

Autism is diversity too

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Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers

Human Development Institute

University of Kentucky



I SAW

You are here

Agenda



Brief introduction to ISAW

Understanding autism

Autism as diversity

The interview

Communication tips

Getting started on the job

Guiding principles

- Everyone who wishes to work should have the opportunity to do so.
- Employers can support autistic workers when given the information and support they need.
- Employment Specialists can better support job seekers by understanding autism.
- Autistic people can thrive in workplaces where there is understanding and acceptance.

Services provided



- Training for employers
- Training for Employment Specialists, OVR staff, direct supporters, and more!
- Consultations with businesses
- Site visits as needed
- Direct supports to job seekers
- Assistance for employees seeking support or accommodations
- Infographics and fact sheets.

Autism Informed Employers

ONLINE COURSE!

Let us help you solve
your staffing problems.



Become an Autism
Informed Employer.

- Employer completes a series of online modules with quizzes
- ISAW issues a certificate, provides links to the business on its website and social media
- ISAW provides ongoing support through further consultation, training, and problem solving

Curriculum

Thinking About Autism

Why Hire Autistic Workers

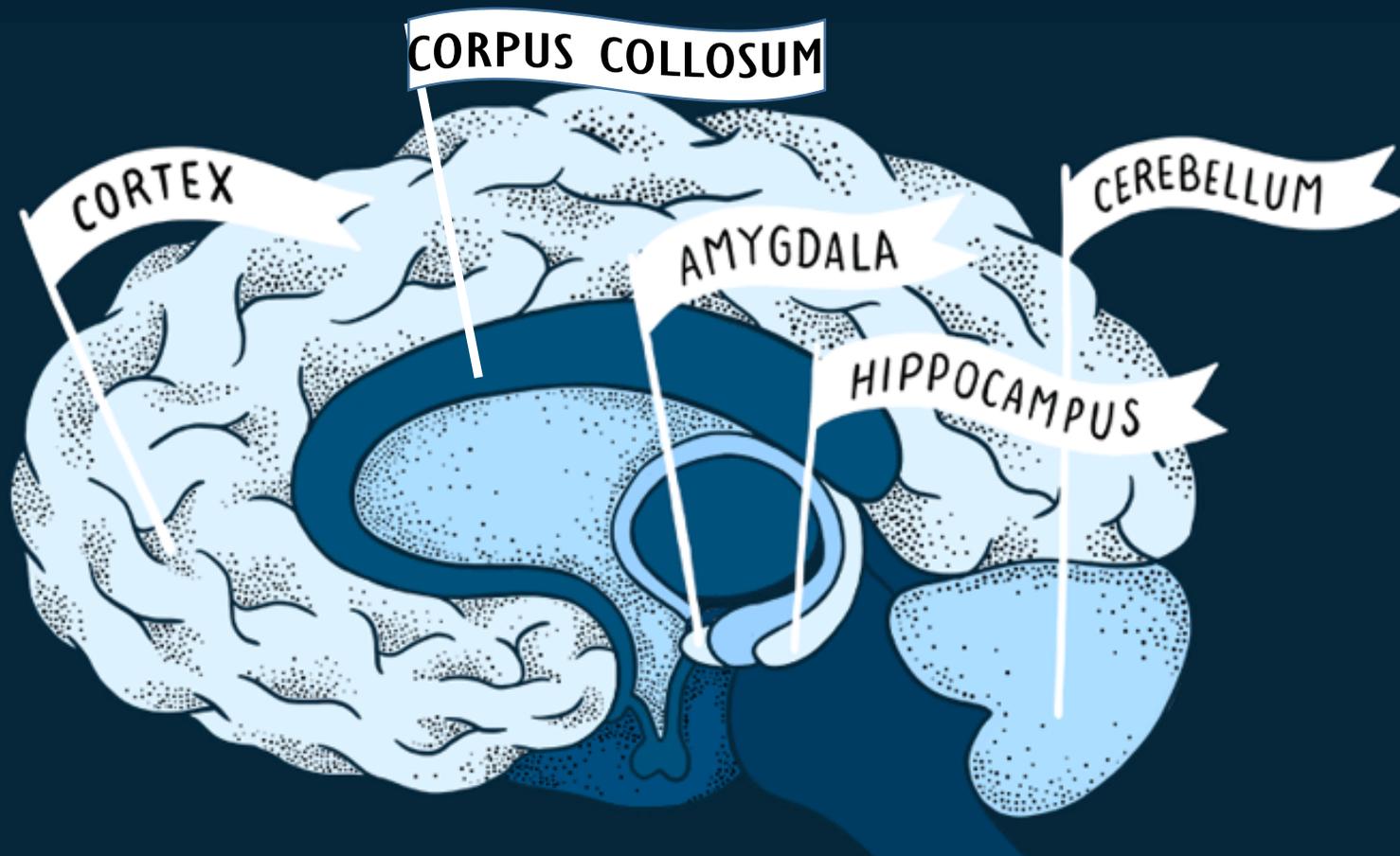
Autism Basics

Interviewing

On the Job

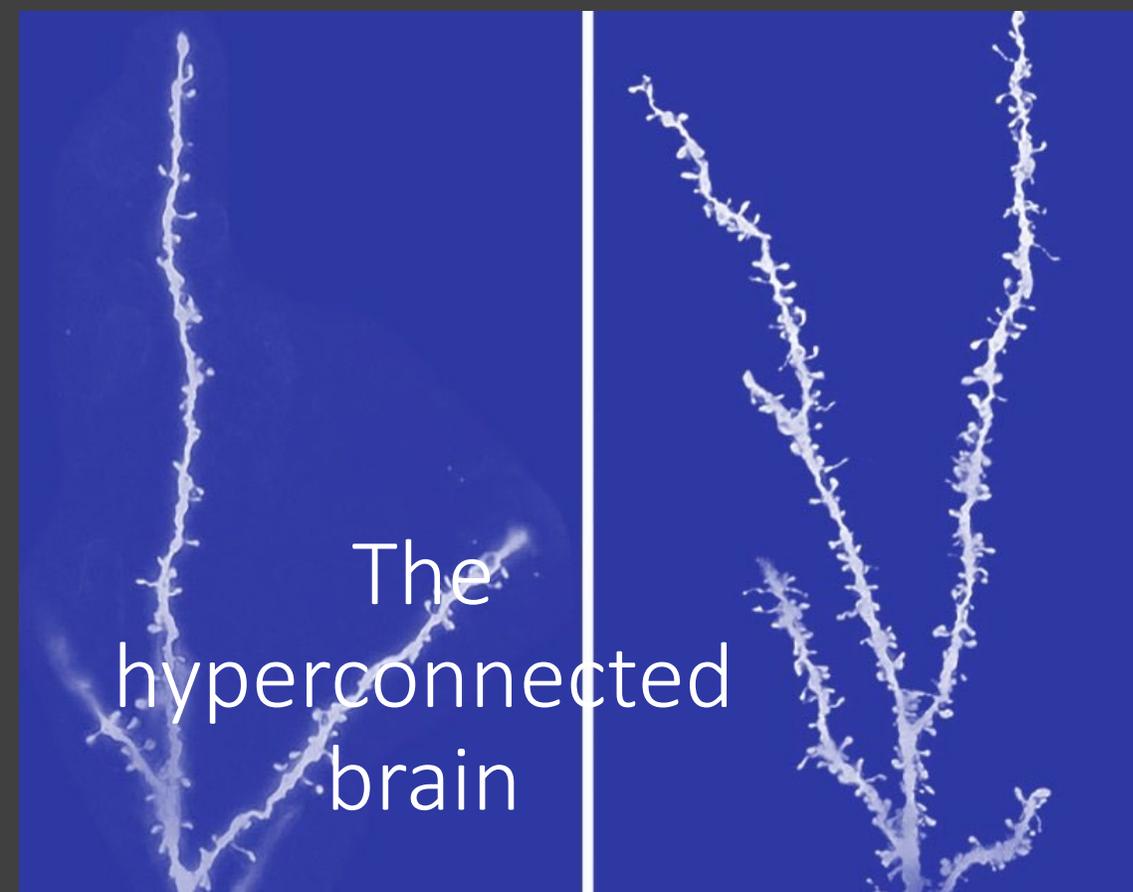
Accessibility and
Accommodation

Supported Employment

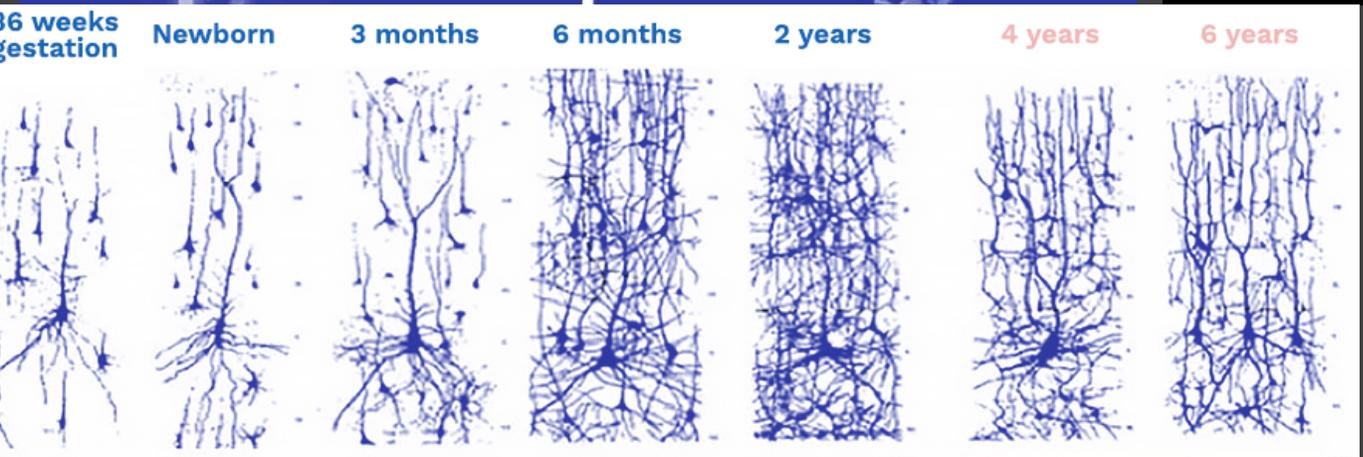
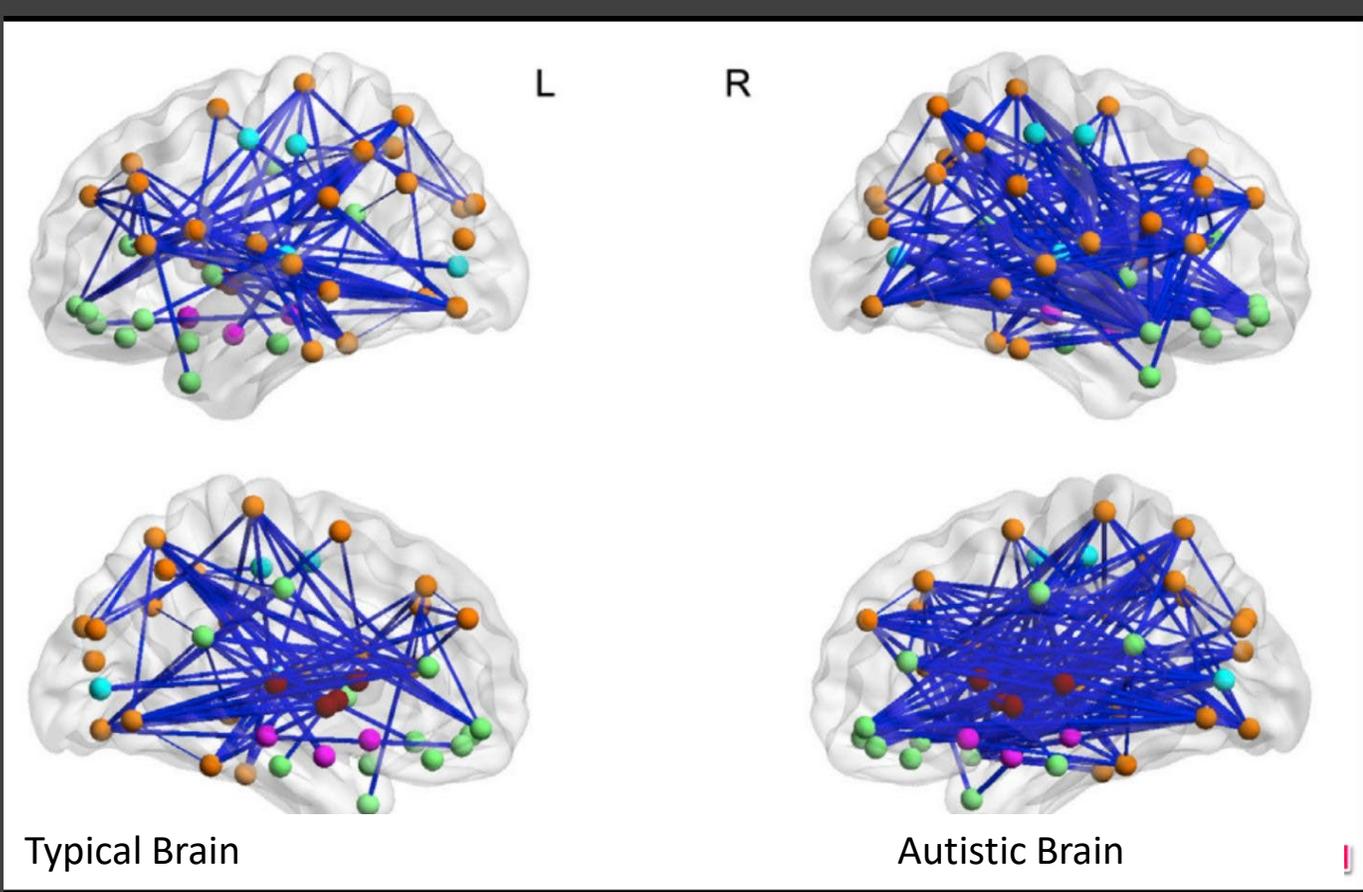


Autistic brains are different

Askham, A.V. (2020). Brain structure changes in autism explained. Spectrum. Retrieved from <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/brain-structure-changes-in-autism-explained/>



The hyperconnected brain



Synapse formation

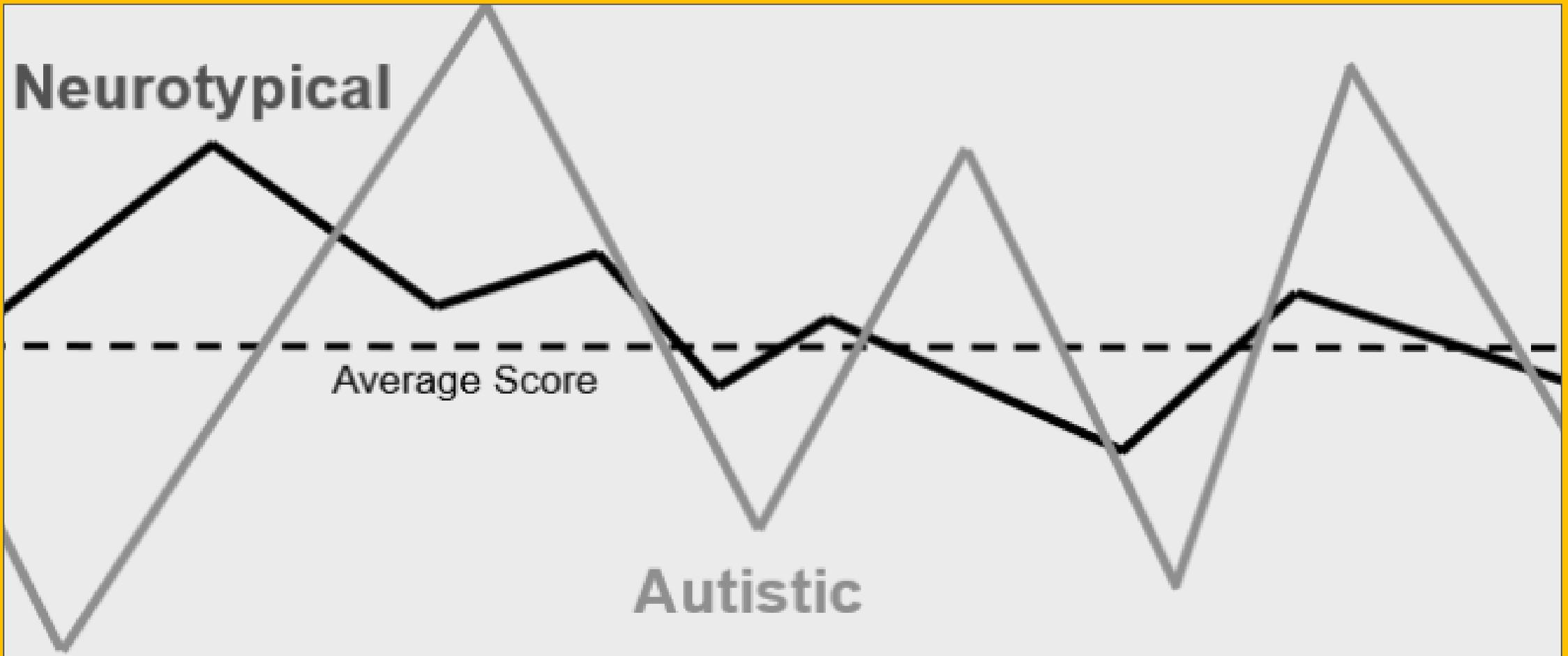
Synaptic pruning

Rafiee, F., Rezvani Habibabadi, R., Motaghi, M., Yousem, D.M. and Yousem, I.J. (2022), Brain MRI in Autism Spectrum Disorder: Narrative Review and Recent Advances. *J Magn Reson Imaging*, 55: 1613-1624. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmri.27949>



Fight Flight Freeze

“Autistic people consistently experience physical discomfort and anxiety as a result of sensory issues” (Howe & Stagg, 2016).



Nartin, M., & Milton, D. (2016). Supporting the inclusion of autistic children. In Knowles, G., Supporting Inclusive Practice and Ensuring Opportunity is Equal for All. London, Routledge.

Autism as diversity: Historical and contemporary marginalization

- Institutionalization, involuntary sterilization, abuse, filicide
- Rejection on first sight common (Bolton, et al., 2020)
- False beliefs contribute to stigma
- Likelihood of mental health and/or correctional systems involvement.

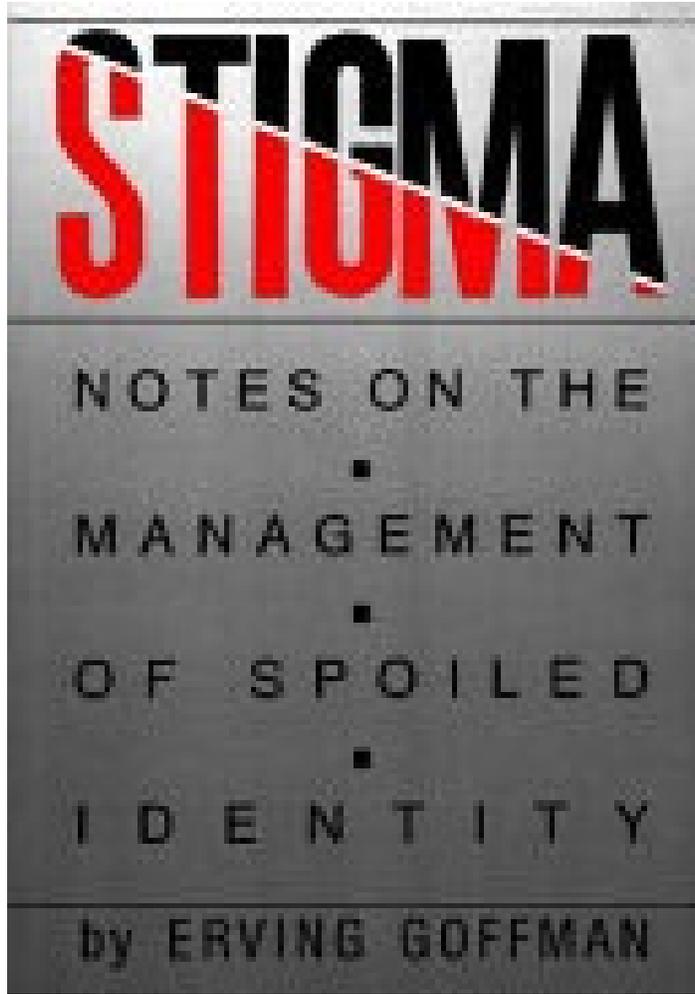
- Likelihood of mental health and/or correctional systems involvement.

THIN-SLICE JUDGEMENTS

“These patterns are remarkably robust, occur within seconds, do not change with increased exposure, and persist across both child and adult age groups. However, these biases disappear when impressions are based on conversational content lacking audio-visual cues, suggesting that style, not substance, drives negative impressions...”

Bolton, et al., 2020

Autism as diversity: Minority status and culture



- Botha, et al. (2020) argue for recognition of autism as a stigmatized social status and autistics as an identity-based minority.
 - Autistic people increasingly view autism as a core part of identity.
 - Autistic people experience excess social stress as a result of this stigmatized status.
 - Autistic people are materially disadvantaged by stigmatized status.
- Autistics have developed a unique culture that includes art, language, in-jokes, and perspectives in common.

Autism as diversity: Effects of discrimination

85%

Unemployment

(Sala, et al. 2020)

19%-
35%
Attempt
suicide

(South, et al., 2021)

26%
Depression
(current)

9x
higher
suicidal
ideation

32%-
44%
PTSD

(Rumball,
et al. 2021)

50% to
89%
Victim of
interpersonal
violence

Haruvi-Lamdan, 2020

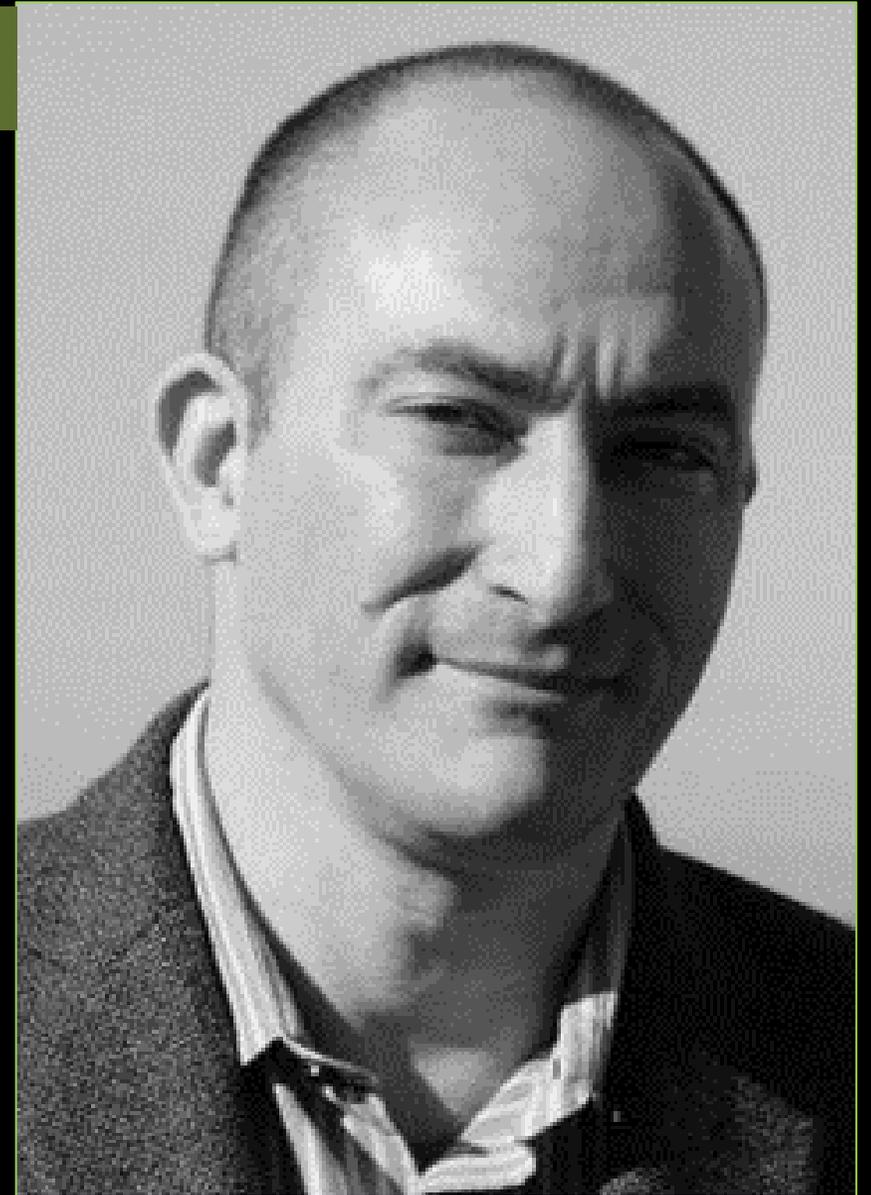
64%
Depression
(lifetime)

58 years
life expectancy
(w/o ID)

Hirvikoski et al., 2016)

Diversity of Thought

“The greater the diversity of the pool of available minds, the greater the diversity of perspectives, talents, and ways of thinking—and thus the greater the probability of generating an original insight, solution, or creative contribution.”



Nick Walker, autistic author and professor

Autism as diversity: cognitive diversity

Different thinking styles will benefit any business.



SYSTEMS THINKING

- Strong pattern recognition
- Efficiently evaluates options
- Bases decisions on big picture

The graphic features three overlapping circles in shades of blue and grey, with a yellow arc on the left side.

MONOTROPISM

- Detail oriented
- Narrow but deep
- Expertise



The graphic shows a red target icon with an arrow hitting the bullseye.

BOTTOM-UP THINKING

- Data-driven
- Real-time processing
- Good collaborator
- Avoids hasty generalizations

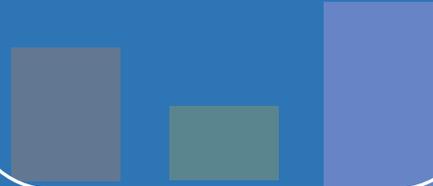


The graphic includes a bar chart with three bars of increasing height from left to right, set against a yellow background.



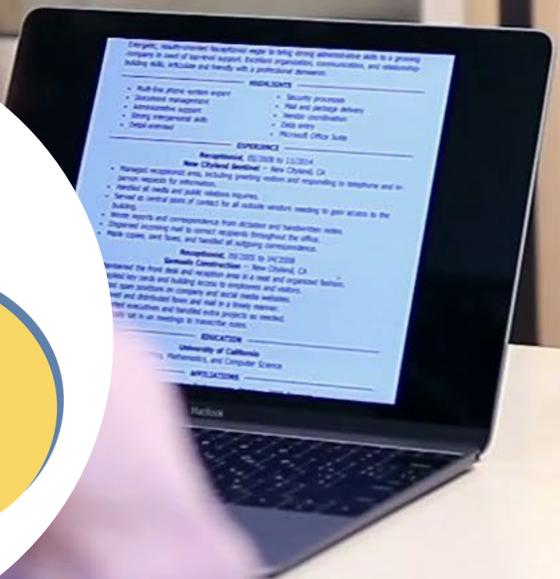
ASSOCIATIVE THINKING

- Highly creative and flexible
- Makes connections others miss



The graphic features three colored circles (brown, olive, purple) at the top and a bar chart with three bars of varying heights at the bottom, all within a blue rounded rectangle.

Module 4: Interviewing autistic applicants





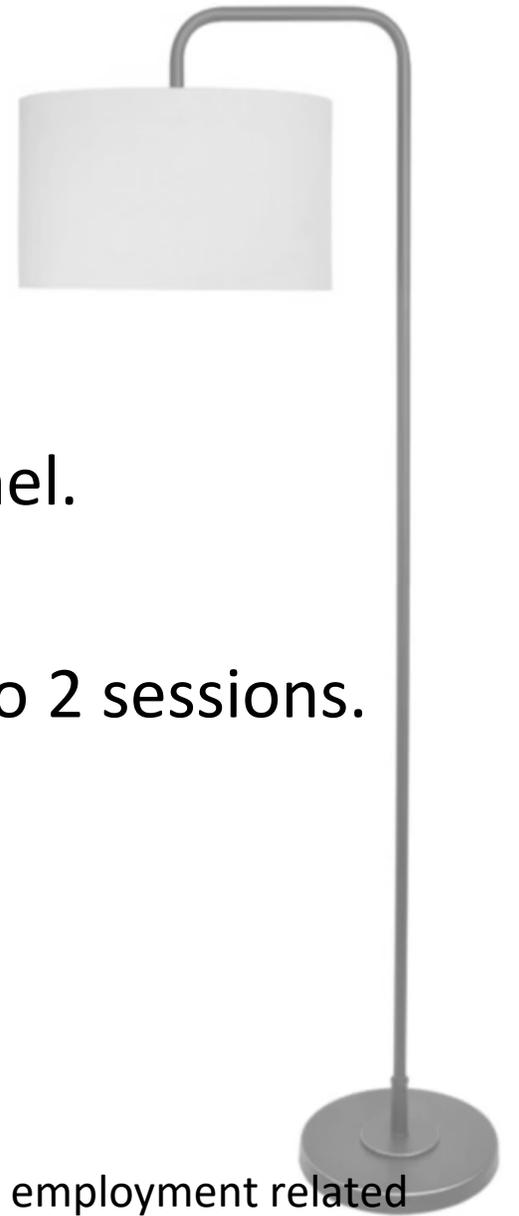
Before the interview

- Make sure the directions to your workplace, plus any other instructions, are clear. If your office suite is on the third floor, let them know this. If there is construction blocking most of the parking lot, tell them where to find alternative parking. Autistic people work best when they know what to expect.
- Secure an office or meeting room that is sensory friendly. Turn down harsh lighting, remove visual clutter, and adjust the temperature if needed.



Interview accommodations

An applicant who has disclosed being autistic may ask for reasonable accommodations for the interview. Ultimately, the business will decide what the accommodation will be.



Accommodations to consider

- Interview setting without fluorescent lighting.
- Applicant to meet with one interviewer rather than a panel.
- Zoom meeting at least for first interview.
- If the interview process is generally long, offer to split into 2 sessions.
- Ability to submit some responses in writing.
- Questions in advance.
- Exemption from “personality inventory.”

Sarrett, J. (2017). Interviews, disclosures, and misperceptions: Autistic adults’ perspectives on employment related challenges. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37(2). Retrieved from <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5524/4652>.

What to expect

First, be aware that the word “autism” tells you little about the person or their abilities. Expecting one autistic person to be like another autistic person you have met makes no more sense than having similar expectations for all neurotypical people.





- An autistic applicant may speak fluently or may give single word responses to questions.
- The jobseeker might use a communication device or app.
- They may or may not have someone supporting them for the interview.

- Understanding the traits shared by all autistic people can help you to properly evaluate the candidate without making it awkward.
- Here are a few situations you might expect to encounter with explanations and examples of affirming responses.



THE INTERVIEW

YOU MAY SEE	REASON	AFFIRMING RESPONSE
May not shake hands.	Inexperience/not understanding the expectation; prioritizing health over social norms; sensory-based aversion to touch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Say nothing.• Say something about how shaking hands is becoming less a social norm post-pandemic.
May not make eye contact	Both nonverbal and verbal communication can be difficult for an autistic person. Trying to attend to nonverbals can prevent the person from understanding your speech or finding words for their responses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not try to force eye contact.• Do not assume dishonesty or a weak personality.• Look at the person as you would anyone else and don't call attention to their lack of eye contact.

YOU MAY SEE	REASON	AFFIRMING RESPONSE
May remain standing, not knowing where to sit.	While this may seem obvious to some applicants, autistic people may not understand the context clues as quickly and may fear making the wrong decision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Point out where you would like the applicant to sit.
May need clarification on some questions.	Some autistic people have difficulty with figures of speech, double meanings, and questions with 2 or more parts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid questions and words that have multiple common meanings. Ask one question at a time. State the question a different way.

YOU MAY SEE	REASON	AFFIRMING RESPONSE
<p>May respond to questions in a seemingly rambling manner.</p>	<p>Each question may open up several lines of thought, each appearing equally relevant. Tangential thinking is a skill that allows autistic people to come up with unexpected solutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen and then redirect back to the main question. • OR follow along and develop a conversation together.
<p>May have difficulty knowing when it is their turn to speak.</p>	<p>Some autistic people cannot read neurotypical nonverbal communication and will have trouble with the rhythm of conversations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave space between your statements. • Use a prompt such as “I’d like to hear your thoughts about this.”
<p>May seem to use canned phrases or repeat the same words.</p>	<p>Echolalia is a way of translating thoughts into words at times when more organic language is difficult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand this as real and sincere communication.

On the other hand

The candidate may not do any of these things. In fact, you might not know the person was autistic had they not disclosed.



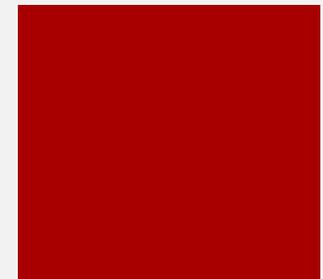
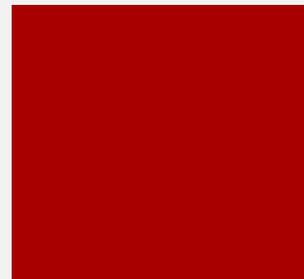
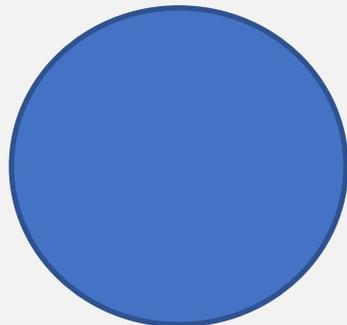
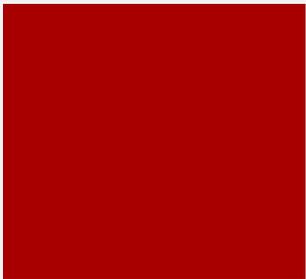
Masking and misunderstanding

Many autistic people learn to “mask” their autism to appear more “normal.”

That’s good, right? If they can act normal, they should do that!

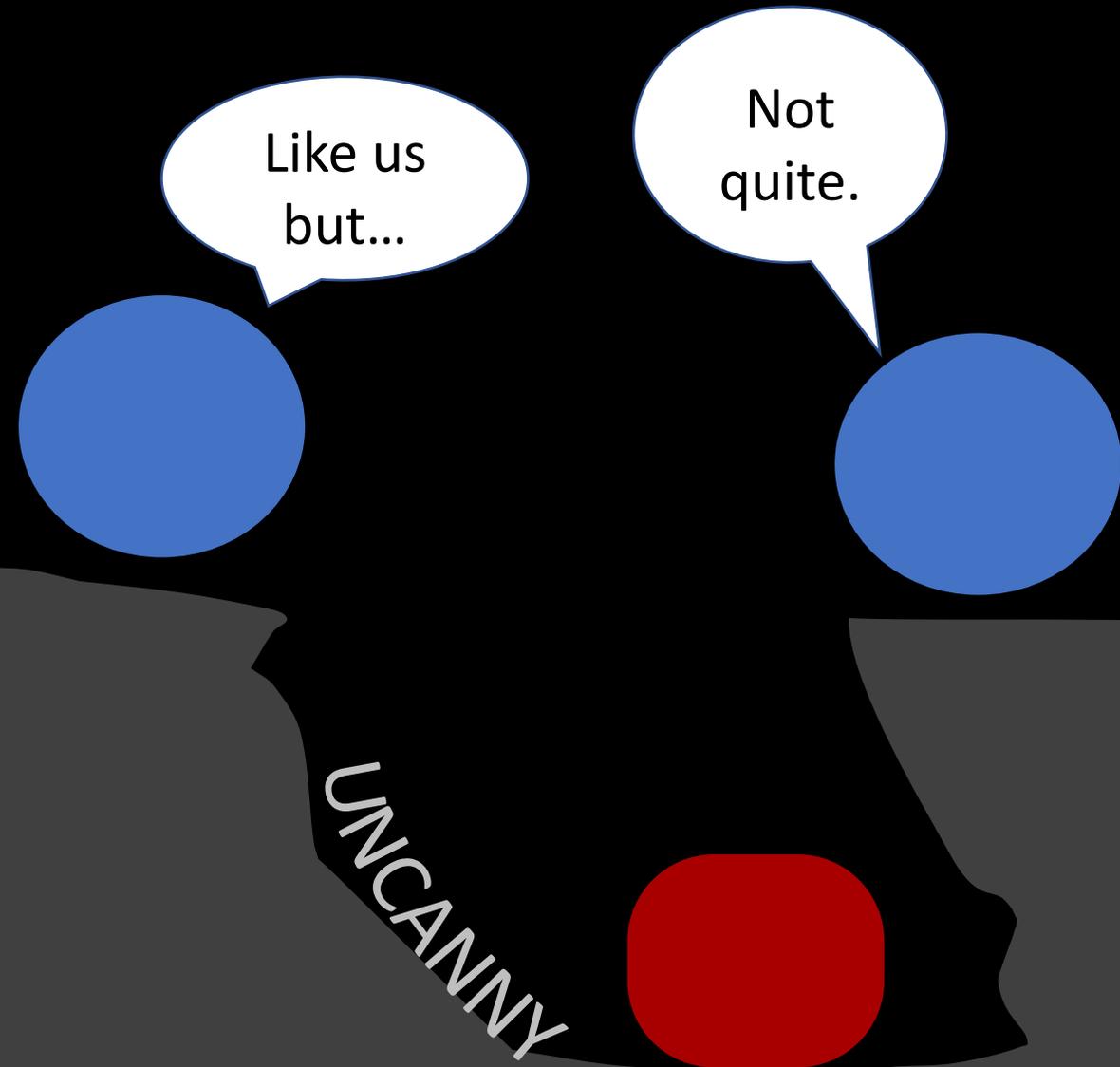
This can mean behaving in ways inconsistent with the person’s neurological makeup, resulting in identity confusion, depression, anxiety, and burnout.

May be able to mask only sometimes. Each success raises expectations, increasing pressure and likelihood of becoming overwhelmed.



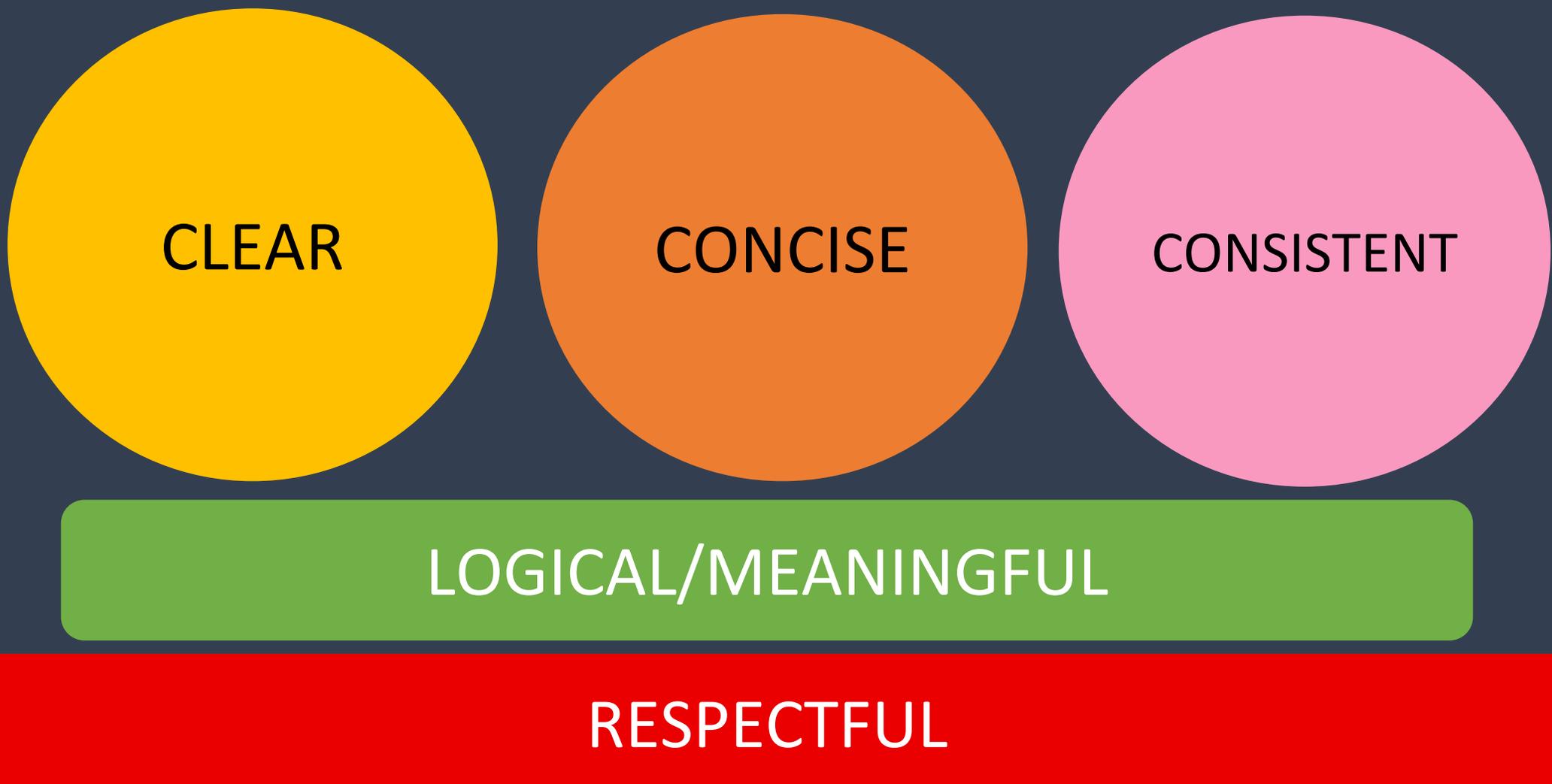
The uncanny valley

- Masking serves the majority (neurotypical) population by removing the need to for flexibility and understanding.
- Autistics who mask not only face harmful consequences, but also fail to gain acceptance.
- Masking increases rather than decreases demands on autistic people to perform neurotypicality.
- We have entered the Uncanny Valley.



Communication

Autistic workers appreciate communication that is:



CLEAR

CONCISE

CONSISTENT

LOGICAL/MEANINGFUL

RESPECTFUL

Priorities in communication

Non-autistic

Connection

- Acknowledgment of the person as important independent of the content

Information may or may not be the primary goal of conversation.

Needs reassurance of caring and respect first.

Autistic

Information

- Clarity
- Transparency
- Logic and reason

Connection—may also matter but is not the point of this interaction.

Needs reassurance that content is understood.

Autistic communication characteristics, styles and strategies

ECHOLALIA

Immediate
Delayed

Real
communication

Not a problem

ANALOGY, METAPHOR

Sometimes it's
easier to access
the language for
a parallel
situation.

INFO DUMPING

Sharing of
intense,
specialized
interests

DIRECT OR BLUNT SPEECH

Can you handle
the truth?

TANGENTIAL SPEECH

Some of the
most interesting
stories and
information we
can share

Interview tips

How to interview an autistic job candidate



Extra time

- The most important accommodation you can grant to an autistic applicant might be extra time.
- Slow down your speech. Take pauses.
- Make sure they know you are not impatient.

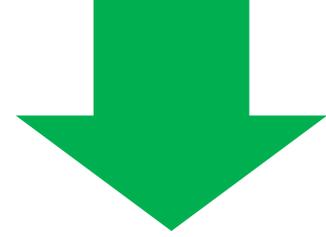


Walking interview



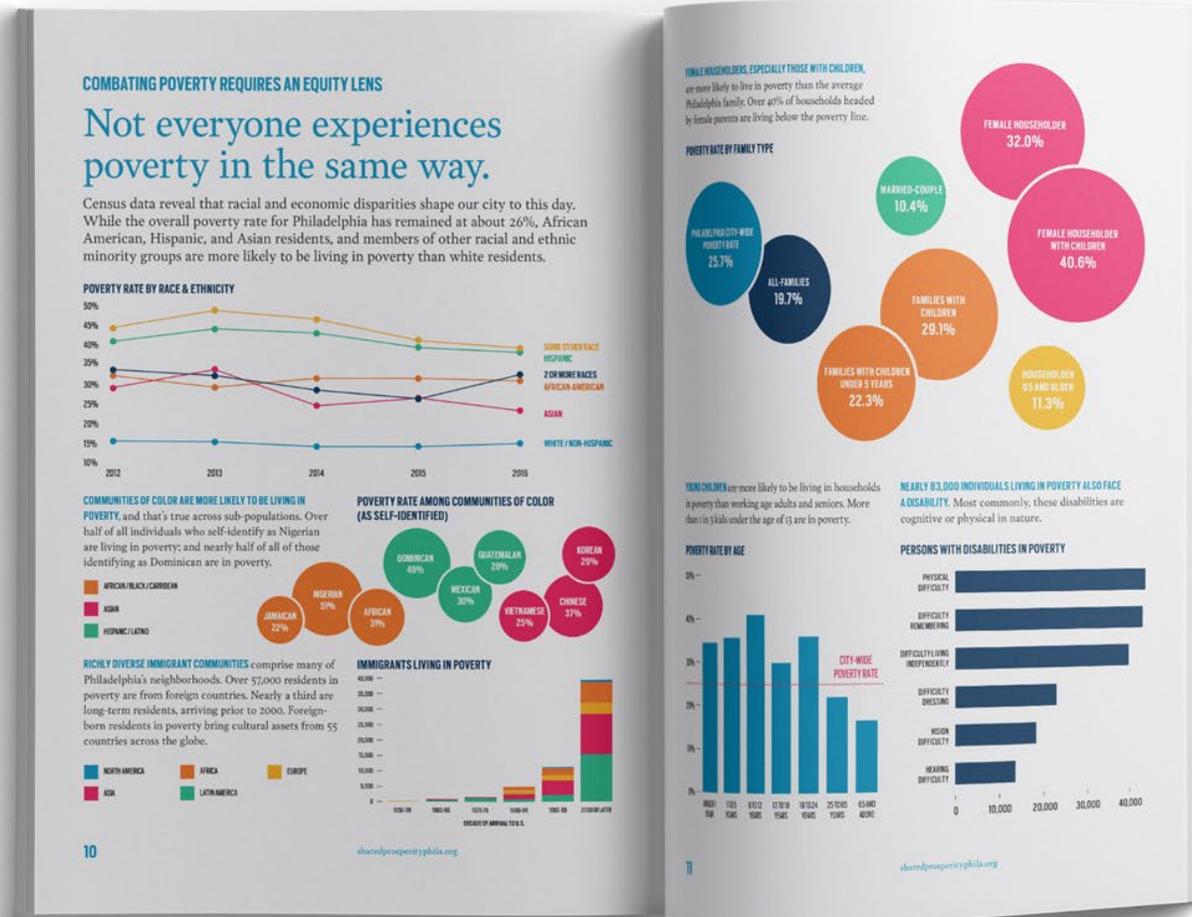
- One option you might try is a walking interview.
- Some autistic people find conversation easier when engaged in some sort of activity. It reduces the demand for eye contact and also allows the applicant to get a feel for the workplace.

Or try this!



Tip: Arrange the interview room as on the right. This can make the applicant more comfortable because there is less expectation of constant eye contact.

Reading materials



- Another subtle accommodation to help the interviewee feel more comfortable and less pressured for eye contact is to make sure there is something meaningful for them to glance at.
- An annual report or organizational chart is good for this. Anything that is relevant to the job, preferably with visual elements as well as text.

Interview questions

- No multiple part questions; one at a time.
- No extremely vague questions (“Tell me about yourself!”)
- Transitions between topics. (“Now let’s move on to...”)
- Direct and specific questions.
- Use a 1:2 mix of open- and closed-ended questions.
- Ask follow up questions (Can you tell me more about that?)

Interviewing Questions

QUESTIONS ASKED BY EMPLOYERS

- How do you think a friend who knows you well would describe you?
- How has your school experience prepared you for a job?
- Why should I hire you?
- What qualifications do you have that make you think that you will be successful at this job?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to this business?
- What two or three accomplishments have give you the most satisfaction, and why?
- Why did you choose this job?
- How do you think you are a good indication of your ability to do this job?
- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?

Page 1

<http://www.scholastic.com>

Norris, J.E., Crane, L. & Maras, K. (2020). Interviewing autistic adults: Adaptations to support recall in police, employment and healthcare interviews. *Autism* 24(6) 1506-1520.

PHRASING QUESTIONS

Original	Problem	How to fix it	Autism-friendly version
Tell us a little about yourself.	Vague	Break down into 2-3 specific and concrete questions.	I see that you have worked in a related industry. What did you like about the work? How did your education (or experience) prepare you for success?
What strengths will you bring to the job?	Undefined	Specify to workplace	What are some of your workplace skills or strengths?
Why do you want to work here?	Invites literal response	Provide context	There are other businesses that do what we do. Why did you choose us as a possible employer?

What if you don't know the interviewee is autistic?

- It is likely that you have interviewed autistic people before without knowing it. You may have autistic workers already at your business. These people may or may not be aware they are autistic. Remember, around 3% of the population fits the current definition for autism!
- Most of the same approaches will benefit people with other disabilities, such as anxiety or PTSD.
- Feel free to adopt any of these practices or accommodations even when interviewing someone without a disability.

Non-speaking applicants

- Some autistic people do not speak but communicate in other ways.
- This doesn't mean they have an intellectual disability OR that they have nothing important to say.
- Some ways the jobseeker might talk to you are by using a communication device or app; by having a support worker assist them; or by writing/typing instead of speaking.
- Use plain language. Otherwise address the person as you would anyone.
- Remember to provide extra time for responses.
- A Zoom interview might be best if the applicant needs to write rather than speak.

Tips for interviewing non-speakers

- Speak slowly, but not too slowly. No “special” voice!
- Speak clearly, but don’t over-enunciate.
- Look at the person, but don’t stare.

If the person seems to have trouble understanding you, try writing the question as well as asking it orally.

Provide paper and pen. Yes, the applicant should have their own, but this shows openness to written communications.

Accommodate part-time speakers as needed.

If possible, provide questions in advance.

Keep follow-up questions brief.

- Okay, now you know how we feel!

Now Hiring!

**All shapes
welcome to
apply!**

Our Leader



Mr. Loop

Our Organization

FAIR ENOUGH

AWARD

for diversity

2018

Just one more test and
the job is yours. Just
roll over to that wall,
bounce off and roll
back.

?



Evaluating the candidate

- Review your decision rubric before starting the interviews. It may need to be updated to incorporate new data and understanding.
 - How much weight is given to performance of expected social behaviors? Is it warranted?
 - What skills do the major functions of this position require? Are the skills you are evaluating relevant to the job?
 - Can you name at least two ways for a candidate to communicate or demonstrate these skills?
 - Is it time to start advocating for the removal of discriminatory “personality test?”
 - How will we provide opportunities for candidates to communicate in ways that work for them?
 - If appropriate, consider requesting samples of work supplemental to interview.



Flex time
or preferred shift



Text-based
communication



Extra time



No fluorescents



Quiet workspace

Frequently requested
accommodations

Orientation

- Training materials should be available in multiple formats (written, video, explained by mentor or supervisor.)
- Language should be straightforward and provide definitions for any technical words or jargon. Plain Language standards can be found at plainlanguage.gov
- Ask for our other recommendations for providing your materials in Plain Language.
- Assigning a mentor provides the new employee with an ally. The employee knows where to take their questions; the supervisor has assistance with teaching company culture and standards.

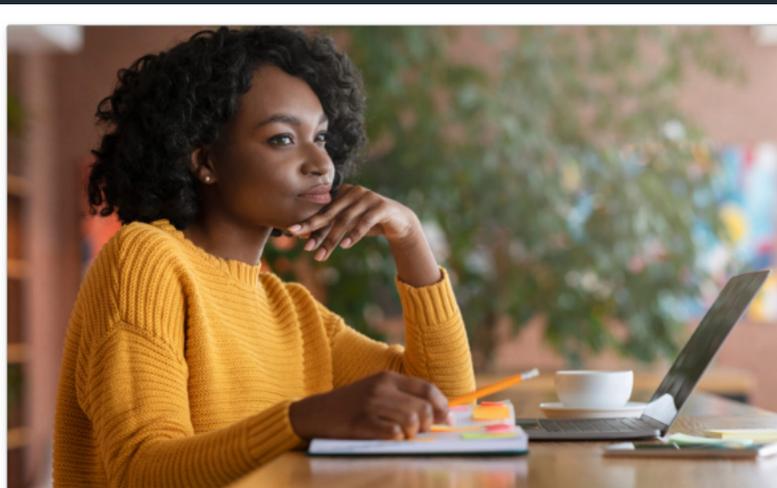
Mentoring for a good start

- A workplace mentor can:
 - Introduce the new employee to co-workers.
 - Familiarize the new person with their workplace culture.
 - Identify “hidden rules.”
 - Answer questions in a non-judgmental way.
 - Manage expectations and build trust.
 - Offer feedback.



ISAW can assist you in setting up a mentoring program.

The
Autism
Informed
Employers
course is
available
now
at HDI
Learning!



EMP 235: Autism-Informed Employers

Since 2016, Innovative Supports (ISAW) for Autistic Workers has offered training on autism to employers across Kentucky and beyond. Autism Informed Employers allows anyone to access ISAW training at their convenience. Learn to effectively interview, supervise, and retain autistic employees. We will show you ways to bridge communication gaps; understand sensory needs to create a more accessible workplace; provide simple and inexpensive accommodations; and identify highly qualified candidates you might have overlooked in the past. Your business will benefit through lower turnover, increased productivity, and the addition of unique perspectives and talents to help your team excel.

Free / student

For Myself

For Groups

Register here:

<https://www.hdilearning.org/>

Contact us!

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- Brittany Granville: brg263@uky.edu

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- For more information about ISAW or autism, contact Bev at baharp2@uky.edu



- Visit our website: isaw.hdiuk.org