

# Welcome!

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# Connected Teens: Navigating Friendships Beyond Norms

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# OneOp

## Readiness. Knowledge. Network.

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# Today's Presenter

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Psychotherapist  
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# Learning Objectives

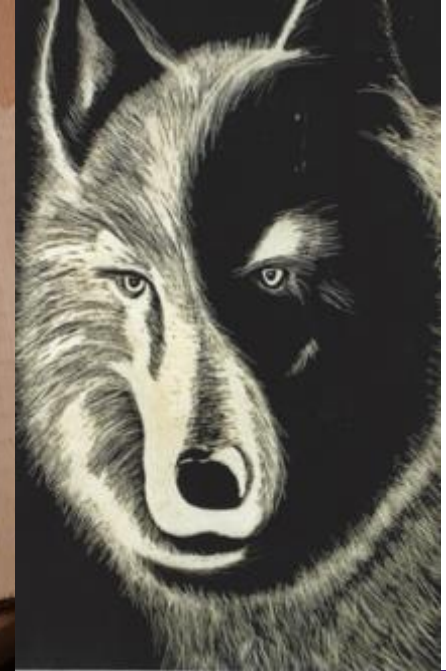
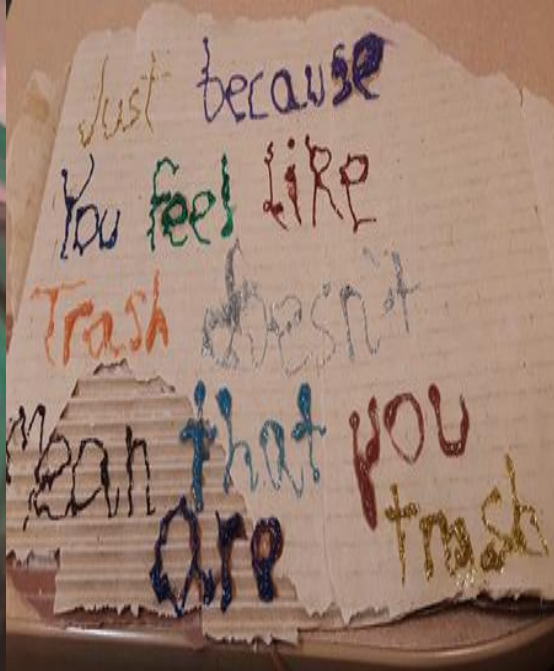
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- Discover three strategies for encouraging positive interactions among neurodivergent youth
- Identify three common social patterns in neurodivergent youth and learn ways to support them
- Understand the term double empathy and recognize common misunderstandings neurodivergent youth encounter

# Who I Am & Why I Care About This

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A Story of a Wolf Taught to Act Like a Fox



# Let's Chat!

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In a word or short phrase, how would you describe what belonging looks like for teens in your setting?



Select **'Everyone'** from the drop-down menu when commenting in the chat pod.

# Neurodiversity Reflects Differences In:

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Social Styles

Emotion Expression

Sensory Experiences

Information  
Processing

Interests

Attention

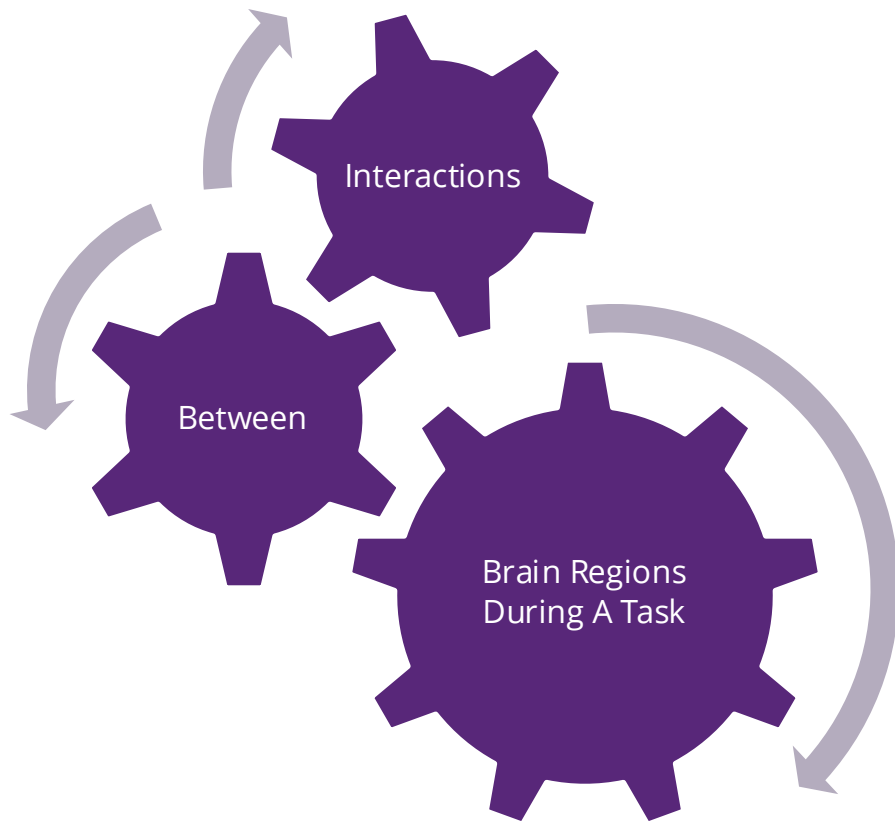
Movement Patterns

A neurodiversity-affirming perspective is not restricted to specific diagnoses.

It's about appreciating a **person's lived experience** and what the **world looks like from their eyes beyond any labels placed on them.**

# Functional Connectivity

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Most often neurodivergent experiences have grounding in brain differences, such as in functional connectivity.

Functional Connectivity: How different brain regions communicate and interact with one another during rest and work (e.g., tasks).

If two areas are frequently active at the same time, they are “functionally connected” regardless of any structural linkage (e.g., by neurons) that may or may not exist.

# Functional Connectivity: The Default Mode Network

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## Default Mode Network

- What the brain is doing at rest, brain wiring
- Usually measured through an fMRI



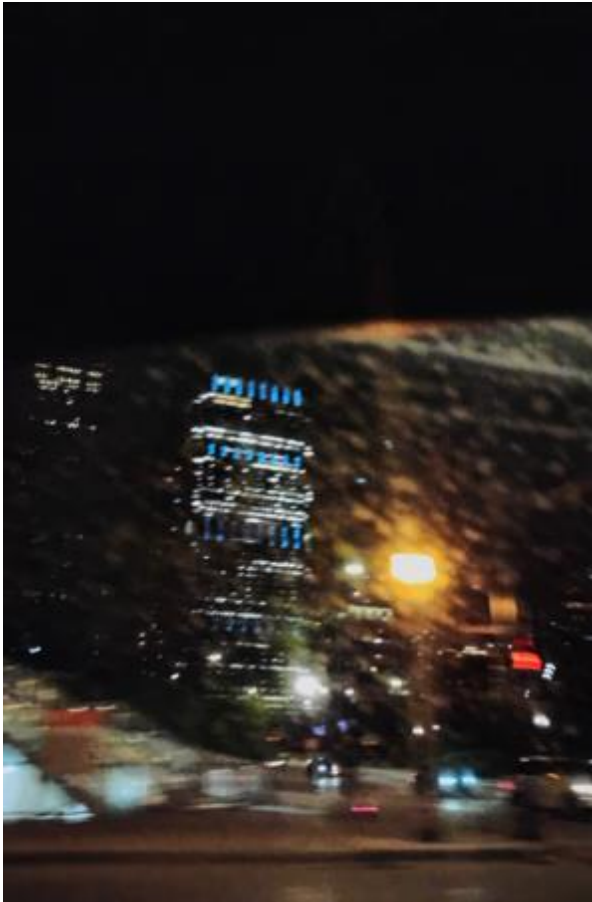
Both Autism and ADHD are associated with different patterns of connectivity when the brain is at rest compared to neurotypical brains.



The brain is wired differently.

# Default Mode Network: The Brain at Rest

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In Autism, fMRI studies have shown more similarity between functional connectivity when the brain is at rest to when it is focused on something specific (salience network).

A review of fMRIs from 1301 participants with ADHD and 1301 without found less coupling between the default mode (resting state) in ADHD individuals' network and task-positive networks than neurotypical people.

# Like an Owl

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At rest, autistic individuals are aware of a lot of details but may not be engaged.

When diving in though, we dive **all** in and might be perceived as being stuck.

This can look like obsessive anxieties at its worst and passion at its best.

Things like eye contact may be overwhelming



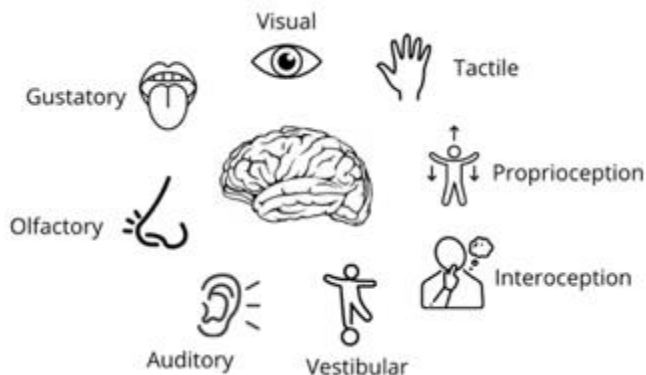
# Processing: Bottom-Up & Top-Down

What am I sensing?



## Bottom-Up Processing

Using information from senses to assemble and work upwards to create a perception.



## Top-Down Processing

Using mental models, ideas, previous experience to interpret sensory experience



Is that something I've sensed before?

# The World Through Neurodivergent Eyes

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- Autistic and neurotypical adults were shown ambivalent shapes
- Marked differences in perception were found between groups
- When the shapes were incongruent, autistic adults had a unique perception
- This suggests a more prominent bottom-up style of processing among autistic adults

Eye tracking studies have found autistic people tend to:

- Glance through more aspects of a page
- Change focus more rapidly than neurotypical individuals



# Eye Contact

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- Most neurotypical people find eye contact enhances connection and see it as a **sign of respect**
- For some neurodivergent people, eye contact can be **uncomfortable and make it difficult to focus**, especially in already stressful situations
- This may be related to connectivity differences discussed earlier.
  - Eyes have **a lot of details. For autistic individuals who experience the world in a very detailed way, this can be overwhelming**

# Fidgeting

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- Fidgeting is often viewed negatively, as a sign of **being bored or not caring**
- Many neurodivergent people find **they focus best when fidgeting**
- This may be due to **stronger pairing between areas of the brain associated with motor functions and those associated with concentration**

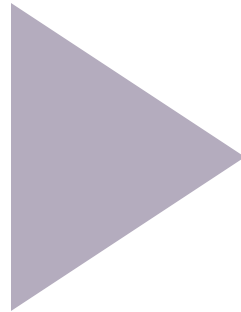
# Is It a Fidget or a Toy?

Fidget	Toy
<p><b>Secondary Focus:</b> When a fidget is being used appropriately, it should remain a secondary focus. This means that it should stay in the background of your attention.</p>	<p><b>Primary Focus:</b> A fidget becomes a toy when it is the primary focus of attention rather than what is being taught.</p>
<p><b>Eyes on Learning:</b> Eyes should remain on the source of learning when fidgets are used correctly. Whether you are completing an independent task or paying attention to the teacher, your focus needs to be on learning.</p>	<p><b>Eyes on Fidget:</b> When eyes are on the fidget instead of the source of learning, it is no longer being used as a fidget. The fidget has now become the primary focus, and attention to the task is lost.</p>
<p><b>Mindlessly Used:</b> When used properly, a fidget is used mindlessly to the point where it becomes a part of a system.</p>	<p><b>Actively Used:</b> When the fidget is actively used, you are investigating how it works, trying to build with it, or trying to create something with it. If a fidget is being actively used, it has now become a toy.</p>

# Posturing

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Odd posturing like sitting cross legged or putting feet under self on a chair can be seen as rude



For many neurodivergent people, the pressure from these positions is regulating to the nervous system

# Yet...

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Social skills programs often focus on teaching eye contact (which may work well for neurotypical people but can interfere with autistic individuals' natural attention processes)



Behavioral interventions often seek to teach ADHD students to be quiet and still when they may need to be active to learn

# A Common Story

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Different perceptions and neurotypes lead to different expectations and conclusions



Neurotypical people have often characterized this as a lack of “skill” or “common sense”

# On Uncommon Sense

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- Neurodivergent people might act in ways that are difficult for others to understand based on what works best for their brains.
- They might come to different conclusions about what people mean or what is expected - **convergent thinking**.
- However, neurodivergent people often excel in **divergent thinking**, a necessary ingredient for creative problem solving.

# Sound Familiar?

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You know, I bet you would argue with me if I said the sky was blue!



Actually, the sky is a rainbow of colors – red, pink, blue, green, purple, white, sometimes black. You also have to think of which sky you are looking at. In Montana the sky looks different than in New York City. And then you have the northern lights and those have their own variations. Also, some people are color blind. Which is a misnomer in itself...



# Any Questions?

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# Double Empathy

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We understand people best who think like us.



Historically neurodivergent people were viewed as missing social cues.



Neurotypical people can be just as challenged when picking up neurodivergent social cues.

# In Real Life

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- Setting: In the Cafeteria

## Lisa

- 15 years old
- Neurotypical (NT)
- Very Self-Conscious
- Enjoys talking about other teens
- Expects reciprocal eye contact and shared conversation



## Emily

- 15 years old
- Neurodivergent
- Feels like people are usually mean regardless of what she does
- Enjoys talking about fantasy creatures
- Looks away when talking





**NT Expectation:**  
Lisa assumes that Emily will want to talk about Nancy's prom dress.



**ND Communication:**  
Rigid social rules "It is never okay to talk about other people if they aren't there." So, she freezes.



**NT Misinterpretation:**  
Lisa sees Emily's silence as meaning that she doesn't want to talk.



**ND Communication:**  
Emily is more comfortable to talking about fantasy creatures. So she pulls out her sketchbook to show Lisa her most recent fantasy sketches



**Empathy Disconnect & Exclusion:** Lisa thinks Emily is acting "weird" and assumes that they can't connect. Views the conversation topic change as abrupt and bizarre



**NT Misinterpretation:**  
Sees this as further evidence that people are mean and she can't make friends.

# Hypothetical Conversation Debrief

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There was a reciprocal misunderstanding in this communication scenario.

**Lisa (NT):** Tried to engage with Emily on the topic of prom dresses as a timely topic, not to gossip. Is frustrated by Emily's change in direction and sees it as 'weird' and evidence that they can't talk to each other.

**Emily (ND):** Thought that Lisa's talking about Nancy's prom dress was violating a social rule that she should never talk about people who aren't there. She hoped to re-route the conversation to what she thought was a more appropriate topic and was confused by Lisa's reaction.

Both teens interpreted the interaction based on their own communication styles, which led each to feel misunderstood.

# Space for All to Learn

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- Saying that a neurodivergent person cannot pick up on social cues is like saying that a person whose first language is not English cannot speak.
- Different brains have different needs and cues.

# Misunderstandings

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- Youth can be misunderstood and labeled, often in non-clinical ways
- In her book, 'Drama Queen: One Autistic Woman and a Life of Unhelpful Labels' autistic author Sara Gibbs describes several "labels" she was given before autism including:

Crybaby

Scaredy-Cat

Inappropriate

Drama Queen

Chatterbox

Spoiled Brat

Teacher's Pet

Weirdo

# Let's Chat!

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How might these labels affect youth at school? How might they affect friendships?



Select **'Everyone'** from the drop-down menu when commenting in the chat pod.

# The Impact

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- Unfortunately, neurodivergent youth often experience:
  - Bullying
  - Rejection
  - Underestimation of ability
  - Academic difficulties
  - Self-Limiting beliefs



# For Neurodivergent Youth, Sometimes...

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# A Cascade of Risk Factors

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- High rates of depression and anxiety in neurodivergent youth
- Missing school and dropping out of school
- Heightened risk of eating disorders (especially anorexia in autism)
- Increased risk of self-harm
- Thoughts of suicide

# Neurodivergence, Isolation and Bullying

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- One study found that 47% of autistic youth reported experiencing bullying compared to 1% of their neurotypical peers
- Bullying is a **major** predictor of school avoidance among neurodivergent youth
- Experiencing bullying in school is a predictor of suicidal thoughts throughout a youth's lifetime and **1 in 10 autistic youth will attempt suicide**

# Let's Chat!

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What are some of the reasons you think youth try to miss school? How do schools react to absenteeism?



Select **'Everyone'** from the drop-down menu when commenting in the chat pod.

Neurodivergent youth who miss school often feel that they do not belong.



**How do schools approach school avoidance?**

# ADHD, Friendships, and Depression

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For most youth, friendships are central.



A study measuring friendship quality, ADHD symptoms, depression, and family relationships found a strong connection between friendship troubles and depression in youth with ADHD.

# To Fit In...

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- Neurodivergent youth will often try to act like others (mask)
- Can make it difficult to form genuine friendships
- Masking also puts youth at heightened risk for depression and low self-worth
- Interventions are often implemented to further change the youth (or their behavior). This sometimes encourages masking in the process.



# An Experiment

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- Imagine if we woke up tomorrow and the social norms have all changed!
- Consider:
  - How would you feel?
  - What would you think about yourself and others as you tried to go through your day-to-day activities and tasks?
  - How do you think you'd react?

# Social Norm #1

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Be direct and always tell the truth.



# Social Norm #2

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Small talk is pointless and rude.



# Social Norm #3

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Eye contact is optional.



# Social Norm #4

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Giving minute details is to be expected especially involving specialized interests.



# Social Norm #5

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Ask questions and expect a lot of questions.



# Social Norm #6

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Wearing headphones and/or wandering away is a normal reaction to life and to be expected.



# Social Norm #7

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Talk to everyone the same; Don't change your words or style between your friends, doctors, teachers, or police.



# Social Norm #8

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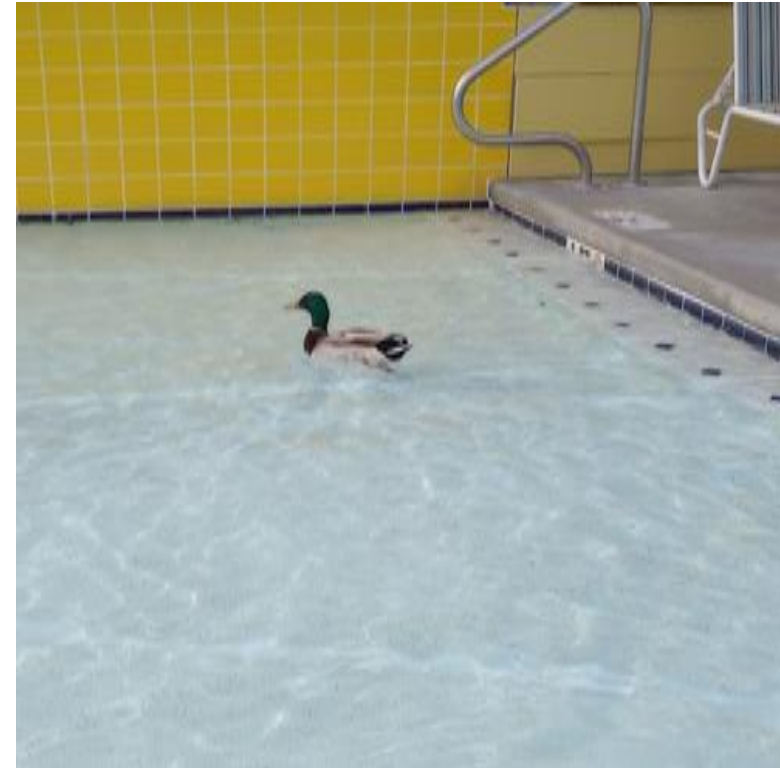
It's typical to show enthusiasm with the whole body (i.e., jumping or talking loudly when excited) and it's also typical to be monotone



# Social Norm #9

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Diving deeply into one topic is the best way to connect.



# Social Norm #10

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Interrupt others and expect to be interrupted. Sometimes people forget their thoughts if they don't talk fast enough.



# Let's Chat!

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What would it be like to have to change your entire way of interacting with others? If these norms didn't match with your neurotype, what might you think about yourself? How would this impact your potential?



Select **'Everyone'** from the drop-down menu when commenting in the chat pod.

# Neurodivergent Youth Need

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- Places to showcase their strengths and passions
- Understanding from others (willingness to learn)
- Freedom from assumptions and judgement
- Empowerment to communicate their needs effectively
- Inclusion
- Accommodations

**Sometimes the changes that are needed aren't in the youth...**

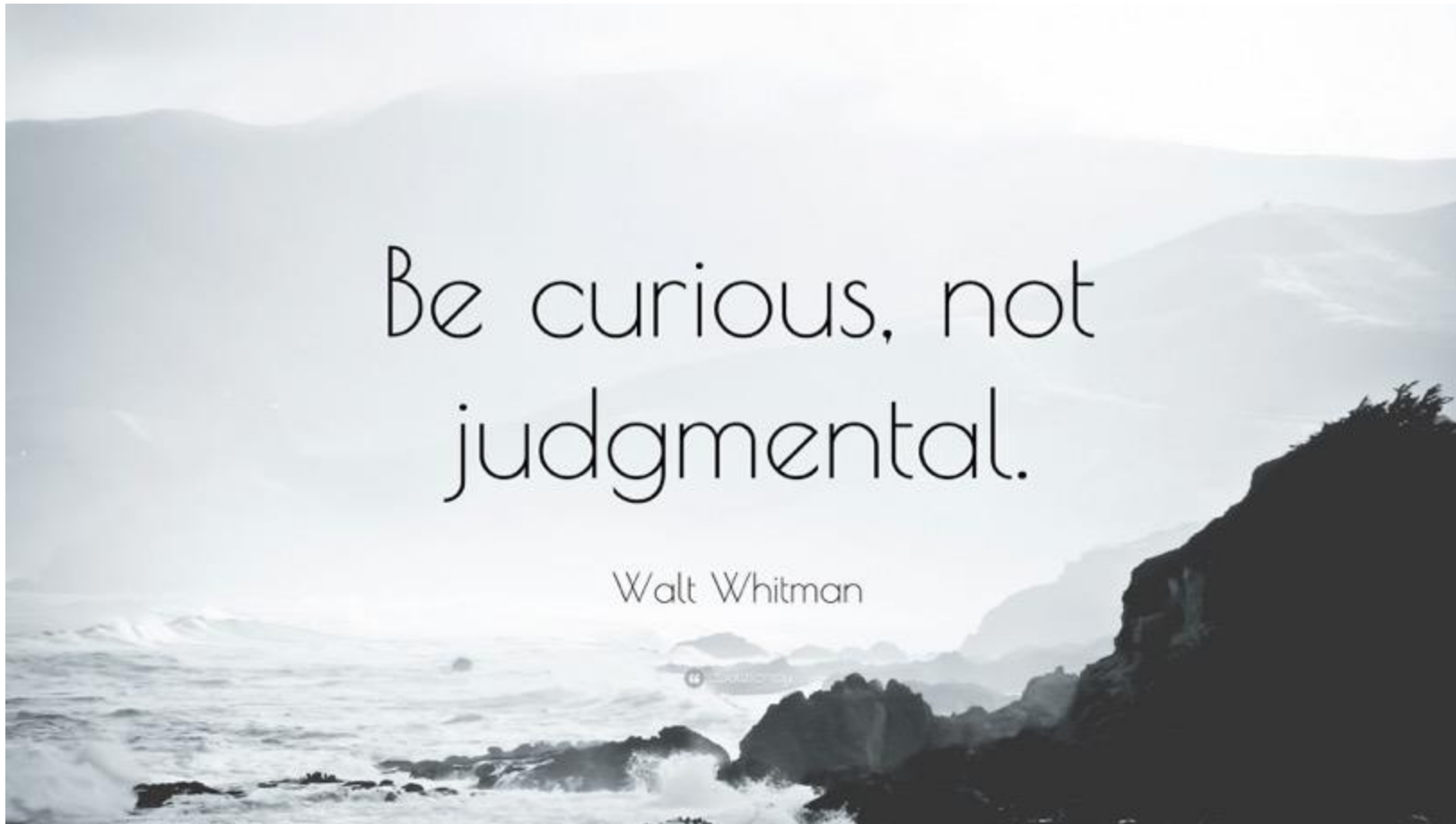


A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a dense forest. The image captures the intricate network of dark tree trunks and branches reaching towards a thick, vibrant green canopy. Sunlight filters through the leaves, creating a bright, glowing effect in the lower right quadrant. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

**but within their environment.**

# Things To Do #1

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# Things To Do #2

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Introduce youth to other neurodivergent youth



# Things To Do #3

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Educate neurotypical youth on neurodiversity and neurodivergent social norms.



# Things To Do #4

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Target self-compassion and self-advocacy rather than "behavior" and "social skills" in therapy.



# Things To Do #5

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Utilize interests (however esoteric) as a means of connection. Having a special interest is common in neurodivergent individuals, especially autistic youth and many connect best from an interest-based perspective.



# Things To Do #6

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Support from adults; While positive support from adults, especially parents, does not replace peer friendships, it is a protective factor against depression for neurodivergent youth.



# Things To Do #7

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Social connection groups, rather than social skills groups.



# Things To Do #8

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Prioritize wellbeing over rigid adherence to social norms.

A study pairing autistic and non-autistic individuals together in conversation found that when partners discussed a complex topic related to a book both had read (i.e., *Of Mice and Men*) they were able to gain empathy from each other.

Look past enforcing social norms and instead engage interests or ideas in a way to give neurodivergent youth a better chance to shine.



# Things to Do #9


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Model acceptance. We have a lot of power



# Things To Do #10

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A vibrant watercolor splash in shades of yellow, orange, pink, and purple serves as a background for the text.

**LET GO  
OF  
UNNECESSARY  
NEUROTYPICAL  
EXPECTATIONS**



# Closing Tips for Professionals

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(Image provided by Maria B.)

**Maria B.**  
Child & Youth Program Teen Lead  
Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, Georgia



(Image from BGCA website)

**Josh B.**  
'24-'25 SE Military Youth of the Year Finalist  
Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, Georgia

Links to the Military OneSource Podcast and a Q&A with Maria are on the additional resources.

# Any Questions?

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# Contact Info

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Jennifer Gerlach

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# Continuing Education

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This webinar has been approved for 1.5 continuing education (CE) credits from:

- American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (CFCS)
- Certificate of attendance available
- MiRegistry/Michigan Education Association Center for Leadership and Learning
- National Council on Family Relations
- University of Texas at Austin, Steve Hicks School of Social Work

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