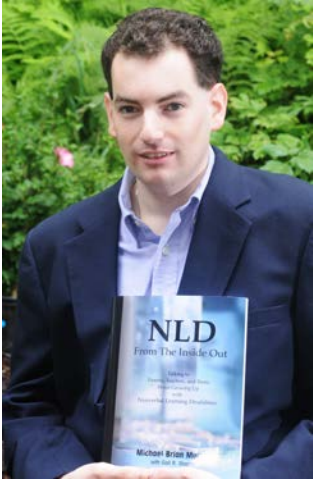


Beyond the Spectrum with Michael Brian Murphy

February 1, 2013 by Rhonda Spellman



When I read about Michael Brian Murphy on LinkedIn I wasn't completely sure that I fully understood what NLD stood for and, even after I read more about it, I wasn't sure if many others understood it either.

After reaching out to Michael and asking him if he would agree to this interview I have learned so much more and I think you will, too. Michael is a very brilliant young man with so much to offer!

Interview Questions:

1. Your book, NLD From the Inside Out is about a misunderstood condition known as Nonverbal Learning Disabilities. Can you give us a clearer picture of this condition that you prefer to refer to as Nonverbal Learning Differences?

First of all, I do not like to refer to the "D" in "LD" as "Differences," since the truth is, all of us – LD or "neurotypical" (which effectively just refers to people who did not go through Special Education) – learn differently from one another. I'm also not crazy about the "D" standing for "Disorder," since it's a value judgment to automatically say that my brain is somehow "disorderly" but yours is not. But with "Disabilities"... well, it's not exactly saying that we're unable (in which case the term would be inabilities), but we once had some kind of ability which has since become disabled. And so, this begs the question: who and/or what disabled it? Ultimately, though, however much we might philosophize on what the "D" should stand for, it's somewhat of a moot point, since both the ADA and IDEA

have the "D" stand for "Disabilities" (in the plural), which is why I used "Disabilities" throughout the book.

But what IS NLD, really? It's easy enough to list the classic symptom areas such as "Executive Functioning deficits," "poor social skills," "poor motor skills," "being an auditory learner," etc. and then to atomize them and explain each individual aspect. But that doesn't give the full picture. NLD is, among other things:

- "Asperger's Lite."
- ADD, plus extra baggage.
- Swept under the rug, and not considered a "real" disability.
- Not in any version of the DSM, including the DSM-5, and at this rate, probably never will be.
- What makes someone a philosopher, a sage even, but with no audience willing to listen.
- What prevents someone from asking someone out, or following up on a date, not just from the so-called "poor social skills," but from the utter conviction that no one would ever want to date a total loser fool like yourself, based on a lifetime of rejection, ostracism, and learned helplessness.
- What makes someone a "word nerd." Clearly, not all people who consistently kick butt at Scrabble or crossword puzzles have NLD, but somehow, I get the feeling that the type of people who go to Scrabble and/or crossword puzzle tournaments, especially those who go year after year, probably have some degree of NLD, whether diagnosed or not.
- The Purgatory of "too-normal-to-be-disabled-yet-too-disabled-to-be-normal."

It's also important to state that NLD is NOT a learning disability in which one is nonverbal – quite the opposite, as we not only have a

rich vocabulary, but tend to talk on and on (and on and on...). Nor is NLD a "right-hemisphere disorder" as Byron Rourke deemed it to be in 1989. (Readers should refer to Chapter Three: The NLD Brain to learn more.)

2. In your book, you state "No matter how tough life may be for you right now, you are not going to feel that way forever." I think that is very positive and supportive. How have your own feelings changed since your book was released?

With the release of the First Edition in 2008, I had felt a lot of the feelings first-time authors feel: pride in my work, giddiness, vindication, catharsis, cockiness, and other variations on good feelings, granted. But there was the flip side, too: dread at how many typos there would be even after proofreading it dozens of times, fear that the public would hate it, fear that the competing NLD authors would sue me, fear that they would laugh at it or at me, fear of looking like a fraud, fear that the number of sales would never go above two digits, even fear of becoming an instant smash success and not having a clue how to handle it.

By the time I was working on the Second Edition, a lot of those fears and doubts had subsided and/or morphed into means and reasons for changing and updating the book - even to the point of completely restructuring some of the chapters.

Since the release of the Second Edition in 2010, a lot of what I've been feeling is frustration: frustration at the limit placed on direct email marketing; frustration at the fact that I can't drive, and hence go to speaking gigs on my own timetable (I also happen to have a co-morbid diagnosis of epilepsy); frustration at the fact that, because NLD is so niche, it's not really welcome at many ADD or AS/Autism groups; and frustrated at the ever-present suspicion I have that, as much as I have improved the book from the First Edition to the Second, a lot of what I say may yet prove to be outdated or irrelevant or incomplete, and so just how drastic a change would I have to make to the Second Edition to make the Third worth it, or would it even be a Third Edition, or a different book altogether?

3. How would you compare NLD to forms of autism?

Clearly, there are a lot of parallels between NLD and Asperger's. So many, in fact, that many experts have wondered if Asperger's

should be taken off the "Autism Spectrum" and placed alongside NLD on some new type of "spectrum" (ala Joseph Palombo), or if NLD should be considered a subtype of Asperger's (ala Nick Dubin), or Asperger's a subtype of NLD, or something, anything. As it stands, it is possible to have a co-morbid diagnosis of both Asperger's and NLD, (at least until the DSM-5 comes out), and while we could once draw definitive lines in the sand between the two ("NLD has auditory processing, AS has visual," "NLD doesn't have stimming where AS/Autism does," "NLD doesn't have sensory hypersensitivity," etc.), now we know that those lines are very blurred, some to the point where they might as well be erased altogether. As for me, I would love it if one day, the APA would decide to put "NLD/AS" as a single entry in a future edition of the DSM, thus equating the two erstwhile distinct diagnoses and therefore giving us a far more accurate incidence rate for each, and – gasp! – NLD would actually be taken seriously for once!

I might as well say here, since this is the only question that addresses the topic of Autism directly, that I have never been comfortable with the term "Autism Spectrum Disorders" or "the Autism Spectrum." I mean, how can we say that six "Autism-ish" disorders constitute a spectrum? What is it a spectrum of? The very idea of a spectrum represents every last color imaginable – every possible permutation of hue, brightness, intensity, and grayscale. Perhaps we could say that the heterogeneous nature of Special Education as a whole could be some type of a "spectrum," but as it stands, this term is as meaningless as those puzzle piece bumper stickers.

4. I love your thoughts here Michael! I agree with your question, Spectrum of what? We are all a part of the human spectrum! Can you tell me more about your book and the outreach you've been doing since writing it?

In October 2008, two months after the release of the First Edition, I was the keynote speaker at Mass Bay Community College in Wellesley in observance of Disability Awareness Month. But because of my inability to drive (as I mentioned in question #2), most of my non-interview-related outreach has been limited to email and social media. Both in preparation for the Second Edition and straight promotion, I have spread the word far and wide, and gained some friends in high places, as far as NLD is concerned. This includes: fellow authors of NLD- and AS-related books, founders of famous LD-related blogs and websites, prominent LD advocates and lawyers, education reform advocates, and well-respected neuroscientists.

But the most important outreach has been in responding to my fans. That is, I am willing to answer any question that someone tosses at me -- any -- provided it's not the type of question to which an answer might leave me open to being sued.

5. What has been the most challenging to you with regards to NLD (either for yourself or educating others)?

In terms of educating people about NLD, I'd say the most challenging thing is when people ask me about the difference between NLD and Asperger's. Usually, I get tongue-tied, but sometimes I just say, "NLD isn't in the DSM; Asperger's is," and leave it at that, which, on the surface might sound terse, even a bit glib, but given what I've said in question #3, is about as accurate an answer as you can get. As far as day-to-day life, I'd say one of my biggest challenges is money management.

6. How have you overcome this challenge? If you are still working on it, what are you doing?

Well, it's not like I'm blind to how much I have, it's just a matter of low income, student loan debt, and occasional impulse shopping (usually in the form of music purchases). But I think that there are a few basic rules of thumb that I live by that I would recommend to anyone:

1. When using a credit card, always pay the company by phone. There's no need to pay a 50 cent surcharge in the form of a stamp and envelope every time you pay a bill.
2. Furthermore, pay the credit card company the same day you make the purchase, or at least within 48 hours. If they say that the order hasn't processed yet, that's fine. Pay it anyway.
3. For student loans, choose the Income Based Repayment (IBR) Plan, especially if you are unemployed or underemployed.
4. As for impulse shopping, buy what you want, but not the very first time you think about it, and never buy anything when it first comes out on the market, especially if it's the type of thing you'd find in Consumer Reports.

7. What are you the most proud of accomplishing?

Definitely the fact that I am now internationally known. When I was just starting my career in 2007, I thought the only people who would buy this book would be maybe, my extended family and friends, and a handful of the interviewees. Now, I'm known in four continents and have received fan mail from nearly every state in the US, plus Argentina, England, Spain, Israel, the Netherlands, and Indonesia, and my sales figures are WAY higher than I could have imagined. Boo-yeah!

8. Congratulations!!! What is the #1 tool you would like to give to people who have NLD or to someone who is helping others with NLD?

Chapter Six. Chapter Six is the culmination of all the tips and tricks garnered by me and my mother (who also is the editor), Gail Shapiro, in terms of raising me to be a lot more healthy, wealthy, wise, and a lot less disorganized, dependent, and depressed. And isn't that what all NLDers and their parents are looking for? Among a few goodies in Chapter Six are: how to write an essay in a way that works, a template for writing a letter of accommodations while in college, smarter methods for note-taking, and even how to approach finding a date.

However, if your claim to understanding NLDers is not via being a parent of one, or being one yourself, but being in the fields of psychology or education (including therapists, guidance counselors, SPED teachers, diagnosticians, and perhaps even "LD advocates"), then Chapter Two: Diagnosing NLD is the #1 tool for you. If you are a doctor or someone interested in neuroscience, then the #1 chapter for you is Chapter Three: Your NLD Brain.

9. What is one of the greatest lessons in life that you ever learned? How did this change your outlook?

One of the best lessons I learned from my own experience is that if you want something done what you think is the "right" way, then you're going to have to do it yourself. No one else is going to fix things the way you think they need to be fixed for you. I would, however, like to augment this with something my mother taught me, which she learned from her mother, which is that, "There are

two kinds of problems in the world: the ones you can throw money at and the ones you can't, and the key is to know the difference."

10. What do you need help with in order to achieve your goals and dreams?

Oh, about the same as everybody else: trust, direction, respect, discipline, love, and of course plenty of \$\$\$.

Thank you Michael!

Your comments, questions and suggestions are welcomed and appreciated. Ill-willed comments of any kind are not allowed here. Please be kind, The law of attraction is always at work: that which you sow, so shall you grow. Thank you and have an incredibly blessed day!

-Rhonda Spellman

Proud to be the mom of two incredibly awesome boys! One just happens to have Asperger's Syndrome. Both teach me how to be grateful for life every day.