



Episode #165:

**4 Listeners Share Their Stories of
Discovering Their Neurodivergence as Adults**

July 9, 2019

- Debbie: Some of my guests had already known they were differently wired before becoming parents, but for all of them becoming a parent forced them to consider their own wiring in a different, and sometimes painful, way. Here's Nathan's story.
- Nathan: I took a little bit different path than probably most people discover their wiring, so to speak, through their kids. As I've kind of come full circle through this journey, I realize that I've been looking on this path for quite some time and it was shortly before I had children, or right around the time I was having children, I knew that there was something different. I had always had problems with attention, focus, distraction, chronic lateness, a lot of the classic hallmarks of ADHD. Everybody says they have it, but it's the debilitating factor that is the sort of major piece to it. And I went looking for that.
- Debbie: Back then Nathan got a diagnosis. He tried different ADHD medications with varying degrees of success. But more than anything, he says that the realization that he had ADHD sparked in him a desire to become his own best advocate, to learn and absorb everything he could to better understand who he was. He says he really started that deep dive before he became a parent to two children, both of whom are differently wired. And learning more about them and getting them the supports they needed also led to his continued understanding of how his own brain works.
- Nathan: I have two boys, they're both, one's 19 and one's 22 now, so this is sort of looking back, but both boys sort of expressed some indicators that they were a little bit different. And we started looking, knowing that I had some brain challenges, we started looking into, um, possibilities with them. Tried to do testing, tried to do things like that. And as I learned more about their challenges, of course I learned more about my challenges because they were very similar. My youngest, he has a very high functioning form of autism, he's on the spectrum. Very binary thinking, very cognitively rigid. So that is something that that's been a challenge through his childhood. But going through all that and learning more about how it affected them, I saw and drew the natural parallels to what I was going through. So as I went down that path, um, you know, psych eval, neurofeedback, medication, lots of different avenues and resources that we have tried. Some have been more helpful than others, but just therapy as well as, uh, you know, neuro eval or psych evals have been probably the biggest things that have helped because there is no magic bullet and there is no magic pill. It takes working through and understanding your brain. It takes understanding the differences between what is, I guess neuro-typical as it's said and differently wired.
- Debbie: Because I know that our own approach to parenting is influenced by how we ourselves were parented, and I also heard from many of the parents I interviewed that their own neurodivergence was misunderstood when they were kids, not just by educators and peers, but by their own families, I was curious to learn about Nathan's childhood experience. I asked him how his parents dealt with his ADHD symptoms when he was a kid.

Nathan: My parents sort of struggled with it. They, to their credit, it was always unconditional love, unconditional acceptance slash you know, availability. How can we help? How can we help? What can we do? They just didn't know. My parents were there as much as they could be, but it really did affect my self esteem. It really did affect my sense of self awareness. You know, that constant idea of why am I different? And immediately your brain goes, what is wrong with me? Growing up in my family of origin it was always, you know, everything was behavior based, which was pretty and is pretty standard in childrearing. It's all about correcting bad negative behaviors and reinforcing good behaviors. And so when you have children that have, that are, that are different that way, that type of parenting just doesn't work. It is not, um, effective. And it can be not only counterproductive, but it can be harmful in a lot of ways.

It can, through no fault or no rather intent of your own, it can generate some pretty significant trauma. Which is a piece that we have started to work through and are starting to understand in our family. So that's been the biggest takeaway I've learned as I've become a parent. Talking about grief and loss, there's a lot of regret that I have felt about how I parented. Trying to be a, you know, quote unquote good parent. Um, do the right things, you know, make sure my children were well mannered, behaved, disciplined, all those things. Everybody, you know, has those sort of visions slash expectations of how they see their children, their family looking. I worked very hard and very ineffectively at trying to meet those sort of inner expectations, those societal expectations I guess. And realizing over a period of time that, and coming to grips with it I guess is more even important cause you start to realize, but for me at least it took some time to come to grips with how that needed to change my relationship with my sons, how I needed to change my connecting with my family, how that affected the dynamic in our family. As a parent it sort of hits you pretty close. It's all very intertwined. Hard to explain.

Debbie: Today, Nathan continues to do the hard inner work on himself and he encourages other parents to listen to their intuitive voice if they have the sense that they're differently wired. He says he hopes people aren't afraid to open Pandora's box and process their life experiences. He told me that while people might not want to go there, on the back end, when you start to see how far you've come and where your journey is taking you, that's where the real healing lies.

Nathan: It has been an ongoing process, constantly working to keep that little voice in the back of your head from getting too loud, that, the inner critic there from getting too loud and drowning out the positives in your life. So, you know, that is a big important piece I would say is working on and letting that grief and loss come out. Let it go, process it, which means going through some painful feelings obviously. And those can come up at unexpected times. And you know, that is I guess where I would say I have benefited greatly from, you know, therapy, talking through it, being able to work through that because that's a uh, that becomes a part of you.

Debbie: Like Nathan, my next guest, Copper, says that she too had always suspected she was differently wired long before her daughters were born.

- Copper: I felt different my whole life in ways that were really difficult to explain. Especially because, you know, the things I, you hear so many other women say them and um, I want to say that over and over again because I have now heard these stories from so many women. They have these common threads of just feeling very strange and feeling different and not finding a kind of social home. Not meaning that you didn't, weren't social but just maybe always feeling confusing or not successful.
- Debbie: Copper said that it was actually in reading the introduction to *Differently Wired* where I write about the challenges my son Asher was having when he was in preschool that she started to really connect the dots.
- Copper: I read about your experiences with Asher and struggling so hard to find a good preschool for him and it, I could have written all of those words about my own child. It was the, one of the first big, oh holy cow, what else could be going on here moments that I had. And over the next couple of days I had many, many, many, many more. And then they started to ring true, not just for my daughter but for me as well. And I realized that I wasn't just looking at a potential diagnosis for her, but that it would likely include myself and my partner and probably at that point, the younger daughter too. And I had suspected that I had ADHD for a long time. I have a brother who has really kind of typical hyperactive ADHD. And I had read some things again about ADHD in women and inattentive ADHD and as I kind of struggled to engage my executive function to do all that research, make all those calls, follow up where I had to, fill out form a, b and c. That was really an area where I could see, wow, I need some help and could also see exactly how I could get it. You know, get a diagnosis, potentially access medication.
- Debbie: While Copper has received an ADHD diagnosis, she hasn't pursued a formal diagnosis of autism yet, though she does identify as being on the spectrum. And recently she's gotten more involved in connecting with that part of who she is and trying to process the emotions surrounding that identification.
- Copper: I feel pretty lucky. I didn't have a lot of trauma related to my autism in my childhood. I wasn't extremely dysregulated, it's not that I spent my childhood really asking for help in my behavior and not getting it. That's the first step. I do feel some grief though, and especially about my college experience. I wasn't able to graduate from college and that's an area that I, I kind of hold it in my head that I might revisit that at some point when my children are older. You know, it's not possible now with a two and a six year old. But, um, you know, looking back and knowing that the success that I didn't have was not the fault of my personal discipline or intellect. So it's like there's grief and then also healing with it at the same time. I'm 37, so just looking at history and the culture, I don't feel a lot of anger about being missed because I know that that's just not where we were with our medical understanding at that time. But I'm really, really happy that that has, and is, changing.
- You know, I, I interact with a lot of autistic adults on Facebook. There's a fantastic Facebook group called Ask Me, I Am Autistic. And almost every day

there's a post from a woman in her thirties or early forties, you know, saying, okay, so I've learned this, this, and this and you know, I was like this and I did this in my childhood and could it possibly be? And would this explain my struggles, my anxiety? You know, so many of these women and myself also have, you know, experienced great impact to their mental health. And then they are engaging maybe care for their mental health that's missing the bigger picture. Like I have worked with therapists for depression or anxiety and I can look back at that now and that care helped but it wasn't the full picture of, of, you know, why were you anxious? Why were you experiencing depression at that point of transitioning into adulthood? What other things were going on?

Debbie: One of the things Copper is working to reconcile was a theme that came up in many of my interviews and that's the concept of masking or camouflaging her autistic traits, which is especially common among autistic women.

Copper: Something that I have learned is that self-diagnosis is really highly respected in the autistic community because of all of these different barriers to diagnosis. And one of them for women is masking. You know, we've learned that autistic women are social in different ways in whether it came from their home or their school or, or just the culture. But it can be very difficult for an, you know, an adult woman can't take that mask off of 30 years of her cultural experience to go have two/ three hour interviews with a psychologist. So I think that's important to mention too. The little baby bird process of this part of my life is trying to learn when I'd like to take that mask off and when I'd like to leave it on. Because the sad truth is that there's important uses to it that I'm also trying to get more in touch with that part of me that may have learned to suppress that feeling of stimming in that moment.

Debbie: I heard a similar story from Emma who told me that when she was younger, a lot of her friends used to joke and call her 'spectrum-y'. She says it wasn't in a mean way, but just in the way that she approached things. So it's always been on her radar. But tuning into her daughter's challenges, especially her sensory processing issues, has helped Emma recognize that she's always struggled with the same issues as her daughter is now.

Emma: So when my little girl was smaller, she was just really affected by sensory inputs. I've got a video of her when she's a few weeks old and I'm talking to a midwife, and she must be only six weeks old, and she's just really, really distressed at certain things. And the midwife said, I think it's just her trying to process all the new sensory information that's going in. And I had forgotten about this until a couple of years later. I was talking to someone about sensory processing disorder and I read *The Out Of Sync Child* and I was like, oh my gosh, that's my kid. But at the same time I was like, oh my gosh, that's me. I didn't realize that all these sensory preferences that I had were not how everyone else experienced the world. I get really stressed and I've realized that I get really stressed and really anxious around the same things that my daughter does.

So it's sensory input, around transitions, and around dealing with anything new. But anytime I go to the doctor about this, they're like, oh, it's anxiety. You should just have some antidepressants. But I really believe that that's really not helping

the root cause. So I've had CBT before for other stuff and it's really helped me. But it seems like you can't access the right support unless you have like the right label, I guess. It's quite overwhelming I think at the moment because like I know that's me, but you're kind of waiting for someone else to say, Oh yeah, you're not crazy. This is you. And it feels like I'm reprocessing my life up to now because I'd always been, I guess, trying to see it through the way that I thought I should see it rather than the way that I was built to see it.

So stuff like feeling on the outside or not sure how to understand certain things or certain situations or feeling like I should do things when I really don't want to, now I feel more confident in saying, actually I don't want to go to that, but, but knowing the reasons why. So I've always like, I've always hated shopping, so like girlfriends would go out shopping and want to do shopping and I hated shopping, but now I'm like, okay, I know that was because I just thought it was, I just thought it was pointless. Why am I going to go and try and loads of clothes that I'm not going to buy, that I don't have money to buy. The sensory thing for me was a big thing in terms of taking clothes on and off to try them on and also the lighting in stores, the busyness, the noise.

Debbie: I asked Emma if she's experienced a sense of relief then or a lightness to now realize that there's a reason why she experienced things the way she has throughout her life.

Emma: Yeah, it's kind of mixed. I think it's a lightness in some way, but also just like a frustration. Like why didn't I know earlier? Um, but it's, yeah, it's nice because now I know actually there's a reason for this and it's not just me being fussy or not wanting to do things. It's actually my body is responding in a different way. I think it's hard for my husband because now I don't feel like I need to mask all the time, I'm a lot more blunt. And I think he's like finding it hard because he's like, you're so rude now and I'm like, I'm just tired. I'm just exhausted and I just don't feel like I need to, I don't know. Some of the social chit chat and stuff, it just tires me out and conserving that energy feels like I can use it better for other things, I don't know.

Debbie: Emma told me that being wired in a way that's so similar to her daughter has been both a positive thing and also presented her with some additional challenges.

Emma: I think it's hard because in some ways we're quite similar so I find it quite hard to manage emotion and I will not notice myself getting stressed that easily until it gets to a point where I'm just like, oh, what are you doing? And she's, she's like quite similar. So it's quite hard in terms of managing that. But it's really good knowing that if she says to me, I don't want to wear these clothes because they feel a certain way, I can just get that and I'm not going to make her wear it. Whereas I know I've got friends who are parents and they would just be like, I bought these clothes so you can wear them all. That's just a stupid reason. So I think it's quite good in the way that I can really understand how stressful it is to wear something that feels uncomfortable or to not be able to tolerate a certain food cause the texture makes you feel like you're going to gag. I think some of the stuff that's been hard for me has been seeing my daughter really anxious and

knowing there's nothing that I can really do about it. And feeling, I know there's like a lot of talk in the neurotypical world about, Oh yes, people who have autism don't have uh, aren't empathetic. And I feel things so deeply for my daughter. I can feel her pain. And I can feel when she's upset, so deeply that it really, really affects me.

Debbie: For many of the parents I talked to, that feeling that Emma just described, that feeling of so deeply connecting with and empathizing with what's happening with your child was a very real and pervasive aspect to their parenting dynamic. Bill, the father of a differently wired teenage daughter explained to me that he always knew his daughter didn't fall far from the tree.

Bill: We, uh, we noticed just the things she was interested in and you know, very much takes after her father. And that was always something that really made me happy. And then now it's kind of a double edged sword. I mean it's, it's, it's frightening to me to think that she's, she's going to face a lot of the same challenges in her life that, that I did. But on the other hand, she was diagnosed so much earlier and there's so much more treatment available. Um, and, and just general awareness now that hopefully it won't be quite the same.

Debbie: Bill told me that though he has struggled with executive functioning and attention issues his whole life, it was only when his daughter was struggling in second grade, back when Bill was around 45 years old, that he suddenly realized he had a brain difference that was behind his challenges.

Bill: When we went in for the meeting, after the tests were done and we talked to her teachers and the school psychologist and various people, they started describing the symptoms that our daughter was having. And I don't really remember specifics, but I just remember every single thing they said and described caused a bell to go off in my head. And I was sitting there and it was like someone was going through a list of everything that I had experienced my whole life, but I really could never describe or put my finger on. And my wife and I, uh, walked out of this meeting and I turned to her and said, they were talking about me. Every single thing that they said about our daughter could have applied to me. And that's when I realized that it was quite likely that I had been suffering with ADHD symptoms my whole life, but had never been diagnosed by anybody, to my knowledge. It was weird. I was, I was around 45 when this happened and to look back at 40 years or so of my life, particularly my years in school and suddenly see it through this new set of eyes, um, was very, uh, sort of life changing. It's like, it's hard to describe what I felt, but it's, just to have a diagnosis and have a name to put to these things that had always sort of been struggles in my life was, was odd.

Debbie: Embarking on his own journey of discovery has been eye opening for Bill as he's been reflecting a lot on things that were hard for him as a student, and as an adult, while reconciling the fact that he went undiagnosed, and as a result unsupported, for so long.

Bill: Looking back it was torture at times to force myself to, to do this work. I had gotten no enjoyment from schoolwork. Um, anything that I was told to do, anything that was assigned, was agony. I could read a book, pick up a book, and I

could read all day. But if it was a teacher who said, I want you to read this book for some reason I couldn't crack it, I couldn't even open the cover. And it became something to, to deny and to push off and procrastinate and, and uh, you know, I would just stay up til two in the morning the night before a book report was due and, and do it that way. And I see my daughter doing much the same thing now. And, uh, it's hard. It's hard. You don't, you know, you don't want your kids to go through the same struggles that you do.

It's changed my self image a bit in that you realize that you're one of millions who are going through things that are remarkably similar to what you're going through. And this is obviously because of, you know, the Internet that, that you can, uh, connect with people and, and like answer the question on some, some ADHD forum or something online. And I was just describing my personality or this or that. And, and I didn't really put too much effort into it. I just kind of typed off the top of my head and, and the first response that came back was someone who said that is the clearest description of ADHD that I have ever read in my life. So I immediately felt like, oh, great, I'm this, you know, I'm this textbook example. So, you know, why, why didn't somebody pick up on it 30 years ago?

Um, it is hard because, you know, you try to live your life looking forward and not back and you try not to live with regrets. You know, I'm, I, I'm getting medication for ADHD now. I'm on 40 milligrams of Adderall and a hundred milligrams of Zoloft for the anxiety. And when I first started to take Adderall, when you're a newbie to this medication, the effects are so profound that you can't help but wonder, what would my life have been like if I had had this at 15? If I could have found a way to stay focused and stay on task, I mean, as it was, I got good grades. I graduated high school, I went on to college, I graduated college with a bachelor's degree. But I've never been able to do what other people make look so easy, which is stay on course. You know, I know so many people who have known their whole life what they want to be.

They get a degree in it, they get a job in it, they get promotions, they move from company to company, but they're always in the same field. And by the time they're in their forties or fifties, they're doing quite well. They're making good money. They've risen to a certain level in their field. My life is nothing like that. I, I've had a million different jobs in a million different fields and that's been problematic for me both in terms of uh, my career and money and stability, but also in terms of relationships. It is hard to realize that everybody else seems to be able to put one foot in front of the other and take these thousand steps that it takes to reach their goals and to me that just seems impossible. It's like how do you do that? How do you take the first, second, and third step knowing that there are a thousand more to go? I can't fathom how you can do that. I, to me, it's enough that I can get through the day and I'm not worried about tomorrow, I'm just worried about getting to 10 o'clock and then I can go to bed.

Debbie: In all of my interviews, I asked my guests if they had any advice for parents listening to this episode who are relating to these conversations and are considering their own potential neurodivergence. Here's what Emma had to share.

Emma: It's really important to get a support network of people who understand because it's one thing doing neurotypical parents in, but when you've got just a kid who thinks a little bit differently, who might be triggered by things that other parents think are just bad behavior or they don't understand, it's really important just to be able to have someone that you can talk to or somewhere where you can go with your kids to not feel like you're being judged. Just having like a safe space of, of activities you can do. And also for a grown up as well. So there's, there's a group near me and it's just autistic parents and autistic adults or, and you can just go and talk and it's, it's just having that safe space where you're like, okay, I can just talk about anything here and I'm not going to be judged for it.

Debbie: And here's Bill.

Bill: My advice would be just realize that you're not alone, that there's hundreds of thousands if not millions of people who are going through the exact same thing. And it helps just to read other people's stories, whether they're adults or they're teens who are going through this and understand that you're not unique. In a way it kind of feels bad to say that, but it does help to know that you can find people who have the exact same stories as you, who have been through the exact same things. And just knowing that it has a label, it has a name, there's existing research, that's very comforting in a way.

Debbie: And lastly, Nathan.

Nathan: Oh god, I've got so much in my head. I could talk for an hour on that. I guess just a couple of things off the top of my head. Don't wait. Start finding out about it. Be your own advocate. Uh, trust your instinct that if something is different, try to learn about it. You may not want to get into the weeds of, you know, the, the brain science behind it. But start by talking to somebody. There's lots of resources out there and don't feel like you have to stick with the first one. Um, get second opinions, get third opinions. I would encourage people, I'm so, so, so pro-therapy, I encourage people to at least start there. That's a great starting place to at least then explore or jump off from there. Um, if somebody is feeling like they need help, just reach out. If somebody is feeling like they don't really have a sense of themselves or they are just intuitively know that there's something different, listen to that voice. You know, don't be afraid to process that.

Debbie: I want to give a special thank you to Copper, Emma, Bill and Nathan who shared their stories with me to put this episode together and to thank everyone who reached out to me to tell me about their own journey down this path. I was so inspired by these conversations and for the way everyone's bravery keeps this paradigm shift moving forward and helps continue paving the way for more understanding and acceptance for all of our differently wired kids and for the next generation of this new normal, these amazing neurodivergent kids. I think conversations like these are so important for all of us to have and to listen to. And I would love your help and sharing this one with your community so we can continue to foster that understanding of these shared experiences and contribute to the growing awareness of both the gifts and the challenges for differently

wired people in our schools and our workplaces and our neighborhoods and in our society. Thank you so much. Let's get this episode spread far and wide.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Part 1: Dr. Melissa Neff on Diagnosing and Treating Adults Newly Identified as Differently Wired](#) (podcast episode)