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# Autism: A different way of thinking



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# Introduction

- Will be looking at some key aspects of what defines autism – this includes potential differences in sensory experiences.
- Going into further depth regarding such sensory experiences and how they are connected with the stress and anxiety often felt by people on the autism spectrum.

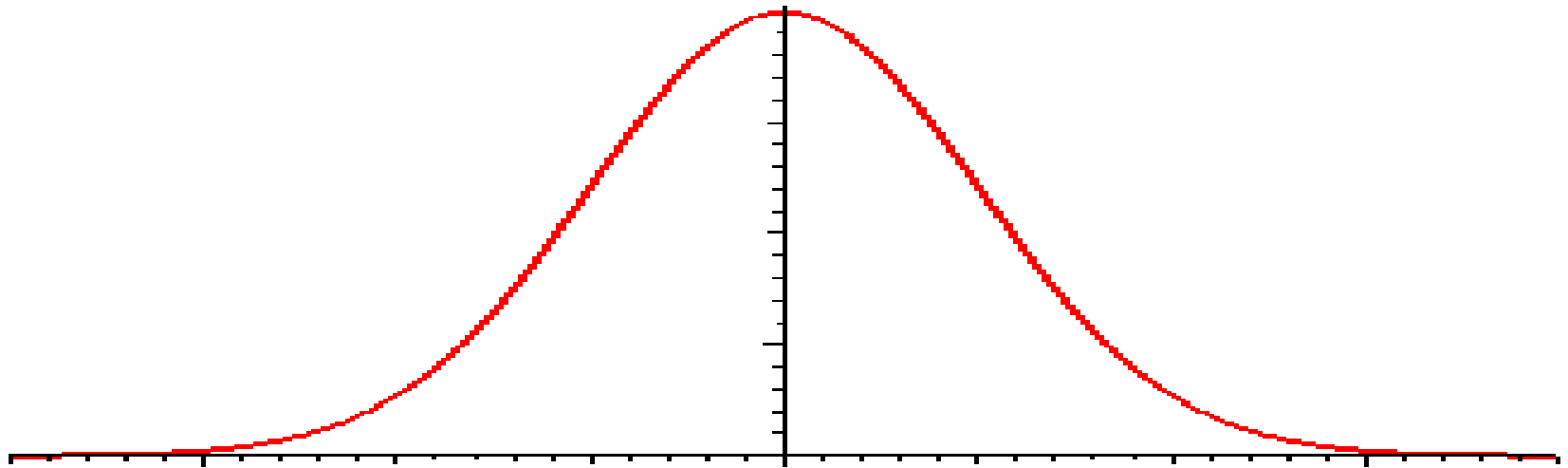
# Changing diagnostic criteria

- The DSM and the ICD.
- Asperger's appears in 1994 and yet now being subsumed under the broader category of ASD and sensory differences added to the criteria.
- Main diagnostic areas: repetitive/narrowly focussed behaviours and interests, and social communication and interaction.

# Different theories of autistic ways of thinking / perceiving

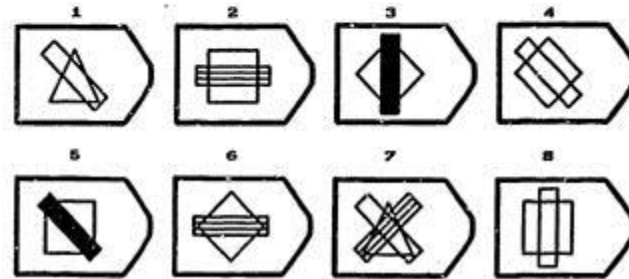
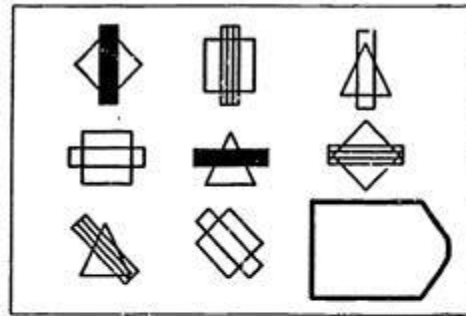
- Executive functioning theory.
- Weak coherence theory.
- Monotropism or 'interest model' theory.
- Film clip: My autism and me.

# The spiky profile of abilities



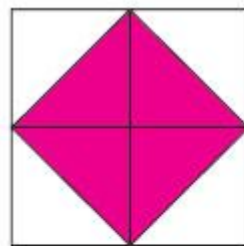
# Non-verbal intelligence

- 'Non-verbal' intelligence tests.

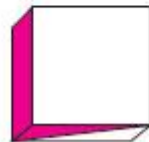


# Enhanced sensory perceptions?

- The block design and embedded figure tests.



original



(a)

Types of block available for making the pattern



(b)

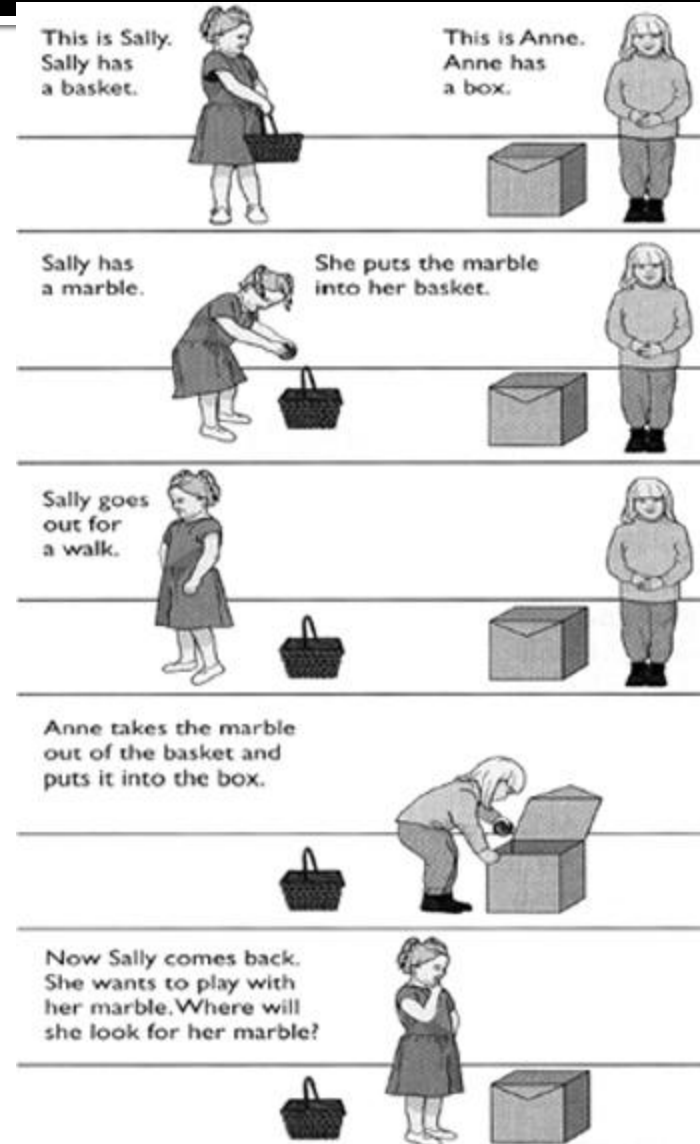


# Sensory issues

- Sensory integration and fragmentation.
- Hypo and hyper sensitivity.
- Context and motivation.
- Stressful stimuli.
- Stress, arousal and sensory overload.
- Film clip: Too much information.

# Theory of mind

- The ability to empathise with others and imagine their thoughts and feelings, in order to comprehend and predict the behaviour of others (also called 'mind-reading' and 'mentalising').



# Mutual incomprehension

- “95% of people don’t understand me”.
- “Friends are overwhelming”.
- “Adults never leave me alone”.
- “Adults don’t stop bullying me”.

# The double empathy problem

- Rather than seeing the breakdown in interaction between autistic and non-autistic people as solely located in the mind of the autistic person. The theory of the double empathy problem sees it as largely due to the differing perspectives of those attempting to interact with one another.

# Autistic dispositions

- As with the rest of the population – great deal of diversity in personality and temperament.
- Often with differing responses to stressful experiences when encountered.
- The 'fight or flight' response – 'meltdowns' and 'shutdowns'.



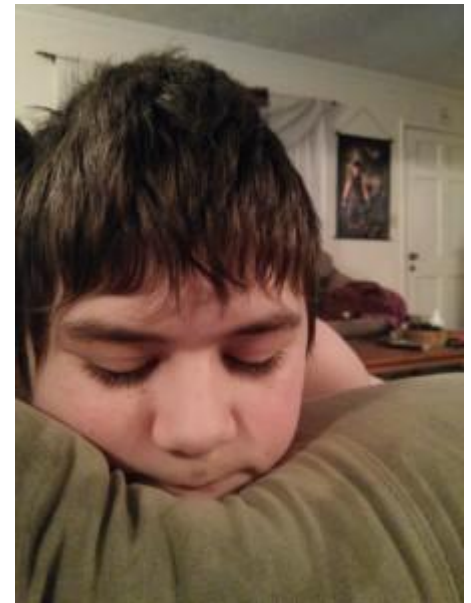
# Meltdown

- The 'meltdown' response and misunderstandings of it.
- 'Challenging behaviour'.
- No choice in the matter.
- Non-autistic people meltdown too – e.g. road rage.



# Shutdown

- Noticing the less obvious - such as more passive natured autistic people and the 'shutdown' response.
- Characterised by withdrawal.
- Often unable to think clearly or to express oneself at all.
- Again – no choice in the matter.



# Panic attack

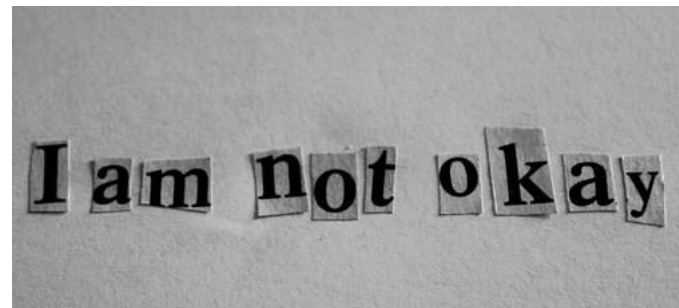
- Shutdowns that are infused with emotional content and/or confusion can lead to a panic attack response.
- This can be characterised by hyperventilating, and in a worst case scenario – passing out unconscious.





# Overload

- Once in such an overloaded state, confusion reigns and communication becomes largely impossible.
- Do everything you can to reduce the stress in order to help.
- Do not ask 'are you alright?' – as one blatantly is not!



# Forms of stressful experience – information overload

- Multi-tasking, integrating information, and fragmentation.
- Interruptions to the 'attention spot light'.



# Forms of stressful experience – emotional overload

- How others see you and how you see yourself. Emotional disjuncture and 'identity crisis'.
- 'Exposure anxiety'.



# Key points in reducing stress

- Acceptance of the autistic way of being, work with the autistic person and not against their autism.
- Watch out for 'triggers' in the environment (although sometimes these cannot be avoided – e.g. the dreaded fire alarm!).
- Explore interests and fascinations together.
- Having strong rapport and building mutually fulfilling and trusting relationships.
- Encourage autistic companionship.
- Encourage understanding of non-autistic people and culture, rather than teaching how to poorly mimic what one is not.
- 'Low arousal' is not 'no arousal' – many sensory experiences are fun!

