



Fostering Well-Being in Autistic Girls & Women

Thursday & Friday,
November 3 & 4, 2022

Simon Fraser University - Harbour Centre
Vancouver, BC

Presented by

Dori Zener, MSW, RSW

In partnership with



Event Schedule

All times are Pacific Daylight Time (PDT)

Day 1: Thursday, November 3

9:00am – 9:30am Registration

9:30am – 11:00am Session 1: Profile of Autistic Girls/Women

11:00am – 11:20am Morning Break

11:20am – 12:30pm Session 2: INVEST Model Presentation

12:30pm – 1:30pm Lunch

1:30pm – 2:30pm Session 3: Case Studies

Day 2: Friday, November 4

9:30am – 10:00am Registration

10:00am – 11:30am Session 1: Panel Discussion

11:30am – 12:15pm Lunch

12:15pm – 1:30pm Session 2: Q & A – “Ask a Therapist”

ACT – Autism Community Training

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Acknowledgements

ACT – Autism Community Training is pleased to bring Dori Zener back to Vancouver to present on the important topic of ‘Fostering Well Being in Autistic Girls and Women’, drawing on her many years of experience. These two days will be facilitated by Dr. Anthony Bailey who many of ACT’s registrants will know from previous conferences. Dr. Bailey has a particular interest in the diagnosis of girls and women. He is highly respected across Canada for his long-standing focus on the needs of adults.

We are particularly grateful to the four autistic women who will be our panelists on Day 2 of this conference: Jennifer Branstons, Juliani Kusmanto, Pam Palmer, and Kyla Tellier. In the nearly 20 years of providing thought-provoking educational opportunities, ACT has learned that personal perspectives provide registrants insights into the common issues affecting autistic individuals, as well as their courage.

POPARD, the Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders, has provided crucial financial support for this conference. POPARD provides consultation, training, and support services to all public and independent schools across the province of British Columbia, under the auspices of the BC Ministry of Education. <https://autismoutreach.ca/>

ACT depends on community collaboration and support to sustain our work as we are a small not-for-profit. We deeply appreciate the many parents and professionals across British Columbia who volunteer their time and expertise, and donate funds, to support free, evidence-based resources.

Support free evidence-based resources – [Donate to ACT!](#)

Free Resources from ACT

Autism Videos @ ACT (AVA) – Nearly 80 quality online videos available free, 24/7 without a log-in, thanks to our sponsors. www.actcommunity.ca/videos

ACT’s New Autism and Intellectual Disability (AID) Search – Keyword search over 2,000 records containing evidence-based, practical information resources in 36 languages sourced internationally, including BC-based community resources useful to families and community professionals - from SLPs to dentists! aid.actcommunity.ca

ACT in Chinese – www.actcommunity.ca/information/act-in-chinese

ACT’s Autism Manual for B.C - 13 chapters! www.actcommunity.ca/autism-manual-for-bc

ACT’s Monthly News Round-Up & Event Alerts - Sign-up to keep in touch with developments affecting those with a range of support needs. www.actcommunity.ca/updates

ACT’s Facebook - ACT carefully sources interesting, insightful stories to inform our nearly 9,000 followers. www.facebook.com/autismcommunitytraining

Fostering Wellbeing in Autistic Girls & Women

November 3, 2022
www.dorizener.com



Dori Zener
MSW RSW
Dori Zener & Associates



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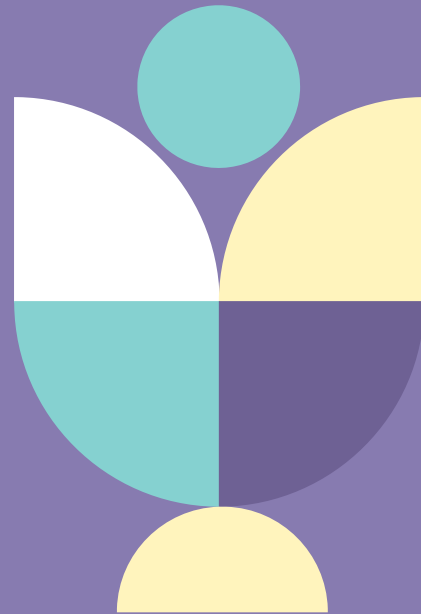
About the Speaker

- Registered Social Worker
- Director Dori Zener & Associates
- Neurodiversity-affirming mental health and peer support

DORI ZENER
& ASSOCIATES

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Profile of Autistic Girls & Women



3

Interests & Talents



4

Sense of Justice

“

You are never
too small to
make a
difference

Greta Thunberg



5



“ I want to see a
world where people
with disabilities
achieving things is a
norm rather than an
exception.

Haley Moss, Florida's First Openly
Autistic Lawyer

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Passionate Interests

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Academic/Researcher



Government Worker



Doctor/Scientist

Careers

Librarian/
Information Scientist



Artist



Helping
Professionals

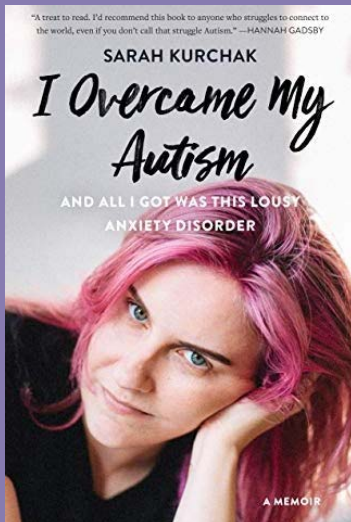


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Focused Interests and Routines

- Create predictable stable environments
- Know who they are and what they want in those settings
- Reduce decision fatigue
- Create and follow rules
- Stimming as predictable sensory input

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Introverts

Canadian writer Sarah Kurchak



Extroverts

Journalist Lauren Ober

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Missed & Misdiagnosed



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Why girls & women get missed



Diagnostic tools developed & normed for males



Gender bias in autism research



Masking



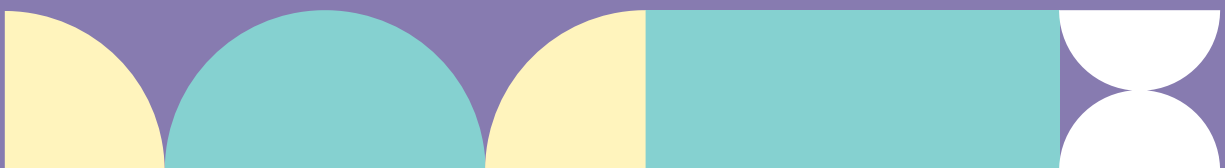
Lack of knowledge of the female autism profile



System divisions



Autism is not on people's radar



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The Power of the Right Label

“

My head was spinning all my life with trying to make sense of why these things happened to me, why I was so odd, why I couldn't live like other people. The diagnosis stopped my head from spinning. I was able to breathe a sigh of relief and relax.

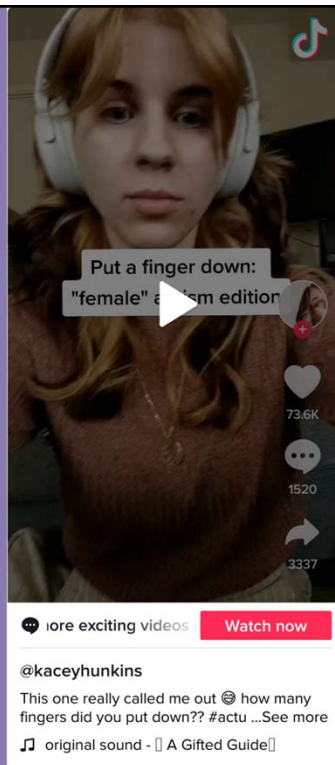
Sarah Hendrickx
Autism Educator, Author,
"Women and Girls with Autism
Spectrum Disorder"



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Put a
Finger
Down:

Female
Autism
Edition



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Sense of Self



1

Interoception

2

Alexithymia

3

Masking

4

Executive
Functioning

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Gender

- Up to 15% identify as trans or non-binary

Sexuality

- Only 30% of autistic people identify as heterosexual

Source: Spectrum News, *Gender and Sexuality in Autism Explained*
<https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/gender-and-sexuality-in-autism-explained/>

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Self-Other Distinctions

1

Diffuse
Boundaries

2

Empaths

3

Diminished Sense
of Agency



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Relationships

Friendship

Romance

Unhealthy Connections



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Vulnerability

- 1 Developmental Age
- 2 Missed Cues/ Literal language
- 3 Monofocus
- 4 All or nothing thinking
- 5 Processing Speed
- 6 People Pleasing

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Relational

Sensory

Sexual assault

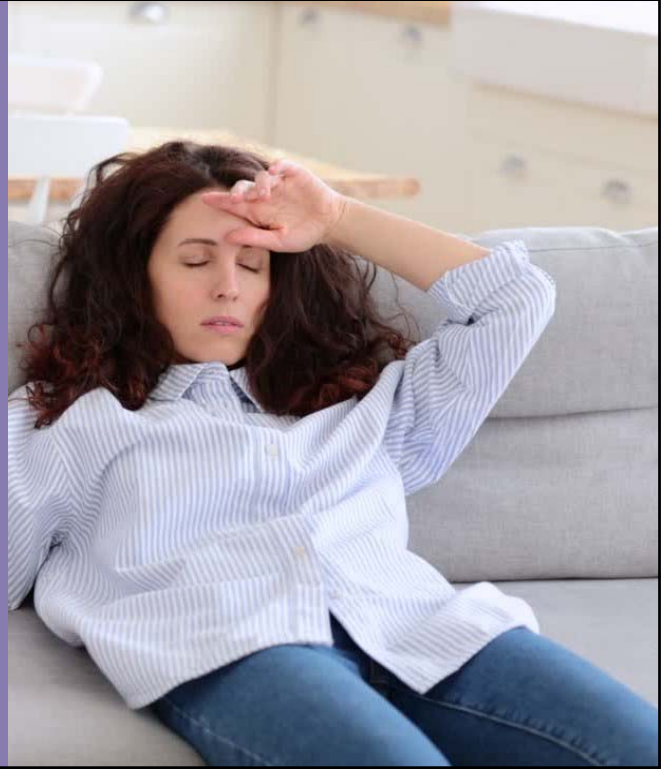
Things not making sense

Medical system

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Embodied Experiences

"I feel unwell most of the time; either a headache, stomach ache, feelings of anxiety or general fatigue. They're nothing serious but there is always something that means I feel less than 100%. Simply existing just seems to be hard work." - Autistic Woman



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Physical Health

- Hormonal abnormalities – PCOS, Endometriosis
- Chronic fatigue, pain
- Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS)
- Sleep disorders
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Migraines
- Movement planning problems

**Medications -
paradoxical reactions**

**Difficulty identifying
and communicating
about pain**

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Mental Health

- Depression
- Anxiety
- ADHD - shared characteristics
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Eating Disorders
- Suicidal ideation
- Autistic Burnout
- Trauma



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**Emotional
Overload**

MELTDOWN/SHUTDOWN

**Sensory
Overload**

**Information
Overload**

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Shame



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COVID & Mental Health

- Lack of structure
- Abrupt loss of routines
- Cut off from familiar people and places
- Loss of work/life separation
- Online learning
- "Post covid" reintegration



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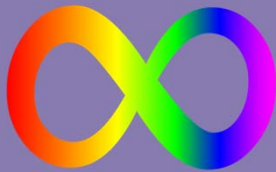
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Dori Zener MSW RSW

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Approach



- Neurodiversity affirming
- Strengths-based
- Person centred
- Varied clinical techniques

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What brings you to therapy
at this time?

How important is this issue for you?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
= Not important			= Moderately important				= Extremely important			

How important is this issue for the people in your life?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
= Not important			= Moderately important				= Extremely important			

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Intake process

What have you already tried to do to improve the issue you are facing?

What do you hope to get out of therapy?

How will you know if therapy has been helpful to you?

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Top reasons for seeking service

Understand neurodivergence	Improve mental health	Enhance social skills
Strengthen relationships	Executive functioning	Increase life skills /independence
Sensory processing	Emotional regulation	Work/ school performance
Advocacy	Navigate institutions	

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How do you learn best?

Visually
(Pictures
or words)

Auditorily
(Listening)

Talk it out

Write it out

Additional
time to
process new
information

I don't know

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Agenda Setting

What do you want to
focus on today?

Ask - "Is this something
you want to explore
further?"



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Working with Families & Partners

01

Identify
shared
goals

02

Acknowledge
differences

03

Honour the
work that has
already been
done

04

Look for
evidence of
overlap

05

Make a
plan

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Emotional Invalidation

When a person's thoughts
and feelings are rejected,
ignored, or judged.



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Emotional Invalidation

When a person's thoughts
and feelings are rejected,
ignored, or judged

Intentional or unintentional



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“

“The respondent’s interpersonal style seems best characterized as being cold and unfeeling. Others likely see her as being stern, punitive and unable to display affection or make a commitment to personal relationships. At times she may appear almost devoid of warmth and friendliness, and she likely has a propensity to make others around her feel uncomfortable and uneasy”

Psychologist

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Validation

- A way to communicate that the relationship is important and solid even if you disagree.



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Validation

- A way to communicate that the relationship is important and solid even if you disagree.
- Recognition that another person's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors are understandable.



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Inside Out



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Validation



Approach

Curious, caring,
compassionate.

'That sounds hard, tell me
more'

Message

I see you, I hear you, you
matter.

'What was that like for you?'

Rephrase

Ask a question.

Is this what you mean?

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Encourage Passionate Interests

- Bring joy and purpose
- Feel safe and familiar
- Career directions
- Loss when interest fades



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Self-Validation

Kindness

"It's okay that it didn't work out"

Reassurance

"I know this is hard. I will get through this."

Acceptance

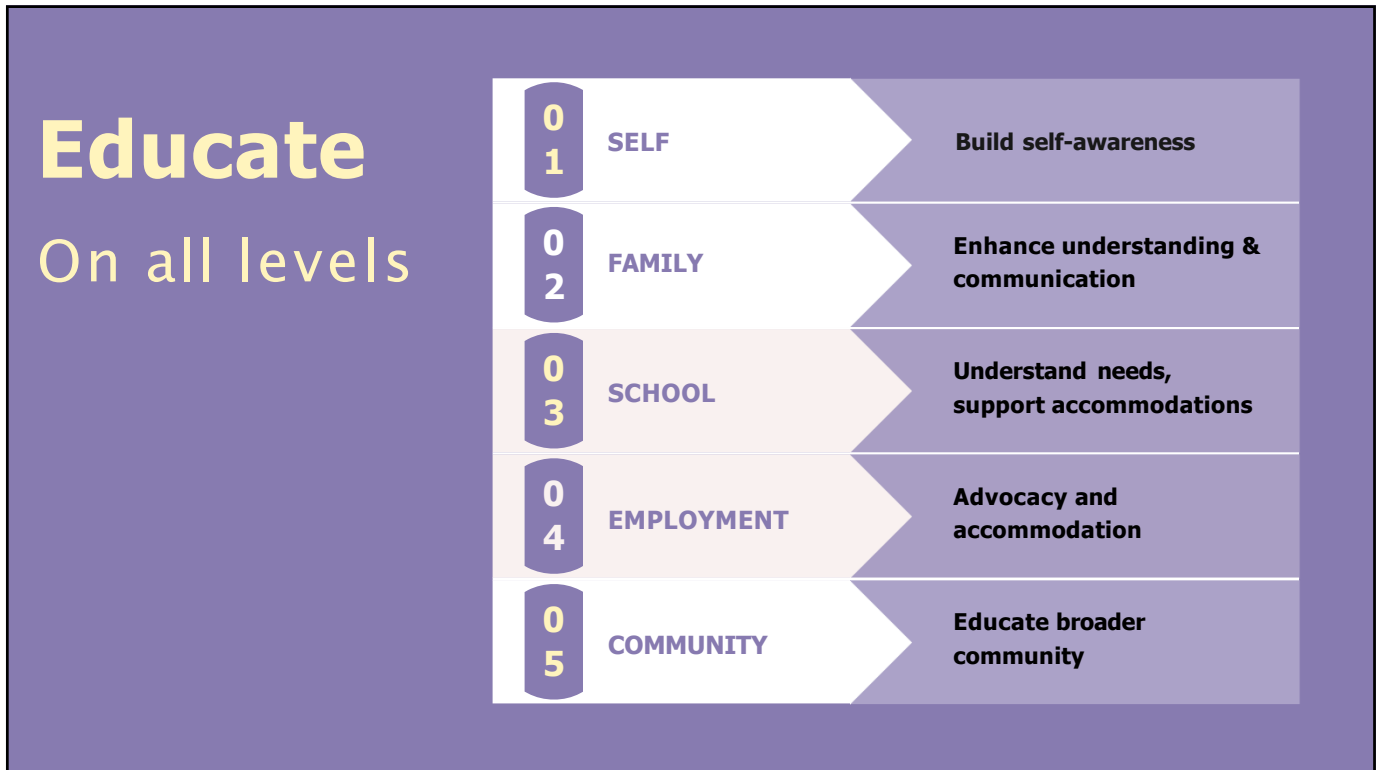
"I will feel better if I stop what I'm doing and take a break."



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Neurodivergent Profile

Pragmatic Language	Social Awareness	Monotropic Mindset	Information Processing	Sensory Processing	Repetitive Behaviours	Neuro-Motor Differences	Emotional Processing
Understanding and use of social communication including body language, eye contact, small talk and turn taking in conversation.	Ability to pick up on social etiquette, norms, and taboos. Ability to form and maintain relationships.	Narrow but intense ability to focus, resulting in "obsessive" interests and difficulty with task-switching.	Ability to assimilate and apply new information. May happen quickly or experience processing delays adapting to new environments or situations.	Differences interpreting sensory information, hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to stimuli.	Tendency to "stim" in response to various emotions. Can be beneficial or harmful in nature. Preference for routines.	Ability to control body movements. Ranges from clumsiness to complete loss of the ability to move with intention.	Difficulties identifying and expressing emotions. May be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to the emotions of others.

Adapted from: <https://neurodastic.com/2019/05/04/its-a-spectrum-doesnt-mean-what-you-think/>.

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Executive Functioning



<https://advantageslearningcenter.com/executive-functioning/>

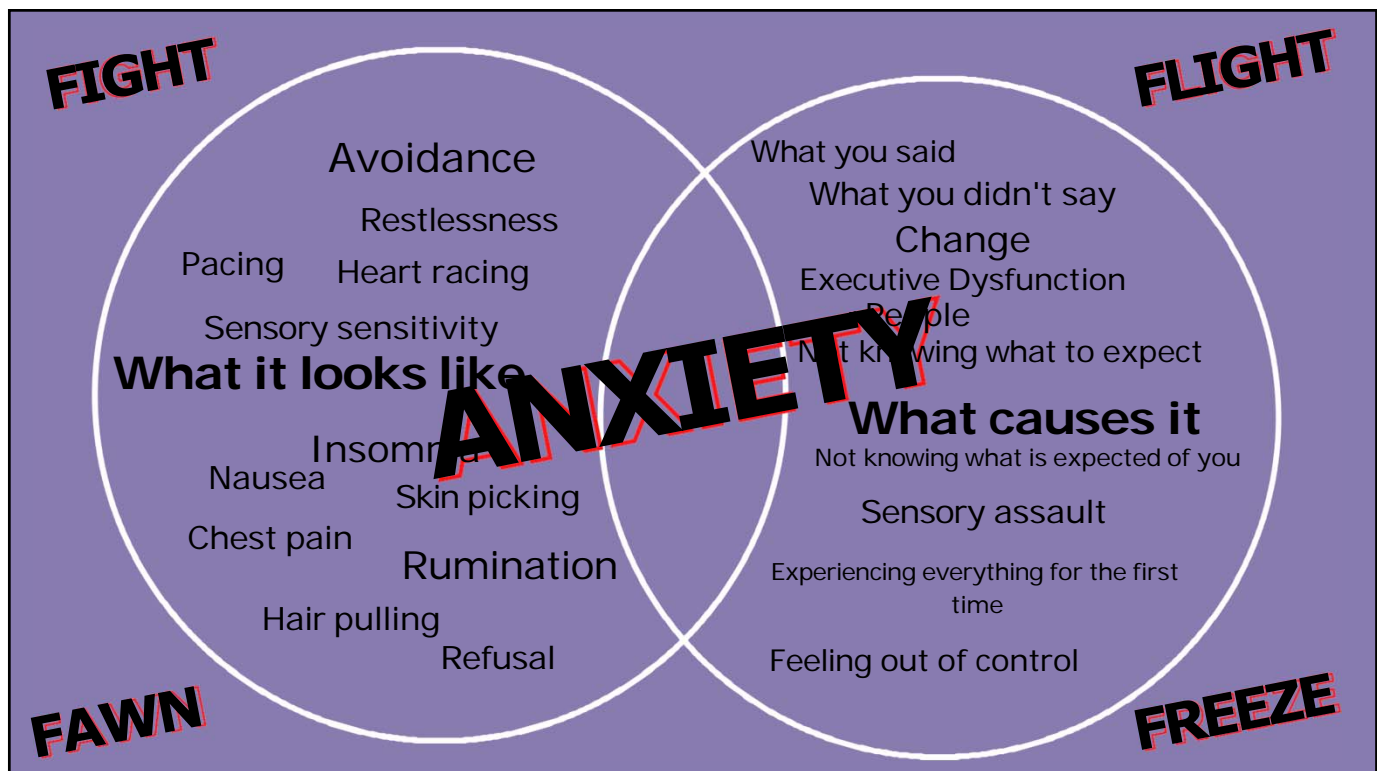
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Give Language to Experiences

- Identify Feelings
- Personality traits
- Values exercise



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- Double empathy problem
- Understand “the why” behind behaviour
- Enhance communication
- Teach validation

Family /Partner

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Community

Advocacy and accommodations:

- School
- Work
- Leisure activities
- Place of worship



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Executive Functioning

- Routines
- Alerts
- Systems



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Healthy Habits

- Sleep
- Exercise
- Healthy eating
- Downtime
- Creativity



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Self-care



- Creativity
- Passions
- Informed choices
- Supportive people
- Accept help, give help
- Self-love



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Strengthen Connections

Enhance relationships

- Common interests and values
- Scripts, texting, role play
- Being vulnerable

Support network



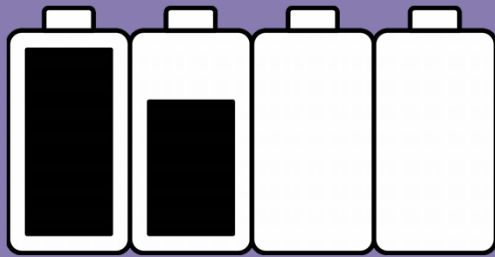
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Assert Your Needs

- Recognize what you need
- Ask for what you need



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Set Parameters

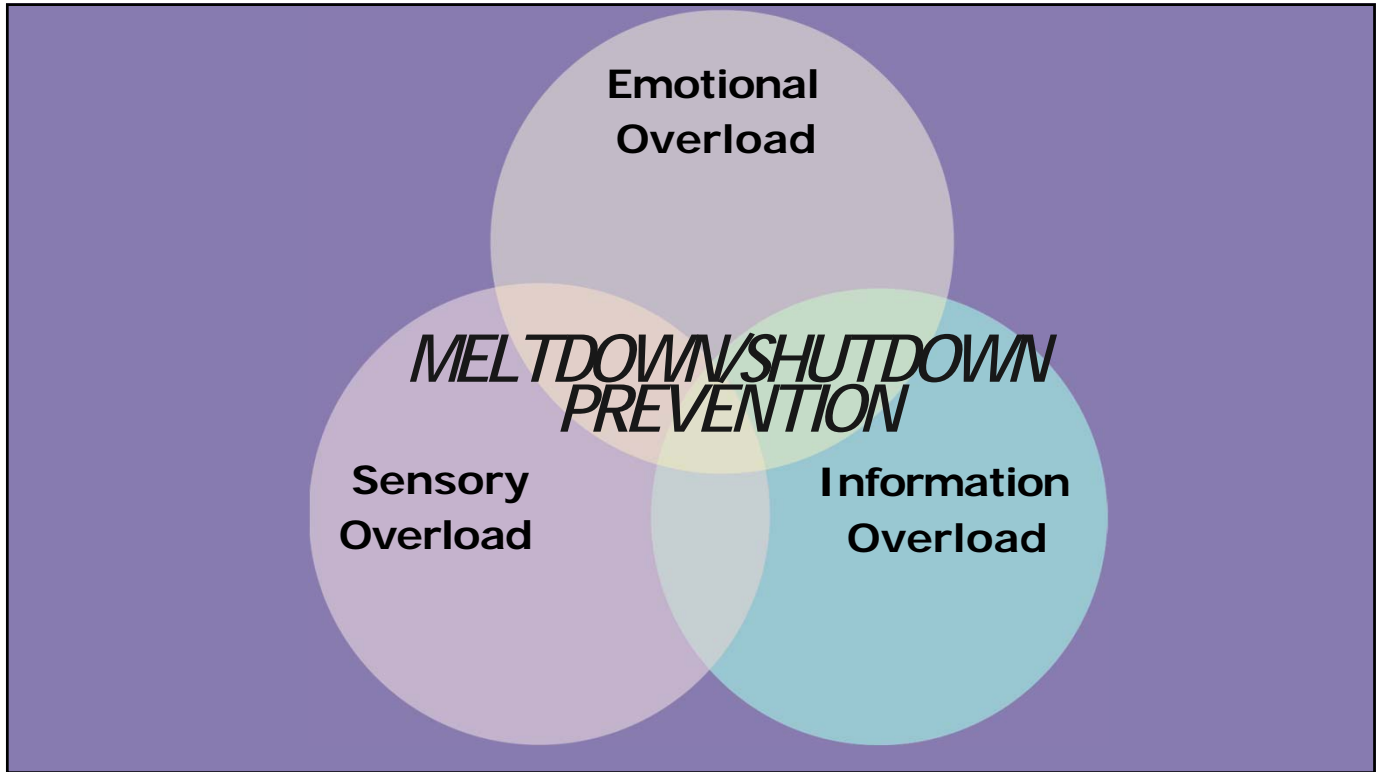
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Distress Tolerance

- Distraction: music, visual
- Intense sensations: deep pressure, ice cube
- Deep breathing/meditation
- Grounding exercises
- Animals
- Sensory deprivation
- Self-encouragement: "This will pass"



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Clarifying purpose



"What do I want and need?"

Relationships

Environment

Work/career

Leisure

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Positive coping, good choices and working towards goals

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Disclosure



- Benefits
- Risks
- How you tell others
- Finding the right time

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Healthy relationships

Empowerment through mutual support

Autistic pride

Boundaries



goodcompany
an autistic women & nonbinary support group
Let's get connected!

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Thrive

- A meaningful life on their/your terms
- Self-awareness & self-acceptance
- Authentic living - unmasking
- Connection and belonging
- Hope and possibility



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Case Studies

INVEST in action

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Case #1 Linda, age 30

- Very driven and accomplished in her career
- Work is her life
- A few close friends
- Strong family bonds
- Lives at home but travels regularly for work
- Considers herself asexual and aromantic

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Reasons for seeking service:

“Recent ASD and anxiety dx – looking to gain a better understanding of what that means to me.”

What are your desired therapy outcomes?

1. Understand my diagnosis and myself better – what are my blind spots and how do they affect how I live?
2. Improve various aspects of my life – work communication challenges, daily life skills (procrastination, difficulty managing many tasks), strengthen relationships.

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Identify Needs

- **Emotional processing:**
 - Works hard all day, cries every night. Doesn't know why. Binge eating to cope with stress.
- **Daily habits:**
 - No set daily routine, difficulties settling into sleep.
- **Executive functioning:**
 - Difficulty adjusting to changes in routines or task demands, loses things, procrastination.
- **Social Communication:**
 - Struggles to put thoughts into words, feels invisible in social situations.
- **Sensory:**
 - Sensitive to light and sound, has difficulty filtering background noise
 - Hypo-sensitivity to pain and temperature
 -

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Session 1–Establish routines



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Sleep

- # hrs sleep?
- Count backwards from wake up
- Downtime activities
- Set alerts for transition



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Exercise

- List activities
- Best times of day
- Night before:
 - Take clothes out
 - Plan route



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Work: tedious tasks

- Night before:
 - To do list
 - Hourly breakdown



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Educate - Identifying feelings

- **Tune into:** thoughts, body sensations and actions
- **Ask:** "How am I feeling?"
- **Reflect:** "Why might I be feeling this way?"
- **Be patient:** Identifying feelings and their root takes time



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IDENTIFYING FEELINGS								
INTENSITY	HAPPY	SAD	ANGRY	CONFUSED	AFRAID	WEAK	STRONG	GUILTY
High	Ecstatic Elated Excited Exuberant Fired-up Grateful Loved Overjoyed Thrilled	Alone Crushed Depressed Devastated Disappointed Heart-broken Hopeless Somowful Wounded	Betrayed Disgusted Enraged Furious Irate Outraged Seething Vengeful	Bewildered Desperate Directionless Lost Spaced-out Stagnant Trapped Troubled	Fearful Horried Intimidated Panicly Petrified Terrified	Drained Exhausted Helpless Hopeless Impotent Lifeless Overwhelmed Vulnerable	Aggressive Determined Forceful Potent Powerful Proud Super	Ashamed Disgraced Humiliated Remorseful Unworthy Worthless
Medium	Cheerful Confident Contented Delighted Good Relieved Satisfied Up	Distressed Down Hurt Left-out Regret Upset	Aggravated Agitated Controlled Frustrated Mad Upset	Disorganized Disoriented Foggy Misplaced Mixed-up	Frightened Insecure Scared Threatened Uncertain Uneasy	Beat Dependent Inadequate Incapable Insecure Lazy Rundown Tired	Capable Confident Energetic Persuasive Secure Sure	Lowdown Mischievous Sneaky Sorry
Low	Calm Fine Glad Mellow Pleasant Pleased	Bad Low Moody Sorry Unhappy	Annoyed Dismayed Irritated Perturbed Put out Touchy Uptight	Baffled Bothered Perplexed Puzzled Uncomfortable Undecided Unsure	Apprehensive Anxious Concerned Nervous Skeptical Timid Unsure Worried	Cautious Lethargic Shaky Shy Soft Unsatisfied Unsure Weary	Able Adequate Capable Durable	Embarrassed

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Building self-awareness

Crying = overwhelm

Constantly pushing
so not "found out"

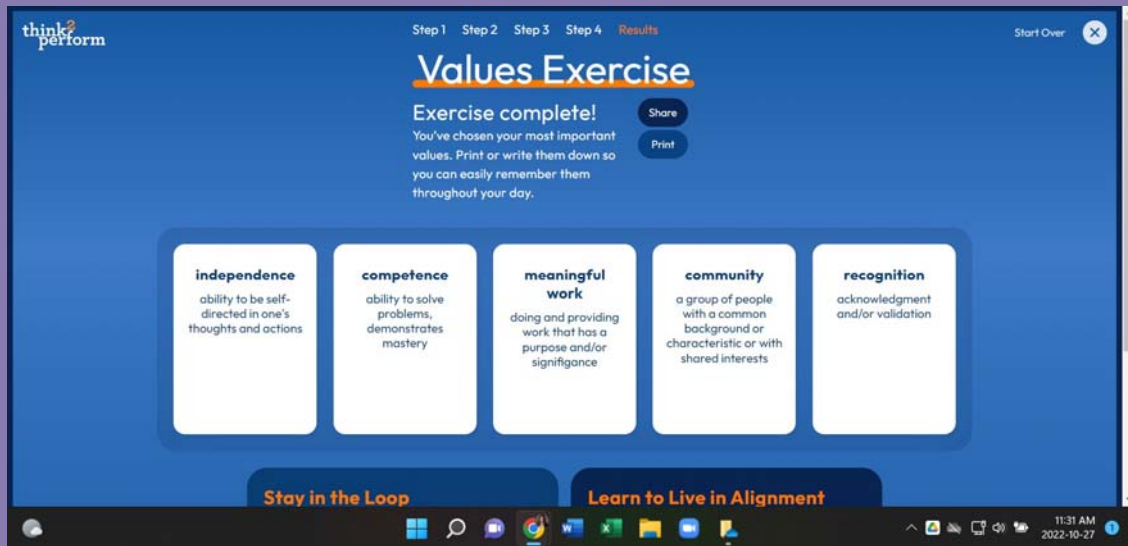
Manager threatens
sense of
competence

Eating - self soothing



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Identify core values



think2perform.com

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Strengthen

Identifying Emotions

Coping thoughts

Meltdowns - was one foot out, noticing what was happening

Awareness of avoidance behaviours and how to move towards values



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Stress management techniques



Meditation



Running



Lift weights



Protect alone time



Small quantities of
treat food



Keepsakes with
positive messages



Adult colouring
books



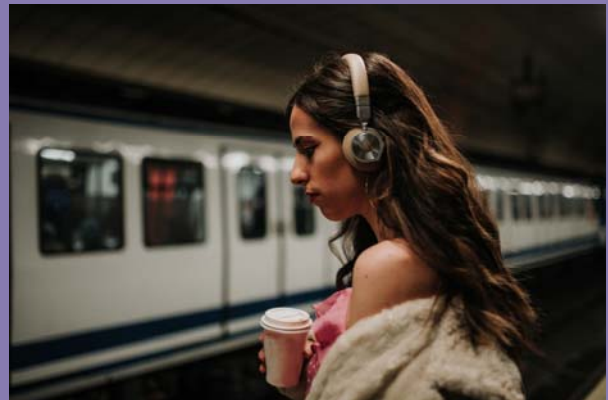
Visuals in the
shower

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Social & Sensory

Friendships:

- What arrangement best for socializing?
- How to strengthen bonds
- Strengthening connection - skills practice
- Autism women and nonbinary group



Sensory Processing

- Leave loud and overwhelming environments instead of suffering and paying for it later
- Headphones where applicable

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Work

Understand boss' leadership style

Identified Values: independence, meaningful work

Strengthen communication:

- Proactive
- Previously didn't know what she wanted so froze and did nothing.

Tedious tasks:

Created templates/short cuts for work



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Thrive



- Good sleep
- Scheduled eating
- Energy metre
- Downtime– intense exercise or quiet/alone
- Scheduled time for transitions, downtime, processing feelings
- Meltdown reduction
- Asking self –Am I doing what I want to be doing or what others want me to do?

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Thrive

- Living in line with her values
- Left her job
- Accepting help – Lean on family & friends
- Found partner she could be herself with
- Intentional and reflective



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Case 2 – Stacey, age 13

Recent dx of autism, child rejected the dx

Reason for referral:

- Parents – behaviour in the home
- Teen – wants closer friendships

Parents' Goal:

Get on same page for household expectations

Issues with siblings – constant negativity

Issues at dinner table eats “like an animal”



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Parenting strategies

- Find common ground
- Clear rules for dinner
 - “Ask to pass the food”
- Feedback by text (private, personal)
 - “I really like how you were polite to your brothers at dinner. It made the whole meal enjoyable for everyone”.
- Prompts of positive statements she could say to brothers
- Respect need for downtime



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Stacey - Parenting Outcomes

- Immediate improvement in dinner table etiquette
- Conversation increased with turn taking
- Parents: feel effective and hopeful
- Bonding with parents: baking with mom, basketball with Dad
- Promote similar interests between sibs



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Stacey - Friendship

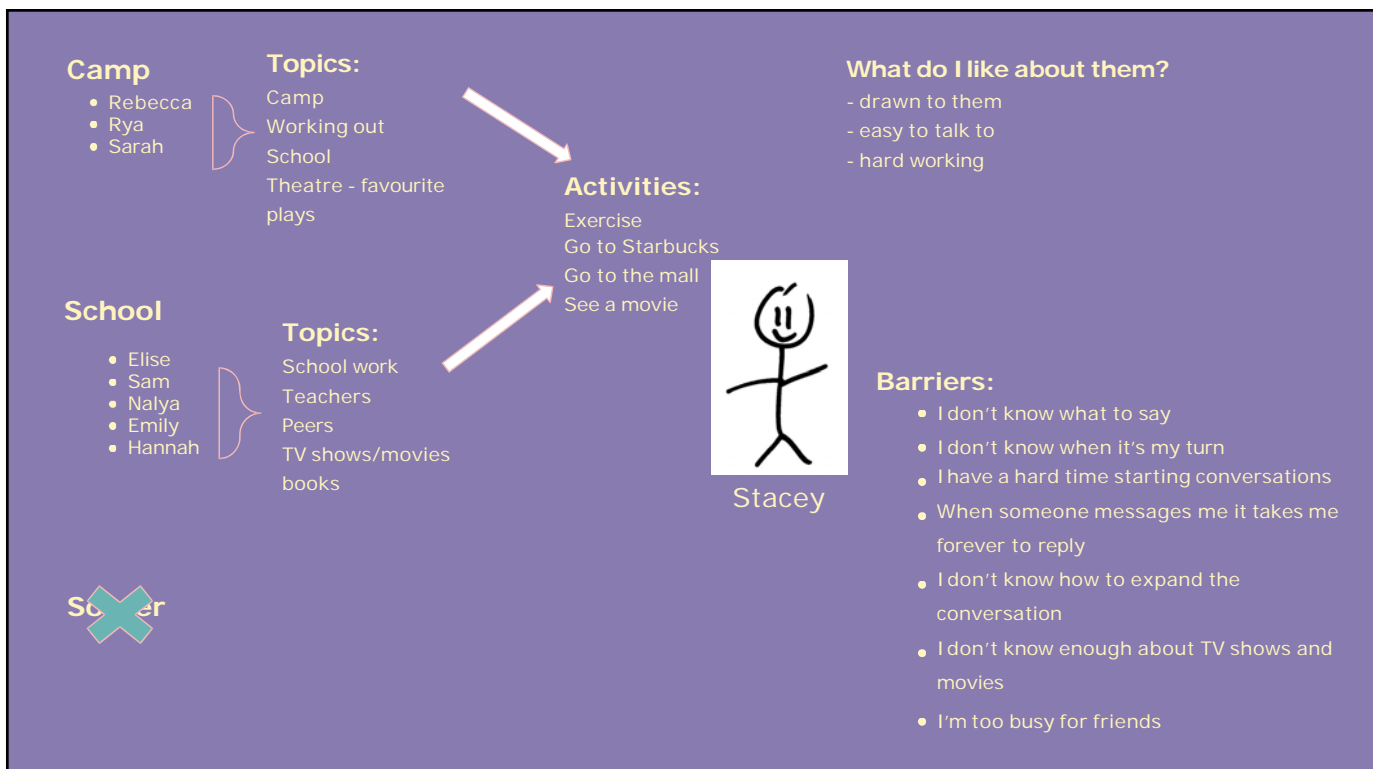
Goal: Become closer with 1-2 friends

History:

- Stacey wanted to be with the “popular” kids
- Excluded, bullied
- Didn't pick up on signals



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Strengthen social skills

- How to get someone's attention
- Built confidence what to say - scripts and practice
- Shared Friendship Pyramid
- Be in the moment - mind wonders "what school work do I need to do?"



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Thriving Socially

- Better at judging character:
 - mean girls vs. nice people
- Built close friendships
- Sleepovers
- First boyfriend



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Laura, age 19

Dx: ASD, MDD, OCD, GAD, Panic disorder

1st year University
Cycle of procrastination and panic

Recently came out
Part-time job

"Therapy has hurt me not helped me"



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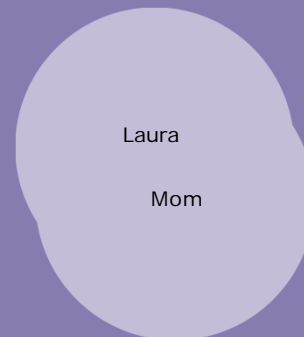
Safety

- Self-harm: hits and bits self during panic attacks
- Suicidal
- Safety plan
- Put school on hold



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Family dynamics



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Home Life

- Chaos
- Invalidation - autistic identity, sexuality

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Emotion: Anxiety	Triggers	What I am thinking	What I feel in my body	What I look like/sound like	Strategies
5. Meltdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anything unexpected Not being able to focus Sensory overload (wind, rain, touch, sound) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I can't live like this anymore" Suicidal thoughts Unsafe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressure head & back of neck Itchy everywhere Chest tight Shake hands tremor Muscles tense Feel out of control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Face red Crying Rocking Hitting forehead with heel of hand Repeated statements of distress "Do something/Make it stop" Stutter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Xanax Weighted blanket on head Distractions (listen to a song, plastic cup)
4. Overwhelmed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wake up anxious Standing up for your rights Waking up early 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "This needs to stop very soon" Unsure of my safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chest tight Itchy No Shaking Muscles start tensing Fingers Losing control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Talk to me" Need for distraction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pet dog Distraction (Stranger Things, Dr. Who) Talk to Mom Music?
3. Tipping point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Daily stressors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I can live like this for now but it needs to stop soon" Unsure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chest tightness Bouncing leg Clench teeth In control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On edge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take a bath Walk, play with dog Phone Music Hot chocolate
2. Stressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Something unexpected happens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "This is going well now, but something is going to mess it up" Anticipation bad More variety in thoughts, positive Thinking many topics "I hope I keep living like this" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little nausea Slight chest tightness Fidgeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk a little faster Fidget Can't find a word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk or play dog Text bestie
1. Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When things are going well 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No tightness in chest Relaxed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not fidgeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic self care (bathing, wash face) Get out to walk dog Go to classes regularly Plan +stick to schedule

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Indicators of Positive Well-Being



Wash my face



My room is tidy



I am eating mostly healthy



I want to speak to others

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Stanford Comparative Pain Scale		
NONE	0	No Pain. Feeling perfectly normal
MINOR Does not interfere with most activities. Able to adapt to pain psychologically and with medication or devices such as cushions.	1 Very Mild	Very light barely noticeable pain, like a mosquito bite or a poison ivy itch. Most of the time you never think about the pain.
	2 Discomforting	Minor pain, like lightly pinching the fold of skin between the thumb and first finger with the other hand, using the fingernails. Note that people react differently to this self-test.
	3 Tolerable	Very noticeable pain, like an accidental cut, a blow to the nose causing a bloody nose, or a doctor giving you an injection. The pain is not so strong that you cannot get used to it. Eventually, most of the time you don't notice the pain. You have adapted to it.
MODERATE Interferes with many activities. Requires lifestyle changes but patient remains independent. Unable to adapt to pain.	4 Distressing	Strong, deep pain, like an average toothache, the initial pain from a bee sting, or minor trauma to part of the body, such as stubbing your toe real hard. So strong you notice the pain all the time and cannot completely adapt. This pain level can be simulated by pinching the fold of skin between the thumb and first finger with the other hand, using the fingernails, and squeezing real hard. Note how the simulated pain is initially piercing but becomes dull after that.
	5 Very Distressing	Strong, deep, piercing pain, such as a sprained ankle when you stand on it wrong or mild back pain. Not only do you notice the pain all the time, you are now so preoccupied with managing it that your normal lifestyle is curtailed. Temporary personality disorders are frequent.
	6 Intense	Strong, deep, piercing pain so strong it seems to partially dominate your senses, causing you to think somewhat unclearly. At this point you begin to have trouble holding a job or maintaining normal social relationships. Comparable to a bad non-migraine headache combined with several bee stings, or bad back pain.
SEVERE Unable to engage in normal activities. Patient is disabled and unable to function properly.	7 Very Intense	Same as 6 except the pain completely dominates your senses, causing you to think unclearly about half the time. At this point, you are effectively disabled and frequently cannot live alone. Comparable to an average migraine headache.
	8 Utterly Horrible	Pain so intense you can no longer think clearly at all, and have often undergone severe personality change if the pain has been present for a long time. Suicide is frequently contemplated and sometimes tried. Comparable to childbirth or a real bad migraine headache.
	9 Excruciating Unbearable	Pain so intense you cannot tolerate it and demand pain killers or surgery, no matter what the side effects or risk. If this doesn't work, suicide is frequent since there is no joy in life whatsoever. Comparable to throat cancer.
	10 Unimaginable Unspeakeable	Pain so intense you will go unconscious shortly. Most people have never experienced this level of pain. Those who have suffered a severe accident, such as a crushed hand, and lost consciousness as a result of the pain and not blood loss, have experienced a level 10.

Pain

- Endometriosis
- Joints
- Fibromyalgia
- Lack of faith in the medical system

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- Back to school - reduced course load
- High, medium, low pain activities
- Got a therapy dog
- Set boundaries with family
- Advocate for medical needs
- Life skills - bathing, cooking, budgeting, laundry
- House - Space for Laura
- Partner