


RIT

A photograph of three students sitting on a stone wall outdoors. The student on the left is a young man with a backpack, wearing a red and white shirt and dark pants. The student in the middle is a young woman with long blonde hair, wearing a blue top and jeans. The student on the right is a young woman with dark hair, wearing a dark jacket with 'RIT' on it and light blue jeans. They are all smiling and talking. The background shows a brick building, a black lamppost, and a large evergreen tree.

# Autism & Higher Education: Fostering a Neuroinclusive Campus

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## Kendra Evans (she/her)

**Rural Poor**

**Cancer  
Support**

**Mom of 3**



**1st  
Generation**

**Divorced**

**International  
Adoption**

# Spoken vs. Unspoken Expectations

## Learning Objectives

- Develop a shared vocabulary
- Understand common challenges for Autistic students
- Learn how *Universal Design* benefits *all* students

## Challenge

- Incidence is increasing 1 in 88 (2008) to 1 in 36 (2020)\*
- 80-85% of Autistic college graduates are unemployed or underemployed
- Just 22% of Autistic adults have employment of any kind\*\*

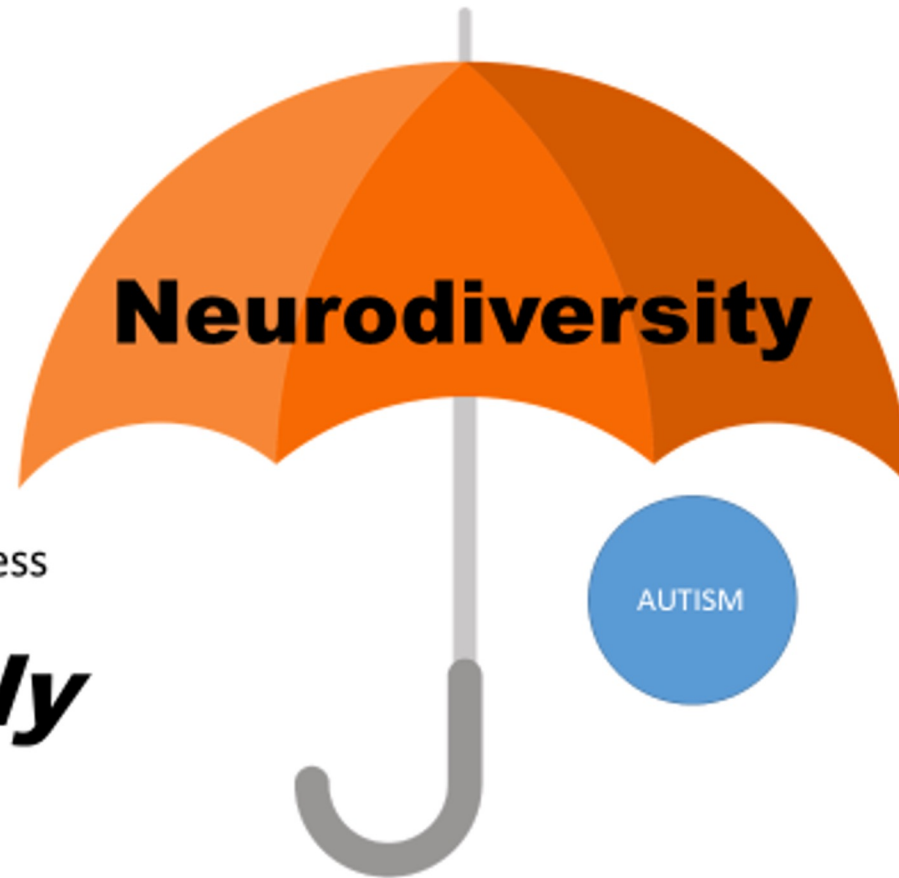
\*CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

\*\* National Autistic Society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/new-data-on-the-autism-employment-gap>

# **PART 1:**

# **Shared Vocabulary**

- Humans naturally process information ***differently***



**Neurodiverse**  
**Neurodivergent**  
**Neurotypical**



**We are already working in  
neurodiverse teams.**

## Language Matters

- **Autistic** Person (Identity first – social model)
- Person with **autism** (Person first – disability/medical model)

## ***Autistic person***

- Autism is a normal part of life and makes Autistic people who they are.
- Autistic people are born autistic and will be autistic for life.
- Autism affects how people think, communicate, and interact with the world.**
- Autistic people are in every community and always have been.
- Autistic people are different than non-autistic people, and that's OK.
- There is no one way to be autistic.
- The communities we are a part of and the ways we are treated shape what autism is like for us.**

\*<https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/about-autism/>

## *Person with autism*

- Autism is a lifelong developmental disability
- It affects how people perceive and interact with the world**
- Autism is not an illness or disease. It does not need a 'cure.'
- It is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways.
- Like all people, Autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses.

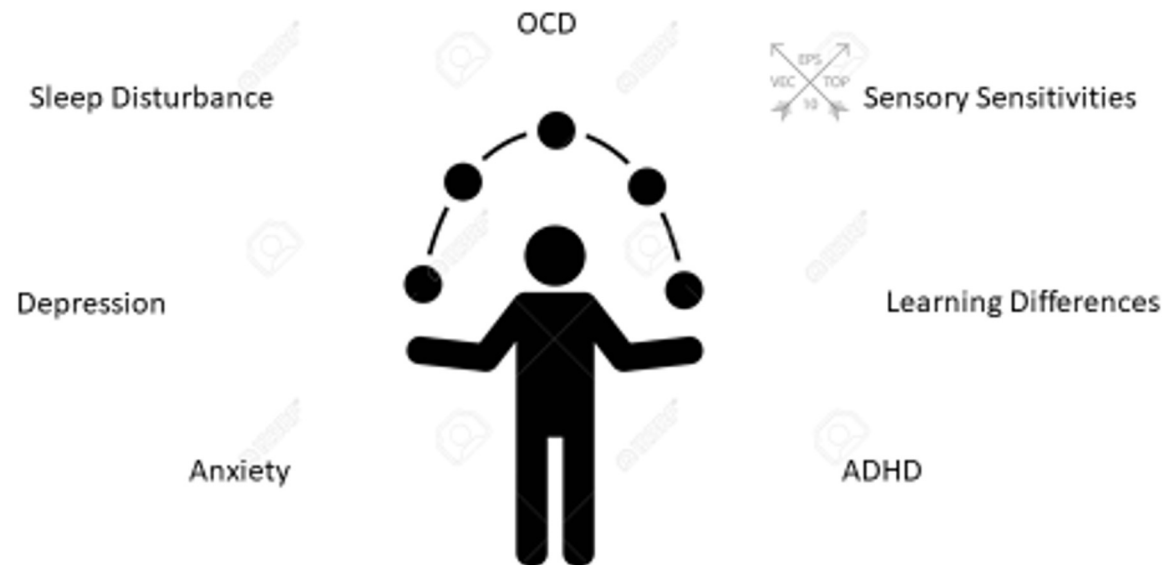
# Each Autistic Person is Different

- Just as there is natural variation among all humans
- Each person experiences the world and their autism differently
- Some characteristics are **OFTEN** but **NOT ALWAYS** observed in Autistic individuals

## What You Might Notice (often but not always)

- Limited or no eye contact
- Social behavior that is awkward or unexpected
- Behaviors that seem suspicious or unpredictable
- Difficulty following verbal instructions
- Slow response time
- Unable to communicate at all (if in crisis)

# Co-Occurring Challenges



First Look: Data on Adults on the Autism Spectrum, 2009.

[http://www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian\\_research\\_reports/adults\\_on\\_the\\_autism\\_spectrum\\_september\\_2009](http://www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research_reports/adults_on_the_autism_spectrum_september_2009)

## PLEASE AVOID:

- The puzzle piece (use infinity symbol instead)
- Autism Speaks
- “mild autism” or “high-functioning autism”



# **PART 2:**

# **Common Challenges**

# FEAR OF FAILURE

- Sensory Sensitivities
- Social Exclusion
- Communication Differences

# Sensory Sensitivity

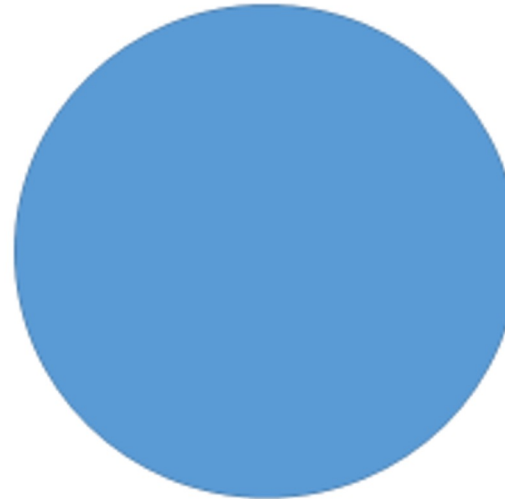
- Too **little** sensory input can cause people to seek sensation (e.g., pacing, rocking, flapping)
- Too **much** sensory input can cause distress (“sensory overload”)

# Emotional Regulation

modulating emotional responses

# **BIG** reaction

Small Problem



**I WOULD IF I COULD**

## Steps to De-escalate

- **Remember** – they would if they could
- **Empathize** – they are overwhelmed, embarrassed and afraid of failure
- **Speak** – quietly, using I statements, and validate
- **Take a break** – encourage them to take a walk, get a drink, go to the bathroom

## De-escalation is ALWAYS the Goal

- Autistic people often have difficulty interpreting body language and behavior
- Have difficulty understanding the intentions of others
- Uncertainty and lack of control are risk factors for dysregulation
- “Problem behaviors” are an individual’s response to dysregulation



- Sensory Sensitivities
- **Social Exclusion**
- Communication Differences

# Always Being “OTHER”

- Emotional Dysregulation
- Misreading or misunderstanding social cues
- Not knowing or following unspoken “rules”
- Intention vs. Impact



Space

Time

Objects

People

## Situations:

Imagine you are in an elevator. What are the unspoken social expectations?

Imagine you are at a funeral. What are the unspoken social expectations?

Imagine you are at a birthday party. What are the unspoken social expectations?

- Sensory Sensitivities
- Social Exclusion
- **Communication Differences**

## Inclusive Communication

- Awareness that everyone communicates differently reduces anxiety and misunderstandings.
- Awareness that everyone communicates differently encourages participation, respect, and belonging.

**Implicit** communication rules are the **use of facial expressions, body language, gestures, postures or vocal qualities to help get a message across.**

## Inclusive Communication Specifics

- Present one question at a time
- Clarify understanding
- Keep any directions simple and declarative
- Allow extra processing and response time
- Repeat and rephrase as needed
- Use language that is clear and concise
- Provide a summary of the interaction and what they can expect next, in writing when possible

# PART 3: Universal Design



## Community Examples

- Hybrid Work Environment
- Gender Neutral Bathrooms
- Ramps

## Higher Education Examples

- Breaks
- Posting materials online in advance
- Previewing
- Allowing for remote participation
- Allow cameras to be off

## MORE Higher Education Examples

- Flexible deadlines
- Written directions
- **\*K\*I\*S\*S\***
- Alternate forms of participation
- Headphones

## AVOID

- Assuming that an individual understands body language, facial expressions, or other social cues (be explicit)
- Physical intervention or touching that could further escalate a situation
- Automatically interpreting unexpected behavior as disrespectful, noncompliant or threatening

## Other Things to Consider:

- Use conduct policy (in writing) to communicate rules
- Ask what resources students are already using on campus
- Allow students to have a familiar (safe) person with them
- Break up longer discussions



- Announce the Unspoken Curriculum
- Make “Performance Enhancers” Universal
- TEACH Group Work
- Support Executive Functioning



## Key Take Aways:

- No one fails on purpose
- Make learning visible
- Keep it short, sweet and direct
- De-escalation is the key to success
- Universal design is BEST PRACTICE

