Explaining Autism

In Pictures

By Kathryn Spence
Psychotherapeutic Counsellor
innerfocustherapy.co.uk

INNERFOCUS THERAPY
COUNSELLING & PSYCHOTHERAPY

What is Autism?

Difficulties with eye contact.

Finding it hard to understand what other people are thinking or feeling.

A social & communication condition - problems understanding what other people mean; verbally & non-verbally

Not understanding the meaning put into tone of voice, facial expressions or body gestures.

Communicating in ways that seem out of place - speaking loudly; talking at length about special interests when not appropriate; difficulties taking turns.

AND exhibiting repetitive and/or disruptive behaviors

Repeatitive body movements.

Obsessive about interests.

Sensory sensitivity.

Obsessive fixation on routines and rituals.

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Autistic Minds

The difference between an autistic brain and a typical brain is the autistic brain does things in **extremes**.

For example, an autistic person may display hyper-empathy or hypo-empathy, whereas a neurotypical brain will experience a typical amount of empathy.

An autistic nervous system will be either more or even less reactive to sensory stimuli than a typical nervous system.

Autism only becomes a ‘disorder’ when those extremes have a negative impact on a person's day to day functioning.

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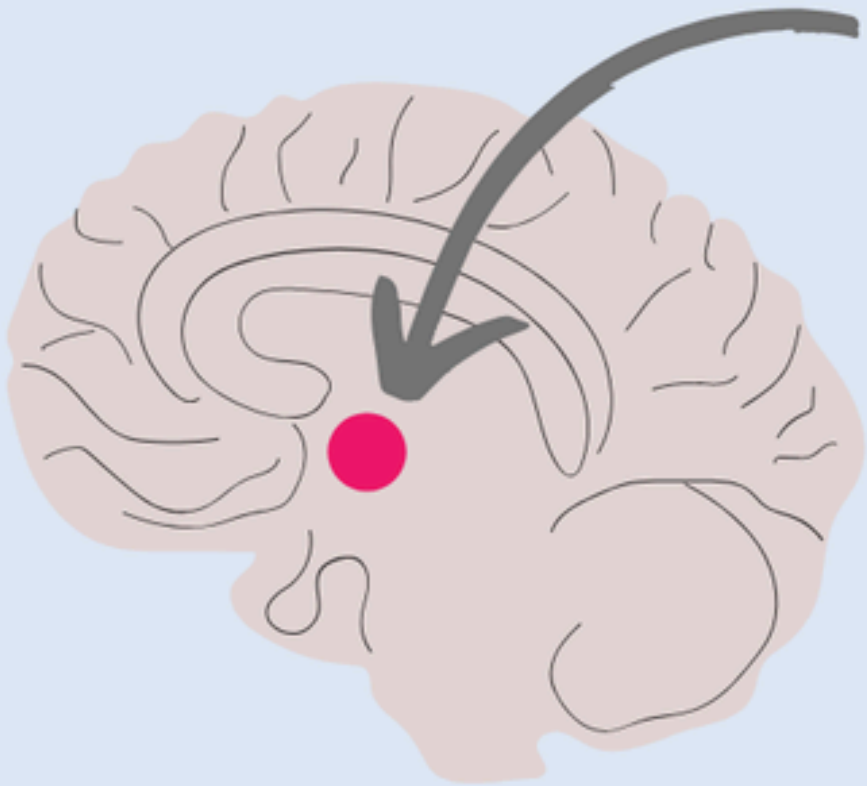
Autism Neuroanatomy



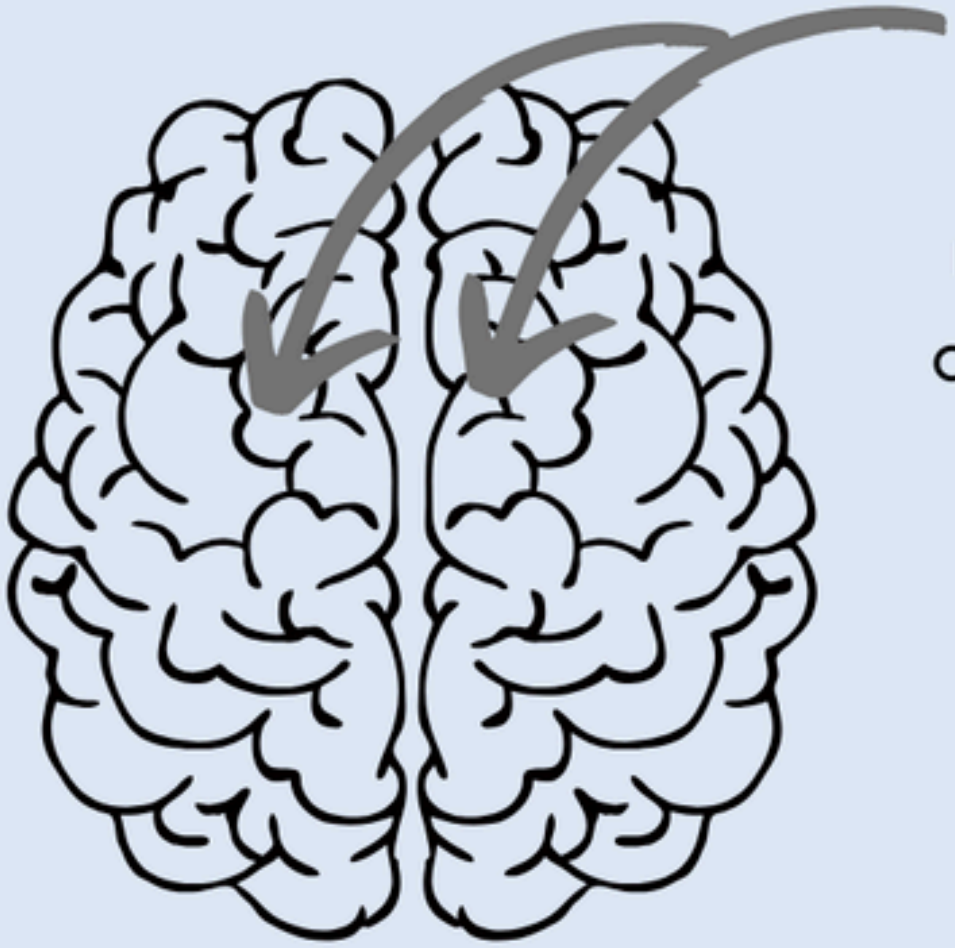
Amygdala

The Amygdala is crucial for processing emotions and social cues. It also plays a role in memory and learning.

What's Different in and Autistic Mind?

The Amygdala in individuals with ASD may undergo an initial period of accelerated growth early in life, followed by a different trajectory of growth compared to individuals without ASD. This may be the cause of social difficulties as well as increased anxiety in those with Autism.

Autism Neuroanatomy



Cerebral Cortex

The Cerebral Cortex is responsible for higher-level cognitive functions, including language, memory and thought.

What's Different in and Autistic Mind?

Studies have found changes in the number and type of cells within the cortex. Therefore there may be differences in how different brain regions connect and communicate, potentially impacting social and cognitive function.

Autism Neuroanatomy

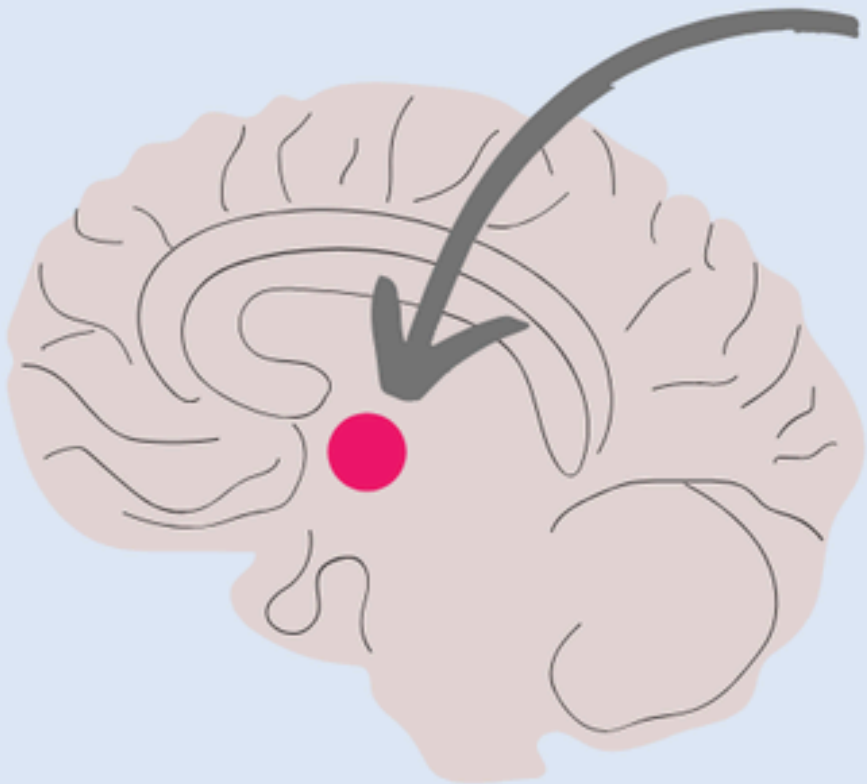
Cerebellum

The Cerebellum is traditionally associated with motor control and coordination.

What's Different in and Autistic Mind?

The Cerebellum may be reduced in size, have altered connectivity, and abnormal activation patterns, in those with autism. This can be linked to social and communication problems, as well as repetitive and stereotyped behaviours.

Autism Neuroanatomy



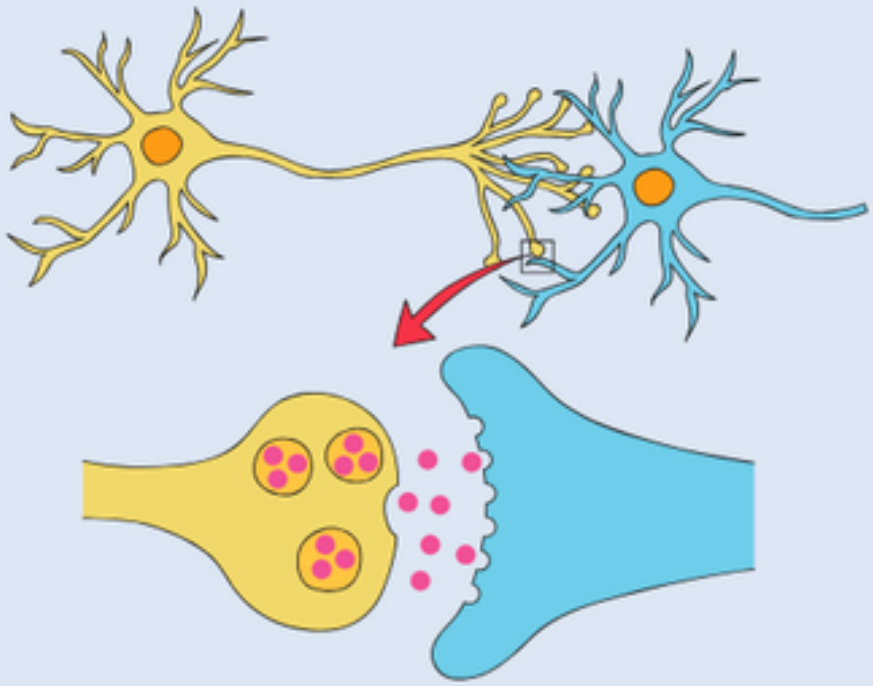
Hippocampus

The Hippocampus plays a vital role in forming and retrieving memories, as well as spatial navigation.

What's Different in and Autistic Mind?

Studies have reported both enlarged and reduced hippocampal volume in individuals with ASD, These changes are often linked to impairments in learning, memory, language abilities, and emotional regulation.

Autism Neuroanatomy



Synapses and Neurons

Neurons are the basic units of the nervous system, and they communicate with each other through specialised connections called synapses.

What's Different in and Autistic Mind?

Research indicates that in some individuals with autism, this synaptic pruning process may be impaired, leading to an excess of synapses. This may potentially affect communication efficiency between brain regions, leading to difficulties with social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviour.

Autism Neuroanatomy

Serotonin

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, social behaviour and sensory processing.

What's Different in and Autistic Mind?

Elevated blood serotonin levels are a notable characteristic found in a significant number of individuals with ASD. Some Autistic individuals with may also exhibit low serotonin levels in the brain. Therefore this difference in Serotonin may impact social behaviour and sensory processing.

The Evolutionary Strengths of Neurodiversity

Autism:
The Systemising Intellect

Autistic brains may have a lower synaptic density, which means less connectivity / communication in the brain, leading to social-communication differences.

People with ASC have heightened systematising abilities, which may have been crucial for early human survival.

Celebrate your organisation and observational qualities.

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CELEBRATE MINDS

of all kinds

The Beauty of Autism

Let's See Some Ways Autistic Brains are Wonderful

Creativity, imaginative – may come up with new innovative solutions.

Attention to detail.

Enthusiasm and interest in topics which can lead to expertise.

Honestly and reliability.

Acceptance of difference.

Great at routine tasks.

Less influenced by social biases.

Methodical and analytical.

Excellent long term memory and able to recall facts.

Deep focus and concentration.

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Incoming Demand or Sensory Input

Processing Load Increases

Anxiety

OH NO...

Immediate Coping Methods

Recovery Phase

SPECIAL INTERESTS

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Autism and Empathy

It's a common misconception that autistic individuals lack empathy! This is due to the **Double Empathy Problem** - communication breakdowns and misunderstandings can occur between autistic and non-autistic people due to differences in social interaction and communication.

Some autistic individuals experience **hyper-empathy** which can lead to overwhelming distress related to empathising with others' feelings.

Some autistic people find it easier to feel **conditional empathy** - finding it easier to feel empathy towards those they know well, such as friends or family.

Some autistic individuals need to exert more **effortful empathy** to understand and express their empathy due to differences in communication styles.

Some autistic people may have **emotional empathy** but may experience difficulties with **cognitive empathy** (understanding another person's perspective).

Monotropism

Where our attention zooms in deeply

Interests, projects, or feelings can take over our mental space - almost everything else fades into the background.

Multi-tasking feels draining, clumsy, or impossible - we prefer to finish one thing before moving on.

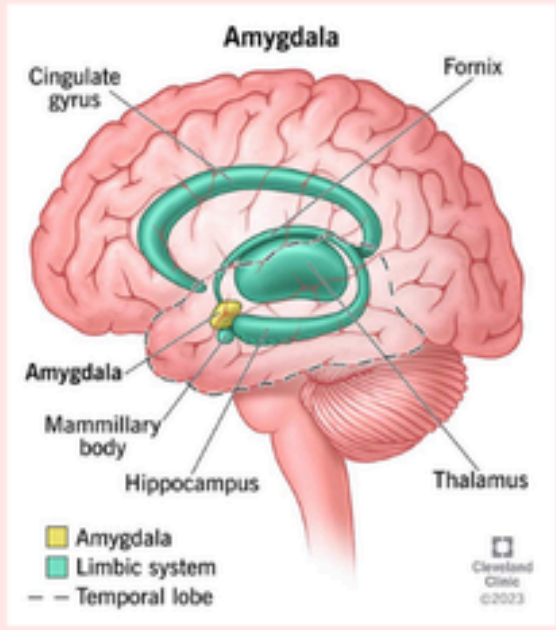
When we get into something, we can become completely absorbed and lose track of time.

Interruptions or sudden changes can feel jarring and can leave us disoriented or frustrated.

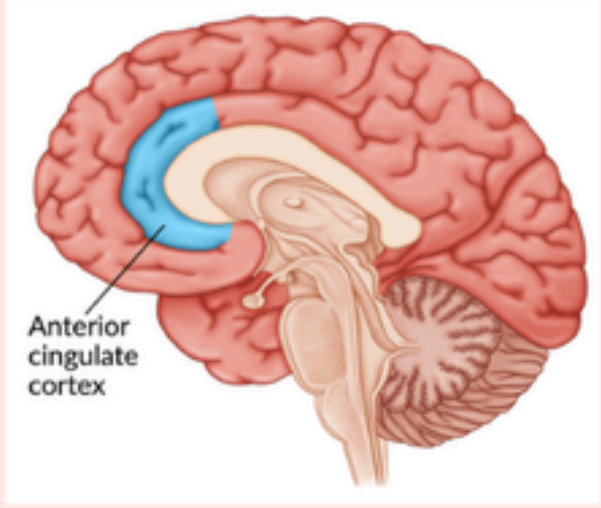
It's hard to stop mid-task or switch to something else, even if we want to.

Learning is enhanced when it connects with something we're already focused on, but hard if it feels disconnected.

The Neuroscience Behind Intolerance of Uncertainty



The **amygdala** scans constantly for danger.
In many autistic people, it can be more reactive, activate faster and stay “on” longer.
Uncertainty = unknown,
Unknown = potential threat
Even when logically safe, the nervous system may respond as if something risky is happening.



The **anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)** helps detect mistakes, conflict, and any mismatches between expectation and reality.
Autistic brains often show stronger prediction-error signals, greater sensitivity to “things not matching the model”.
So, when reality shifts unexpectedly, the brain flags it intensely: “Something is wrong.”
Even if nothing is actually dangerous.

The brain is a prediction machine, aiding our survival. It constantly guesses what will happen next, what sensations to expect etc.
Many researchers believe autistic brains weight prediction errors more heavily, update models more rigidly, and prefer stable patterns.
So, when something unpredictable happens, the system has to rapidly rebuild its model which uses more energy, and triggers a stress reaction.

Why the Autistic Brain Often Prefers Certainty and Predictability

Autism isn't about "liking routine" in a simple personality way. It's more about how the brain processes information.

Predictability reduces cognitive load
Unpredictability = the brain has to suddenly process a lot at once.

Autistic cognition is often strongly pattern-oriented
When reality suddenly doesn't match the internal model, it creates a sharp internal mismatch and thus feels physically uncomfortable.

Uncertainty therefore creates anxiety
It triggers the fight, flight, freeze response and reacts quickly and intensely.

Why the Autistic Brain Often Prefers Certainty and Predictability

When something unexpected happens:

- The mental script breaks
- The brain must rapidly build a new one
- Emotional regulation systems may get overloaded
- Stress chemicals spike

This can lead to:

- Shutdown
- Meltdown
- Irritability
- Freezing
- Rumination

It’s not a choice — it’s a nervous system event.

Why Social Uncertainty Is Especially Hard

Social Rules Are Invisible and Variable

The brain has to constantly interpret a lot of social data - facial expressions, tone shifts, jokes, hidden expectations etc.
And the “rules” change depending on the social context - who is present, their mood, the setting, cultural norms, relationship history.
There is no stable script. For many autistic people, that means: The prediction system never fully locks in. And that’s exhausting.

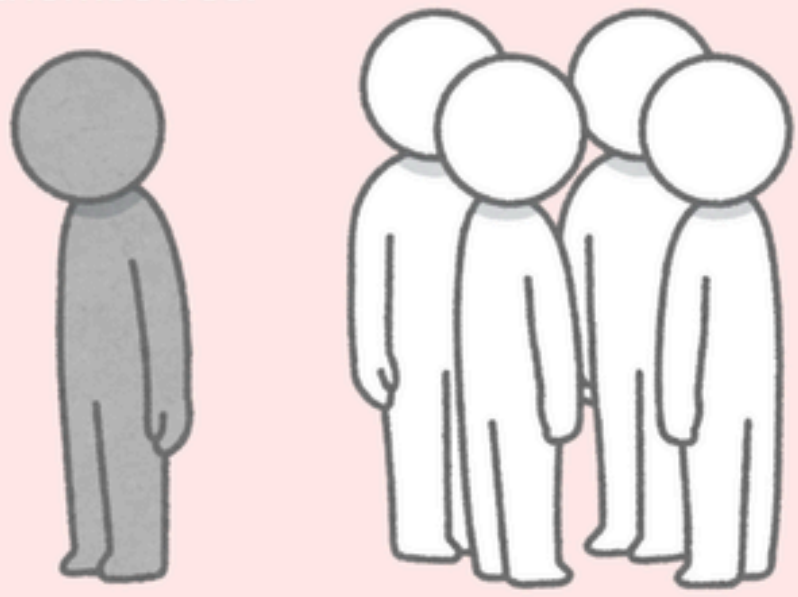
Social Rejection Risk Feels High-Stakes

Humans are wired for belonging. Social exclusion activates the same brain regions as physical pain. If you have already experienced past misunderstandings, social correction, bullying, being told you’re “too much” or “too blunt”, then your nervous system may treat social unpredictability as a genuine threat. It’s not overthinking — it’s a hyper-alert error detection system.

Double Processing Load

In social situations, many autistic adults are doing two things at once:
1) Participating in the conversation,
2) Monitoring themselves.

That self-monitoring (masking) increases cognitive load. If something unexpected happens e.g. someone laughs unexpectedly, you’re interrupted or a joke doesn’t land The brain has to reinterpret the moment, regulate emotion and continue performing. All in seconds. That spike can feel overwhelming.



Why Social Uncertainty Is Especially Hard

Ambiguity Has No Clear Answer

With logistical uncertainty, you can solve it:
Late train → take next one.

With social uncertainty:
“Are they annoyed?”
“Was that sarcastic?”
“Do they like me?”

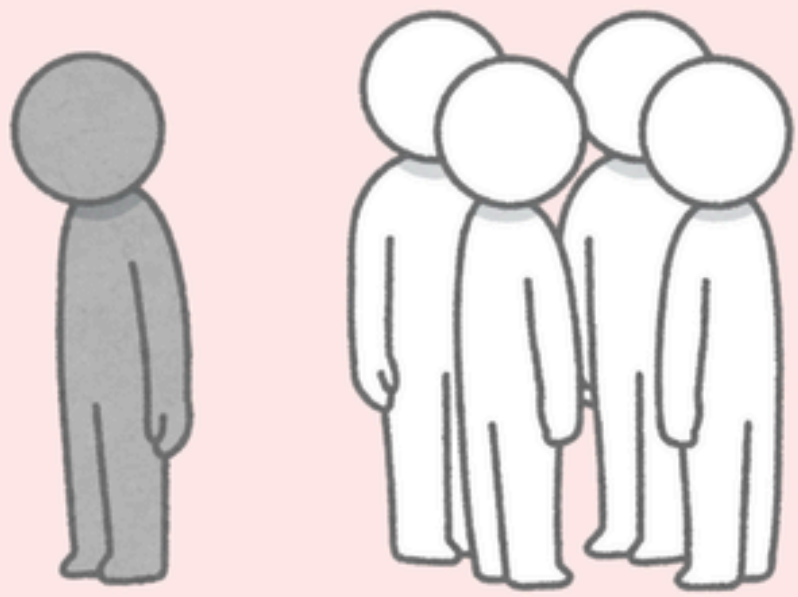
There’s often no definitive data. For brains that prefer clear models, that ambiguity can feel intolerable.

Why It Can Linger Afterward

Many autistic adults report replaying conversations for hours or days.
This happens because:

- The prediction system wants closure
- The error-monitoring system stays activated
- There’s no clear “resolution signal”

So, the brain keeps searching for one.



What can help manage unpredictability?

Build flexible predictability
Instead of rigid scripts, create range-based expectations.

Pre-plan "If–Then" buffers
Create mini contingency plans.

Practice micro-exposure to uncertainty as this will build tolerance safely
Very small, controlled unpredictability - e.g.:
Take a new route once a week
Order something new occasionally
Leave one small part of a day unplanned

"Uncertainty Budget"
Plan for one small unpredictable thing per week. Keep it measurable and safe.

Nervous system reset tools
Practice self soothe strategies to calm the stress spike before logic can return.

Cognitive rehearsal reduces shock
Before events, ask:
What might go wrong? What would I do? How would I cope?

Self-compassion
It's important to understand:
It's a nervous system trying to stay safe, not a flaw in you.

Tools for Managing Social Uncertainty

Build "Evidence Files"
When your brain says: "They probably think I'm weird."
Counter with: They invited me. They laughed. They responded.
Concrete evidence stabilises uncertainty.

Limit Post-Event Rumination Time
Set a boundary: 10–15 minutes to reflect, then redirect attention.
The brain wants infinite analysis. It rarely finds certainty that way.

Pre-Load Social Scripts (Flexible Ones)
Instead of memorising exact lines, create flexible templates:
"That's interesting — tell me more."
"I hadn't thought of it that way."
"Can you clarify what you mean?"
These reduce processing pressure in real time.

Ask Directly (When Safe)
If appropriate:
"Just checking — was that a joke?", "Are we still good?", "I can't always read tone — what did you mean?"
Many people respond positively to clarity.

Reduce Masking Where Possible
The more you mask, the higher the cognitive load and the more fragile your regulation becomesLower performance = lower crash risk.

Long-Term Skill: Tolerating "Unresolved"
A powerful growth step is practicing:
"I may never know exactly what they meant. And that's okay."
Not because it feels okay. But because the nervous system learns:
Uncertainty ≠ catastrophe.

Autism and Justice Sensitivity

Why do so many autistic people have such a powerful sense of justice?

There are real neurological and psychological reasons behind it – and they're fascinating.

For many autistic people, injustice isn't just "unfair." It's a violation of logic, empathy, and moral structure all at once.

Let's explore these reasons for justice sensitivity because it's not a flaw – it's integrity. It's clarity. It's a strength that the world needs more of.

Autism and Justice Sensitivity

1. Rule-Based Thinking (Systemising)

Autistic brains naturally look for patterns, consistency, and fairness. When someone breaks moral rules, it doesn't just feel wrong – it registers as a logical error in the brain's internal system.

2. Heightened Error Sensitivity

Research shows differences in how autistic brains process prediction errors. The same circuits that detect changes in routines or patterns also react strongly to ethical violations.

Autism and Justice Sensitivity

3. Deep Affective Empathy

Despite stereotypes, many autistic people feel emotions intensely. Seeing someone mistreated can trigger strong empathic distress – not mild discomfort, but real emotional pain.

4. Consistent Moral Reasoning

While non-autistic people often weigh social context ("just this once" or "no one will notice"), autistic people tend to rely on unwavering principles: fairness, honesty, equality. Morality is a system – and systems should be consistent.

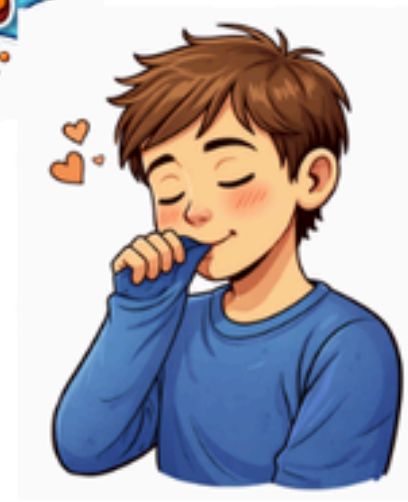
Autism & Oral Sensory Seeking aka Oral "Swimming"

If you see an autistic adult or child constantly chewing, sucking, snacking, biting nails or clenching their jaw, it's often not anxiety alone or a "bad habit." It's oral sensory seeking.

The mouth is one of the body's strongest sensory regulators.

Oral input can:

- calm the nervous system
- improve focus and emotional regulation
- reduce overload and burnout
- provide grounding in stressful environments



Oral Sensory Seeking behaviours are lifelong self-regulation tools, especially during stress.

Support looks like:

- ✓ chewable tools or discreet chew jewellery
- ✓ gum, mints, or crunchy/chewy snacks
- ✓ respecting stimming instead of policing it

Autistic adults don't need to "grow out of" sensory needs. We deserve accommodations, dignity, and understanding — at every age.

Uncertain transitions feels like free falling from a plane.

You don’t know where the ground is. You don’t know what’s next. It’s terrifying.

The trick isn’t to stop the fall.

It’s to have a **plan**:

Activate your parachute.

Grab hands with others jumping with you.

Aim for a landing zone.

You don’t need perfect clarity — just a plan, connection, and direction.

That’s how we survive the free fall.

Neurodiversity and the Increased Likelihood of Being Bullied

We are programmed with an innate mechanism to judge people based on first impressions. And these impressions take only a fraction of a second.

There is a concept known as 'social signalling' – in which people unconsciously send out messages in the form of micro-expressions (e.g. nodding, speed of speech, subtle body movements, etc.) and these are unconsciously picked up by others leading to judgements and unrealised modified responses.

Whether we 'know it' or not we can recognise when someone is different. And children are particularly good at picking up on differences.

A neurotypical person might meet a neurodivergent person and they will notice micro differences (e.g. too little / too much eye contact, inappropriately smiling, interrupting etc.). And that's it. The opinion is formed. And some people can't get past that opinion and brush them off. Or even deliberately bully them.

But it is vitally important to remember that only 'hurt people, hurt people!' You are never to blame for being bullied. What I have described is an innate human process. But there are others in our social world who see an opportunity to take advantage of others due to their own insecurities.

The Evolutionary Strengths of Neurodiversity

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria: The Empathic Connector

RSD is a heightened sensitivity to rejection, criticism or failing, causing intense distress.

RSD may have evolved as a mechanism to maintain social connection.

Celebrate your emotional and relational responsiveness.

Neurodiversity and Masking

What is masking?

A conscious or sub-conscious strategy to hide your natural behaviours, whilst taking on behaviours which are "socially acceptable" in order to "fit in". For example, people pleasing, mirroring social behaviour, suppression of stimming, rehearsing social scripts, hiding interests and passions, not sharing opinions, caretaking, or copying other's behaviours.

Why do we mask?

Neurodiverse people often feel "different", which is interpreted as "not good enough", receive more criticism and can be more often bullied. This leads to Rejection Sensitivity and overwhelming distress, with less ability to emotionally regulate this distress, so behavioural strategies are used to reduce distress, criticism, judgement and rejection. It's a survival strategy to manage this social world and our innate need for connection and attachment.

The Consequences of Masking

The Short Term Advantages of Masking

- Social Acceptance - fewer judgements and criticism, able to 'blend in', reduce bullying and thus feeling safer
- Increased Opportunities - hiding the differences / condition can mean we are not disadvantaged in educational or occupational settings due to stigma / discrimination

The Long-Term Impacts of Masking

- Low Self Esteem - due to hiding away our true selves, we can never be accepted for who we are, so we continue to not feel "likeable / loveable / worthy / good enough", this leads to poor mental health and often withdrawal from connection and relationships
- Burnout - the strain of suppressing and masking causes exhaustion, leading to burnout, and can impact physical health

Examples of Masking

My true self	Judgement	My Mask
Being forgetful	'You're disorganised'	Extreme organisation
Hyper-focused	'You're obsessed'	Hide interests
Speak too much / too little	"You ramble / You're too quiet"	Rehearse conversations
High energy	'You're too much'	Suppress energy
Emotional dysregulation	'You're too sensitive'	Bottle up emotions
Unable to focus	'You're stupid / lazy'	Procrastination
Social difficulties	'You're weird'	People pleasing / avoidance
Creative doodling	'You're a daydreamer'	Suppress creativity
Overwhelmed	'You're naughty'	Conforming

Un-Masking

Firstly, let's clarify that everyone learns to conform and adapt to society and in certain situations this can be a very useful skill. However, this is a problem when it is used universally in all situations especially intra-personally or in close healthy relationships.

How to Un-Mask

Unmasking can be a challenging process, so it's crucial to prioritise doing this with people who are supportive and safe.

Do it at your pace and comfort level.

Seek support from other Neurodiverse individuals.

Take it one step at a time; choose a behaviour to start with that feels important to you, but not too scary - this could be a behaviour you have used to over-compensate to 'cover' a trait which was deemed 'unacceptable' which you would like to stop, or a behaviour you have always suppressed but would like to 'own again'.

Set experiments to change your behaviour and evaluate the outcomes, building on this little by little, until you are more your authentic self.

If someone is critical of you - evaluate what happened and whether this is a person who it is safe to un-mask around.

Neurodiversity and Homophily

The combination of different communication styles, different body language and social cues allows neurodiverse people to gravitate towards each other, often unknowingly. This is because we understand each other better, as well as have an increased unconscious empathy towards one another.

This phenomenon, known as homophily, suggests a preference for social bonds with those who share similar traits, behaviours, or cognitive styles.

Neurodivergent people may find comfort and understanding in shared experiences and communication styles, leading to stronger connections.

Being with others who understand neurodivergent experiences can be validating and reduce feelings of isolation or being "different".

We self-select - and when we unconsciously and consciously choose people who "get us", and who "we get", then we have a greater sense of belonging.

Find your people!

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Neurodiversity and ‘Fitting In’

The human need to belong is crucial for everyone, this provides a sense of self-identification as well as being part of a community. The search for a community can be a challenge for people with neurodiversity, with a sense of ‘not being the same’ as others.

It’s like feeling out of place among horses, when you're unaware of your true zebra nature.

This can lead to confusion and a sense of inadequacy.

We need to all find ‘our people’!

Neurodivergent people don’t need to change — our environments do.

Stop trying to “fix” neurology that was never broken. Build schools, workplaces, and communities that accommodate different sensory needs, communication styles, and ways of thinking.

When we change the environment, everyone has the chance to thrive.

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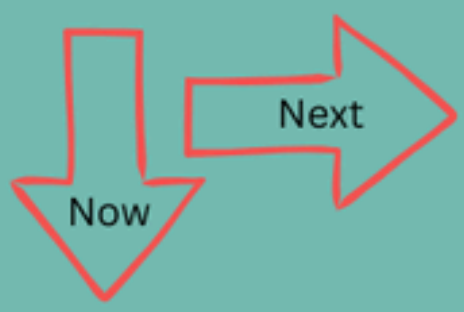
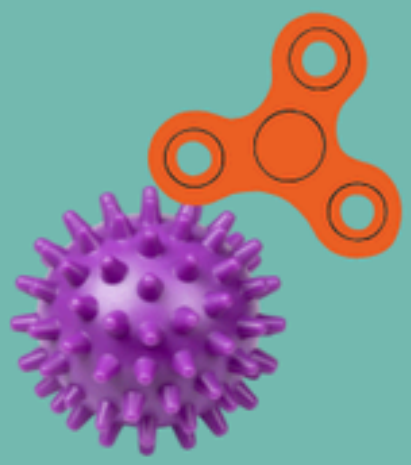
In daily life, **neurodivergent people** shouldn't have to change who they are just to get through the day — we **should be changing the environment around us**.

Instead of forcing ourselves to push through sensory overload, exhaustion, or systems that don't work for our brains, let's build routines, spaces, and supports that do. Noise-cancelling headphones, flexible schedules, clear communication, sensory-friendly homes, task tools — these aren't "crutches," they're empowerment.



We thrive not by reshaping our neurology, but by reshaping our surroundings to meet our needs.



And that's valid, powerful and necessary.

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Research shows that **50–70% of Autistic people also have ADHD**, and **20–50% of ADHDers are also Autistic**.

Neurodiversity isn't about fitting people neatly into one box or another — our brains are far more complex.

Instead of asking "Which label fits?"
Let's start asking
"What does your *unique* brain look like?"

Every individual's presentation is valid. Every experience matters.

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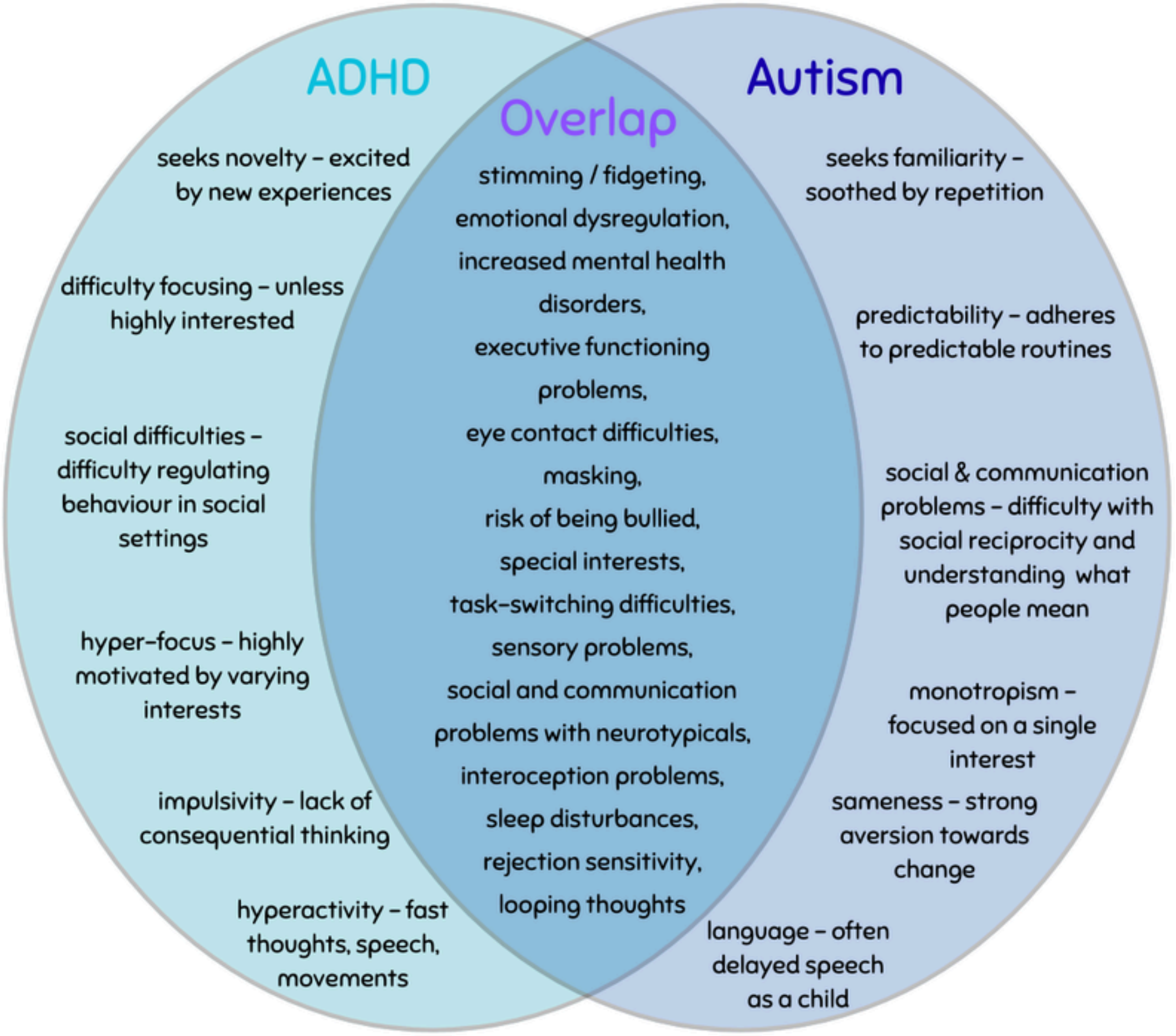
Is it ADHD or Autism?



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NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE HAVE ROUGHLY 2-3X HIGHER RATES OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION COMPARED TO NEUROTYPICAL PEOPLE

Those with ADHD are 30-40% likely to suffer with anxiety and 25-35% likely to suffer with depression

Those with Autism are 30-50% likely to suffer with anxiety and 40-50% likely to suffer with depression

Neurotypical People are 20-25% likely to suffer with anxiety and 15-20% likely to suffer with depression

The world isn't built for neurodivergent brains! Neurodivergent brains process stimuli, emotions, and social cues differently. constant masking, sensory overload, social criticism / rejection, and lack of support create a chronic state of threat and stress. With understanding, acceptance, and accommodations, emotional wellness can dramatically improve.

Neurodivergence and Anxiety

Differences in brain structure - less connection between Pre-Frontal Cortex ('thinking brain') with the Limbic System ('emotional brain'), which means emotions may be harder to regulate, including anxiety.

Masking - not feeling like you fit it, or not meeting society exceptions, can lead to anxiety and therefore masking as a coping strategy.

A need for predictability and a greater intolerance of uncertainty - which can lead to anxiety during change or uncertain times.

Sensory overload - heightened sensitivity to external stimuli can be anxiety-inducing.

Social challenges - difficulty interpreting social cues, social norms, and initiating conversations can lead to social anxiety.

Misjudgement - being judged by others who don't understand their experiences; "different", "naughty", "odd", "difficult", leading to social anxiety.

Looping - getting caught on thoughts and ruminating, worrying or obsessing on them can lead to anxiety.

Autism, Looping & OCD

‘Perseverative cognition’ is a "rigid pattern that involves habitual engagement of circular, looping thoughts". Such as, rumination, worry, or becoming stuck on a topic or idea.

This style of thinking is more common in People with Autism.

And can also develop into OCD, which is more prevalent in Autism than the general population (6-37% vs 1-4%).

The reason for this may be due to the differences in brain structure in the Autistic Brain:

- **Less communication between the Pre-Frontal Cortex (‘thinking brain’) and Limbic System (‘emotional brain’), so you may stay in a distressing emotional state for longer.**
- **Difficulty shifting focus - ‘hyper focus’**
- **Heightened sensitivity to certain sensory information**
- **Rigidity of thought**
- **The need for predictability**

How to Manage ‘Looping’

Identify triggers to the looping thoughts, and where possible, reduce, avoid or prepare for the triggers.

Acceptance of your own amazing mind and how it works.

Find ways to break the loop - talk to supportive people; write down all your thoughts until you can’t write anymore; mindfulness; meditation; observe the process rather than the content of the looping.

Explore a different loop - a different special interest, which you can focus on - a pleasurable loop or an activity which interests you.

Avoid harmful maladaptive coping strategies, such as thought suppression (which ultimately enhances the thoughts) or substance misuse.

Reduce stress overall (less stressed often = less looping) - manage your self care e.g. exercise, healthy eating habits, good night’s sleep, seeking positive connection with others.

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Disclaimer – I have been a therapist for many years and thus cannot reference where I have learned all theories and aspects that I have covered in this book, however, I have listed key texts and sites which have shaped my thinking.

www.innerfocustherapy.co.uk
innerfocustherapy@outlook.com