

But is it Really Autism?

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In this session, we will explore some of the misconceptions about autism and widen the lens through which we understand autism, especially Level 1 autism.

Objectives:

- Debunk common misconceptions about autism
- Define what Level 1 autism looks like across the lifespan
- List autistic strengths

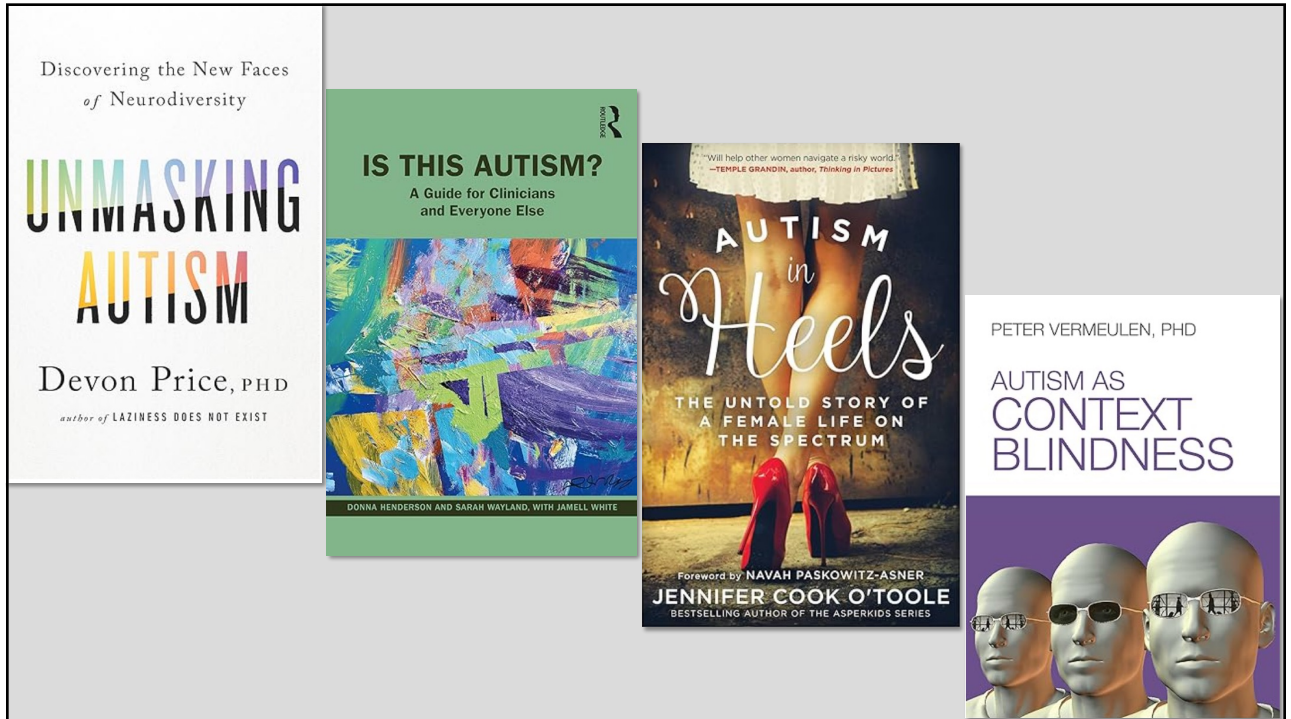


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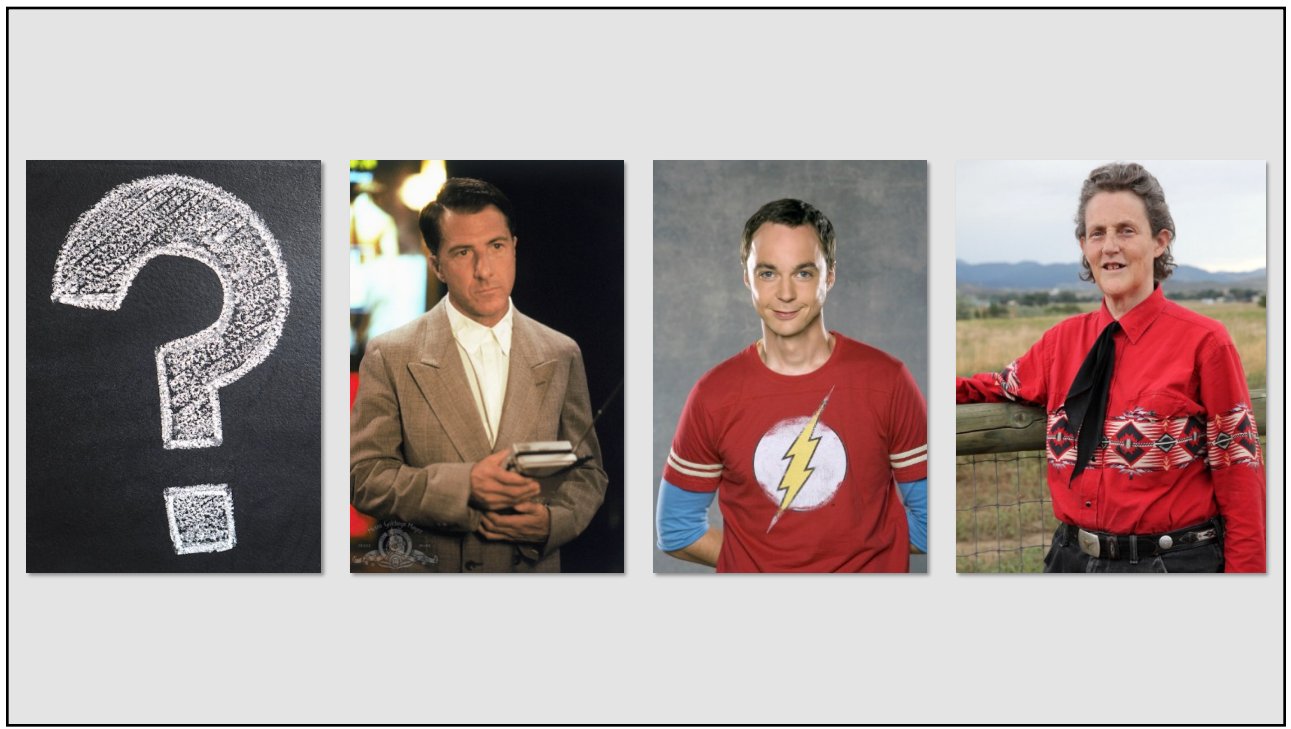
A few things first

- Person-first language versus identity-first language
- Referring to people who are not autistic
- Avoidance of functioning labels
- “Female” presentation of autism
- Camouflaging

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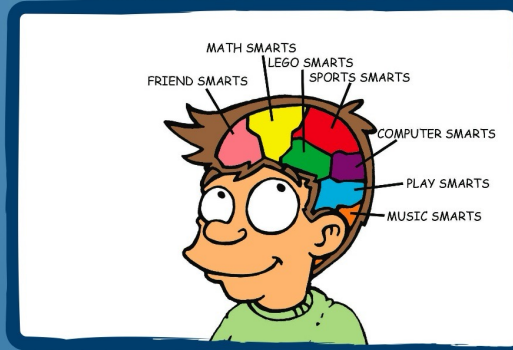
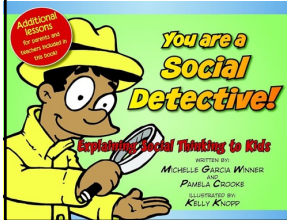
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Obligatory Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Diagnostic Slide

- 2.3% of people are diagnosed with ASD
- Unexpected social communication
 - Social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and relationships
- Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities
 - Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech
 - Need for consistency and rituals
 - Intense interests
 - Sensory processing differences
- Features can be present currently or in the past
- Level 1, 2, 3

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Autism as a natural form of human variation



In our brains there are all types of "smarts." Some people have really great computer smarts, music smarts, sports smarts, math smarts, or even Lego™ smarts!

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	Medical Model	Neurodiversity Paradigm
Core assumption	Normal is real, and flaws require correction	Brains come in varieties, and no brain is better than another brain; neurodiversity is an advantage for the species
Conceptualization of Autism		
Conceptualization of Disability		
Language Used		
Goals of Treatment		
Ideal Outcome		

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	Medical Model	Neurodiversity Paradigm
Core assumption		
Conceptualization of Autism	Autism is a disease/disorder that is bad/undesirable	Autism is part of human biodiversity and is part of a person's identity
Conceptualization of Disability		
Language Used		
Goals of Treatment		
Ideal Outcome		

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	Medical Model	Neurodiversity Paradigm
Core assumption		
Conceptualization of Autism		
Conceptualization of Disability	A defect within the person	Results from a poor fit between a person and their environment; lack of support is disabling
Language Used		
Goals of Treatment		
Ideal Outcome		

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	Medical Model	Neurodiversity Paradigm
Core assumption		
Conceptualization of Autism		
Conceptualization of Disability		
Language Used	Deficit based, ignores strengths	Difference based, includes strengths
Goals of Treatment		
Ideal Outcome		

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	Medical Model	Neurodiversity Paradigm
Core assumption		
Conceptualization of Autism		
Conceptualization of Disability		
Language Used		
Goals of Treatment	Make the autistic person look less autistic or find a “cure”	Help the autistic person be their authentic self in a way that is functional in their life; treatment should result in change in the environment to shift negative perceptions and support the autistic person
Ideal Outcome		

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	Medical Model	Neurodiversity Paradigm
Core assumption		
Conceptualization of Autism		
Conceptualization of Disability		
Language Used		
Goals of Treatment		
Ideal Outcome	Prevent or cure autism	Change the cultural narrative about autism (and other forms of biodiversity that have been pathologized)

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Being Autistic means...

- ...having a different type of nervous system
- ...experiencing, processing, and responding to the world differently from non-autistics
 - External sensations
 - Internal sensations
 - Movement patterns
 - Communication
 - Information processing
- ...differences change over time but are lifelong and pervasive

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Misconceptions about Autism

- You can't be autistic if...
 - You make eye contact, use gestures, and/or have good facial expressions
 - You have average to above average intelligence
 - You have friends, are married, etc.
 - You have basic social skills and understand sarcasm
- If an autistic person is good at camouflaging, then they don't need help/support
- Autistic people are not empathetic
- We are not "all a little bit autistic"
- Most clinicians are good at recognizing Level 1 ASD

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Let's try an experiment...

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THE RULES

1. When you greet someone, raise both arms
2. Always wait 5 seconds before responding in a conversation
3. Do not use gestures
4. Do not comment about the weather
5. Spin around when you say the word “and”

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If you messed up a social rule you didn't know existed, how you might feel?

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Let's talk about Level 1

(the "less obvious" presentations)

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Reciprocity

- Difficulty greeting or responding to greetings
- Low level of interpersonal interest
- Difficulty faking interest
- Tendency not to share personal information, experiences, or emotions
- Difficulty initiating interactions
- Difficulty with the flow of conversations and/or building conversations
- Having a very direct communication style
- Giving an unexpected amount of context to the listener
- Difficulty engaging with a group
- Difficulty seeing a comment or situation from the other person's point of view
- Misunderstanding people's intentions

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Nonverbal Communication

- It's so much more than eye contact
- Body positioning
- Personal space
- Eye gaze
- Volume
- Prosody
- Rate of speech
- Facial expressions
- Gestures

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Relationships

"My soul longs for connection, but my body longs for isolation."

-Dr. Neff, autistic psychologist

- Making and keeping friends
- Lower social motivation
- Understanding different types of relationships
- Being socially flexible
- Conflict management
- Being overly trusting or not being able to trust

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Repetitive or Idiosyncratic Behavior

- Use of body: clapping, rocking, skin picking, hair twisting, rubbing fingers together, scalp scratching, pacing, dancing
- Use of objects: might also include re-reading the same books and re-watching shows, repetitively making lists
- Speech/language: using favorite words a lot, repeating lines from songs or movies, asking the same thing repeatedly, “flat shower”
- Why?
 - Stress relief, calming, promotes focus, helps when overwhelmed, release of emotion, and just because
 - Being asked to stop can trigger stress and/or meltdown

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Flexibility

- Routines/rituals
- Strong reactions to small changes
- Difficulty coping with transitions
- Black-and-white thinking
- My way or the highway
- Getting “stuck” in thinking (e.g., not letting things go, being “stubborn”)
- Trouble understanding others having different morals
- Rigid rule following (& sometimes need for perfection)
- Literal interpretations
- Refusal to part with certain objects

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Uncommon or Intense Interests

- Uncommon is defined in the context of that person's family and culture
- Intense
 - Animals, reading, human behavior, human anatomy/medical science, plants, autism, music, and arts/crafts
 - Girls are more likely to have intense than uncommon interests, and they are usually about people or animals...or reading
- Attachment to objects
 - Intense
 - Uncommon for developmental level
 - Uncommon for the level of focus
- But doesn't everyone have a strong interest?

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Sensory Differences

- These are not specific to autism
- Hearing, touch, vision, taste, & smell
- But also: proprioception, vestibular, & interoception
- Can be under and/or over-responsiveness to sensations

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Camouflaging

Aka masking, passing as non-autistic, nuanced presentation, pretending to be "normal" ...

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Cultural considerations

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Possible Emotional Issues

- Anxiety
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Depression
- Autistic Burnout
- Trauma
- Alexithymia
- Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)
- Emotional Intensity and Lability
 - Neuro-crash
 - Extreme empathy (emotional disequilibrium)
 - Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD)
 - Bipolar Disorder
 - Repeated Self-Injury
 - Suicide

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Possible Cognitive Differences

- Attention
- Executive Functioning
- High need for explicit context
- Spoken language (understanding and speaking)
- Academics
- Processing speed
- Prosopagnosia (face blindness)
- Giftedness

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Possible Medical/Health Concerns

- Commonly
 - Sleep
 - Eating
 - Gastrointestinal
 - Dental
 - Atypical reactions to medications
 - Obesity
 - Menstruation & menopause
- Neurological
 - Motor skills
 - Tics/Tourette's
 - Seizures
 - Migraines
- Other health stuff
 - Autoimmune conditions
 - Connective tissue disorders
 - Dysautonomia/POTS
 - Genetic disorders

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Others

- Adaptive functioning
- Driving avoidance
- School avoidance
- Gender

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Autistic Strengths

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Sensory Differences

- Visual
- Hearing
- Smell
- Taste
- Touch
- Proprioception
- Vestibular
- High pain tolerance

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Cognition

- Making unique associations
- Narrow and intense focus
- Ability to notice details
- Less distracted in preferred tasks
- Systematizing (making sense of information)
- Bottom-up thinking (here's the problem and all the data, how do we solve it?)
- Visual thinking (thinking in pictures)
- Hyperlexia (fast readers and great spellers)
- Creative – but also analytical – thinking

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Intense Interests

- Intense curiosity
- Deep desire to learn
- Intensity of focus
- Development of an encyclopedic understanding of things
- Gaining skill through intense, self-directed study

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Consistency

- Repetition without boredom or making mistakes
- Examples: air traffic control, running a nuclear reactor, coding

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Social Communication Style

- Learning to camouflage can lead to skills in understanding social dynamics
- Less susceptible to peer pressure (more likely to question social norms)
- May do very well academically in areas of strength
- Strong sense of integrity
- Ability to enjoy solitude

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Social Communication Style

- Strong sense of fairness/justice that can be channeled into action
- Very attuned to the emotions of others
- Accepting of differences and open to marginalized & misunderstood groups
- Direct communication style can lead to genuine and honest interactions
- Make incredibly thoughtful friends

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Humor













- Amazing sense of humor!
- Deliberately using flat affect
- Enjoying wordplay/puns
- Preferring dark humor, sarcasm, or satire


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Grit

- Strong work ethic
- Tenacity
- Courage
- Resilience and perseverance living in a society not built for autistic people

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 <p>Attention to detail</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoroughness • Accuracy 	 <p>Methodical approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analytical • Spotting patterns, repetition
 <p>Deep focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentration • Freedom from distraction 	 <p>Novel approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique thought processes • Innovative solutions
 <p>Observational skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen, look, learn approach • Fact finding 	 <p>Creativity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinctive imagination • Expression of ideas
 <p>Absorb and retain facts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent long term memory • Superior recall 	 <p>Tenacity and resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determination • Challenge opinions
 <p>Visual skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual learning and recall • Detail-focussed 	 <p>Accepting of difference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less likely to judge others • May question norms
 <p>Expertise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth knowledge • High level of skills 	 <p>Integrity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honesty, loyalty • Commitment


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Why focus on strengths?

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