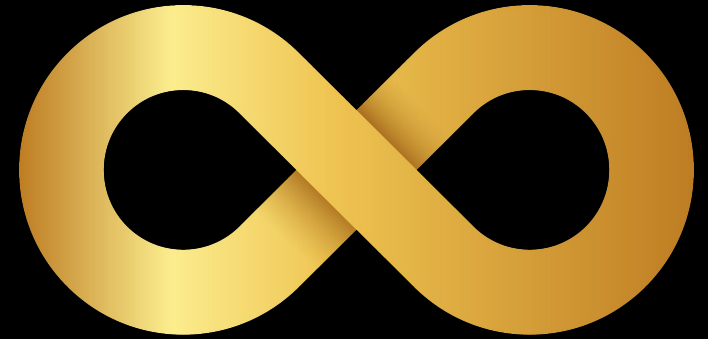


Neuroaffirming Practices in Mental Health Counseling: Practical Skills for Working with Autistic Clients



Emily Walsh,
M.A., LPC-A

Emily Walsh

- Autistic adult with ADHD and OCD
- Licensed Professional Counselor Associate in South Carolina specializing in providing mental health counseling to Autistic adults, and adults with ADHD



Learning Objectives (Slide 1 of 2)

By the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

- 01** Define neuroaffirming practice and distinguish it from a deficit-based approach.

- 02** Identify common barriers autistic clients may face in traditional counseling settings.

Learning Objectives (Slide 2 of 2)

By the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

03 Demonstrate at least three in-session strategies to support communication, emotional regulation, and client autonomy.

04 Modify therapeutic techniques to align with autistic cognitive and sensory styles.

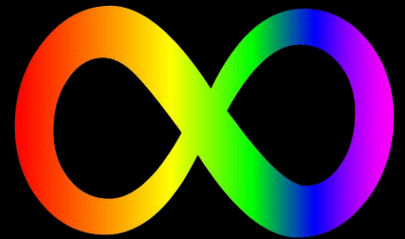
Deficit-Based Approach

- Historically, interventions have focused on “curing or normalizing the disabled person to make them more like an abled, typical individual,” contributing to stigma and masking behaviors (Dwyer, 2022)
- Common goals included improving perceived social deficits, minimizing repetitive behaviors, and encouraging neurotypical communication styles



Neuroaffirming Practice

- Supporting clients in ways that respect and affirm their neurotype
- “Diversity of minds and brains should be valued and individuals with neurological disabilities should be accepted for who they are” (Dwyer, 2022)
- “Curing or normalizing the disabled person should not be goals” (Dwyer, 2022)



Key Terms



Masking -

Suppressing natural behaviors to appear neurotypical.



Burnout -

“Pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus... resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports” (Raymaker, et al., 2020).

Common Barriers



Communication



Executive
Functioning



Masking



Sensory
Processing



Processing
Time



Generalizing
Strategies

Barrier: Communication



- “Verbal communication expectations make therapy difficult” (Mazurek, et al., 2023)
- Many Autistic individuals report “having trouble talking about feelings” (Mazurek, et al., 2023)

Barrier: Executive Functioning



- Difficulty focusing during therapeutic activities such as mindfulness meditation (Mazurek, et al., 2023)
- Difficulty implementing strategies without a support person
- Logistical barriers with scheduling/time management

Barrier: Masking



- Autistic clients may suppress or camouflage their authentic thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and support needs in session
- When Autistic clients feel unable to unmask in therapy, treatment may remain surface-level, limiting trust, self-expression, and meaningful progress

Barrier: Sensory Processing



- Autistic client's can have overwhelming experiences from the time they walk into the office until the time they leave
- Ex: fluorescent lights, plug-ins/candles, perfumes of staff/other clients, volume of background music, visual stimuli inside office or outside windows

Barrier: Processing Time



- Autistic clients may need additional time to interpret questions, identify emotions, organize thoughts, and formulate responses.
- Fast-paced conversations or frequent interruptions may increase stress, reduce participation, and lead clients to appear disengaged or unresponsive when they are actively processing information.

Barrier: Generalizing Skills



- Mazurek et al., (2023) discovered, “many tended to ‘forget to use [strategies learned in therapy]’ in daily life.”
- Difficulties generalizing skills due to lack of executive functioning skills, due to difficulty generalizing with environmental changes, and due to difficulty accessing skills during crisis

In-Session Skills: Communication Strategies

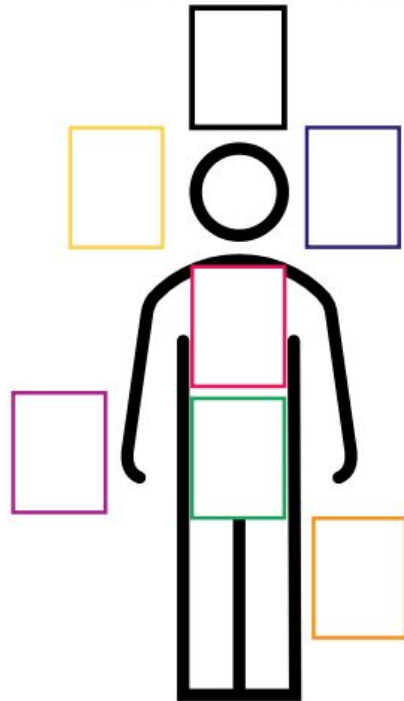
- Use clear, direct, literal language
- Avoid implied meaning, metaphors (or explain them explicitly)
- Allow extra processing time to accommodate differences in cognitive processing speed
- Offer alternative communication methods (writing, typing, drawing/whiteboard)
- Incorporate art into sessions (Mazurek, et al., 2023)





























In-Session Skills: Emotional Regulation Support





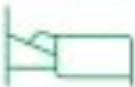


















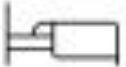
- Use visual supports (emotion charts, scales)
- Identify sensory contributors to distress
- Slow paced diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindful meditation
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy
 - Distress Tolerance
 - Emotional Regulation
 - Mindfulness



_____ 's _____ Body Clues



Brain 	Thinking clearly 	Headache 	Can't think clearly 	Act before thinking it through 	Head feels like it is exploding 	Can't focus 
Face 	Smiling 	Hot 	Clenched teeth 	Crying 	Sweaty 	Tight forehead 
Voice 	Talking calmly 	Can't speak 	Shouting 	Talking lots 	Voice shaking 	Speak without thinking 
Chest 	Heart beating calmly 	Heart beating fast 	Tight chest 	Heart feels heavy 	Breathing fast 	Can't breathe 

Body 	Relaxed 	Goosebumps 	Shaking 	Feels sick 	Frozen in place 	Has butterflies 
Hands 	Calm and still 	Clenched fists 	Sweaty 	Fidgety 	Biting nails 	
Muscles 	Relaxed 	Tense/tight 	Slouched 	Energetic 		
Other	Need the toilet 	Dry mouth 	Tight/lump in throat 	Want to run away 	Want to hit something 	Feeling tired 

In-Session Skills: Sensory & Environmental Adjustments

- Low lighting
- Minimal noise (avoiding repetitive sounds such as ticking clocks)
- No “big light” or fluorescents
- Provide or allow fidget tools
- Freedom for movement, fidgeting, stimming
- Consider a fragrance free policy for your office
- Notice and bring awareness to motor stereotypies in session



ALWAYS BE HONEST BE KIND
KEEP YOUR PROMISES SMILE
SAY PLEASE AND THANK YOU
BE GRATEFUL LAUGH SHARE
DO YOUR BEST WORK HARD
FORGIVE AND FORGET LOVE
BE HAPPY SAY YOUR PRAYERS
SHOW GRACE SPEAK TRUTH



In-Session Skills: Collaborative & Strengths-Based Work

- Prioritize the client's wellbeing, identity, and self-defined goals rather than “normalizing” behaviors
- Collaboratively set therapy goals and offer structured choices throughout sessions
- Normalize autonomy and boundaries by encouraging clients to say “no,” request accommodations, take breaks, and provide corrective feedback

Modifying CBT

- Provide structure and predictability (agendas, written summaries, visual supports, routine check-ins)
- Allow extra processing time and avoiding pressure for immediate verbal responses
- Avoid goals centered on “appearing neurotypical”
- Use graphics/visuals to describe emotions
- Including sensory regulation, energy accounting, and recovery planning alongside cognitive strategies

Modifying CBT

- Distinguishing between anxiety-driven thoughts and valid autistic experiences (e.g., sensory overload, social fatigue, misunderstanding by others)
 - “It’s too loud in here” vs. “I am trapped and there is nothing I can do”
- Modify exposure work so it does not encourage enduring overwhelming sensory or social situations without accommodations

Rethinking “Social Skills Training”

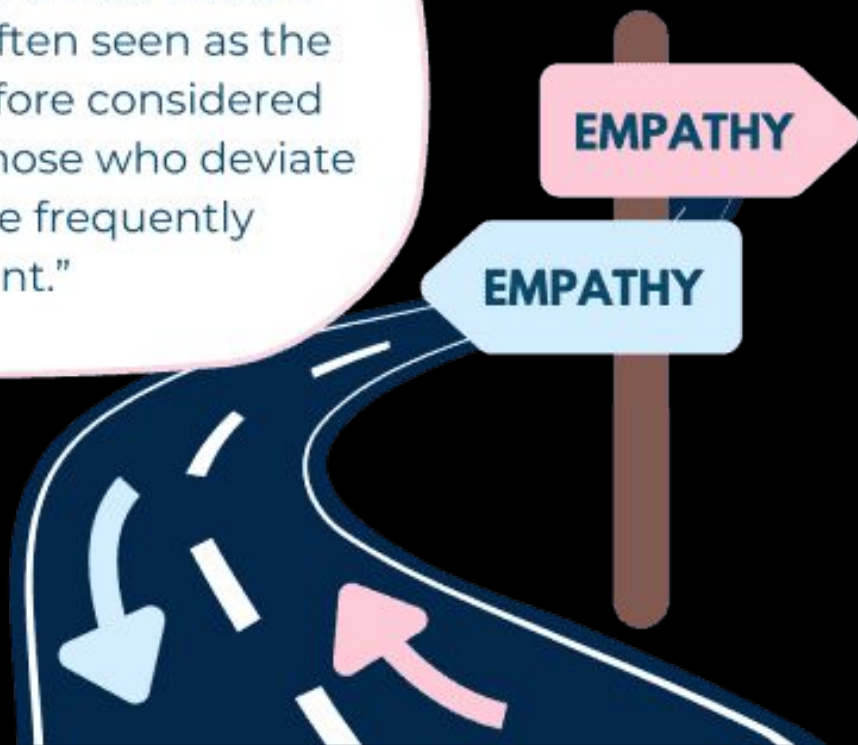
- Clarify what is important to the client
- Autistic communication is not “bad” but it may not be the right “language” for that environment
- Social skills instruction that emphasizes conformity over authenticity may promote masking and increase risk of burnout
- PEERS for Young Adults Videos*

Double Empathy Problem

- Autistic minds tend to experience the world and communicate one way while Allistic minds tend to experience the world and communicate another way
- When an Autistic person and Allistic person interact, there may be difficulties or “a language/cultural barrier”
- Those differences are often blamed on the perceived “deficiencies” of the Autistic individual

Empathy is a two-way street.

However, because allistic culture is dominant, it's often seen as the "norm" and therefore considered the "right" way. Those who deviate from this norm are frequently viewed as "deficient."



Using Special Interests Therapeutically

- Use discussions of the interest to support rapport-building
- Identify strengths associated with the interest, such as attention to detail, persistence, creativity, or expertise
- Explore how the interest can be used to build community, connection, or vocational opportunities



**“feeling heard, accepted, and validated
was the most essential element of the therapy
experience.”**

Mazurek, et al. (2023)

Questions?

Contact Info:

Emily Walsh, M.A., LPC-A

emilywalshcounselor@gmail.com

www.palmettotherapist.com

Resources (Slide 1 of 2)

- Emotion Body Clues:

<https://languagedisorder.org.au/about-us/our-services/school-support-services/professional-learning/resources/>

- Emotion-Sensation Wheel:

https://lindsaybraman.com/emotion-sensation-feeling-wheel/?_gl=1*88dmq2*_gcl_au*MTE2MTg2NTgyNC4xNzc5MTg2MjMz*_ga*Mzk3OTEyMTczLjE3NzkxODYwNTM.*_ga_E6KE9QG69X*czE3NzkxODYwNTIkbzEkZzEkdDE3NzkxODYzMzAkajE2JGwwJGgw#download

Resources (Slide 2 of 2)

- PEERS Videos:

<https://routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/9781138238718/videos.php>

References (Slide 1 of 4)

- Dwyer P. (2022). The Neurodiversity Approach(es): What Are They and What Do They Mean for Researchers?. *Human development*, 66(2), 73–92. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000523723>
- Mazurek, M. O., Pappagianopoulos, J., Brunt, S., Sadikova, E., Nevill, R., Menezes, M., & Harkins, C. (2023). A mixed methods study of autistic adults' mental health therapy experiences. *Clinical psychology & psychotherapy*, 30(4), 767–779. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2835>

References (Slide 2 of 4)

- Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem.' *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008>
- Neff, M. (2024). The Double Empathy Problem: Why Autistic Communication is a Difference not a Deficit [Graphic]. Neurodivergent insights. <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/the-double-empathy-problem/?srsltid=AfmBOorFqkEzfkavV9oegiKfq5V1Kiw2vIQ176GDAAQUtMDbEd128txdC>

References (Slide 3 of 4)

- Raymaker, D. M., Teo, A. R., Steckler, N. A., Lentz, B., Scharer, M., Delos Santos, A., Kapp, S. K., Hunter, M., Joyce, A., & Nicolaidis, C. (2020). "Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew": Defining Autistic Burnout. *Autism in adulthood*, 2(2), 132–143. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0079>
- Vecteezy (n.d.) Gold Autism Infinity Sign Symbol Free PNG [Clip Art]. Vecteezy.
<https://www.vecteezy.com/png/36607471-gold-autism-infinity-sign-symbol>

References (Slide 4 of 4)

- (n.d.). Emotion Body Clues [Printable Worksheet]. Language Disorder Australia.
<https://languagedisorder.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Emotion-Body-Clues.pdf>