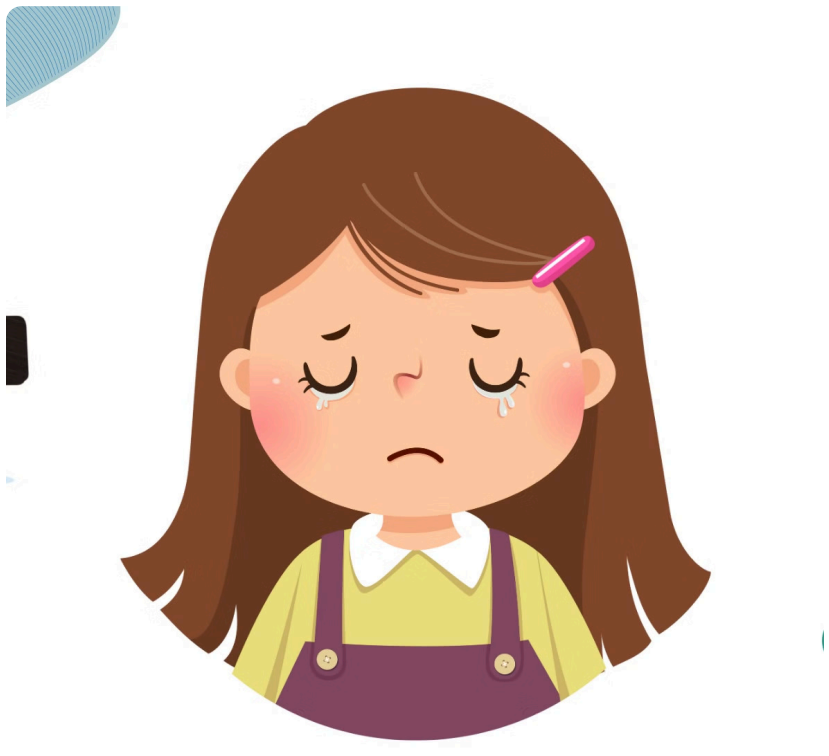
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A Neurodivergent-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

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Childhood Experiences and Communication Basics

As a girl with ADHD, you likely had unique communication differences. Others around you may have responded unkindly to these differences. The best you could do may have been to adapt to their responses, typically through masking behaviors. Most girls conclude there is something wrong with their communication.



Communication can be broken down into three parts—speech, language, and pragmatics.

1 **Speech**

2 **Language**

3 **Pragmatics**

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Speech

Speech refers to the physical act of producing sounds and involves:

1 **Articulation**

How sounds are made.

2 **Voice**

How breath and vocal cords create sound

3 **Fluency**

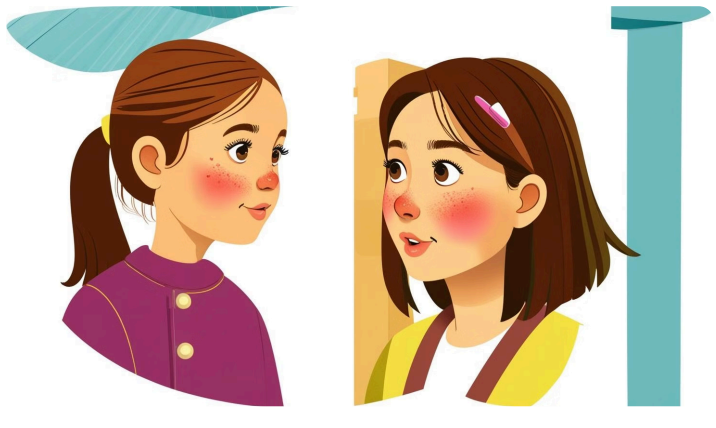
The rhythm and flow of of speech.

Language

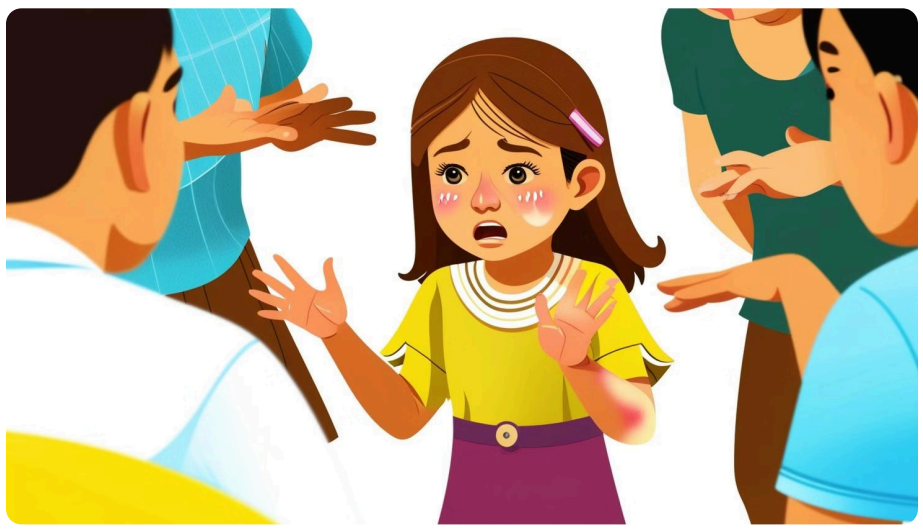
Language is a system of communication that utilizes symbols - such as words or gestures - agreed upon by a community to convey meaning.

The community we are referring to is usually the neuro-majority or neurotypical community. Language involves both understanding and expressing.

Receptive language is how you understand what others say.



Expressive language is how you share your thoughts.



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Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the aspect of communication that focuses on how context influences the interpretation of meaning.

It includes using language "appropriately" in social situations.

1. **Using language "appropriately" in social situations.**
2. **Interpreting body language.**
3. **Understanding and using idioms.**
4. **Recognizing the intent of sarcasm or humor.**

Pragmatics is critical for understanding intended meaning.

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What Do We Know About the Speech, Language, and Pragmatics of ADHD Children?

Speech and ADHD

Research shows that ADHD might result in differences in speech patterns.

ADHD children often exhibit differences in the volume, pitch, and frequency of vocal pauses. When neurotypical children notice these differences, their reactions are often impatient rather than understanding.

Language and ADHD

Children with ADHD may struggle with:

- [ ] Word retrieval
- [ ] Sentence construction
- [ ] Staying on-topic when disinterested or having nothing to add

> ⓘ Neurotypical peers bully ADHD children and socially reject them due to these differences



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Pragmatics and ADHD

1 ADHD children



May interrupt when excited or struggle with turn-taking.

2 Neurotypical peers



May perceive these differences as rudeness, leading to social challenges.

3 Adults



Often correct or shame children for these communication differences.

Listening Comprehension and ADHD

- Environmental distractions can make it harder for ADHD children to process spoken language.
- They may miss details, leading others to assume they are ignoring them.
- Misinterpretations often result in reprimands or punishment rather than support.



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ADHD Women's Communication

As an adult, communication challenges may persist, shaped by childhood experiences and ADHD-related differences.

Common struggles include:

1. **Difficulties with processing and expressing language**
2. **Challenges in interpreting and using communication in social settings with neuromajority rules**
3. **Impact of past criticism and rejection sensitivity (RSD)**

These experiences may make it harder to verbalize needs or thoughts. Our previous discussions on silencing and people-pleasing relate directly to these struggles, and we will continue developing skills to help you feel heard.



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Factors That Impact Communication

- You may find communication more challenging when you:
- Struggle to focus on someone who speaks too fast or too slow
- Process information slower or experience information overload
- Get distracted by multiple stimuli in your environment
- Feel emotionally dysregulated or socially anxious
- Experience sensory sensitivities (e.g., bright lights, loud noises, strong smells)
- Have trouble shifting focus from one task to another
- Feel frozen when put on the spot

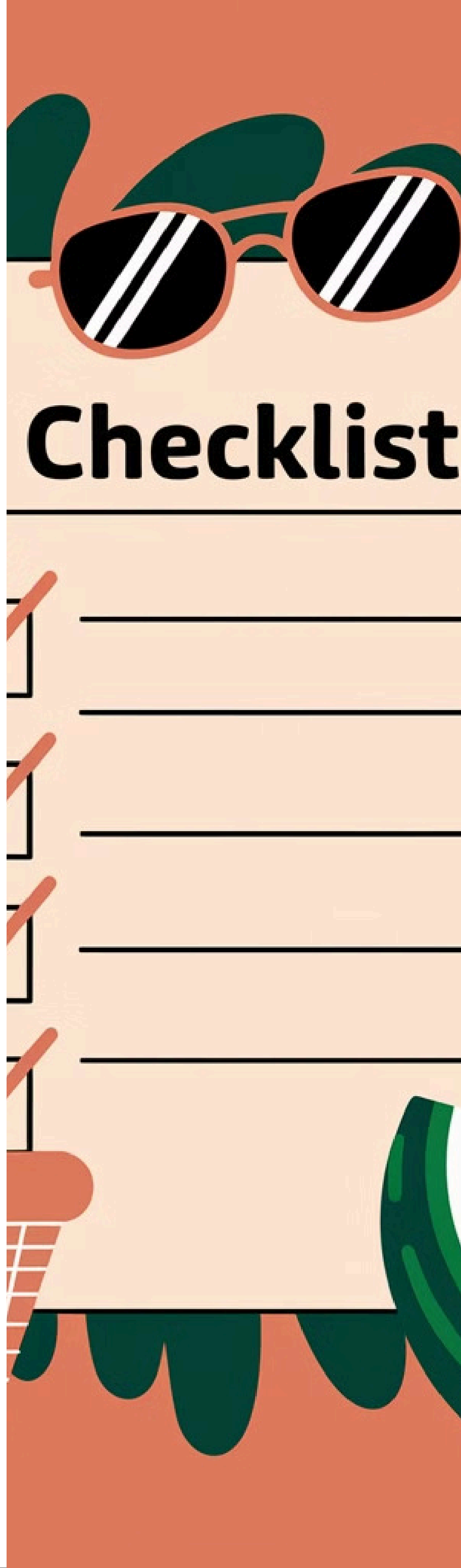
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Communication Checklist

Reflect on areas that cause you stress:

- ☐ Conversations that are too fast or too slow
- ☐ Large amounts of information at once
- ☐ Distracting environments
- ☐ Multiple people talking at the same time
- ☐ Feeling frozen when put on the spot
- ☐ Forgetting or missing key details
- ☐ Slow processing speed
- ☐ Social anxiety interfering with processing
- ☐ Sensory sensitivities making it hard to listen
- ☐ RSD Issues

Are any of these true for you?



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Reflection: Understanding Your Communication Needs

Take a moment to reflect on your communication experiences. Consider the following questions:

1. **What aspects of communication do you struggle with the most?**
   - ☐ Processing information
   - ☐ Social anxiety
   - ☐ Sensory sensitivities
   - ☐ Keeping up with conversations
2. **Have you ever been misinterpreted because of your communication style?**
   - How did it make you feel?

     _____

     _____

     _____
   - How did you respond?

- _____

  _____

  _____

1. **What situations make communication easier for you?**
   - ☐ A calm, quiet environment?
   - ☐ More time to process and respond?
   - ☐ Written communication instead of verbal?
2. **What accommodations would help you communicate more effectively?**

   _____

   _____

   _____
   - Could you implement any of them in daily life?

     _____

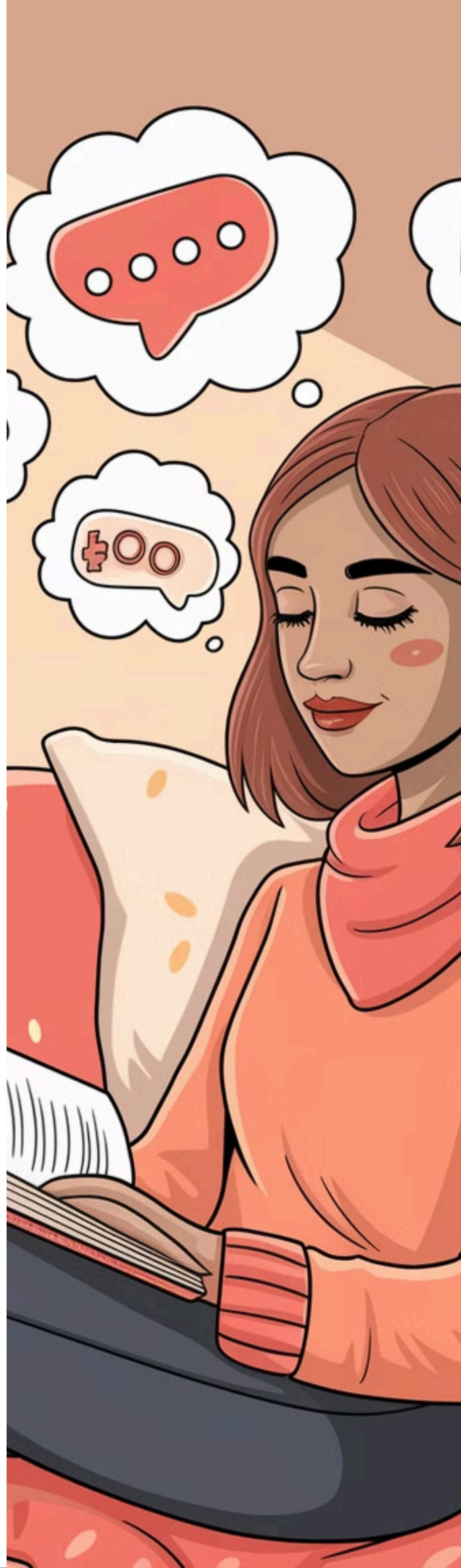
     _____

     _____
3. **How can you be kinder to yourself about your communication challenges?**

Write down any insights you gain from this reflection. Recognizing patterns and understanding your needs can help you advocate for yourself and navigate conversations more effectively._____

_____

_____



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Pragmatic Communication and ADHD Women

Pragmatic communication is influenced by cultural and neurodivergent factors. Sarcasm, politness metaphors and implicit requests are part of pragmatics. Neurotypical norms often do not align with how neurodivergent people communicate.

Common Pragmatic Challenges for ADHD Women:

1. **Knowing when to join a conversation**
2. **Interrupting out of fear of forgetting what to say**
3. **Sharing personal experiences in response to others**
4. **Blurting out thoughts that seem "inappropriate" by neurotypical standards**

Research Findings

Your neurodivergent friends might understand and accept these differences. The neuro majority may misinterpret them as rudeness or disinterest.

Research shows that these issues don't exist among neuro minorities. Research done by Catherine J. Crompton shows that autistic people communicate well among their own neurotype but struggle outside their group. We believe this is same for ADHD people. Your "social problems" are not problems in your own group!

Experience Reflection

If you can relate to these experiences, know you are not alone. Experiencing criticism or shame for these natural communication differences is harmful! It might also affect your beliefs about your "social skills". This can lead to avoidance of social situations out of fear of being judged. Often, this can create an anxiety disorder called social phobia. Is this something you can relate to?

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Reflection:

Here's your **reflection prompt** with space for writing:

Reflection on Communication Differences

Think of a time when someone misunderstood how you communicate. Have you ever been labeled, judged, or criticized for how you process information?

_____

_____

_____

Did this happen at work, with family, or in a social setting?

_____

_____

_____

How do you listen, process, and share information? Do you notice any patterns in how you communicate?

_____

_____

_____

What feels natural to you that others may not understand?

_____

_____

_____

Many communication challenges come from misunderstanding. Neurotypical people might misinterpret your communication style. They may see directness as rude, processing time as disinterest, or clarity as inflexibility. Even therapists may unintentionally make you feel like you need to change to fit in.

Remember: Your communication style isn't a flaw—it's just different.

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Understanding Monotropism and The Double Empathy Problem

ADHD, Autism, and Monotropism

Monotropism is a theory that PhDs Dinah Murray, Mike Lesser, and Wenn Lawson first put forth. This theory suggests ADHD and autistic minds work like an "interest system," where attention gets caught up by interests.

A lot of brainpower is poured into a small set of interests at any given moment. This results in an intense focus or 'attention tunnel'. Interests pull ADHD and autistic people in more strongly than most people.

This theory was crafted by autistic people to help explain how they experience the world. It's also proven helpful in explaining many ADHD people. It can be helpful to explain how you understand conversation, communicate about interests, and transition when communicating.



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Respecting and Understanding Cognitive Differences

It's important to understand each other's perspectives and find ways to **bridge differences.** This is how we approach couples or family therapy. Yet for some reason, we insist on forcing ADHD and autistic people to communicate in the same way by teaching them "skills. "Instead of imposing "normal" communication rules or encouraging masking behaviors, it's important to promote mutual understanding and empathy.

Practices like insisting on eye contact, expecting small talk, or discouraging the deep focus typical in monotropic interaction can cause harm. These actions can lead to feelings of shame, trauma, and overall negative effects on well-being.

We don't want to teach you skills that encourage masking. This is already pushed by environments that don't affirm neurodivergence, such as certain therapists who are untrained in working with neurodivergent clients, schools, parents, and programs.

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Choosing How to Communicate

You can choose communication practices that work for you while also understanding how neurotypical people may communicate differently in work and social settings.

It helps to recognize their patterns, but you don’t have to change who you are to fit in. Instead, focus on strategies that support both your authenticity and effective communication.

Some helpful goals:

1. **Expressing your thoughts clearly**
2. **Understanding how neurotypical people communicate in different settings**
3. **Knowing your rights in conversations and workplaces**
4. **Recognizing the best conditions for you to communicate effectively**
5. **Advocating for accommodations that support your needs**
6. **Sharing your perspective with confidence**
7. **Setting boundaries when needed**
8. **Asking for help or clarification without fear of judgment**

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The Double Empathy Problem

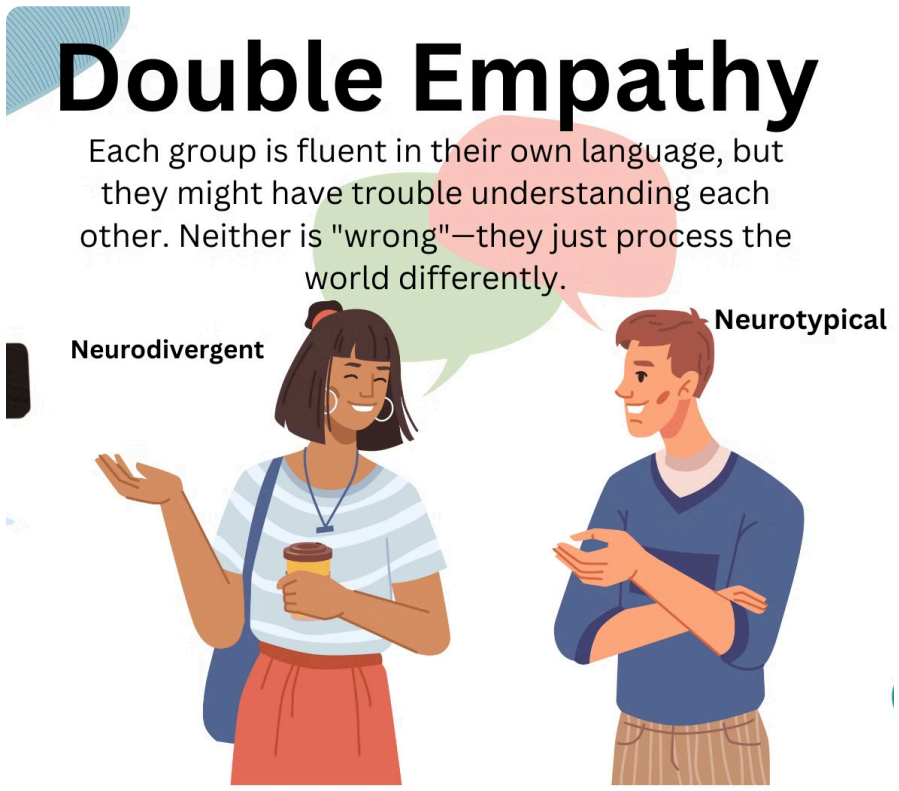
The concept of the "Double Empathy Problem" was first introduced by Dr. Damian Milton. It was originally designed to help us understand how we have harmed autistic people.

The "Double Empathy Problem" refers to mutual misunderstandings between neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals.

This theory points out that challenges aren't solely due to the neurodivergent person's characteristics, but also stem from the lack of understanding or empathy from the neurotypical side.

Historically, we have treated neurodivergent people as if they need to be fixed. Similar to conversion therapy meant to force conformity to sexual orientation norms, **therapy designed to fix, suppress and change the very nature of who autistic and ADHD people are and how they experience and relate to the world, does harm because of this approach.**

Mutual understanding and accommodation of differences, as proposed by the "double empathy problem," is key to reducing stigma and fostering empathy in society. It's crucial not only to adjust behaviors of individuals with autism or ADHD, but also to educate society on neurodivergent experiences. The issue of ADHD women often feeling defective, even in therapy, must be addressed. By embracing the double empathy theory, we can counteract the notion of being 'broken' and needing 'fixing'.



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The neuromajority imposing their communication norms on neurodivergent individuals parallels historical events where conquerors enforced their practices on perceived "backward" cultures.

Similarly, neurotypical individuals often mistakenly view neurodivergent communication styles as flawed, trying to impose their norms. This needs to change.

What do you think when you read the quote below?

> "Social skills training is a pseudoscientific and archaic model of therapy that is on par with other harmful therapies of the past. The highly biased clinical expectations for neuro minority populations to conform to neuro majority social standards are naïve at best, and ableist, domineering and elitist at its core." - Julie Roberts, Neurodiversity Affirming Collective

You can write your thoughts here.

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Self-Accommodation and Self-Advocacy Strategies

Here are some strategies to help navigate communication.

1

Manage Your Environment

- [ ] Avoid conversations when you're distracted or stressed.
- [ ] Recognize when you need a break from a conversation and ask for it.
- [ ] Ensure you are in optimal circumstances when you are receiving information or relaying it.

2

Set Clear Expectations

- [ ] Be open about needing more time to process information during conversations.
- [ ] Establish a cue with your partner to remind each other to take a break when conversations go off track.
- [ ] Tell friends, family, and others when you are overwhelmed or need time to process something.

3

Create Helpful Systems

- [ ] Use 'do not disturb' buttons or signs to ensure you are not interrupted during important communication.
- [ ] Choose how you respond or communicate information to others or receive information.
- [ ] Ask for written information at work.

4

Utilize Technology

- [ ] Ask to record information at work (online meeting software now makes this quite easy.)
- [ ] Ask someone to text or email you something so you don't forget it.
- [ ] Choose calm places in your house where you feel like you are more able to receive and process discussions or deliver communications such as email or texts.

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Helpful Advocacy Phrases

Setting Boundaries

"I can't do this right now because I can't give you my full attention. Can we do this later?"

"Can you get back to me at such and such a time? It would work better for me to focus fully on you."

Acknowledging Overwhelm

"I'm overwhelmed right now; can we please talk about this difficult topic after dinner or check with me then to see if I'm in a better place?"

"Can you check in with me tomorrow when I'm feeling less tired?"

Expressing Needs

"I had a hard day at work today and I might not be able to process this well, can you save it for tomorrow?"

Reflect on an accommodation that you think would help you with communication.

Write it down here

._____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Cultivating Self-Compassion

Understanding how and why things have been difficult and offering kindness to oneself is crucial.

Reflect on moments of self-criticism around your communication.

Why do you think they happened?

How can you extend compassion to yourself for these moments with new understanding you may now have?

Write down more thoughts here.

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Self-Advocacy

The Power of Self-Advocacy

Remember that your communication style is unique and valuable.

Identifying your sensory sensitivities, preferred communication modes, and energy levels can help you advocate for yourself and seek suitable accommodations.

Asking for help can be hard. Perfectionism can get in the way, making you feel like you should be able to handle everything on your own without assistance. Along with this, feelings of shame and rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD) can act as barriers to seeking help.

It's common to hide your needs and vulnerabilities to appear strong. But this can lead to misunderstandings.

Self-advocacy is critical to overcoming these obstacles. This involves working on new skills to replace the old ones, like reaching out to ask for clarification if you are confused and articulating your needs and thoughts. It's about building a stronger, more resilient version of yourself who knows she deserves to stand up for and communicate her needs.



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Expressing Confusion

If you are unsure about what someone means in a conversation, don't hesitate to ask for clarification or a deeper explanation.

Asking for What You Need

If certain changes would make you feel more comfortable or enhance your communication, work towards voicing these needs. This could be anything from a quieter environment to taking breaks during a long discussion.

Sharing Your Neurodivergent Experience and Perspective

While understanding the other person's point of view is important, it's equally vital to express your own thoughts and feelings. Remember, there's no "right" perspective in a conversation.

Expressing Confusion /Asking for Help

Example: "I'm not sure I understood what you just said. Can you please explain it again?"

Asking for What You Need

Example: "Would it be possible for us to continue this conversation in a quieter place? I find it easier to concentrate that way."

Sharing Your Neurodivergent Experience and Perspective

Example: "I know you said you feel Z, and I hear you. When I am focused on X it's hard for me to shift and do Y. I'd like to share the idea of monotropism with you. Would you be willing to learn about it?"

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Setting Boundaries

Defining what you are comfortable with in terms of conversation content, timing, and location can greatly enhance your communication experience. This could involve stating that certain topics are off-limits, specifying times you're available for conversation, or expressing preferences for a particular setting.

Example: "Right now I am feeling overwhelmed, would you mind checking in with me a little later to see if it's a better time to talk about this issue."



Remember, self-advocacy is a crucial skill that helps you communicate more effectively, and it's entirely appropriate and beneficial to express your needs and preferences.

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Sample Letter to My Childhood Self



Dear Little [Your Name],

I see you there, trying so hard to understand the world around you. I know how confusing it felt when conversations moved too fast, when people expected you to just "get" what they meant, and when your words didn’t come out the way you wanted them to. I know you tried your best, and I want you to know that was enough.

I remember how lonely it felt when you misread a situation or when your excitement about something was met with confusion—or worse, dismissal. It hurt to feel like you were always the one misunderstanding, the one who had to work harder to keep up, to fit in. But I want you to know that those struggles didn’t mean you were wrong or broken. They meant you were navigating a world that wasn’t built for the way your brain works.

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I want to tell you what I've learned: Communication isn't just about fitting into other people's expectations—it's about finding people who value how you express yourself. It's okay if social rules feel unclear or overwhelming. It's okay if you need more time to process or if you communicate best in ways that don't match the standard mold. Your way of expressing yourself is just as valid as anyone else's.

You were never alone, even though it felt like it. There were so many other girls who felt the same way, who masked their struggles, who wondered why things seemed so much easier for everyone else. I see them now, and I see you. You deserved patience and understanding. You deserved people who made space for you, who wanted to hear your thoughts, who valued the way you saw the world.

You did the best you could with what you had, and I am so proud of you for that. I know you carried so much self-doubt, but you don't have to anymore. Your words, your thoughts, your way of being—they matter. And you, just as you are, are enough.

I love you and I want you to know this.

[Your Name]

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How to Write The Letter to My Childhood (Self: Self-Compassion Exercise)

Instructions for Writing a Letter to Your Younger Self

1. **Find a Quiet Space**
   - Choose a comfortable, peaceful environment where you can reflect without distractions.
   - Take a few deep breaths to ground yourself before beginning.
2. **Visualize Your Younger Self**
   - Recall a time when you struggled with communication and social understanding.
   - Picture yourself at that age, experiencing confusion, isolation, or frustration.
3. **Start Your Letter with a Greeting**
   - Use a warm, gentle address, such as:
     "Dear Little [Your Name],"
4. **Acknowledge Her Struggles**
   - Write about the difficulties she faced in communication and social interactions.
   - Example:
     I know how difficult it was to find the right words, understand others, listen and remember, or decipher social cues that others seemed to grasp so easily."
5. **Validate Her Feelings**
   - Recognize and affirm the emotions she felt—confusion, loneliness, or even shame.
   - Example:
     "I can see how you felt confused, and different. There might have been times when you wondered why social situations seemed so easy for others but so difficult for you."
6. **Offer Compassion and Understanding**
   - Let her know she wasn't alone and that her feelings were normal.
   - Example:
     "You were not alone. There were many others who felt just as you did. I'm sorry you had to go through that. "
7. **Empower and Reassure Her**
   - Acknowledge her resilience and let her know she did the best she could.
   - Example:
     "You did the best you could, and I am so proud of you for that. You deserved more understanding and compassion. Who you were then—and who you are now—is okay."
8. **Reflect on the Purpose of This Exercise**
   - Recognize that this exercise is about self-understanding, self-compassion, and validation.
   - Release self-judgment and appreciate your resilience and growth.

This exercise helps cultivate mindfulness and kindness towards yourself, reinforcing that you weren't alone and that your experiences were valid.

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Group Discussion Questions

1. Can you recall any instances where you felt misunderstood due to your unique communication style?
    - How did you handle it?
2. How often do you find yourself masking or modifying your communication behavior to fit into 'neurotypical' norms?
    - How does this affect you?
3. Some good communication goals that are neurodivergent affirming are:

which of these resonate for you? Discuss :)

- to learn how to express your own thoughts effectively
- to understand your rights
- become aware of optimal circumstances for you to give and receive information
- advocate for those circumstances
- make accommodations for those circumstances
- articulate your perspectives
- set boundaries
- ask for help
- ask for clarification