

Autism: Strengths-based rather than a deficits-based perspective

by

Matt Lowry

Matt Lowry, an autistic therapist, thought it might be an idea to post a thread to discuss further how the DSM criteria differs from the autistic experience, as follows:

The DSM is problematic in that it's extremely ableist, and vaguely describes autistic traits. EVERYTHING about autism comes down to neurology- **we have hyperconnected brains**. We have way more synapses than neurotypicals, and it influences EVERYTHING.

So, with that said, I'll break down **the DSM criteria** into more neurodiversity-accepting language:

A- Differences in **social communication and interaction**

B- **Stimming, routines and special interests**

C- **Masking** - we are born with these traits, but learn how to mask them

D- **Our traits cause other people distress**

E- It is **NOT** due to intellectual disability

A- DIFFERENT social communication and interaction as evidenced by the following:

- 1- Differences in communication, tendency to go off on tangents, tendency to talk passionately about special interests, and tendency to not engage in small talk.
- 2- Differences in nonverbal communication, including stimming while talking, looking at more interesting things while talking, and being bored in conversation because they'd rather be doing something else.
- 3- Due to the above differences in communication, autistic people tend to be shunned by neurotypicals and therefore are conditioned to believe that we're somehow less social.
*Note- this criteria is reversed scored at Comic-Con, in a comic shop or gaming store, or when around other autistic people.

B) Repetitive behavior or interests as evidenced by at least two of the following:

- 1- **Stimming** or engaging in **echolalia** (the repetition of words or phrases found interesting and quotable by the autistic person)
 - 2- **Security in routines**. Autistic people do not have a sensory filter, so the world is perceived as a constant state of chaos. Routines and expectations give comfort to overwhelmed autistic people.
 - 3- **SPecial Interests (SPINs)**- Due to hyperconnected brains, autistic people feel more passionately about what we love, so when we have a special interest, we tend to fawn over and fixate on it. It's a level of enjoyment that neurotypical people cannot experience due to the lack of connections.
 - 4- **Hyper or hyporeactivity to stimuli**- Again, due to hyperconnections, we feel things more intensely. Sometimes, however, we feel things less intensely because we tune them out in favor of other stimuli. Sometimes, we'll go outside without a coat because we're too focused on the mission at hand.
- C- We're born with these traits, but learn how to mask them.** Sometimes, they only show up when we're stressed and let our guards down.

D- These traits cause other people distress. Note- the DSM ONLY indicates impairment when it affects other people or jobs, but not when it's a daily issue that we learn to live with. Ableist bullshit right there.

E- It's not due to intellectual disability. Fun fact, autistic people often do poorly on IQ tests due to timed portions and performance anxiety. When the evaluator doesn't understand autistic people being tested, it automatically puts the evaluatee at a disadvantage, because our system resources are being used to mask WHILE also trying to complete IQ tests. Again, Ableist bullshit.

Then, you get into the **levels of autism, based on how inconveniencing it is for the people around us, rather than how much support we need to be happy and healthy.**

Honestly, if you want a **better framework for evaluating autism, I use this:**

1) Sensory intensity (any meltdowns or shutdowns? Sensitivity to light, complexity of sound, clothing texture, food, or electromagnetic hums?)

2) Issues with interoception (an internal sense that tells us when we're hungry, thirsty, full, tired, or have to go to the bathroom. We tend to overwork ourselves to death because we can't tell when we need to stop.)

3) Emotional intensity (people might be misdiagnosed with bipolar or BPD due to going 0-90 when afraid, angry, sad, or happy)

4) Communication differences (like Social pragmatic issues- We speak in pragmatic disjointed speech, sometimes (but not always) with flat affect or monotone voice. We tell stories the indirect, scenic route rather than from A to B to C.

5) Relationship differences (Because of the communication differences, we relate to people differently. If people understand us, we bond to them for life. If people don't understand us, they can fuck right off. Also, we tend to have RSD- Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria, a HUGE fear of rejection. We also have HYPER empathy- a tendency to wholeheartedly download emotions of other people, phrases from others, and accents from others (also echolalia)

6) Executive Functioning differences- If it's something we like, we're fastidious with it. We're hyper-organized to a degree deemed obsessive by nerotypicals. At the same time, if we don't care, you can't force us to do it. We might have an easy time making huge worlds in Minecraft, but math homework just never gets done. We also have PDA- Pathological Demand Avoidance. Due to anxiety, our first response to most requests is a firm, "HELL NO." Requests must be phrased with an option to consider the request and a time and date of which the request is to be completed. We also have what's called Autistic Inertia- a tendency to where, if we're doing an enjoyable task, we STAY with that task, and if we're at rest, we STAY at rest. That makes transitions super difficult for us.

7) Stims (We fidget. A LOT. Like, with anything. Its a form of energy regulation, and we stim more when anxious or upset. Telling us not to stim is like telling us not to breathe, and ABA can fuck right off.)

8) SPINS- SPecial INterests (Again, because we have such strong passions, we deep dive into them. We may research for hours without knowing time has passed. We'll forget to eat or drink or go to the bathroom, because we're engrossed in what we love. A form of autistic relationship is to download someone else's SPINs and embrace their passions. If an autistic person downloads your SPIN, it's a true friendship. SPINs may last days, weeks, or a lifetime. A person may periodically revisit a SPIN, or drop it and never pick it up again. Autistic minds and autistic culture is WAY more than the DSM makes us out to be. I really encourage you to seek out more autistic people, so you can see these for yourself. Any other openly autistic people care to comment and add to this?