Sins of My Own Will and Sins Not of My Own: Accommodating NET in Autistic Orthodox Christians to Facilitate Communion and Participation in Church Community

SUMMER KINARD, M.DIV., TH.M.

THERAPEUTIC LANGUAGE DOESN'T ALWAYS MATCH AUTISTIC PROCESSING AND LEARNING STYLES

Accommodations for Storytelling in Therapies (like Narrative Exposure Therapy) and in Church

Agenda

01 Overview of Austistic Differences

02 Overview of Some Accommodations

03 Sticking Points: Narrative

04 How to Tell Faith Stories

05 Specific Aids

Introduction to Summer Kinard, M.Div., Th.M.

- AuDHD (diagnosed as an adult) mother to 5 autistic children, 2 of whom have high support needs, one with medium support, 2 low support; 3 were nonspeaking
- Disability theologian who develops resources for accommodation and inclusion for churches
- Author of Of Such is the Kingdom: A Practical Theology of Disability (Ancient Faith, 2019), Accessible Church School: Incarnational Practices for Participating in God (Park End Books, 2023), and God With Us High Support Sunday School: An Accessible Church School Curriculum (Park End Books, 2026)
- Catechism for adults focused on helping people tell their faith stories.
- Curricula for children, youth, and all ages focused on making connections with faith stories and our lives and communities.
- Bookshop owner who reads a LOT of books and is very familiar with narrative and storytelling
- Author of five published novels (& contributor to the God's Stories for God's People children's Bible from The Bible for Normal People – I wrote on Jairus' daughter)
- Owner and editor of a small press

"Each entry sings with one theme: Christ is present. And it is this present God we can trust to sustain us, draw us closer, and sanctify us, no matter what."

–Sojourners Magazine

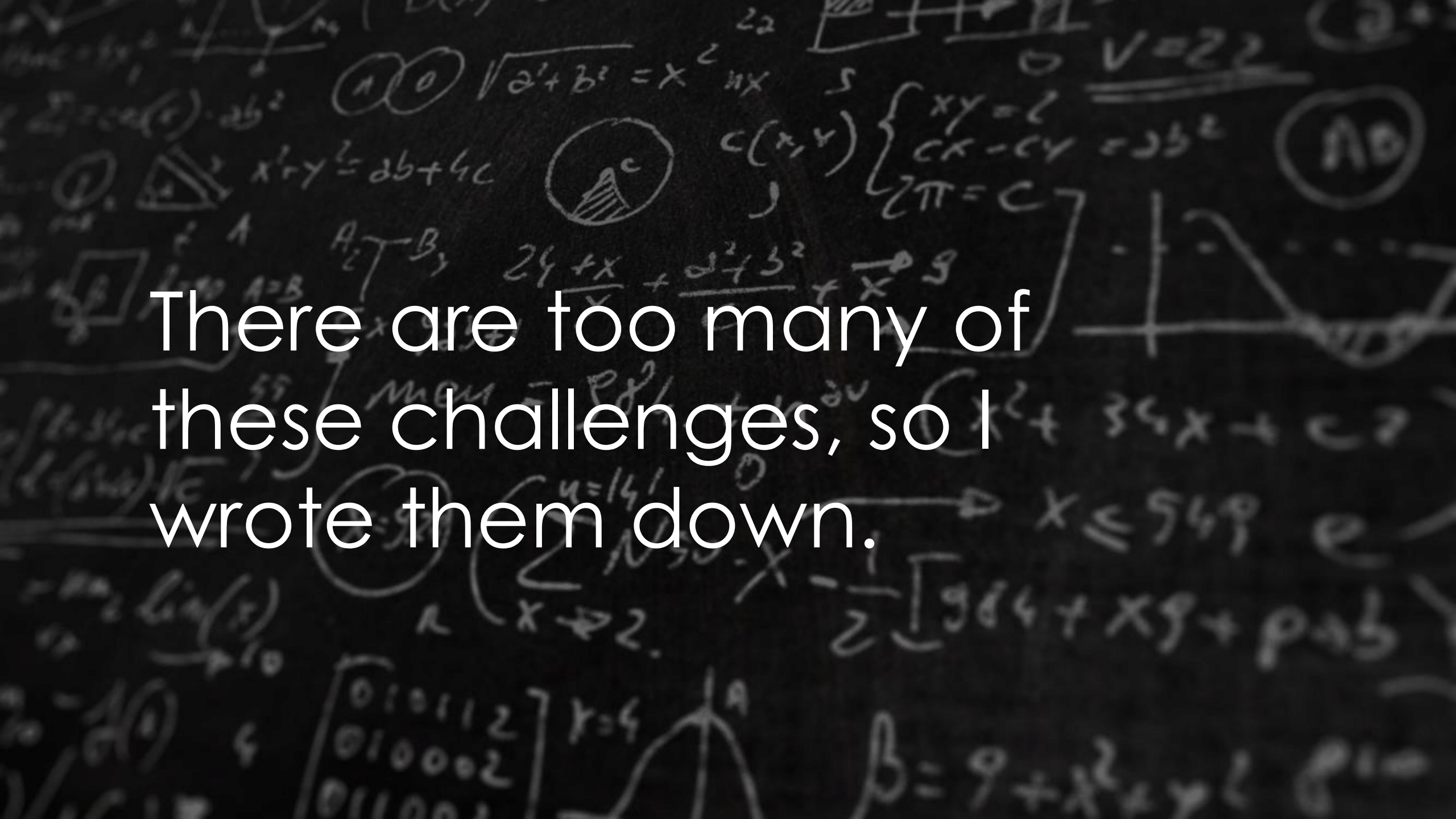


PARK END BOOKS

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

I’m a theologian, Captain, not a therapist!

- The reason I am pointing out difficulties I see in the psychological language is because I am autistic and see potential pitfalls that can be overcome with awareness.
- I am primarily trained in spiritual formation and historical theology, so we will demonstrate accommodations through how they would fit in church.
- I am an expert on autism as a lived experience and in the context of building expertise to write curricula and to help my own children, so please ask me questions.

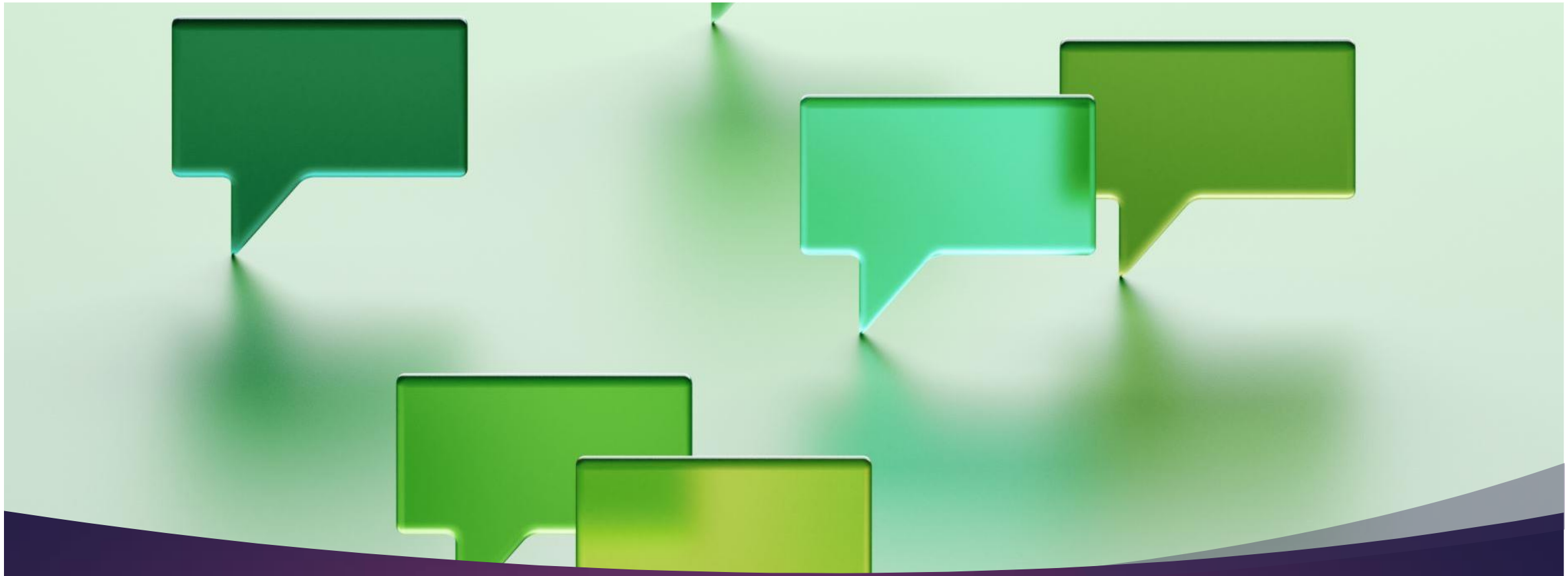

There are too many of these challenges, so I wrote them down.

Four Categories of Autistic Differences

- COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES
- BODY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES
- EMOTIONAL PROCESSING DIFFERENCES
- EXECUTIVE FUNCTION PROCESSING DIFFERENCES



THESE DIFFERENCES WILL AFFECT COMMUNICATION IN THERAPEUTIC SETTINGS AND AT CHURCH.



SIX AUTISTIC COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

LIST OF COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING: sounds, music, echolalia, repeated phrases, quotations repeated with an emotional and communicative meaning that is not always immediately clear because the meaning was derived from the GESTALT of the experience from which it was drawn

ECHOLALIA: This could be repeating oneself like an echo either in company or alone, replaying conversations to oneself, repeating scripts, repeating music, or repeating sounds, echolalia can be to oneself or others

DYSPRAXIA OF ORAL MOTOR PLANNING: This is the most common reason that autistic people have trouble speaking or keeping up with communicating in a live environment. (Research is still emerging in this area but is promising.)

LIST OF COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

SITUATIONAL NONSPEAKING: Lots of autistic people experience unpredictable or inconsistent ability to speak in a timely manner due to a variety of factors such as processing speed, dyspraxia, apraxia, and differences in interpreting prompts and predicting desired answers.

AAC (AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION: Many autistic people speak/communicate with speech output devices, visual language boards, sign language, or speech output buttons. These might be more or less complicated according to the user's other abilities/disabilities.

DELAYED AUDIO PROCESSING: Many autistic people experience a lag between receiving and interpreting audio prompts. Sometimes there is additional time needed to guess/predict the context and meaning of prompts/questions.

SIX AUTISTIC BODY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

LIST OF BODY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- DYSPRAXIA OF POSTURE: Common to autistics, people with ADHD, and another 5% of the population beyond ADHD and autistics (so around 20% of population), the inability to maintain or regulate posture predictably can make it hard for autistic people to participate in interactions where they cannot support their bodies, shift positions frequently, or where endurance of rigid posture is expected. It can also make "feeling in the body" questions confusing to evaluate.
- CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISORDERS & POTS: A lot of autistic people have connective tissue disorders, POTS, and other dysautonomia syndromes. This can make some otherwise neutral movements painful or dangerous (e.g., prostrations in church; some stretches and yoga poses). Checking in with the body prompts can be confusing to people with these differences.
- SENSORY REGULATION: Most people think of lights and sounds, and sensitivity to these is important to note. Gross motor sensory regulation is a strong need for autistic people and is rarely well understood. Deep joint pressure (from heavy work, deliberate therapeutic movements, and added weighted items, for instance) and proprioceptive movements (swinging, rocking, balance boards, walking freely with sway), especially crossing the midline, can be deeply regulating.

LIST OF BODY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- EATING DISORDERS: Many autistic people experience eating disorders, including the autism-specific eating disorder ARFID. This can greatly affect appetite and what is seen as food. For memory purposes, noting this potentiality is important to avoid misunderstandings. For church settings, care should be taken before discussing/recommending any kind of fasting, as it will most likely do only harm and lead to dysregulation.
- PDA (PERSISTENT DEMAND FOR AUTONOMY/PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE): This is a condition many autistic people experience either some or most of the time wherein demands (especially questions or asking people to engage without a path to success laid out for them) trigger the spinal cord's fight or flight response.
- INTEROCEPTION: Most autistic people struggle to interpret and/or communicate what is going on in their bodies. This can lead to missed cues for bodily needs (warmth/cold, toilet, food, drink, rest, pain, etc.). Few autistic people will be able to interact with a standard pain scale predictably because of this. This also complicates conversations about feelings in the body or past/present pain.

SIX AUTISTIC EMOTIONAL PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

LIST OF EMOTIONAL PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- SUICIDAL IDEATION & TRAUMA: Autistic people are seven times more likely to consider or attempt suicide than general population. There is about a 90% rate of abuse survival in this population. Though current research varies on whether autistic people experience higher rates of trauma and PTSD, there is agreement that autistic people tend to have more severe effects from trauma due to their processing differences and lack of supports.
- REJECTION SENSITIVITY (and Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria): Autistic people tend to be highly sensitive to rejection, often due to repeated rejection and denial of their goodness and curtailing of autonomy when they were younger. They will perceive slights and rejection quickly. Sometimes this results in RSD, Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria, which can lead them to perceive rejection where there is none. (This also shows up in assuming one is not invited unless specifically asked in person.)
- ALEXITHYMIA: This is a delayed or lacking ability to process emotions and feelings in the usual way or in a timely manner. Often autistic people will recognize their feelings in a situation years later. This also contributes to missing non-explicit social cues and hints.

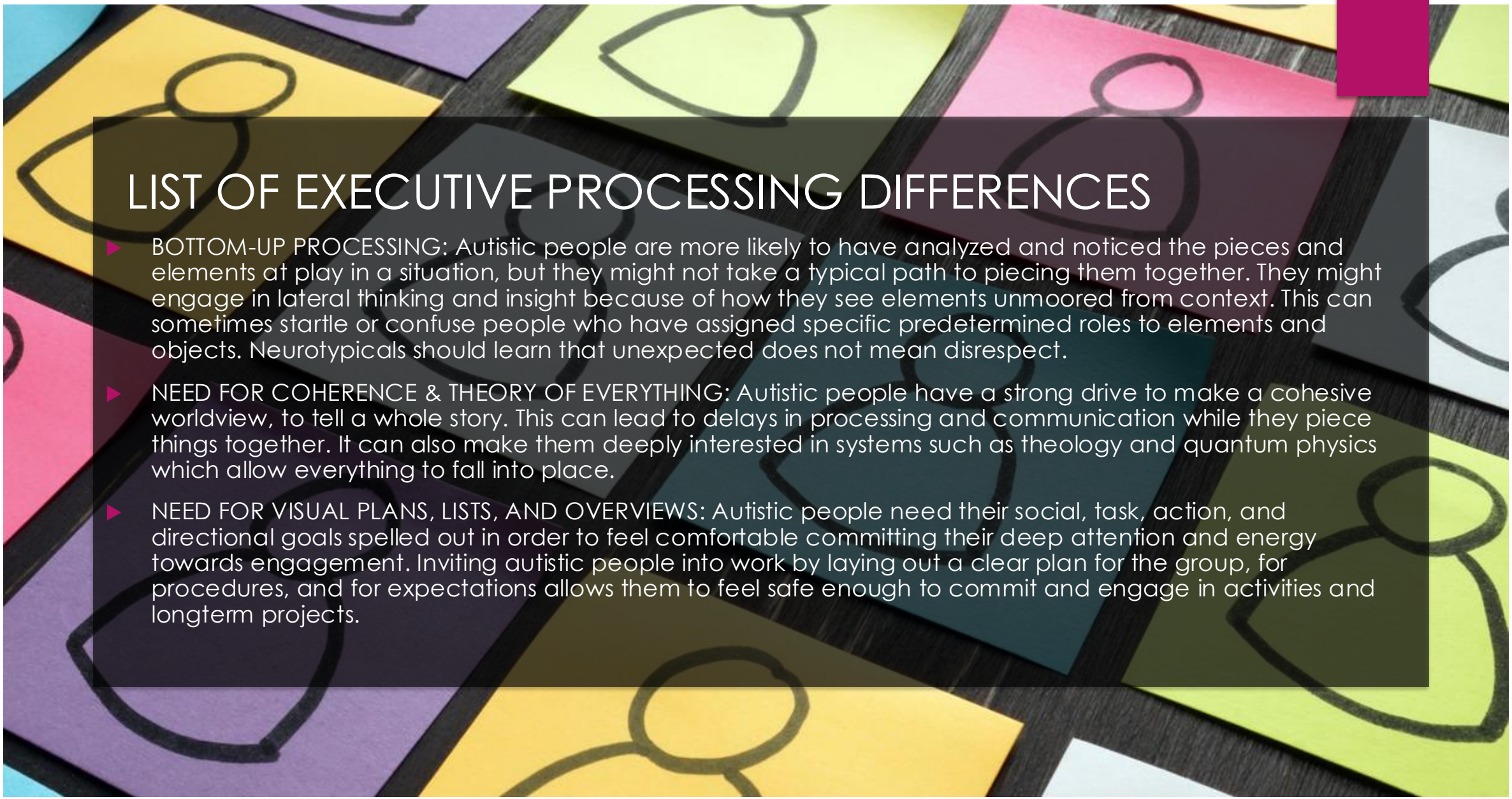
LIST OF EMOTIONAL PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- MASKING: In order to fit in with neurotypical social settings and sensory demands, most autistic people try to mirror the people around them. They limit their own personalities and personal expressions and fail to understand their own needs, strengths, and places they need help as a result. "Unmasking" is not only being authentic in facial/emotional/personality expression but favoring actual strengths and offloading tasks outside the autistic person's competence. It involves setting up a life of accommodations.
- ECHOLALIA: (also in Communication) Emotional processing often requires supports such as listening to the same song over and over again in order to fully feel a feeling or to put it into words. Sometimes words and phrases are repeated to help understand the feelings behind them, so that the feeling only comes through scripting and acting it out.
- TIME AGNOSIA: Many autistic people do not feel the passage of time. This can make memory navigation difficult, as time is flattened for them. This shows up as "the other day" referencing an event years prior as well as in not knowing how long one takes to complete tasks or how much time is passing currently.

SIX AUTISTIC EXECUTIVE PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

LIST OF EXECUTIVE PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- HIERARCHY AGNOSIA: Autistic people fail to recognize social hierarchies because they see everyone as on the same level. This leads to misunderstandings, especially when they take invitations literally because they don't understand their place in the social hierarchy. They are often subjected to bullying and censure when they upset hierarchies of which they are unaware and disinterested.
- MONOTROPISM: Autistic people favor deep focus on one task at a time. They have deep areas of interest in which they become broadly and deeply competent and knowledgeable. They often struggle with transitions between thoughts, activities. They have a hard time leaving issues unresolved because they can't move to the next task. This leads to a lot of misunderstandings when they overexplain or seek resolution.
- COMPETENCY SCANNING: Autistic people constantly try to find a path to success, to put together the goals of the undertaking they are participating in, and to predict whether they have a way forward, Leaving them in the dark about goals and plans can make them feel unwanted. Not allowing for a path to continued flourishing and offering of their gifts can lead to despondency. (Giving a plan or visual schedule or overviews can help.)



LIST OF EXECUTIVE PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

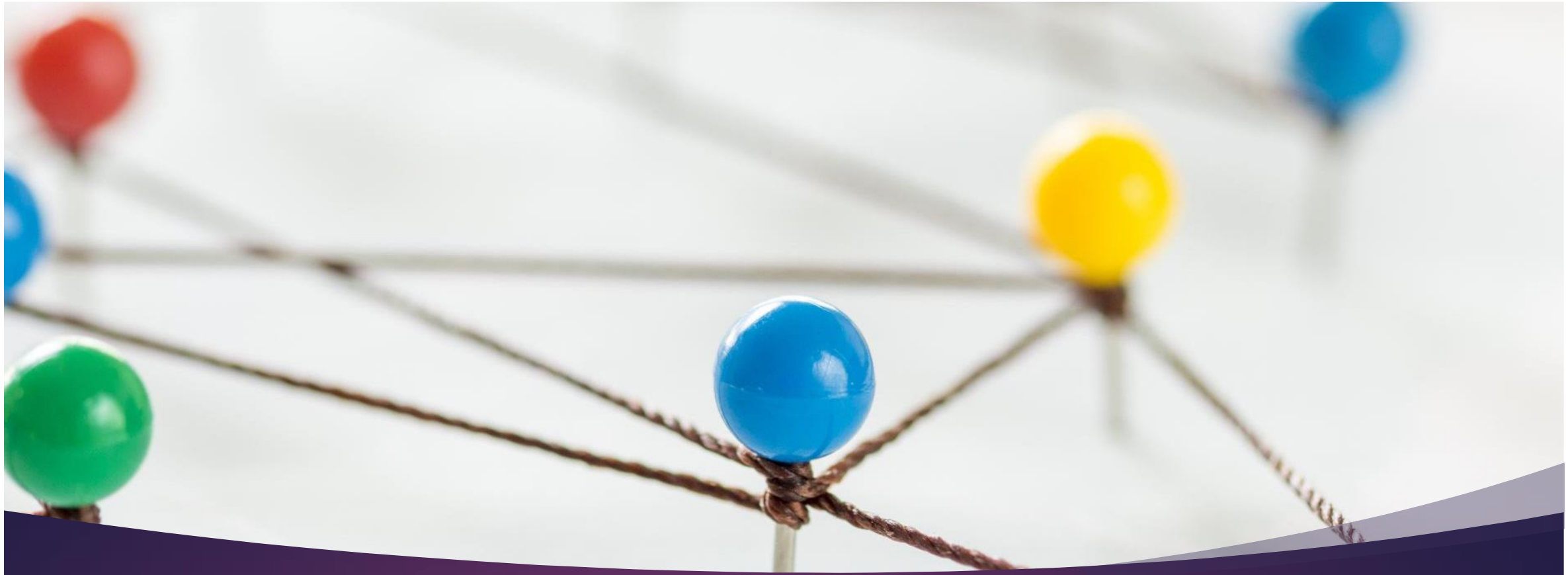
- BOTTOM-UP PROCESSING: Autistic people are more likely to have analyzed and noticed the pieces and elements at play in a situation, but they might not take a typical path to piecing them together. They might engage in lateral thinking and insight because of how they see elements unmoored from context. This can sometimes startle or confuse people who have assigned specific predetermined roles to elements and objects. Neurotypicals should learn that unexpected does not mean disrespect.
- NEED FOR COHERENCE & THEORY OF EVERYTHING: Autistic people have a strong drive to make a cohesive worldview, to tell a whole story. This can lead to delays in processing and communication while they piece things together. It can also make them deeply interested in systems such as theology and quantum physics which allow everything to fall into place.
- NEED FOR VISUAL PLANS, LISTS, AND OVERVIEWS: Autistic people need their social, task, action, and directional goals spelled out in order to feel comfortable committing their deep attention and energy towards engagement. Inviting autistic people into work by laying out a clear plan for the group, for procedures, and for expectations allows them to feel safe enough to commit and engage in activities and longterm projects.



OVERVIEW OF GENERAL ACCOMMODATIONS

PRIORITY ACCOMMODATIONS

- SPELL OUT THE DIRECTION & PLANS: Make visual schedules, lists, whiteboard scribbles with arrows to support needs in the moment, and give agendas for all meetings ahead of time. You can also add social stories.
- GIVE MOVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES: Provide a rocking chair. Avoid body postures that lead to dissociation (prostrations, rigid postures of stillness). Take a walk together. Use balance boards or moving chairs (spinning bucket chairs they can move a bit).
- NARRATIVE IS NOT LINEAR: Even though some therapeutic protocols rely on forming a timeline, narrative is formed around connections. Though you might be working toward a timeline, focus on helping the autistic person make connections with themselves.
- SENSORY ANCHORS & ASSOCIATIONS: Though NET often uses the placement of rocks and flowers or other items already along a timeline, you can remove anxiety of time agnosia and increase their ability to make connections by giving them a holistic geometry of memory (See expanding ball example) with sensory anchors appropriate to them. If they have good memories by the beach, for instance, {ask them to} bring in shells for that part. Then allow a mind net/connections based memory model around the anchor to access memories more fully than with time and body prompts.
- USE DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE: Describe a plan. Invite others in. Speak plainly rather than prompting with questions. This will lower the demands on autistic processing and help them engage less anxiously.
- INCORPORATE AAC: Engage with their speech output devices as though they are their voices. Even if someone doesn't use much AAC, you can still make safer environments with it.



NARRATIVE IS ABOUT CONNECTIONS

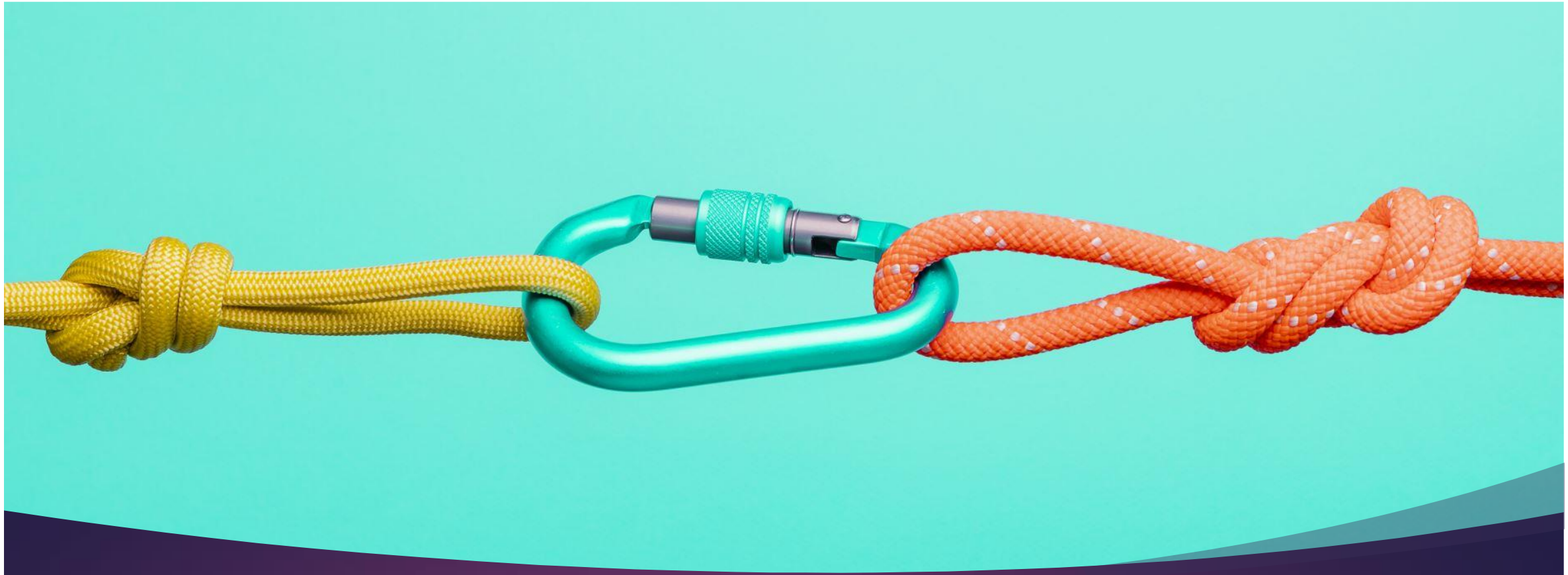
MIND MAPS & CONNECTIONS

- TIMELINES ARE STRESSFUL to put together for many autistic people because they don't process linearly or in sync across all of their systems. But they can understand moving towards a goal. Find what they connect with and associate around that instead.
- SENSORY ANCHOR MODEL helps you spot patterns.
- STARTING POINT IS IRRELEVANT when you are forming connections. You'll get there.
- TELLING WHICH PARTS WERE WHICH BECOMES EASIER WITH CONNECTION-MAKING


TELLING FAITH STORIES

FAITH NARRATIVES

- WE START WITH CONFESSING FAITH, NOT SIN. A lot of times autistic people come to you with faith seeking understanding, burdened with shame, some guilt, and a lot of confusion. Because of their processing differences, they will need to be directed positively towards the love of God. They probably come because they sense that God's love is how to make sense of the whole universe. They might have a lot of shame and discomfort and not know which discomfort and feelings are due to their own sins, which to disabilities, and which to harm from others.
- IN TELLING FAITH STORIES, THE STARTING POINT IS IRRELEVANT. But we must start where we are, making connections with the sacred story.
- THE GEOMETRY OF FAITH NARRATIVE pulls us towards God, each other, and self-understanding mutually.



EXERCISE: SENSORY ANCHOR

Fish

- Each table has paper and fish.
- Consider Gospel stories that involve fish. List them in summary.
- Examples: The five loaves and two fishes. The abundant haul of fish when Christ called the first disciples. Christ sent Peter to catch a fish that had a shekel in its mouth to pay taxes for Christ and Peter's household. The disciples went back to fishing after Christ was crucified, and Christ was cooking them breakfast on the shore.
- What are some themes in the story you thought of?
- Have you ever been fishing? Do you associate eating fish with people or events or places?
- Have ever needed to stretch a small amount to meet an impossible demand?
- Think of a time when you went fishing or "went fishing" when you were grieving. Was Christ waiting for you when you returned?

TELLING OUR STORIES HELPS US CONNECT WITH GOD

- When we navigate faith through making connections between our lives and God, we become adept at knowing our part in our stories as well.
- By giving accommodated access to the whole story of God, we allow a way for autistic people to confess the faith and to not worry whether they can see all the distinctions in their role or others' roles in how they feel. They can grow closer to God and others in the meantime by taking this directional approach.
- Discernment builds over time.
- Unmasking builds over time, as the Gospel and stories of the faith illuminate and reveal God's presence with us in our own lives.
- Today we play with fish and talk about a Gospel, and eventually an autistic person who learns to reason like this can shift their confession from things that are disability-related and not sins, to care-based insights about themselves and others.
- Through making connections, they learn that God's presence and love is reliable.

Social Story for Confession

- Every {fasting period} it is time for Confession. Confession happens in the church by the {cross} with Father and me {standing} by the icon of {Jesus healing the paralytic}. Confession helps me heal from the behaviors and habits that hurt me. Other Christians also go for healing during this time.
- I can list the things I know I have done wrong to ask God to forgive and heal me. If I can't tell what's wrong, I can tell Father and Christ that I feel uncomfortable about something. I can tell Christ and Father what I feel is helping me feel closer to God, even if I am not sure where I am making mistakes.
- Confession is one way to help me point my mind, body, soul, and strength back towards loving God, my neighbor, and myself. I can listen to Father's guidance about ways to pray and engage in loving actions that will point me more towards God and kindness to others. I can take time during fasts to add supports for better habits. I can ask for help.
- Confession gives me synergy, energy and encouragement with the Holy Spirit, so I can work to be more like Christ. It helps us all to know that God doesn't leave us when we are awkward, confused, or make mistakes. No matter what, God loves us all and wants us to come nearer.