Beyond the Buzzword:

What Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice Really Means.

Kim French, R.S-LP Katelyn Mayo, R.S-LP

Who Are We?

Kim French, R.S-LP(C)



- Private Practice Therapist 13 years
- Private Practice Owner 4 years
- Part of province's first multidisciplinary private Autism Assessment team for 7 years
- Personal experience in neurodivergent family



Katelyn Mayo, R.S-LP(C)

- Registered Speech-Language Pathologist 3 years
- Experience in school board and private practice settings
- Diagnosed AuDHD (Autistic and ADHD)

A Note on Language and Terminology!

Throughout this presentation, we will use identity-first terminology (i.e., Autistic people, neurodivergent individual, etc...). This language has been identified as the preference by a large portion of neurodivergent populations and it is the language we have decided to use to refer to the population in this broad and general senses.

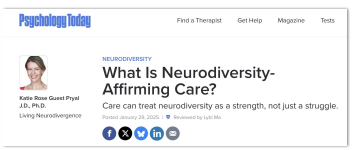
It should be noted that language preferences and use are personal and decisions about identity-first vs. person-first terminology should be made by the neurodivergent individual (whenever possible).

Reflections and Takeaways

Reflect & Discuss

- What are you already doing in your practice that is neurodiversity-affirming?
- What is one small change you could make tomorrow?
- What resources, strategies, etc... have helped you in providing neurodiversity-affirming support?
- What have you learned from neurodivergent individuals? What do you want to learn more about?
- What will you do to continue your learning after today's session?

Notes

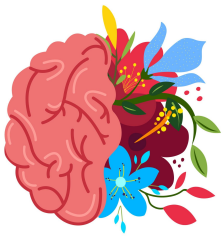


"Neuro-affirming care takes into account a person's neurodivergence, and how their brain functions differently from the neurotypical norm; it celebrates those differences while still respecting struggles and providing assistance."

Neurodiversity-Affirming Care

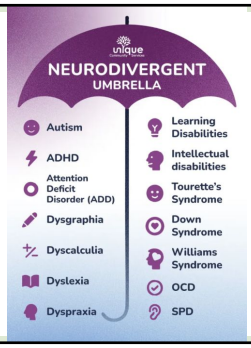
WHO?	WHAT?
WHY?	HOW?

WHO?



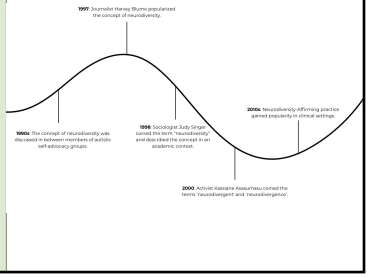
Neurodiversity = the concept that <u>all</u> brains are different.

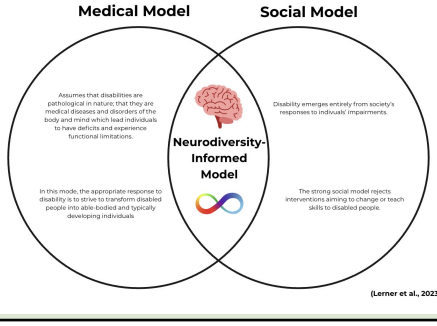
Neurodivergent = a brain that *diverges* from what is seen as the "standard".



WHAT?

History of *Neurodiversity* and *Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice*





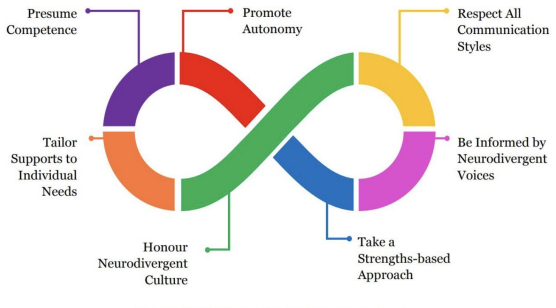
Neurodiversity-Informed Model of Disability

- *Middle ground* between a medical model and a strong social model
- Can draw on *social-relational* and *interactionist* models of disability
- Encourages environmental modifications, societal shifts, and individual support
- Intervention encourages skill building, but discourages attempts to "normalize"

(Lerner et al., 2023)

A key part of neurodiversity-affirming practice is how we view disability. But what do we do next?

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices do not refer to any one specific strategy, tool, or intervention.



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Reflection

What does Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice mean to you in three words or less?

Mentimeter Word Cloud Link

WHY?

What have we been doing instead of NDA?

- Compliance-based approaches
- Teaching ND individuals to "mask" to appear more like Neurotypicals (NT's)
- "Symptom Reduction"
- Assuming NT way of functioning is the better, ideal, and preferred way to communicate, learn, and exist = Ableism

What is the Impact of these "Traditional" Approaches?

- Lai et al. (2019)
  - Depressive and anxiety disorders, respectively, at double and triple NT rates

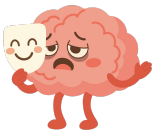






- Camouflaging (masking) associated with feeling distressed (depressed, anxious, and/or stressed), regardless of whether those traits were very mild or more severe.
- For women, camouflaging was also associated with having thoughts about suicide and struggling to function in everyday life.
  - Beck et al. (2020)

- Intervention promoting masking may unintentionally increase the risk of mental health problems
  - Corbett et al. (2021)

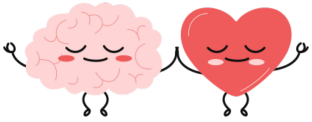


Why is NDA Care Different?

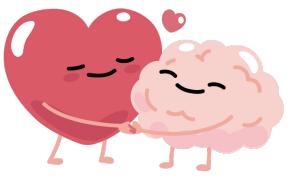
- Studies show NDA care:
  - Reduces trauma
  - Improves quality of life outcomes
  - Reduces exhaustion and burnout
  - Improves mental health
    - Decreases levels of anxiety and depression
    - Increases self-confidence and self-acceptance

- When acceptance is prioritized over masking, we see better outcomes
- When measuring Quality of Life outcomes of autistic individuals, support and acceptance matter more than reducing 'symptoms' or 'behaviour'
  - Cooper et al. (2022)

- Autistic mental health is positively correlated with autism acceptance and perceived quality of support
  - Pantazakos & Vanaken (2023)

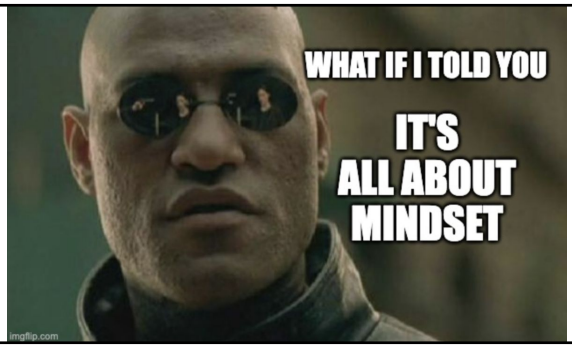


- Autistic-specific peer support and social support ***for*** autistic people, ***by*** autistic people can lead to increased self-awareness, better relationships, and improved well-being.
  - Crompton et al. (2022)



HOW?





Becoming Neuroaffirming is *NOT* about checking off a "Must-Do" list…

It's about making a Mindset Shift!



Implicit Biases: *Who Me?*



Yes YOU! And ME Too!!

We *ALL* have implicit biases.

We need to unpack and unlearn them.



Project Implicit at Harvard:
https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/index.html

In our society, we tend to unconsciously rely on neurotypical standards to judge, label, or treat neurodivergent behavior as disordered rather than simply different



We associate NT traits and compliance with "good" behaviour, politeness, and respect



This can unconsciously influence how we perceive and interpret a person's behaviours, language, and needs

It impacts how we support them, talk about them, and show up for them

There is a "right" way to play. → There is no "right" way to play. Autistic play is authentic play.

Sensory supports mean quiet rooms with dim lighting. → Sensory support looks different for everyone.

We can start to shift our perspective by...

- *Opening our minds* to "unlearning" some of our previously held beliefs and practices
- *Learning* about new perspectives and strategies
- *Presuming* Competency and Potential!
- *Challenging* systems, current practices, and other people's perspectives
- *Listening* to ND voices and lived experiences



Extending our new mindsets

This extends to ***ALL*** people in our lives. Our friends, family, colleagues, strangers, etc.

We are not truly NDA if we only extend that respect and acceptance to certain people.

Many of the ND population have invisible disabilities - or ND characteristics, differences that are not obvious from the outside

The challenges and struggles faced by many people are imperceptible to most people around them



Looking for *neurodiversity-affirming* support?

Here are some things to keep in mind...



Language Matters

The language we use and how we talk about a person can influence how others see them, and how they see themselves.

Don't Forget!



Avoid:		Try:
Deficit or Disorder	→	Difference or Disability
Normal	→	Typical
Behavior problem/ Non-compliant	→	Dysregulated/ Communicating needs
Making assumptions about identity	→	Asking about & respecting identity language

Miss SPEECHIE

Consider Sensory Supports





Honour and Integrate Interests

- Specific interests are associated with social connection and belonging for Autistic people. (Thomas, 2026)
- Knowing, validating, and honouring interests allows you to build meaningful connections, and this supports meaningful communication.
- It is important to *know* interests AND *honour* them.
- Deep and specific interests can be a ***strength***.



Universal Design for Learning

"When things are designed to be accessible for people of all abilities, they're better for everybody."
DeCook (2026)



Listen to and Learn from Lived Experiences



Reflection, Open-Mindedness, and Continued Learning



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