



# **Harnessing the Strengths of Neurodiversity in Medicine by Supporting Autistic Clinicians During Medical Training**

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## Medical/Pathology Model

**Focus:** Identifies neurodivergence as a disorder or deficit

**Goal:** "Cure" or "fix" individuals to align with neurotypical norms

**Language:** Terms like "symptoms," "treatment," and "normalcy"

**Power Structure:** Clinicians and diagnostic labels hold authority over individual experiences

**Intervention:** Uses standardized therapies and medications to reduce "symptoms"

## Neurodiversity Paradigm

**Focus:** Views neurodivergence as a natural variation of human diversity

**Goal:** Support individuals in accessing tools and environments that align with their neurotype

**Language:** Emphasizes identity, agency, and acceptance; avoids pathologizing terms

**Power Structure:** Individuals and communities lead in defining their experiences

**Intervention:** Provides accommodations, individualized support, and celebrates neurodivergent strengths





Dr. Greeter, age 4/5

## Receiving ADHD Diagnosis at Age 5/6



My Brain

Undercooked and Running  
All Over the Place



Other Kids' Brains

Light, Fluffy, and Organized!





Dr. Greeter, Age 40

**"I have found my neurokin! They share my experience of the world!"**



**"My brain works differently."**

**"It is both a blessing and a curse."**



**Creative**

**Honest**

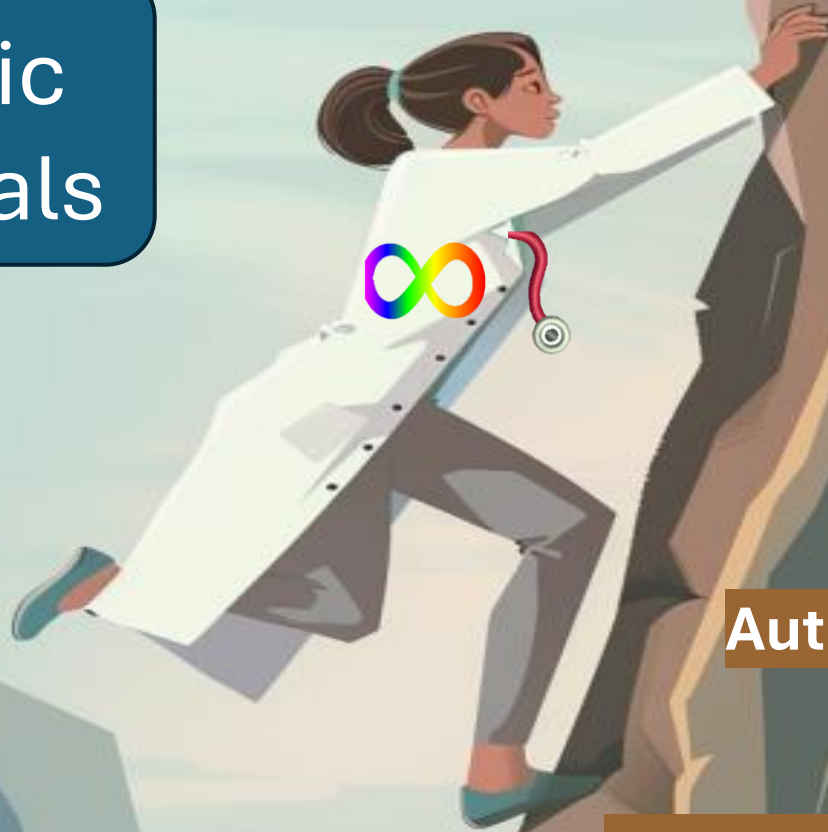
**Analytical**

**Non-judgmental**

**Passionate**



# Strengths of Autistic Medical Professionals



Curiosity

Fairness

Less Influenced by  
Social Norms

Authenticity

Advocacy

Nonjudgment

Pattern Recognition

Detail Oriented

Openness

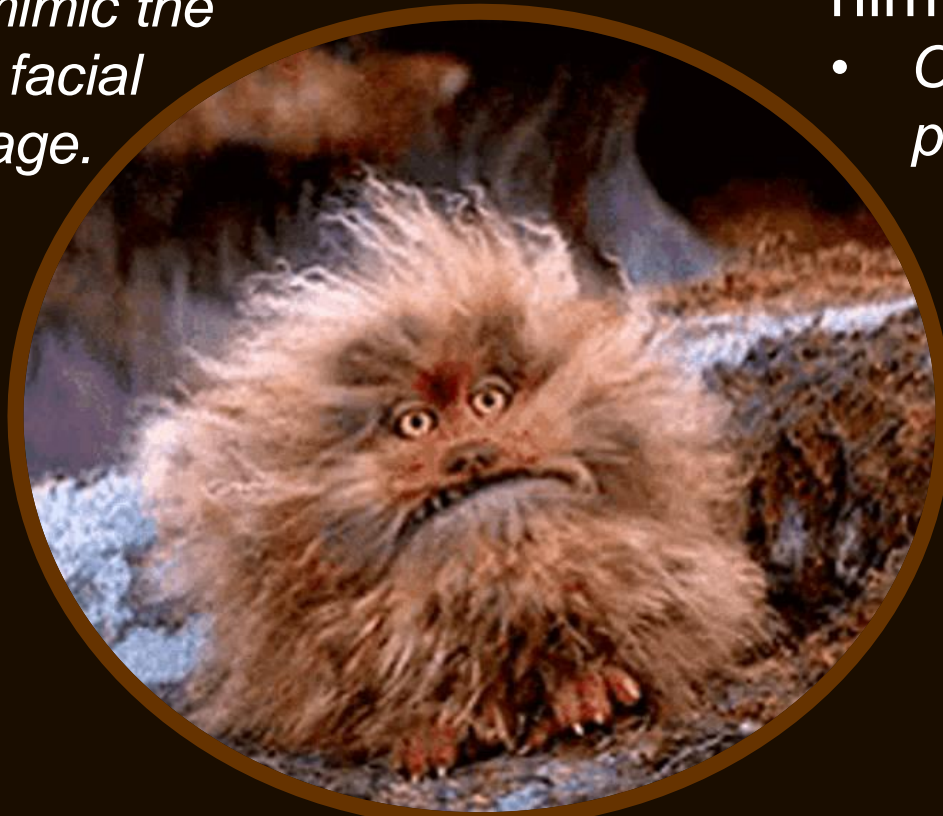
Creativity

## **Affective Empathy**— feeling with people

“I feel Fizzgig’s anger and anxiety!

*Mirror neurons light up that mimic the emotions of others based on facial expressions and body language.*

Kimber, L. , Verrier, D. and Connolly, S. (2023). *Autistic people’s experience of empathy and the autistic empathy deficit narrative*. Autism in Adulthood. Vol. 6, No 3.  
<https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0000>



## **Compassionate Empathy**— feeling for people

“Poor Fizzgig, I care about him and feel bad for him.

- *Compassion and concern for people and desire to help them.*

## **Cognitive Empathy**— “I understand why Fizzgig would be so upset about being left behind.”

*Also referred to as “theory of mind” or perspective taking.”*

# Alexithymia : Decreased Perception of Emotional Detail

“color blindness for one’s inner emotional experiences”

Detailed Emotional Perception  
of One’s Feelings



Gummy Bear Flavors Easily  
Distinguishable

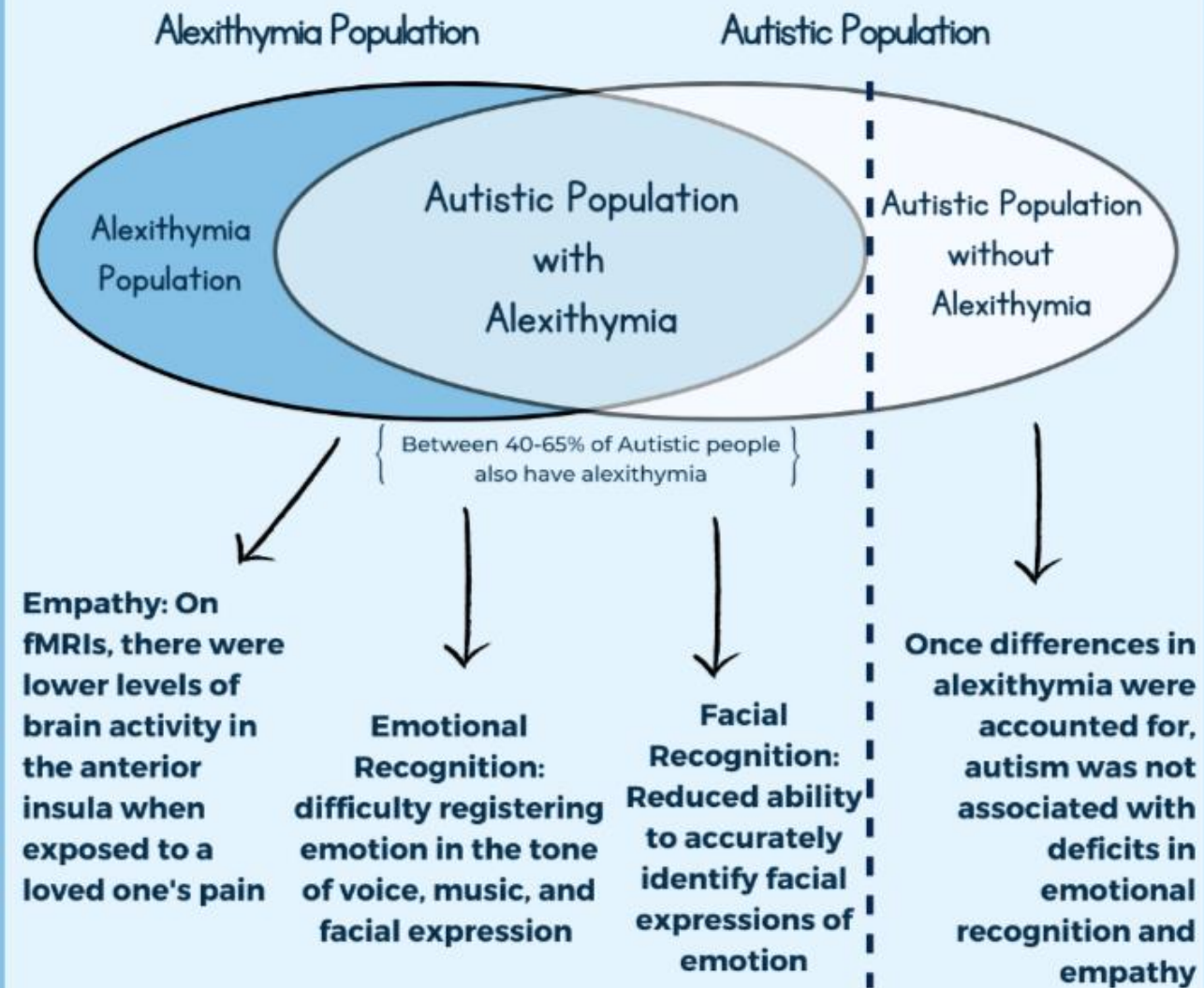
Alexithymia



Gummy Bears  
Melted Together



Bird G, Cook R. Mixed emotions: the contribution of alexithymia to the emotional symptoms of autism. *Transl Psychiatry*. 2013 Jul 23;3(7):e285. doi: 10.1038/tp.2013.61.



Many autistic physicians actually experience more intense affective empathy.... Also called hyper-empathy!

# The Double Empathy Problem

Challenges the idea of autistic communication as a deficit.

**Autistic Communication:** A different way of connecting, not a faulty one.

**Cross-Neurotype Challenge:** Misunderstandings happen across neurotypes.

**Finding Ease Within Neurotype:** Autistic people communicate effectively with each other – so do allistic people.

Damian Milton






# ADHD Medical Professionals

- Quick thinkers under pressure
- Creative, novel ideas
- Divergent thinkers linking multiple pieces of data into one big picture
- Can intensely hyper-focus when engaged/stimulated
- Enthusiasm, resilience, and humor

Shen, et al., 2021 showed a five-fold increase in suicidal behaviors in ADHD medical students.



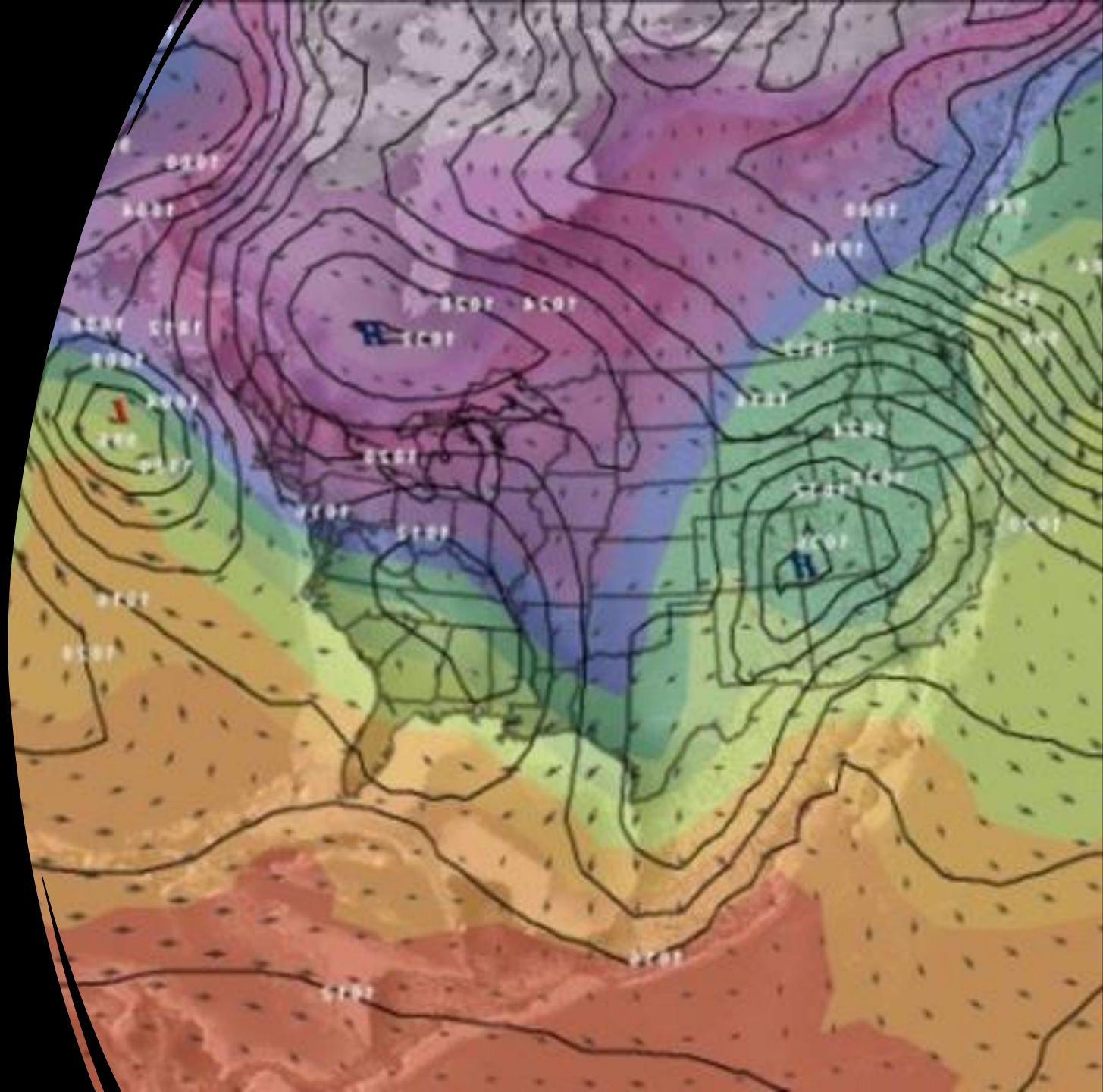
“Creative, “outside of the box thinkers,”  
quick decision- makers, passionate, big-  
picture thinkers, and entrepreneurs.”

Mammoliti et al

# Dyslexic Medical Professionals

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- Verbal skills
- Visuospatial ability
- Interconnected reasoning
- Global thinking
- Dynamic reasoning
- Narrative reasoning





# Neurodiversity Strengthens the Medical Field



Curiosity

Fairness

Less Influenced by  
Social Norms

Authenticity

Advocacy

Nonjudgment

Pattern Recognition

Detail Oriented

Openness

Creativity

Shaw et al. 2023 found that 77% of autistic physicians  
had considered suicide and 24% had attempted it.

# Sustaining Autistic Medical Professionals

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- A neurodiversity affirming perspective
- Autistic role models in medical education
- A culture of acceptance where self-disclosure is safe
- Open, direct communication
- Being given the benefit of the doubt.
- Accommodations





# Different Skill Sets

## Practicing Medicine

- Keen understanding of medical science.
- Egalitarian treatment of each individual patient.
- Be authentic, human, open and curious.
- Accuracy of information

## Completing Medical Education

- Keen awareness of medical culture.
- Relate to individuals differently depending on their standing within the social hierarchy of the academic system.
- Be “professional.”
- Social safety

# Different Skill Sets

## Connecting with Your Patients

- Authenticity
- Vulnerability
- Curiosity
- Challenging people to grow
- Deep communication
- Creativity and thinking outside the box

## Pleasing Supervisors and Staff

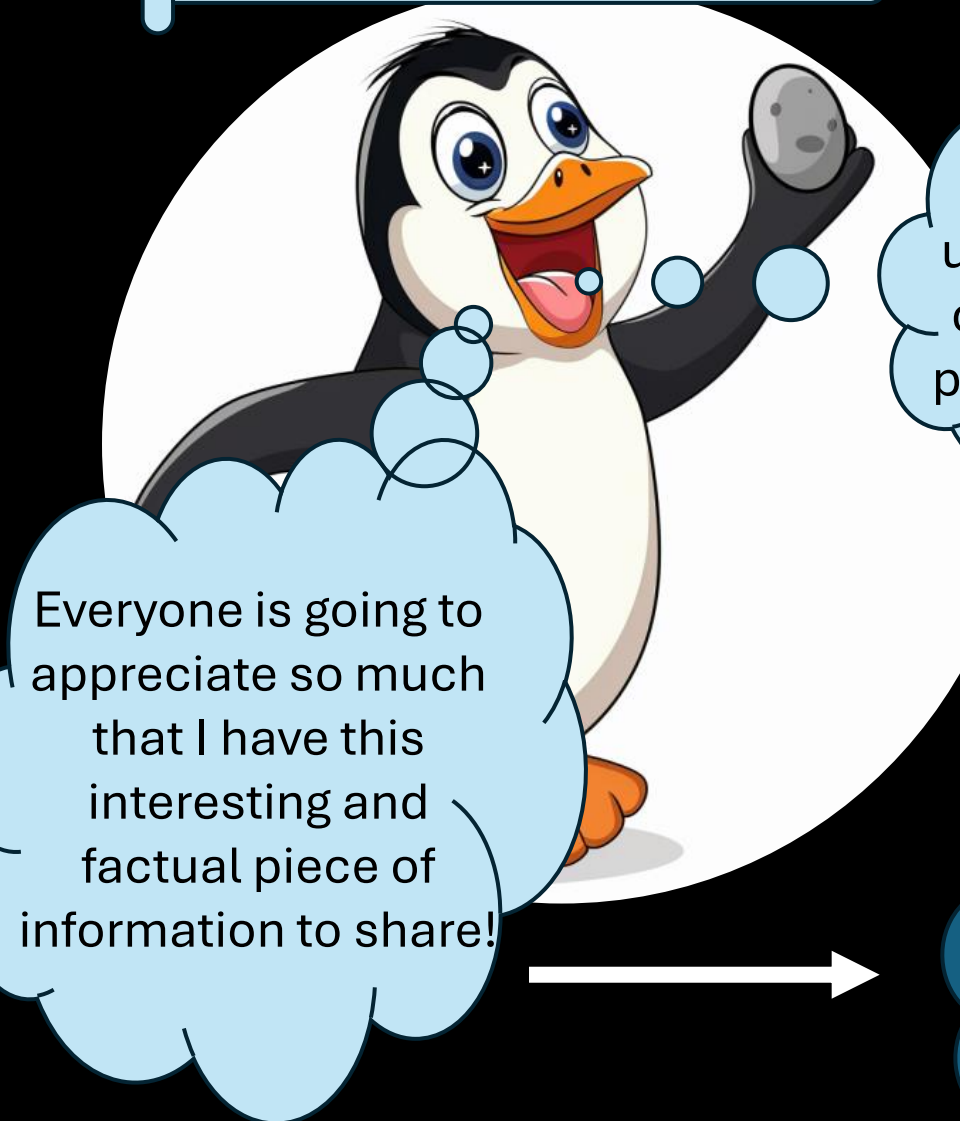
- Masking
- Appearing impervious to weakness/deficit
- Agreeableness
- Appeasing people
- Small talk
- Conformity



## Autistic Intention



## Neurotypical Misinterpretation



I really want to understand your clinical thought process in detail!

Everyone is going to appreciate so much that I have this interesting and factual piece of information to share!



You're showing off to advance your standing in the social hierarchy!

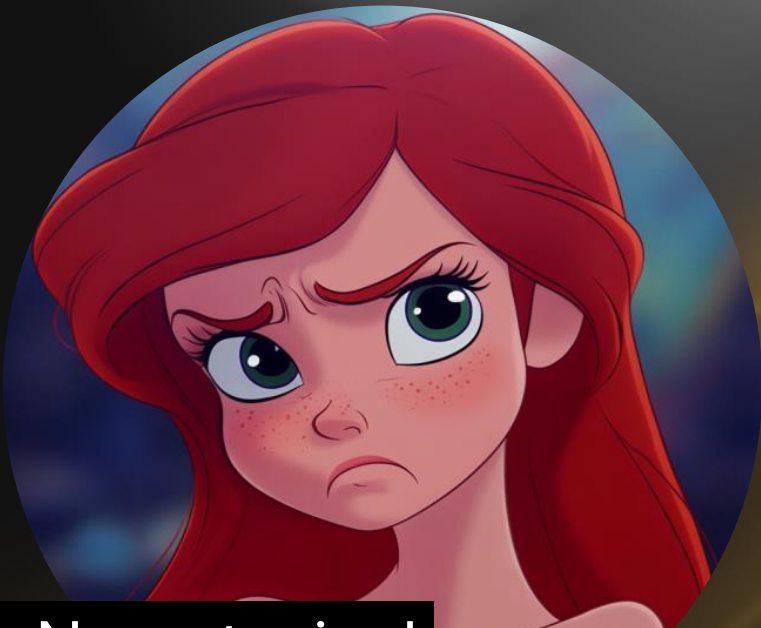


Are you questioning my medical authority?

Great at accumulating medical knowledge!  
Terrible at fitting in.....

New medical  
knowledge!

Must ask another question....



Follow Neurotypical  
Social Protocol to  
Avoid Making Anyone  
Uncomfortable



Monotropic Attention  
Vortex Focused on  
Special Interest



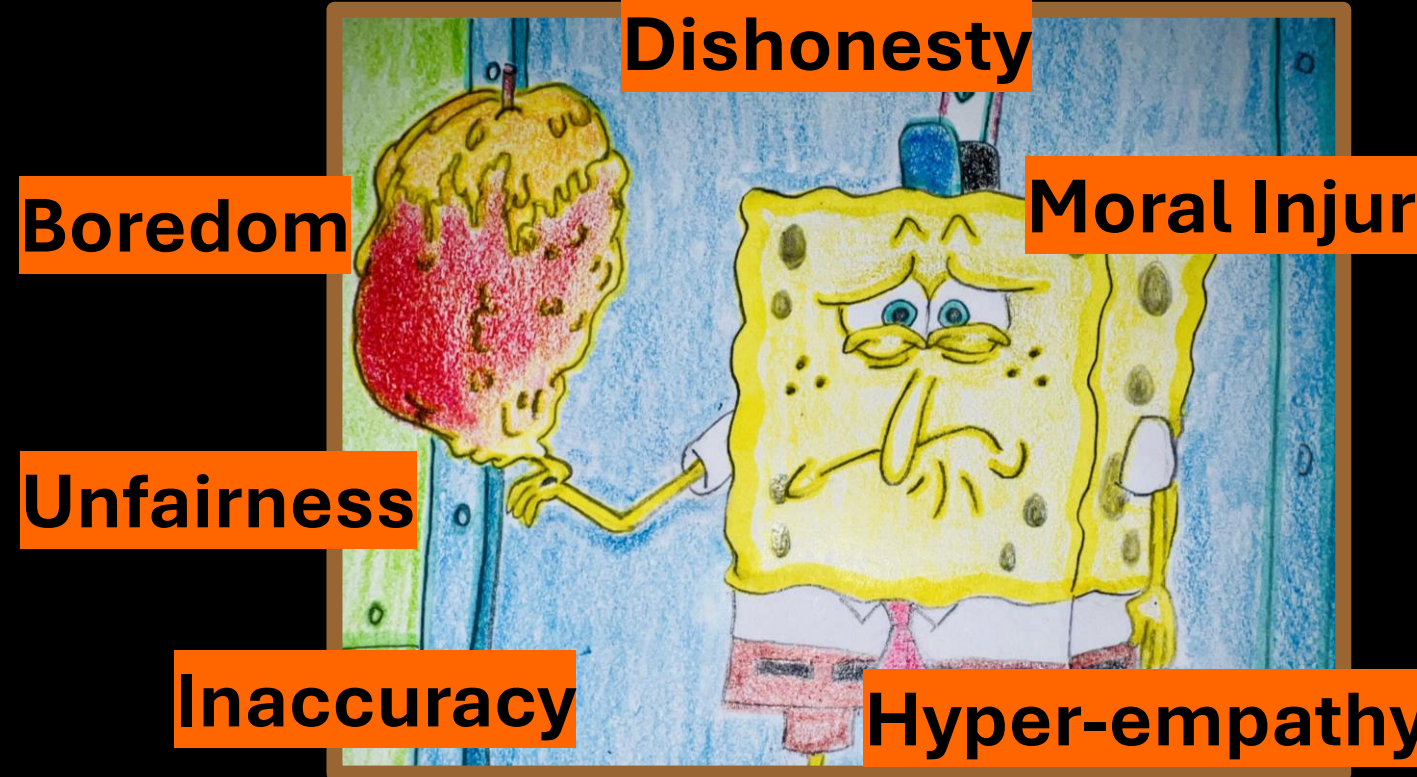
# Different Internal Experiences

## Neurotypical Experience:



Helps System Remain Stable

## Autistic or ADHD Experience



Challenges System to Grow/Improve

Inside training program that values  
openness, new ideas, and leads  
with curiosity prior to judgment.

Autistic Clinician

Inside training program with rigid  
hierarchy, intolerance of  
difference and quick to Judge

Autistic Clinician

Neurotypical  
Clinician

This learning environment works  
much better for me too!





Practicing Medicine in  
Sensory Overwhelm



Practicing Medicine in  
Sensory Regulation

Autistic Sensory Experience Makes a World of Difference

# Give us direct feedback please!

## Indirect Feedback

- You're clearly brilliant, but you need to be more aware.
- You're really smart, but slow down. Just relax.
- Read the room.
- You need to differentiate the forest from the trees.

## Direct Feedback

- It's considered rude to sit down while the attending is still standing.
- When you're a medical student answering questions that residents are getting wrong, it makes the residents feel bad and you need to stop.
- While you were talking to the child you missed the mom's change in affect.
- Be more concise so you don't overwhelm your listener with details.



# The Hidden Curriculum

## Explicit Messaging

Practice evidence-based medicine.

Don't be afraid to ask all the questions you want...

Learn as much as possible to advance your career.



## Implicit Messaging

Medical students should be seen and not heard.

Practice medicine the way the attending/institution likes.

Impress the right people to advance your career.

# Accommodating Challenges:

A collaborative process

- **Reduce change/unpredictability**
  - Less shifting between different attendings/worksites
  - Allowing someone to reserve designated desk space
- **Work culture**
  - Give benefit of the doubt and encourage open, direct communication
  - Present expectations and core requirements up front
- **Sensory accommodations**
  - Allow loop ear buds, sunglasses, fidgets
- **Executive functioning support**
  - Reorientation to tasks, pacing of workflow, coaching re triage
  - Increased structure in curriculum
    - Breaking down large projects into smaller parts
    - Templates
    - Presenting information in preferred format (ie auditory, written, visual)

\*Create space for continuous assessment of the adequacy and effectiveness of accommodations with room for adjustment.




# Accommodating Strengths:

Just a few examples...

- **Need for Novelty**
  - Opportunities to be part of innovative projects and problem-solving
  - Integration of entrepreneurial skills and opportunities
- **Justice Sensitivity**
  - Provide opportunities to advocate for patients and other social justice causes
- **Curiosity and self-directed learning**
  - Allow research and literature on topics of interest
- **Innovativeness**
  - Provide opportunities to give feedback and improve systems of care
- **Pattern Recognition**
  - Encourage sharing insights and observations.

\*Create space for trainees to utilize their unique strengths.

# Purpose-centered Professionalism!



**Do what makes the  
most sense to enhance  
patient care and  
clinician well-being!**



# To Disclose or Not to Disclose To Patients

## Benefits

- Normalizing autistic experience and identity
- Modelling self-acceptance and positive identity
- Giving hope to children and families.
- Associated with lower rates of self harm in physician (Shaw 2023)

## Risks

- Patient may view the professional as the “expert” or benchmark for living the ideal autistic life.
- Frowned upon in medical culture as “unprofessional.”
- Patient’s internalized ableism may decrease trust in the professional.

# To Disclose or Not to Disclose To Colleagues/Attendings

## Benefits

- Representation/Enhanced Community
- Enables greater authenticity and more energy focused on clinical work.
- Access to supports/accommodations
- Increased safety for other autistic medical professionals to disclose.

## Risks

- Colleagues may look for weaknesses and ascribe any flaws they observe to autism.
- Stigma, discrimination, and loss of credibility.
- Invalidation when colleagues don't believe we are really autistic.
- May complicate ability to acquire/maintain licensure.

Autistic physicians without autistic colleagues report higher rates of considering suicide (Shaw, 2023)



**Ever feel like The Ugly Duckling?**

Is there anyone like  
me out there?

In Shaw et. al.'s 2023 study of autistic doctors, Having never worked with another doctor who they suspected to be autistic was significantly associated with having considered suicide.

Sebastian C. K. Shaw, Alexander Fossi, Laura A. Carravallah, Kai Rabenstein, Wendy Ross, and Mary Doherty 2023. The Experiences of Autistic Doctors: A Cross-sectional Study.



# Openly Autistic Role Models in Medicine



I can do  
this!

**Autistic Trainee**

“witnessing colleagues with whom we can identify and being able to learn from their successes and struggles may make the difference between leaving a career we dreamed of, or pursuing it, more aware of our strengths, our vulnerabilities and the right to advocate for accommodations.”

Shaw SCK, Grosjean B, McCowan S, Kinnear M, Doherty M. “Autistic role modelling in medical education.”



# How can we make it safer for a medical professional to disclose their autism diagnosis?

- Medical professionals in positions of relative safety and power can start the disclosure process, gradually making it safer for those in positions of less power to disclose.
- Cultivating a culture in medicine in which vulnerability and self-acceptance is celebrated.
- Enhanced understanding of what autism actually is among medical professionals.



# Authentically Autistic in Clinical Practice







The joy of being a different  
kind of clinician....



Contact Us!  
Ask us Anything!



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