects of themselves in order to fit social expectations. Others grow up repeatedly misunderstood, corrected or expected to communicate in ways that feel unnatural. Research exploring the Double Empathy Problem suggests that misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people are often mutual, rather than the result of autistic people simply lacking social understanding. We are sometimes speaking different relational languages without realising it.

Perhaps that is why authenticity becomes so important. When much of your life has involved adapting to the expectations of others, relationships where you no longer need to perform can feel profoundly regulating. Love begins to look less like grand romantic gestures and more like emotional safety.

Beyond the traditional love languages

Many people are familiar with **Gary Chapman's Five Love Languages**. Whether or not the model has a strong scientific evidence base, it has helped many couples think differently about how they express and receive affection.

The Standard 5 are:

1. Gifts
2. Physical Contact
3. Acts of Service
4. Words of Affirmation
5. Time Spent

More recently, neurodivergent communities have begun describing experiences that don't sit neatly within those original five categories. These are not recognised psychological love languages, but they offer an interesting insight into how some neurodivergent people experience connection.

One example is **pebbling**, inspired by penguins who collect stones for their chosen mate. In everyday life, pebbling might look like sending someone a photograph of an unusual cloud because they love photography, forwarding an article about a special interest, sharing a favourite song or texting simply to say, "I saw this and thought of you." The object itself is rarely important. What matters is the message underneath: You existed in my mind when you weren't here.

Others describe **parallel play**, spending time together without the pressure to constantly interact. Sitting quietly reading separate books, working on different hobbies or simply sharing the same space can feel deeply connecting because there is no expectation to perform socially.

Another frequently discussed experience is **information sharing**, sometimes referred to as information dumping. Whilst it may appear overwhelming to someone unfamiliar with neurodivergent communication, many describe it as an invitation into their inner world. Sharing a special interest is often less about delivering facts and more about saying, "This matters deeply to me, and I trust you enough to let you see it."

Running through all of these examples is a common thread.

Authenticity: The freedom to exist without constantly editing yourself.

Traditional Love Languages	Community-described Neurodivergent Expressions
Words of affirmation	Sharing knowledge, information, favourite songs, memes
Quality time	Parallel play
Gifts	Pebbling
Physical touch	Co-regulation / shared space (for some people)
Acts of service	Accommodating sensory needs, remembering routines

What I find particularly interesting is that these examples are not necessarily replacements for Chapman's original Five Love Languages. Rather, they may be different expressions of the same underlying human need.

Whether someone values words of affirmation, physical affection, pebbling or parallel play, the need beneath those behaviours is often remarkably similar. We all seek to feel seen, understood, valued and emotionally safe within our relationships. The language may differ, but the message is often the same.

Perhaps this is where neurodivergent experiences add something valuable to the wider conversation. Rather than asking, *"What is your love language?"* we might begin asking, *"How does your nervous system recognise love?"*

For some people, love is recognised through physical closeness. For others, it is consistency. For someone else, it may be the freedom to share a lifelong special interest without fear of judgement, or the quiet comfort of sitting beside another person without the pressure to perform socially. None of these experiences are more or less valid than the others. They simply reflect different pathways towards the same destination: emotional safety.

Viewed through the lens of attachment theory, this begins to make sense. Bowlby proposed that our earliest relationships create internal working models of what we can expect from others. Perhaps what we later come to describe as our "love language" is, at least in part, shaped by those early experiences and by the unique way our nervous system has learned to recognise safety, connection and belonging.

When trust begins to change

One of the most fascinating conversations I have with neurodivergent clients' centres around what happens when trust is broken.

Many people assume trust disappears dramatically, perhaps following a betrayal or significant argument.

That certainly happens. Yet many autistic and AuDHD clients describe something much quieter. Relationships slowly provide information. A promise is broken. An explanation changes. Someone says one thing but repeatedly does another. An apology is offered, yet the behaviour never changes.

Individually, these moments may seem relatively small. Collectively, they begin creating a pattern.

Eventually, there can be a quiet internal acknowledgement.

"Oh... that's how you roll."

It is a phrase I have heard from neurodivergent clients more times than I can count. It is rarely said with anger, and almost never with drama. Instead, it tends to arrive quietly, after weeks, months or sometimes years of trying to understand another person's behaviour.

By the time those words are spoken, something important has usually changed. The relationship may still exist, but the way it is experienced no longer feels the same. Trust has shifted. Not because of one catastrophic event, but because the person's nervous system has slowly gathered enough information to draw a different conclusion.

It has made me wonder whether we sometimes misunderstand what trust actually is.

Instead, it often reflects acceptance. The internal picture of who that person is has changed.

"I can't unsee it"

This is another phrase I hear regularly.

Once a person has demonstrated repeated inconsistency, deception or manipulation, many neurodivergent people describe finding it difficult to return to the previous version of that relationship.

From the outside, this can be misunderstood as stubbornness, inflexibility or holding a grudge. From the inside, however, it often feels different. Their understanding has changed. Their internal model has updated. The nervous system has gathered enough information to make a different prediction about future safety. That prediction cannot simply be ignored because somebody apologises. It isn't that forgiveness is impossible. It is that trust and forgiveness are different things.

Forgiveness is not the same as trust

One of the most important distinctions we can make is between forgiveness and trust. Forgiveness is often an internal process. It may allow someone to release anger or resentment, regardless of whether the relationship continues.

Trust is relational.

Trust develops when repeated experiences consistently demonstrate that another person is emotionally safe, predictable and authentic.

If behaviour repeatedly contradicts words, trust naturally weakens and if behaviour consistently supports words, trust gradually strengthens. This is true for all human beings. However, many neurodivergent people describe consistency as carrying particular significance because predictability helps regulate the nervous system.

Can trust be rebuilt?

Yes. People change. Relationships heal. Repair is possible. However, rebuilding trust rarely happens because somebody promises things will be different. The neurodiverse nervous system watches behaviour and it notices whether promises become actions.

Whether honesty replaces avoidance, accountability becomes consistent. Whether today's behaviour matches yesterday's words. Gradually, and over a long time, if enough new experiences accumulate, the internal prediction begins to change once more and not because someone demanded another chance but because they quietly demonstrated that they had become consistently and predictably safe again.

A different question

Perhaps that is why neurodivergent relationships can sometimes feel so incredibly deep.

If somebody shares oxygen with you, they often share all of it.

They assume honesty because honesty is how they are trying to meet the world.

They share interests because inviting you into their inner world feels more meaningful than small talk.

They remember tiny details because noticing patterns is often how they make sense of relationships.

They remove the mask because they have decided you are safe enough to see who they really are.

None of those things should ever be mistaken for something that will always be there.

Because authenticity is reciprocal.

When somebody repeatedly demonstrates that their words and actions no longer match, the nervous system quietly updates its understanding.

It doesn't necessarily stop loving.

It doesn't necessarily stop caring.

It simply stops predicting safety.

Perhaps that is why so many neurodivergent people describe saying, almost with sadness rather than anger,

"Oh... that's how you roll."

They aren't describing the moment trust disappeared.

They're describing the moment reality finally caught up with hope.

Further Reading

- Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). Attachment and Loss: Volume 1 – Attachment.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). Patterns of Attachment.
- Siegel, D. J. (2012). The Developing Mind.
- Milton, D. (2012). On the Ontological Status of Autism: The Double Empathy Problem.
- Crompton, C. J., et al. (2020). Research exploring communication between autistic and non-autistic people.

- Murray, D., Lesser, M., & Lawson, W. (2005). Attention, Monotropism and the Diagnostic Criteria for Autism.

This article combines current psychological theory, published research and clinical observations. It is intended as an educational resource and should not be interpreted as describing the experience of every neurodivergent person.