



NEUROAFFIRMING CARE FOR AUTISTIC GIRLS AND ASSIGNED FEMALE AT BIRTH (AFAB) YOUTH

By Dani Busayong,
RSLP

AGENDA

01

Introduction

Neurodiversity 101

02

Gender & Mental Health

How Autism presents in girls

03

The ND Experience

Masking
Burnout
Pathological Demand Avoidance

04

Practical Strategies

Environmental considerations
Culture shift
Supporting regulation
Strengths-based lens

05

Reflection

How will you bring this into your everyday role?

INTRODUCTION



Dani Busayong, RSLP (She/Her)

- Autistic and ADHDer (AuDHD)
- Working with Autistic children and families for 10 years as an SLPA and SLP



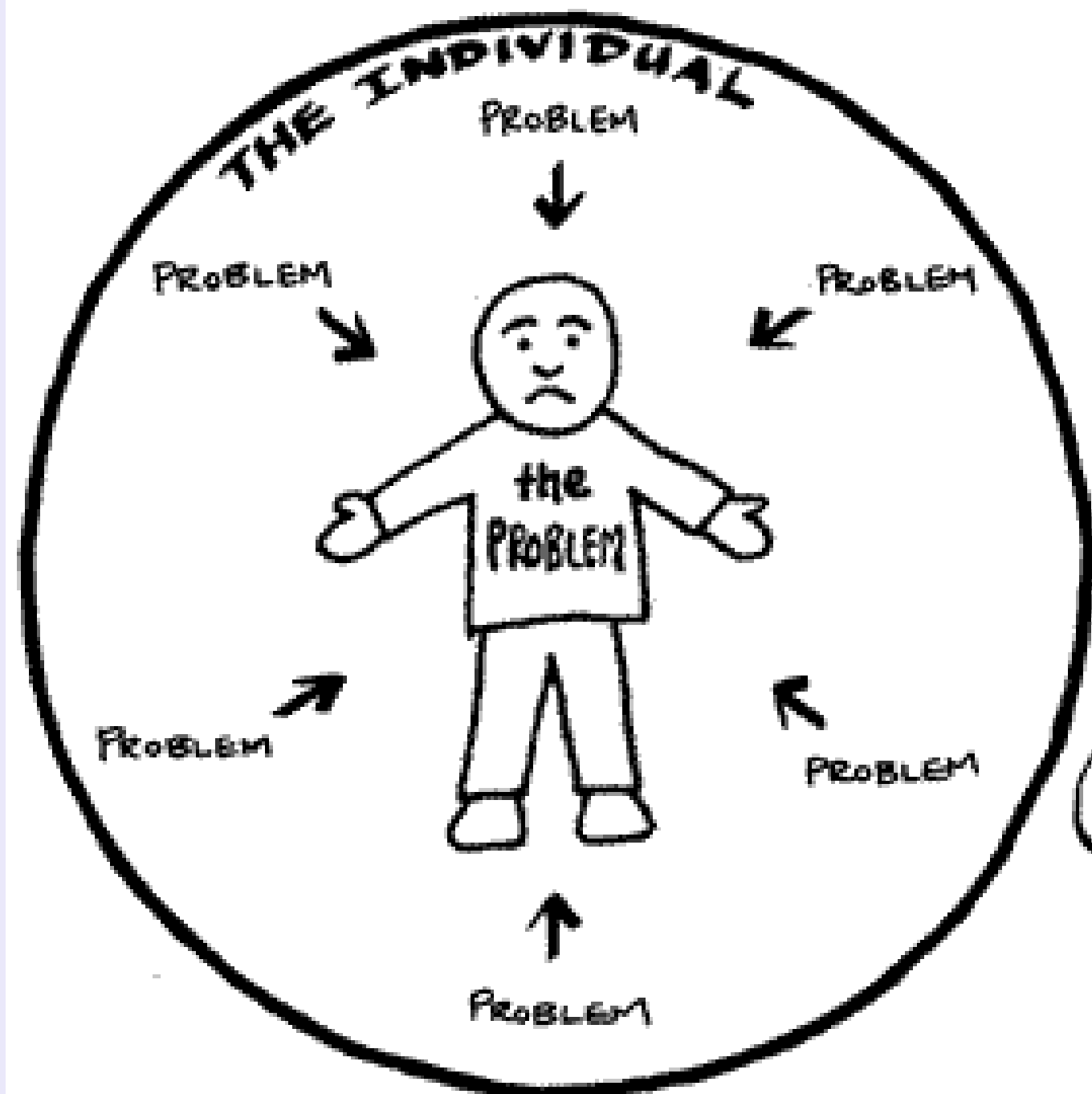
WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU HEAR “AUTISM”?



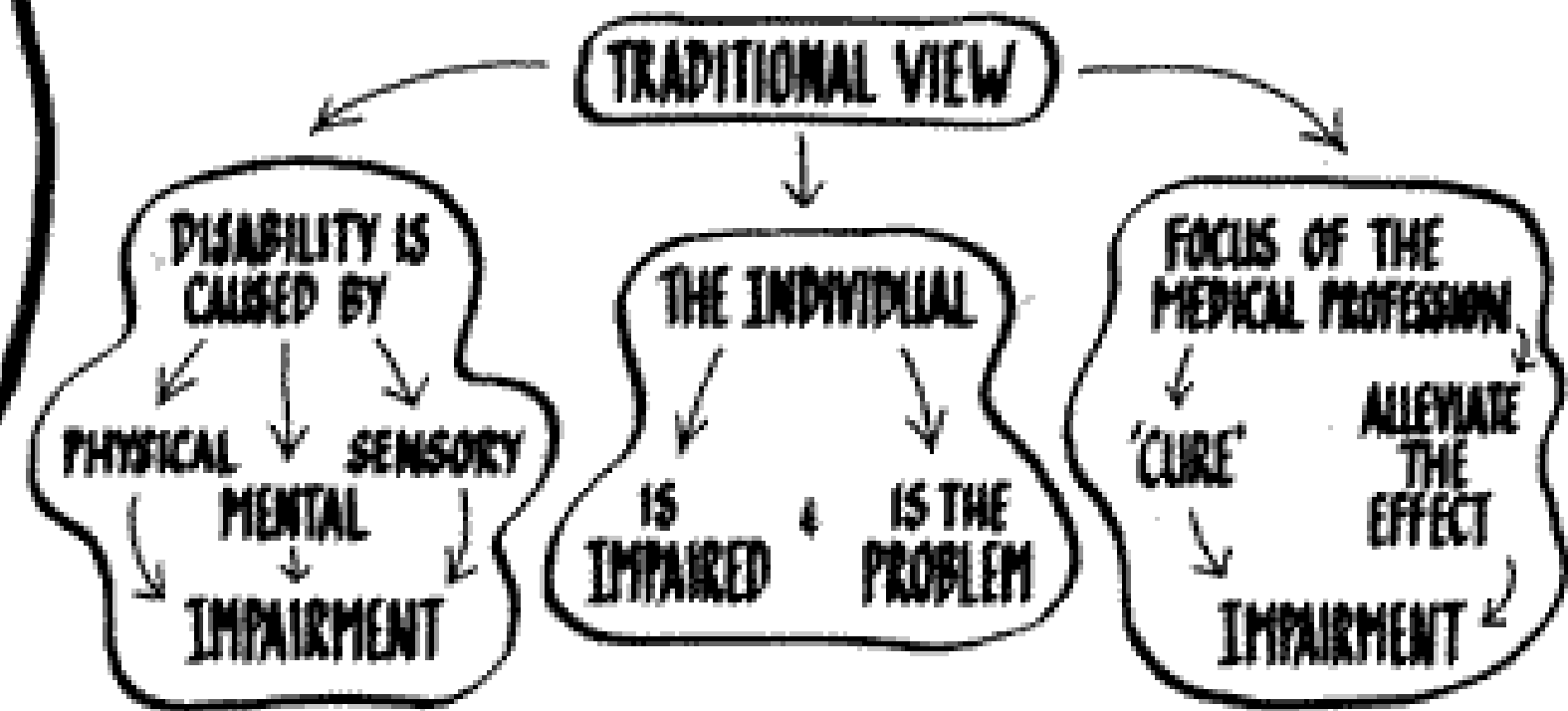
DSM-5 DEFINITION OF AUTISM

1. Persistent Deficits in Social Communication and Social Interaction
2. Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behavior, Interests, or Activities

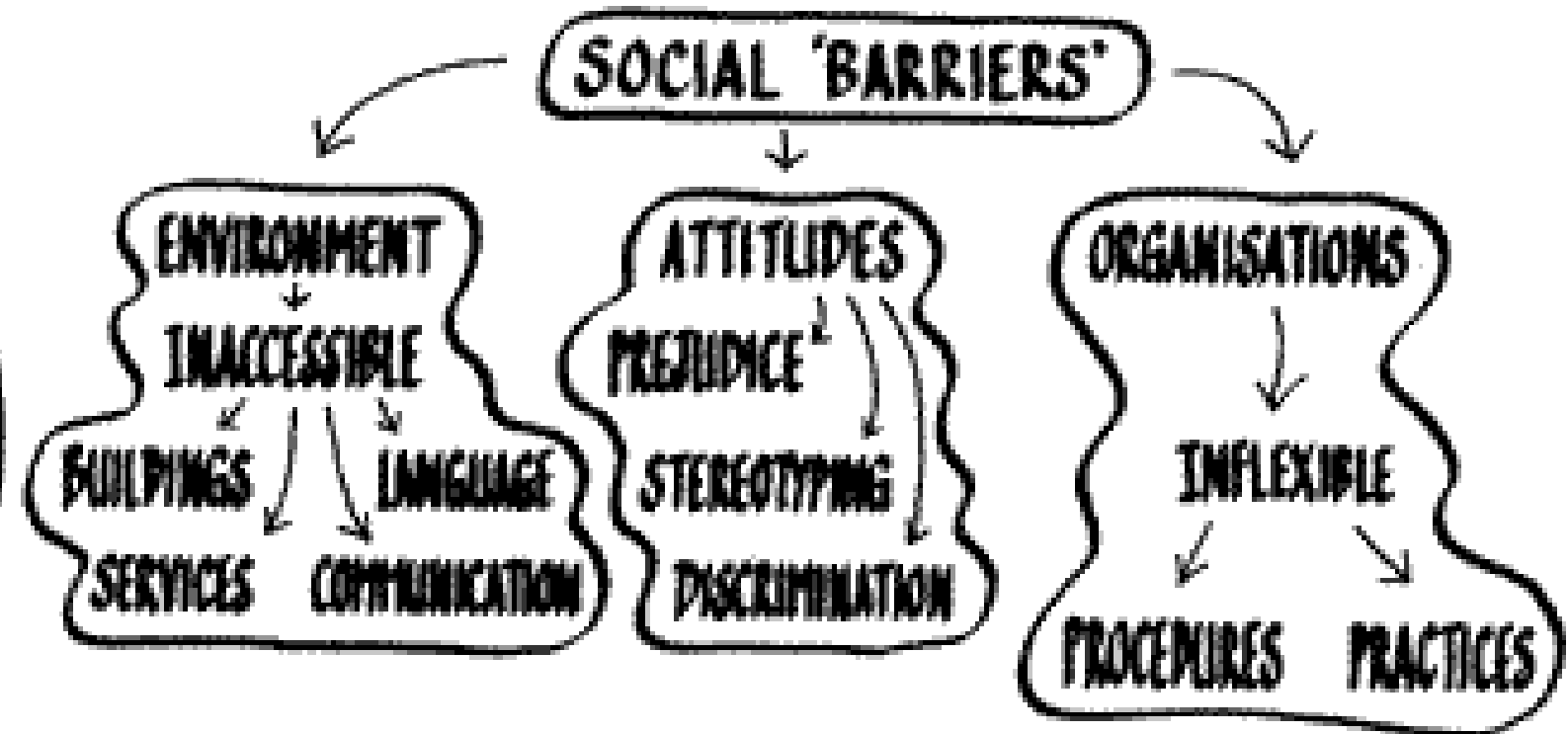
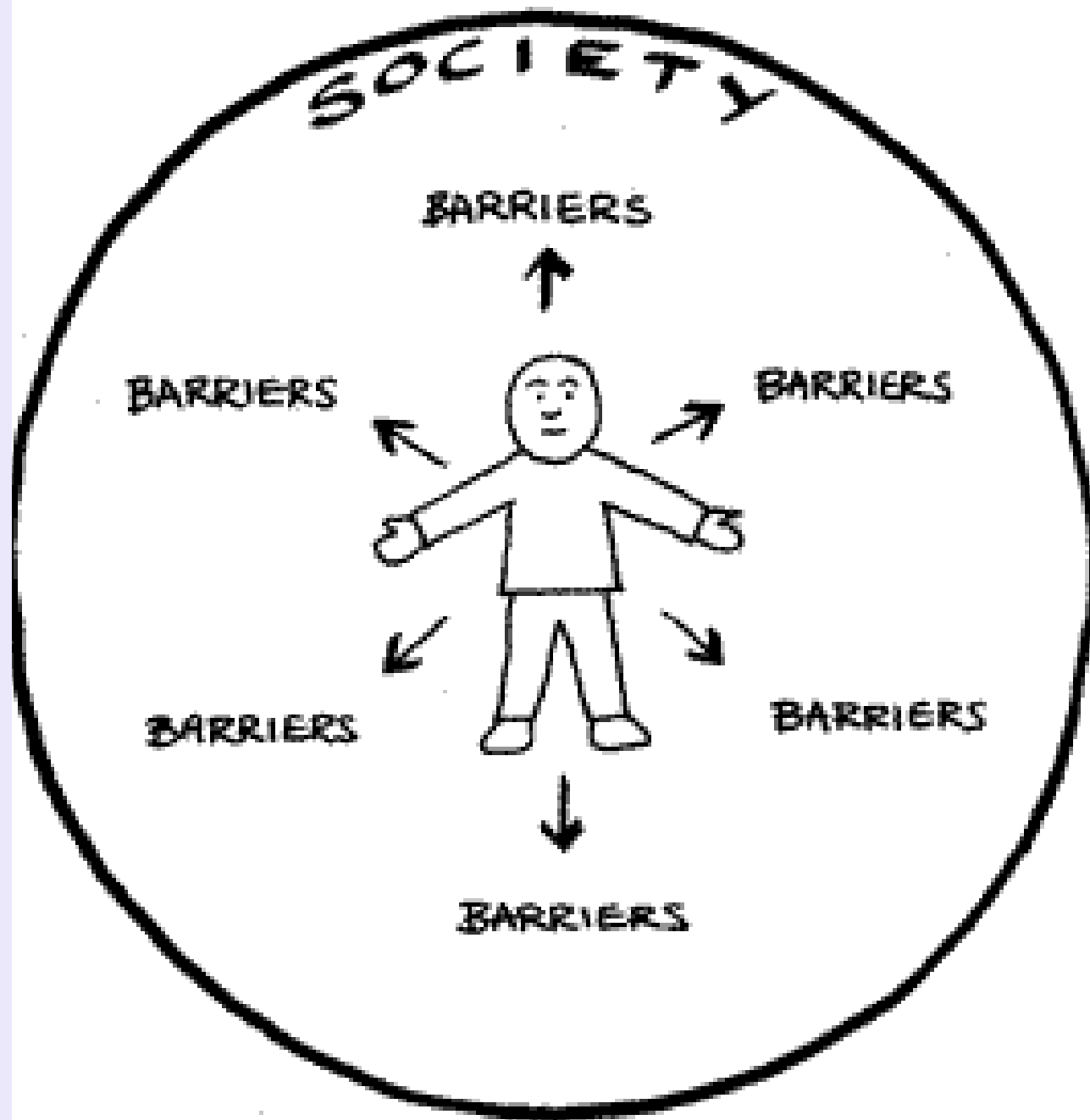
THE MEDICAL MODEL OF DISABILITY



IMPAIRMENTS AND CHRONIC ILLNESS OFTEN POSE REAL DIFFICULTIES BUT - THEY ARE NOT THE MAIN PROBLEMS



THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY



NEURODIVERSITY



Diversity in human minds



Variation in neurocognitive functioning

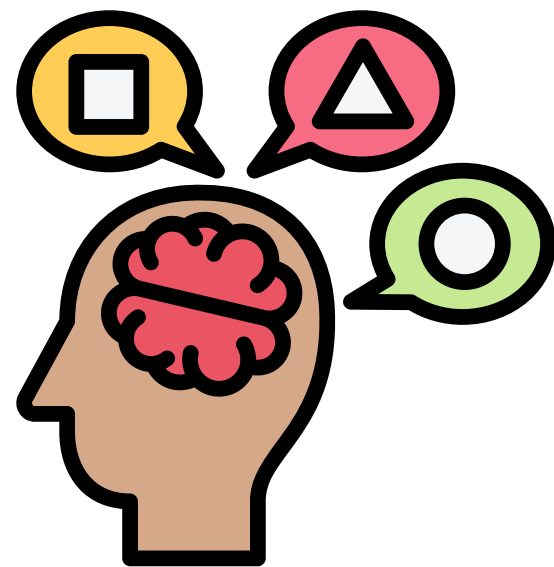


The idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of brain or mind, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture.



NEURODIVERSITY

A state of nature



NEURODIVERSITY MOVEMENT

a social justive movement



NEURODIVERGENT

describes a person

Note:
neurodiverse
describes a group,
not a person.





Dyslexia

Autism

Attention Deficit
Hyperactivity
Disorder (ADHD)

Developmental
Language
Disorder (DLD)

Developmental
Coordination
Disorder

Tic
Disorders

Intellectual
Disability

Dyscalculia

Autism Spectrum

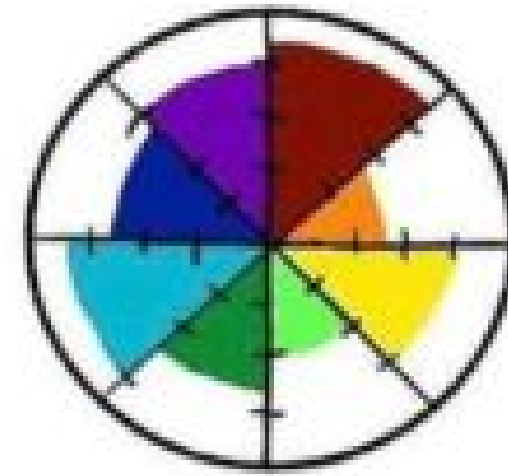
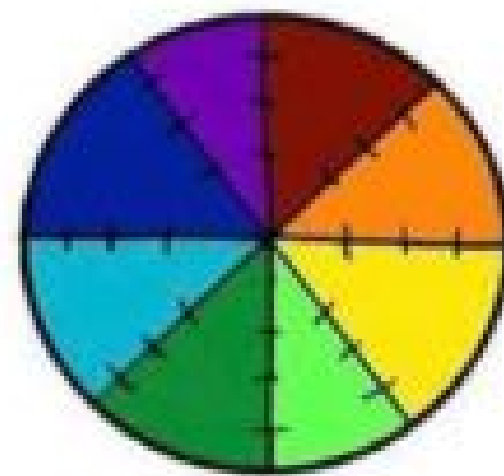
The Autism spectrum is not linear



less autistic

very autistic

The Autism Spectrum looks more like:



- Social skills
- fixations
- routines
- Sensory issues
- stimming
- perception
- executive func.
- other

→ Terms like "high functioning" and "low functioning" are harmful and are not used anymore

Autism - sketches

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

- BUILDS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH AUTISTIC IDENTITY
- ADDRESSES OUR OWN INTERNAL BIASES WITH DISABILITY
- PRESENTS AN ACCURATE PROFILE OR PICTURE (RATHER THAN LETTING A LABEL LEAD TO PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS)

**GENDER & AUTISM:
UNIQUE
CHALLENGES FOR
AUTISTIC GIRLS AND
AFAB YOUTH**

SOPHIA: THE PERFECTIONIST PEOPLE- PLEASER

Grade: 5

Strengths: Academically high-achieving, rule follower, kind and helpful
Challenges: High anxiety, burnout from masking, difficulty expressing needs

Profile:

Sofia is the teacher's dream: she always finishes her work, keeps her desk tidy, and is the first to volunteer to help. She gets top grades and follows instructions to the letter. But underneath, she's constantly anxious—she rehearses what to say before raising her hand and stays up late redoing assignments that were already “good enough.” Sofia rarely asks for help, fearing she'll be seen as a burden. At home, she melts down over small things and needs hours to decompress after school.

What's Missed: Because she appears so competent and polite, her anxiety and autistic traits (like sensory sensitivities and rigid thinking) are overlooked. She's often diagnosed late—sometimes during a mental health crisis.

MAYA – THE SOCIAL CHAMELEON

Grade: 6

Strengths: Observant, adaptable in short bursts, mimics peer behavior well

Challenges: Doesn't form true friendships, masks differences, emotional exhaustion

Profile:

Maya seems social—she laughs at the right times, follows trends, and floats between friend groups. Adults say she's "well-adjusted." But Maya doesn't feel like she fits anywhere. She scripts interactions, mimics her peers' slang or interests (even if she doesn't like them), and doesn't understand why she still feels left out. She holds it together at school but is exhausted and irritable at home. When conflict happens, she shuts down or gets tearful, unsure how to advocate for herself.

What's Missed: Her social mimicry hides significant challenges with understanding social nuance, reciprocity, and identity. Teachers might not realize her interactions are rehearsed.

AMINA – THE ANXIOUS ACHIEVER

Grade: 7

Strengths: Passionate about niche topics, expressive writer, deep thinker

Challenges: Internalized ableism, fears of being “too much,” selective mutism or shutdowns under pressure

Profile:

Amina is bright and deeply interested in mythology and marine biology. She can talk for hours about these topics—if she feels safe. In class, she’s quiet and reserved, often giving one-word answers or saying nothing. She panics if she has to present or if called on unexpectedly. She has a few intense friendships but worries constantly about saying the wrong thing.

She’s extremely self-critical and masks by downplaying her needs.

What’s Missed: Because Amina doesn’t act out or demand attention, she’s seen as shy or introverted, not struggling. Her selective engagement is mistaken for disinterest rather than overload.

WHAT ARE COMMON THEMES IN THESE PROFILES?

- Internalizer and anxious
- Social chameleons but also socially confused
- Feeling perceived

Under the radar = underdiagnosed

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What's Missed: Because she appears so competent and polite, her anxiety and autistic traits (like sensory sensitivities and rigid thinking) are overlooked. She's often diagnosed late—sometimes during a mental health crisis.

ND-Affirming Support Ideas:

- Reframe “perfectionism” as anxiety and offer safe ways to make mistakes.
- Proactively check in (not just when she asks).
- Allow unstructured downtime and reduce performance-based praise.

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What's Missed: Her social mimicry hides significant challenges with understanding social nuance, reciprocity, and identity. Teachers might not realize her interactions are rehearsed.

ND-Affirming Support Ideas:

- Teach self-advocacy and emotional literacy explicitly.
- Offer identity-affirming activities where she can explore her own interests.
- Normalize neurodiverse social styles within the classroom.

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What’s Missed: Because Amina doesn’t act out or demand attention, she’s seen as shy or introverted, not struggling. Her selective engagement is mistaken for disinterest rather than overload.

ND-Affirming Support Ideas:

- Allow written responses or presentations recorded privately.
- Help her name and normalize her sensory and emotional needs.
- Provide models of autistic pride and support unmasking gently.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

01

Girls (and all children) are not protected from harm just because they appear “fine”, or “quiet”

02

Gendered masking can delay support—and deepen shame.

03

Cultural expectations placed on girls creates pressure to conform

THE ND EXPERIENCE

Shifting your mindset

AUTISTIC MASKING

WHAT IS MASKING?



a strategy used to hide or suppress autistic traits in order to fit in, avoid negative reactions, navigate social situations, or even for survival.



It involves conscious or unconscious efforts to alter behaviors, expressions, and even sensory responses to appear neurotypical. Can be learned



Masking can be a way to cope with social pressures, obtain jobs, or improve overall well-being.

Masking isn't only an autistic behavior - it's neither exclusive to autism nor is it something all autistic people can do.

Customer service people often learn to mask to make an interaction more in line with social or expected norms.

But, autistic masking *is* different than the way neurotypical people mask.

Masking is common in autistic people because many of our behaviors are considered socially unacceptable. It threatens selfhood, nervous system regulation, and safety.

PROFESSIONAL MASKING

Share one thing in the chat that you often mask in your professional life

SUBTLE SIGNS OF AUTISTIC MASKING

- Appears quiet and “compliant” but struggles with fatigue and/or physical symptoms (e.g., headaches)
- sudden withdrawal from peers or social activities
- Relies on scripted responses in conversation - others going off-script = brain overwhelm
- Hides special interests that are not socially accepted

OUTCOMES OF MASKING

Chronic masking has mental health consequences

- Leads to emotional exhaustion and Autistic Burnout
- Feeling lost with your sense of self
- Secondary mental health difficulties - anxiety, depression,

“Unmasking means we stop trying to be an appealing brand.”

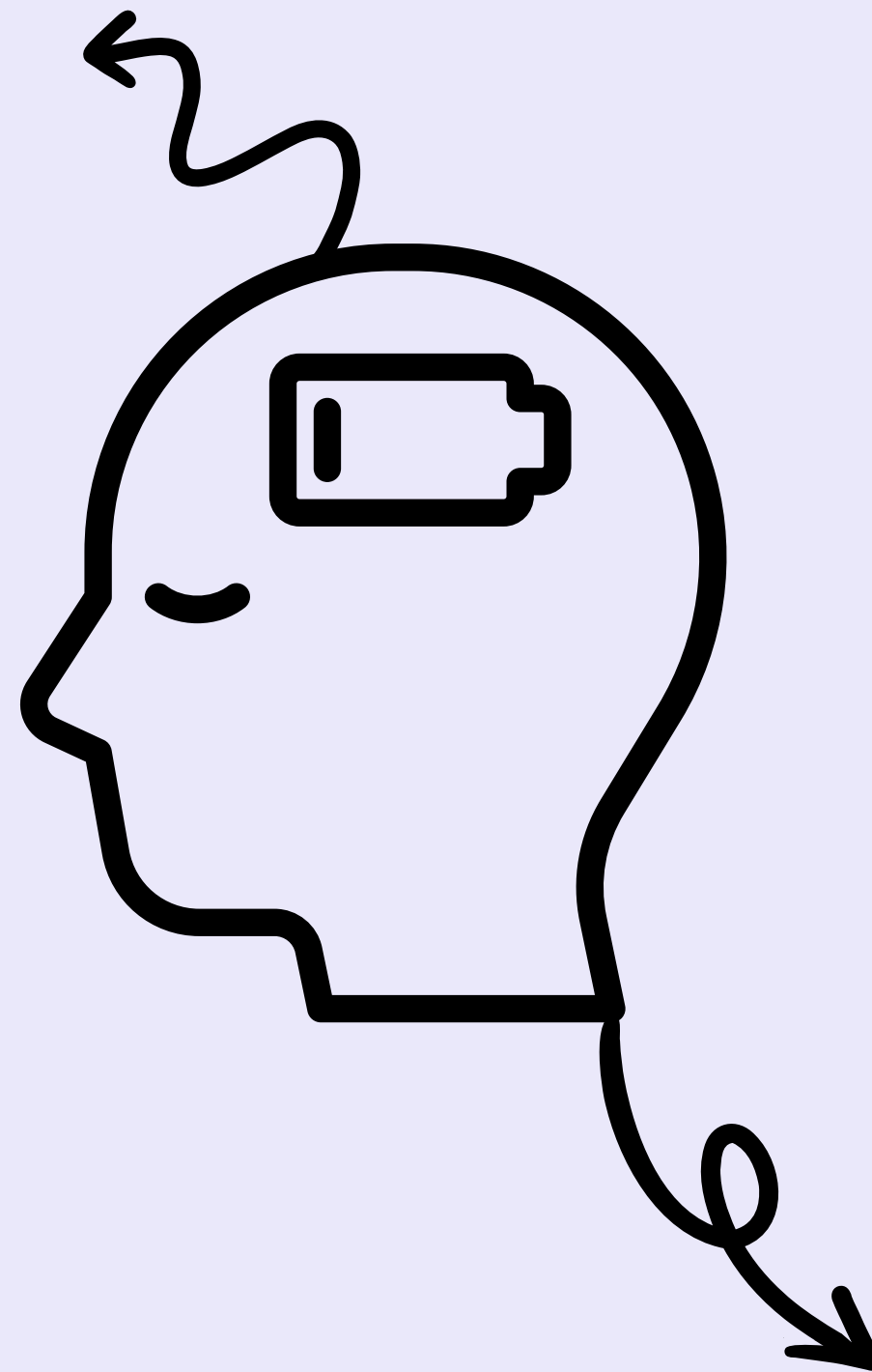
Dr. Devon Price

AUTISTIC BURNOUT

Shifting your mindset

WHAT IS AUTISTIC BURNOUT

a state of profound mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion experienced by autistic people due to long-term stress and overextension



decline in various aspects of functioning, including decreased executive skills, heightened sensory sensitivity, and increased meltdowns



[Watch video on YouTube](#)

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RECONIGIZING SIGNS OF BURNOUT: CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR



Avoidance of previously enjoyed activities



increase in need for alone time



Regression in skills

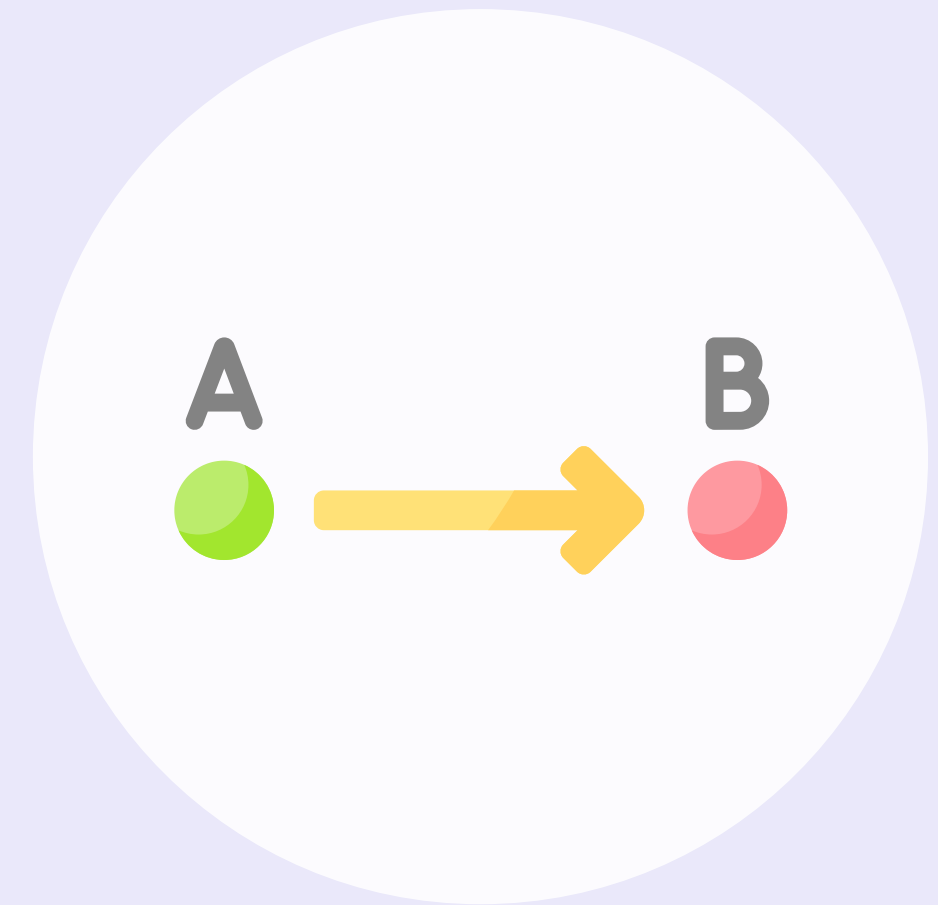
RECONIGIZING SIGNS OF BURNOUT: MENTAL HEALTH



Constant fatigue, even after sleep



Seeming “tired of everything” or flat emotionally



Increased anxiety, especially around school or transitions

RECONIGIZING SIGNS OF BURNOUT: COMMUNICATION



Less verbal interaction, even if they're typically talkative

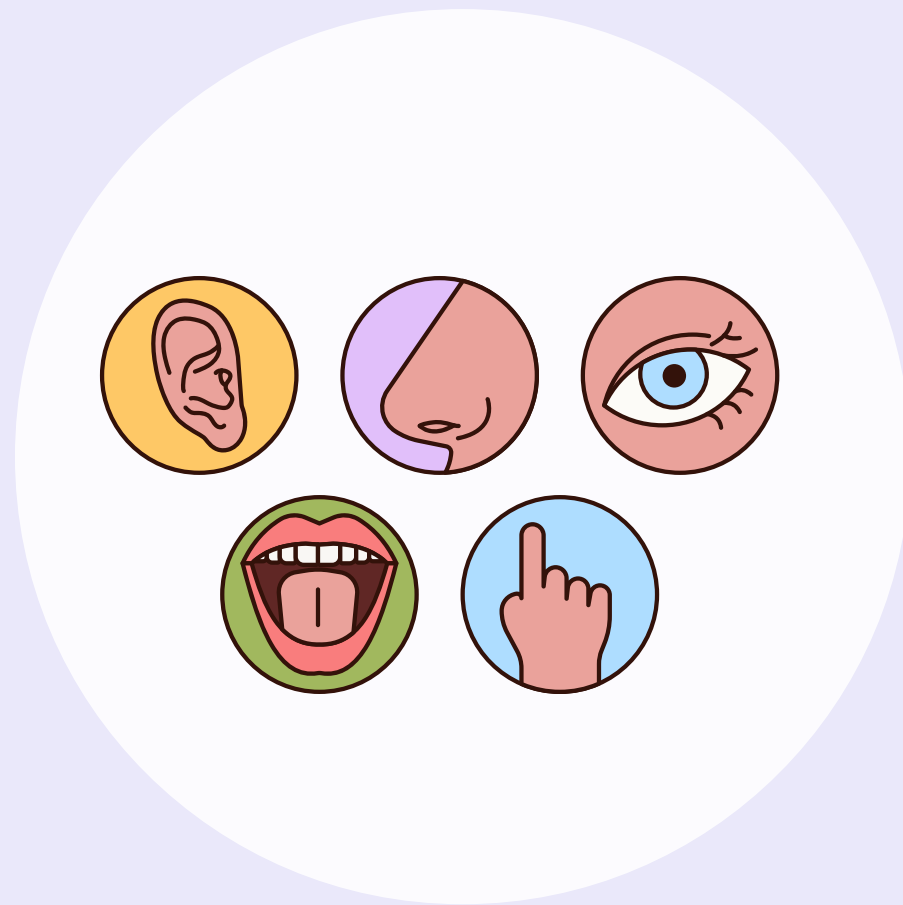


More echolalia, scripting, or nonverbal communication



Refusal or inability to engage in conversations

RECONIGIZING SIGNS OF BURNOUT: SENSORY/PHYSICAL



Heightened sensory sensitivities
(e.g., lights, sounds, clothing
textures)



More frequent sensory-seeking
or avoiding behaviors



Headaches, stomachaches, or
other vague complaints without
medical cause

RECONIGIZING SIGNS OF BURNOUT: SHUTDOWN



Hiding, refusal to go to school,
or “freezing” when overwhelmed



Not responding when spoken to



Zoning out or appearing to
daydream for long periods

~~PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND
AVOIDANCE (PDA)~~

PERVASIVE DRIVE FOR
AUTONOMY

PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE (PDA)

Demands & Pressure

The most common understanding of demands is that they're direct instructions or requests and that the demand avoidant person just doesn't like to be told what to do.

What is a Demand?

COMPROMISE TO MY AUTONOMY & FREEDOM

- Instruction or request
- Restrictions - time, food, activities
- Plans, routines, schedules
- Sameness - what everyone else is doing

PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE (PDA)

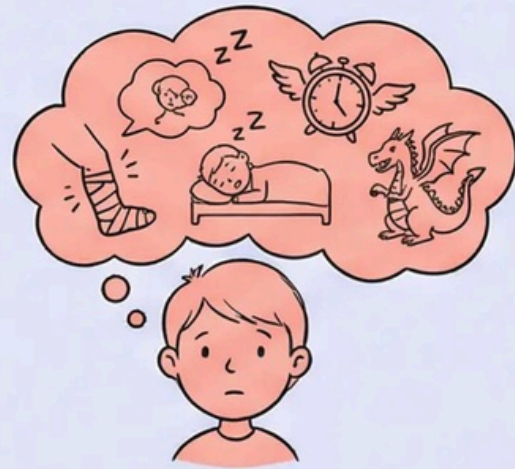
Children with PDA are not being oppositional or defiant on purpose. Their nervous system perceives certain demands as threats, even everyday ones. Their avoidance is a fight/flight/freeze response to protect autonomy and reduce anxiety.

Demands are perceived as threats to loss of autonomy.

When triggered, a person may find it hard to manage everyday tasks or demands, even those they want or need to do.

PDA characteristics in girls/AFAB youth can look more subtle, but because it is often conflated with girls coming off as more socially charming.

Common PDA Characteristics in the Classroom



Avoidance Strategies

- Elaborate excuses ('My legs don't work today')
- Diversion and distraction techniques
- Using fantasy or role-play to avoid tasks
- Procrastination and delay tactics



Control-Seeking Behaviors

- Negotiating conditions for compliance
- Changing rules or expectations
- Need to dictate how activities unfold
- Strong resistance to others' agendas



Social Strategies

- Using charm or humor as deflection
- Appearing sociable while avoiding demands
- Manipulating social situations for control
- Seeking to direct play or group activities

Note: These behaviors stem from anxiety, not defiance or manipulation.

Source: IEP Individualized Education Program on Facebook

PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE (PDA)

**The PDA brain is centred around fairness.
What is right & what is just and 'Balance'.**

LEVELLING AND COMPENSATING

“I need you to do it for me”

=

"I want to do this for you,
and for me, but I need
you to do this part so that
my brain understands we
are levelled and this is fair’

Exercising more control

=

My brain is exercising a
neurobiological reflex
and finding ways to
manage discomfort, an
action or thought not
favoured by my neurotype.

Unexpected behaviour

=

My brain is exercising a
neurobiological reflex
and signalling to my body
to engage in
compensatory behaviour.
Getting a reaction from
others negatively gives my
brain back the power
it seeks to take back it's
control. This is how my
brain perceives safety.

Triggers That Increase Demand Avoidance

Direct Instructions



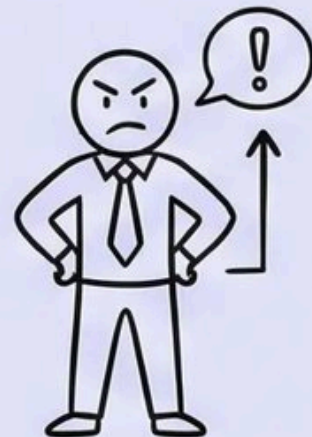
- Commands that remove choice or autonomy
- Examples: 'Go sit at your desk and begin reading.'
- 'You need to put your coat on before we go outside.'
- Immediately activates anxiety and resistance

Time Pressure



- Countdown situations create overwhelming anxiety
- Examples: Timed tests, activities with deadlines
- Phrases like 'You have five minutes left'
- Creates feeling of loss of control over pace

Authority-Based Language



- Hierarchical language triggers autonomy anxiety
- Examples: 'You must do this'
- 'Because I said so'
- Phrases that assert power over the student

WHAT CAN WE DO?



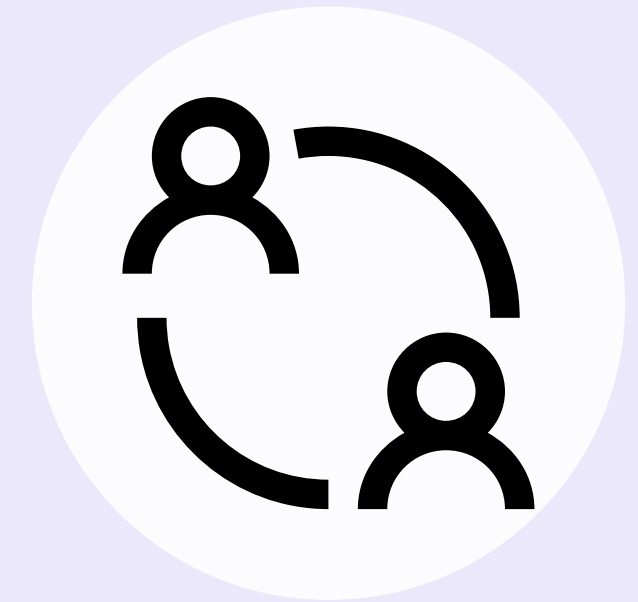
OFFER MEANINGFUL AUTONOMY

- Let them set their own order of tasks when possible.
- Give opt-out options without punishment (e.g., “You can come back to this later.”)
- Let them choose when and where to work (e.g., sitting on floor, working outside classroom).
- provide leadership opportunities



PICKING OUR BATTLES & FLEXIBILITY

- Our stress and desperation cultivates and generates threat
- We don't always have to put the onus on Neurodivergent kids to accommodate others.
- Be willing to adjust expectations



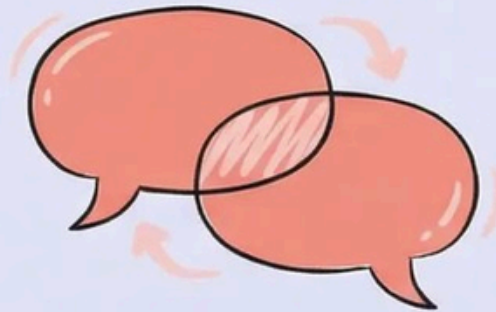
PRIORITISE CONNECTION

- Things feel less scary when we are with someone we trust
- We need a sense of safety before learning occurs
- Feeling genuinely understood rather than judged develops the emotional safety for engagement

Language That Helps PDA Students

Indirect Language

- Declarative Statements
 - "I notice the pencils are over here."
 - "It looks like it's time for reading."
- Exclamatory Statements
 - "Wow, look at this amazing science experiment!"
 - "What a fascinating book this is!"
- "I wonder..." Phrases
 - "I wonder if we could start with this task."
 - "I wonder what would happen if we tried it this way."



Collaborative Phrasing

- Problem-Solving Language
 - "How might we tackle this together?"
 - "What's another way we could approach this?"
- Choice-Based Language
 - "Would you prefer to start with A or B?"
 - "You can choose when to do this during the morning."
- Depersonalized Language
 - "The classroom needs tidying" (vs. "You need to tidy up")
 - "The worksheet is waiting to be completed."

Remember: How we say something is often more important than what we say.

AUTHENTIC ND AFFIRMING CARE TO ENCOURAGE UNMASKING

01

Advocate against damaging/non-supportive environments and tools that encourage ignoring your body signals

02

Facilitate connection with other peers in structured peer groups

03

If your role allows for it, opt for a more casual approach in your language and activities together. Children and youth don't care about how "professional" you are.

04

Highlight effort rather than outcome. But also, sometimes agreeing something did indeed suck is more validating than trying to provide praise

05

Teach self-advocacy, consent, and boundaries. Practice phrases to communicate these boundaries and empower them.

ENVIRONMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS



- Normalize Support tools:
- Everyone uses and has access to planners, visual aids, quiet spaces, etc. so no one feels singled out or perceived for using it.



Create a Safe Exit Plan

- Let the student know it's okay to take breaks before escalation.
- Offer a quiet or safe space they can retreat to without needing to explain.
- Use nonverbal signals or code words for "I need space."

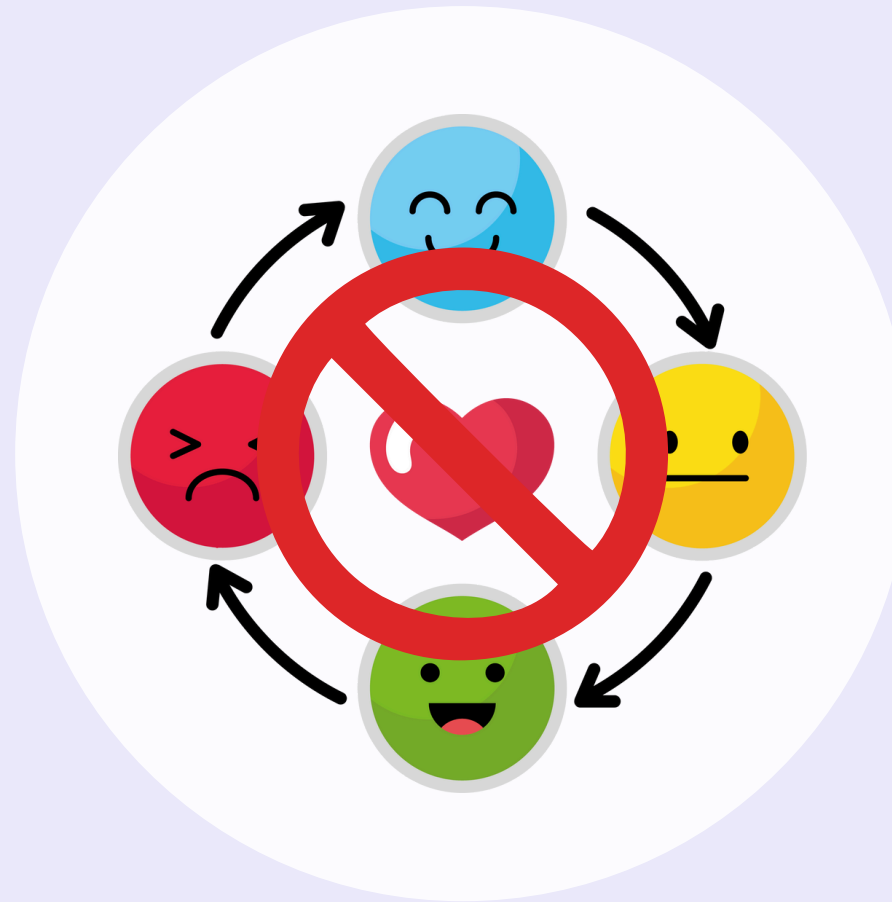


Provide flexible working environments with different set up options that work for the individual

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DYSREGULATION



Co-regulation

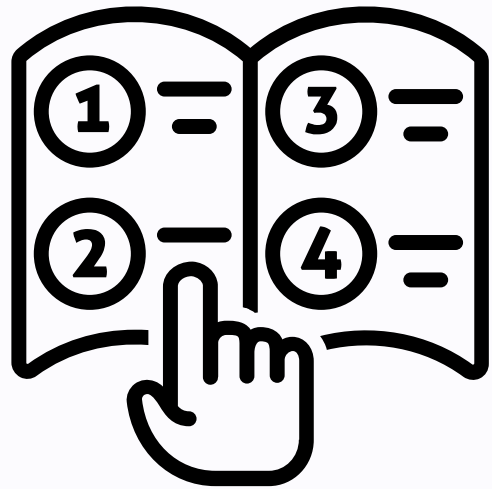


Rather than Zones of Regulation or Size of the Problem, consider talking about energy levels (Autism Level Up)



Provide a private space to unmask or create a check-in system

COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS



Ease fatigue for all information processing styles, such as pair any verbal instructions with written or visual



Rather than Whole Body Listening, consider other forms of what listening can look like.



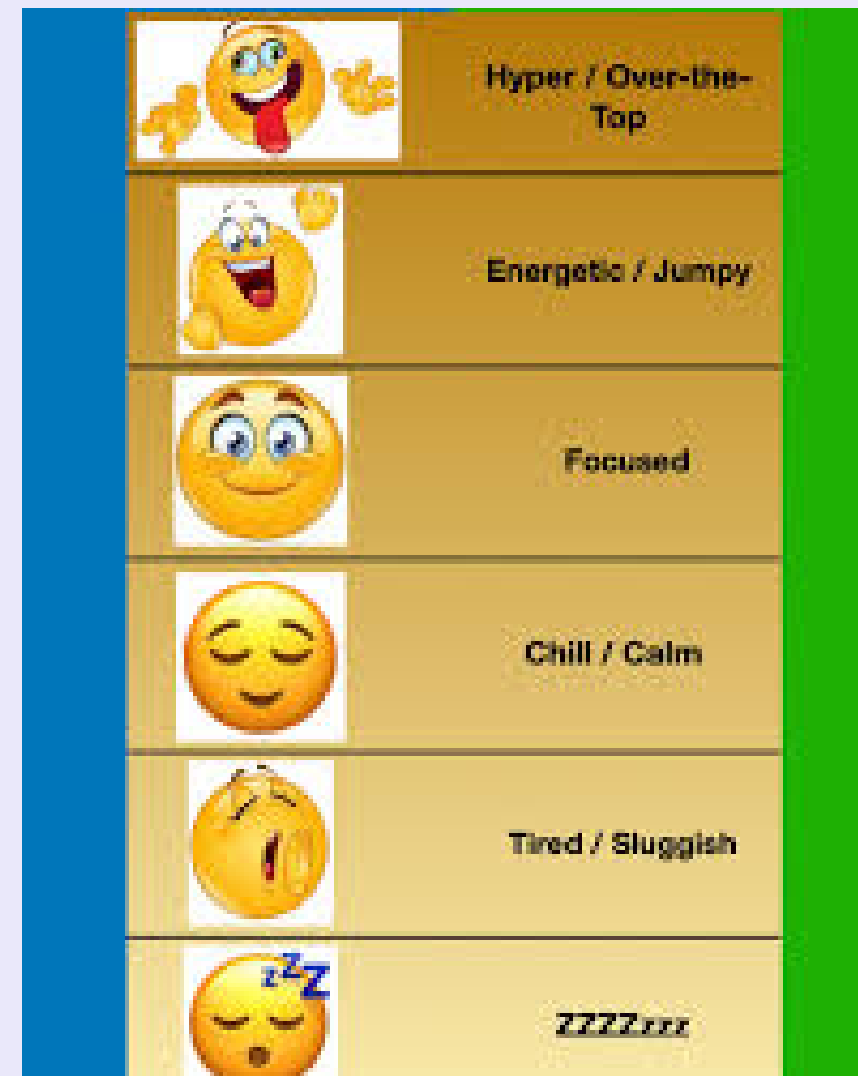
Not looking does not mean not listening.

Attention can look different in ND youth.

RESPECTFUL ALTERNATIVES



Listening bodies can look different



Autism Level Up Energy Levels



Incorporating interests rather than token boards

**“NOTHING
ABOUT US
WITHOUT US”**

REFLECTION

What is one way you can shift your classroom environment, language, or mindset tomorrow to better affirm and include neurodivergent youth you work with—without asking them to change who they are?

THANK YOU!