

Beyond Awareness: Discovering and Celebrating Autistic Strengths

Benino Coscia

Pre-Survey

- **Primary purpose:** translate academic research into community education
- Your engagement is important!

The pre-survey was sent out prior to this webinar.

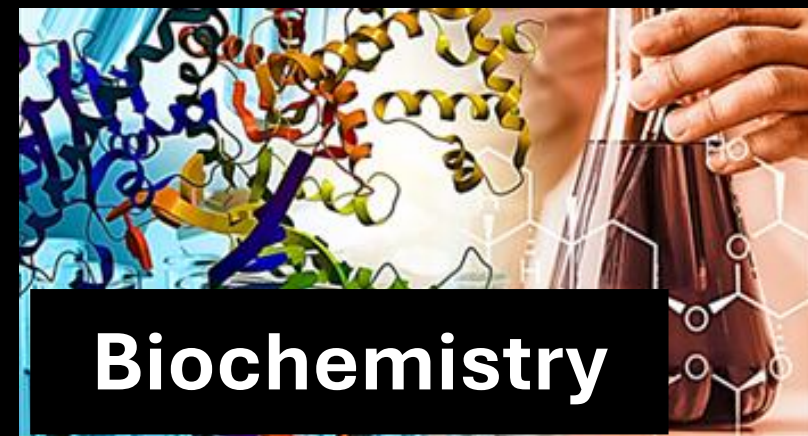
If you didn't get to fill it out yet, please do that right now.



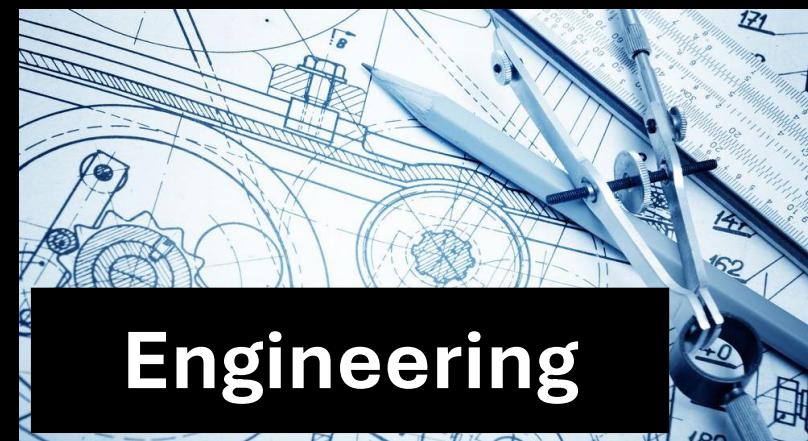
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About me



Biochemistry



Engineering

Story

Pre-Survey

Please complete the pre-survey
if you haven't yet:

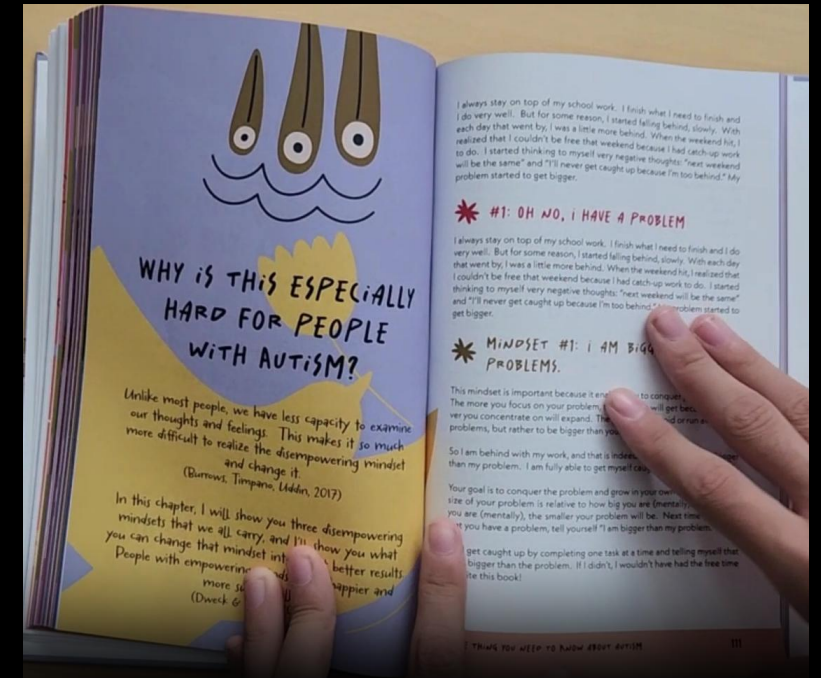
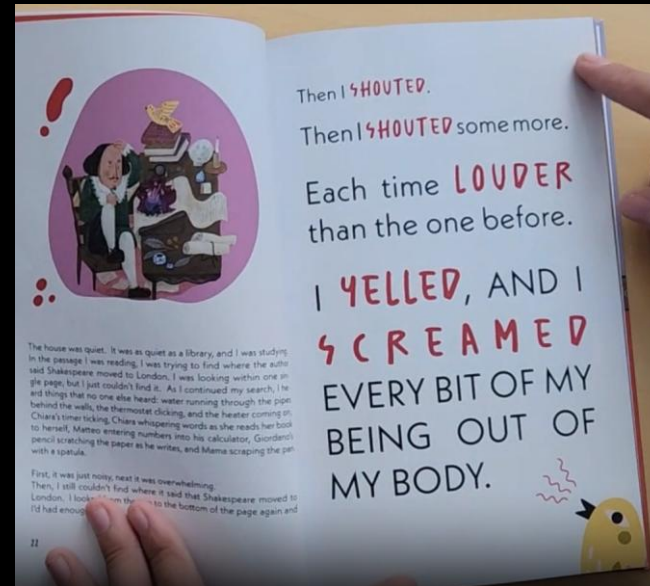
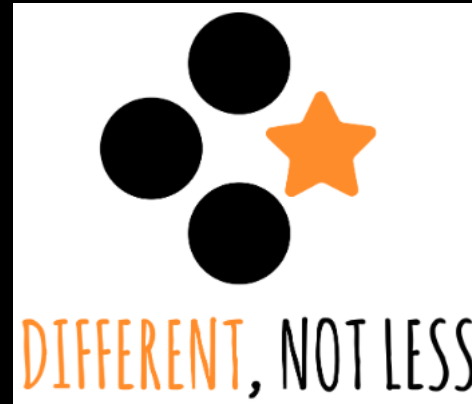
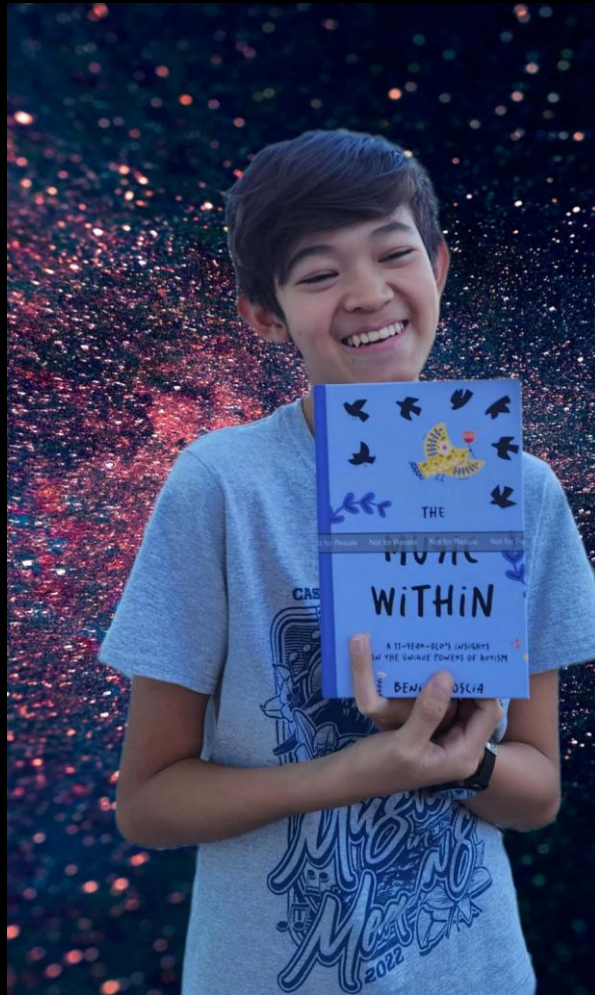


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Penguin Story



Different, Not Less



Today's Agenda

Neurodiversity Affirming

1

Sensory

2

Social

3

Emotional

4

Rigidity

Famous People

The 4 traits are not diagnostic criteria.

They are what I observed to be the most common traits in autism

Poll 1

What is your age group?

12-15

16-18

19-21

22-25

26+

Poll 2

What is your relationship to autism?

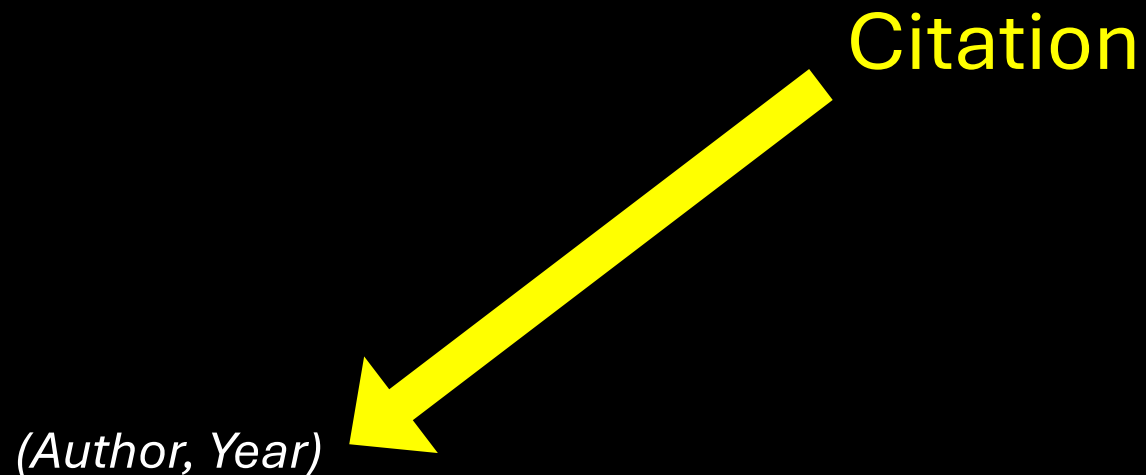
I am autistic

Family member or friend

Educator or service provider

Research-based content

- Translate academic research into community education
- Many slides contain research-based content with a citation
- Other slides are from my personal experience





Deficit Framework

- Forcing a left-handed person to write with their right hand only

(Cage et al., 2018) (Graf-Kurtulus & Gelo, 2024)



Neurodiversity Affirming

- Giving a left-handed person left-handed writing utensils

(Cage et al., 2018) (Graf-Kurtulus & Gelo, 2024)

Deficit Framework vs. Neurodiversity Affirming



(Cage et al., 2018) (Graf-Kurtulus & Gelo, 2024)

1. Perspective

Common belief

It's just a developmental disability

Neurodiversity-affirming

It's a different way of thinking and processing the world

For people with high support needs

We should...

- Protect the dignity of autistic individuals without erasing the reality of support needs at any level

What am I saying? Different

What am I **NOT** saying

“
We should
ignore support
needs.”

What I **AM** saying

“ Meeting
support needs
without treating the
person as less.”



**BOTTOM
LINE**

Different support needs. Same human worth.

2. Message

Common belief



Fit in

Neurodiversity-affirming



Stand out

Trying to fit in
vs.

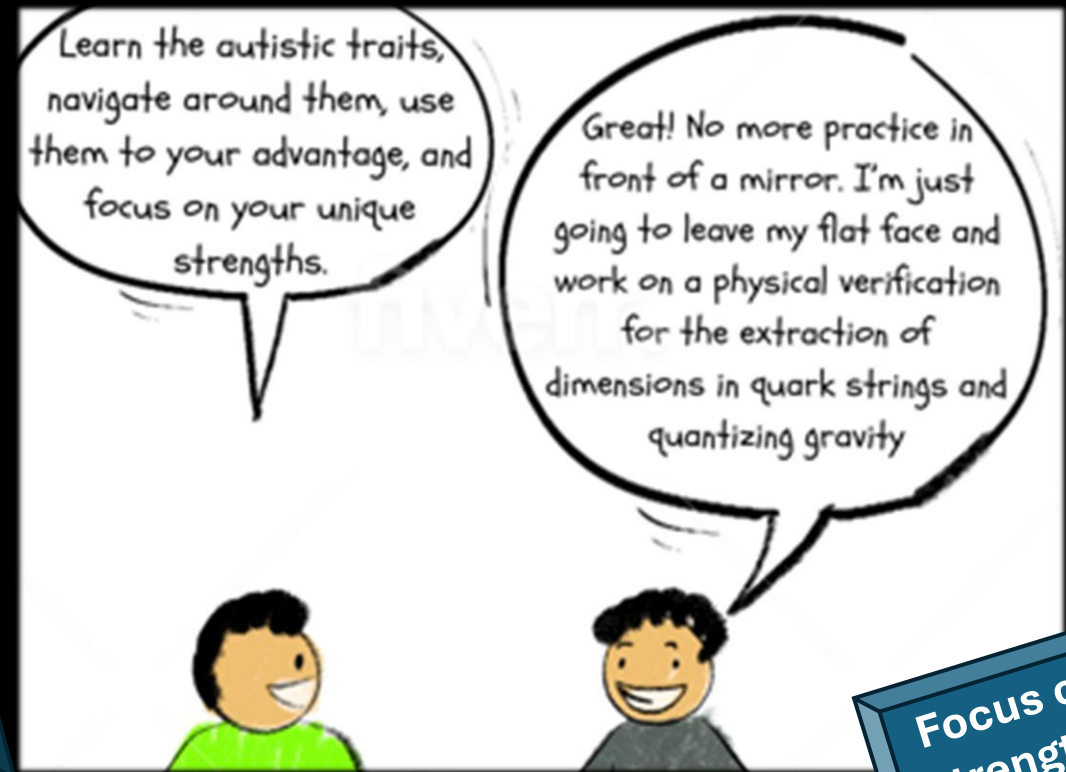


3. Goal

Common belief



Neurodiversity-affirming



What am I saying? Avoid Masking

What am I **NOT** saying



“ We should
remove therapy,
teaching, and
support. ”

What I **AM** saying



“ Autistic people
shouldn't spend all our
lives pretending to be
normal. ”



**BOTTOM
LINE**

Help autistic people live better, not pretend better.

Trait 1: Sensory

Neurodiversity Affirming	
1	*Sensory*
2	Social
3	Emotional
4	Rigidity
Famous People	

Balloons

Small balloon

- Has space left to expand
- Will not pop

Bigger balloon

- No space left to expand
- Might pop



“Hyper-reactivity”



(Kern et al., 2006)

Hear

- A lot of people talking can cause sensory overload
- Mechanical sounds are particularly irritating



(Kern et al., 2006)

Touch



Smell



Vision



Taste



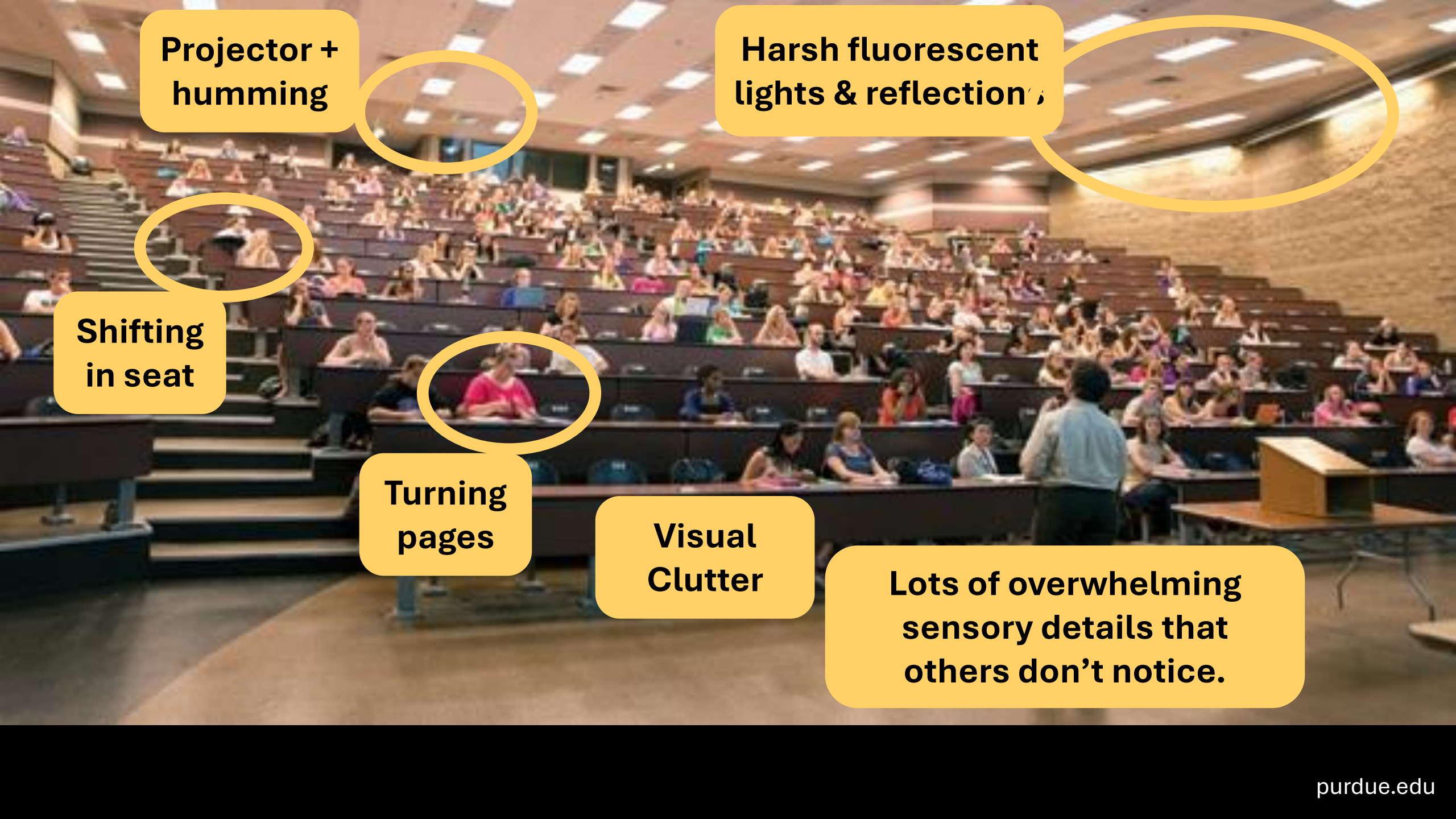
(Kern et al., 2006)

The impact of heightened senses

1. Easily bothered by minor things
2. Very easily frustrated or overwhelmed

(Kern et al., 2006)





**Projector +
humming**

**Harsh fluorescent
lights & reflection,**

**Shifting
in seat**

**Turning
pages**

**Visual
Clutter**

**Lots of overwhelming
sensory details that
others don't notice.**

The world isn't set up for us

- Autistic people must work harder internally
- We can feel like places aren't set up for us
 - Physical or non-physical
- Traits can feel hard to manage

What you can do: **Make small changes**

Make small changes:

Examples:

- Lower sensory overload
- Lower noise, lights, and visual clutter
- Give processing time
- Notice overload before it comes a meltdown

➔ Small changes in the environment can create big changes in belonging



Strengths in this trait (sensory)

- Incredible attention to detail
- Heightened awareness of surroundings
- Authentic and accurate observations of the world
- Experience joy from positive sensory input

Trait 2: Social

Neurodiversity Affirming	
1	Sensory
2	*Social*
3	Emotional
4	Rigidity
Famous People	

(Baron-Cohen et al., 1985)

Perspective Story

- I lost my favorite Hot Wheels car
- I eventually found it in my sister's room
- My family got mad at me, and I had to apologize to my sister



Social trait

People with autism struggle with...

1. Perspective-taking

- Harder to see others' perspectives

2. Social interactions

- Must be taught social norms
- Logical reasoning rather than intuition

(Baron-Cohen et al., 1985)

Perspective Story 2

My sister's perspective

- I invaded her room and made a mess

My perspective

- I found my Hot Wheels car



1. Perspective-taking

The arch can be viewed as:

- A bridge
- A wall
- A tower



2. Social interactions

- We have trouble understanding what other people think
- Disconnect between **neurotypical** and **autistic**



What you can do: **Redefine Success**

A new measure of success

Success is not

- Eye contact
- Fake enthusiasm
- Looking “normal”
- Hiding autistic traits

Success is

- Supporting self-understanding
- Communication that works
- Emotional safety
- Real connection

➔ Make space for us to be real



Strengths seen

- Can speak candidly at times
- Focus more time on studies and interests

(Milton, 2012)



What am I saying about Strengths?

What am I **NOT** saying

“
Every autistic
challenge should
be renamed as a
strength.”

What I **AM** saying

“
Autistic traits
can bring challenges
and strengths.”



**BOTTOM
LINE**

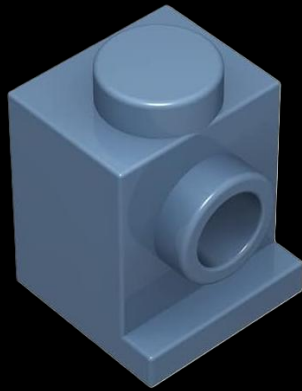
Autism is more than a list of deficits

Trait 3: Emotional

Neurodiversity Affirming	
1	Sensory
2	Social
3	*Emotional*
4	Rigidity
Famous People	

Perspective Story 3

- Building a LEGO plane
- Couldn't find one piece I needed
- Started getting upset



Emotional trait



Alexithymia

- We used to think autism comes with emotional dysregulation

Mixed emotions: the contribution of alexithymia to the emotional symptoms of autism

[G Bird](#)^{1,2,*}, [R Cook](#)³

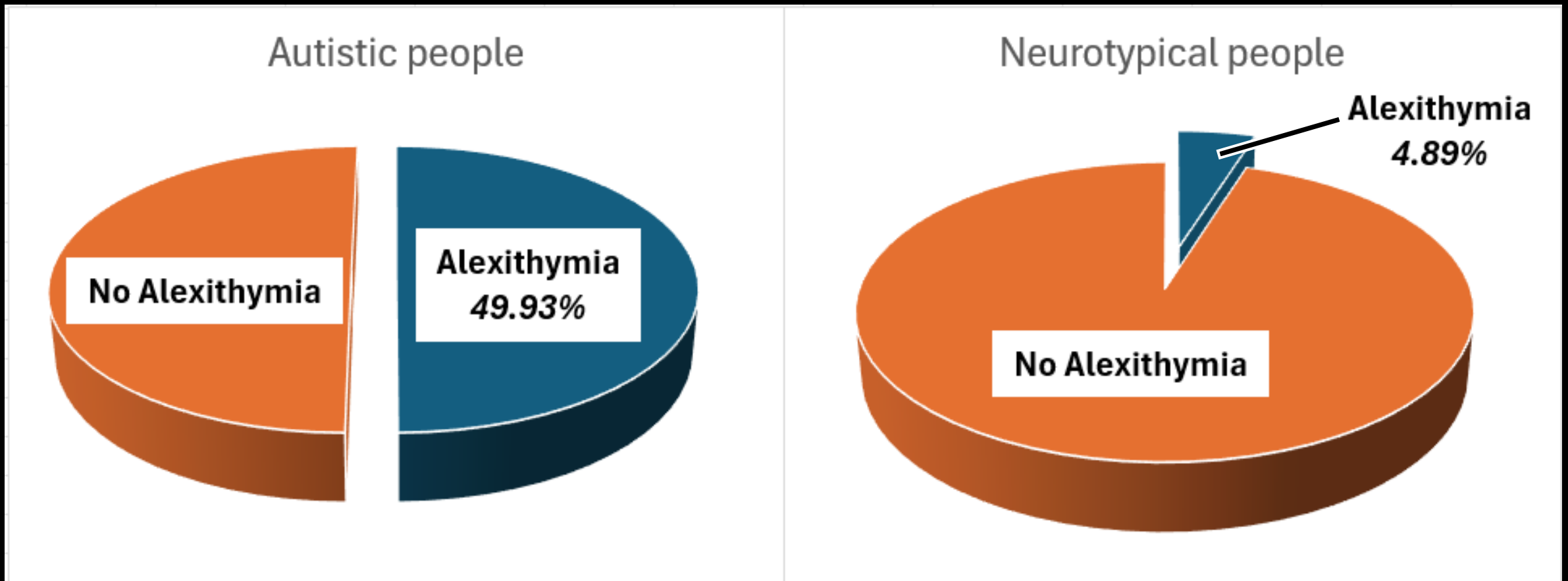
where observed, emotional impairments are due to alexithymia—a condition that frequently co-occurs with autism—rather than a feature of autism *per se*. Alexithymia is a condition

- The emotional difference is just an internal processing issue

(Bird et al., 2010), (Bird & Cook, 2013)

Alexithymia Prevalence

- More prevalent in people with autism than neurotypical



(Kinnaird et al., 2019)

Why emotional trait?

Alexithymia

Sensory Trait

Rigidity Trait

Social Trait

“Empathy imbalance hypothesis”

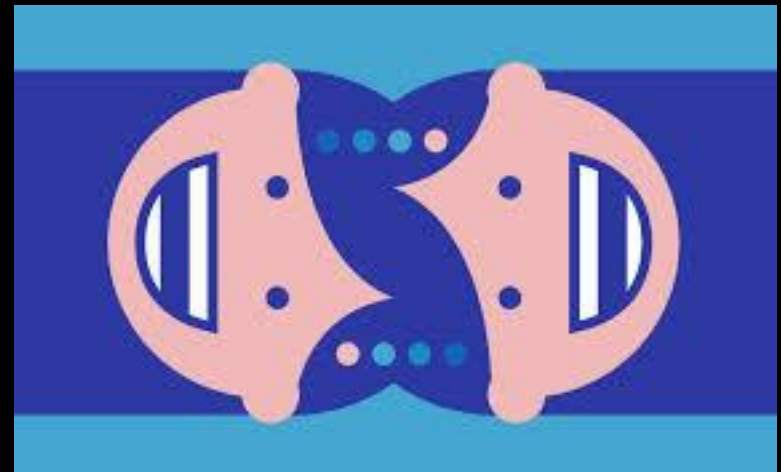
- We believed that people with autism have less empathy
- Autistic people actually have *more emotional empathy*

Empathy imbalance hypothesis:

- Less cognitive empathy
 - Struggle to understand why someone feels a certain way
- More emotional empathy
 - Experience others' emotions almost like our own

“Double empathy problem”

- Low cognitive empathy in autism is not actually a deficit
- Autistic individuals have high cognitive empathy when interacting with other autistic individuals
- The perceived gap occurs when an autistic person communicates with a neurotypical person (and vice versa)



The Impact of Regulation

- We tend to let our emotions take over
- Individuals with autism less frequently use adaptive emotional regulation strategies

Analogy: Regulating body temperature

- Temperature becomes more intense if we don't regulate it

(Samson et al., 2014)



What you can do

Understand before responding, correcting, or problem solving

Ask:

- “What is this behavior communicating?”
- “Is this sensory overload?”
- “Is this anxiety from uncertainty?”
- “Is this honest communication being misunderstood?”
- “Do they need regulation before conversation?”

➔ The goal is not less autism. It’s more understanding.



Strengths in this trait (emotions)

- Strong emotions and creativity can flow through your work
- Feel deeper, stronger, and live life more fully
- More emotional empathy



Trait 4: Rigidity

Neurodiversity Affirming	
1	Sensory
2	Social
3	Emotional
4	*Rigidity*
Famous People	

Perspective Story 4

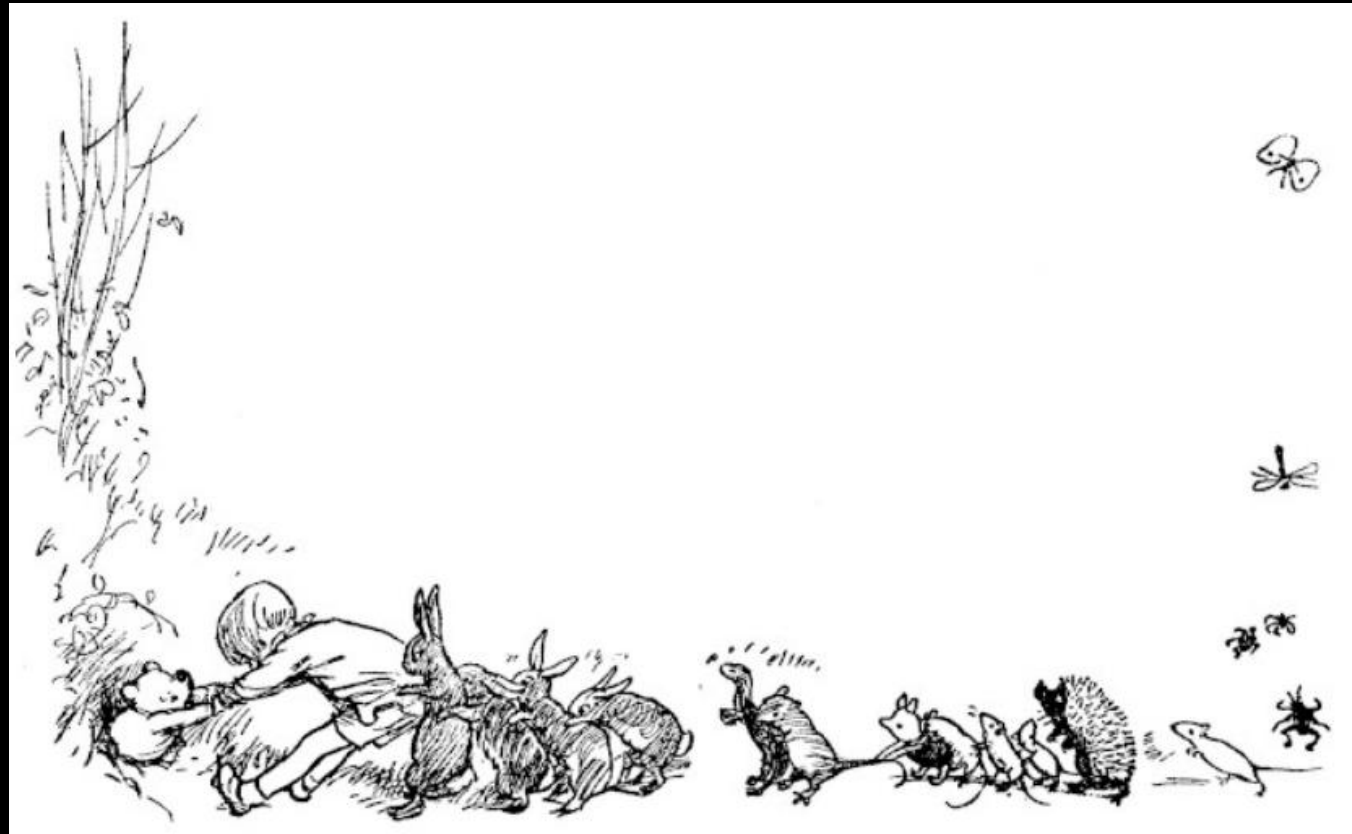
- I'm doing math homework
- I'm doing really well with all of them
- Problem 14 is impossible!
- I'm in my own world
- I'M GOING TO SOLVE IT!!



1: Rigidity trait

- We can get stuck on a thought, and have a hard time snapping out

**I'M GOING TO
SOLVE IT!!**



2: Rigidity trait

1. Cognitive inflexibility (monotropism)

- Deep, single-focus processing
- Rigidity in thinking

Examples:

- Restricted interests
- Black-and-white thinking
- Literalism and legalism

2. Insistence on sameness (IS)

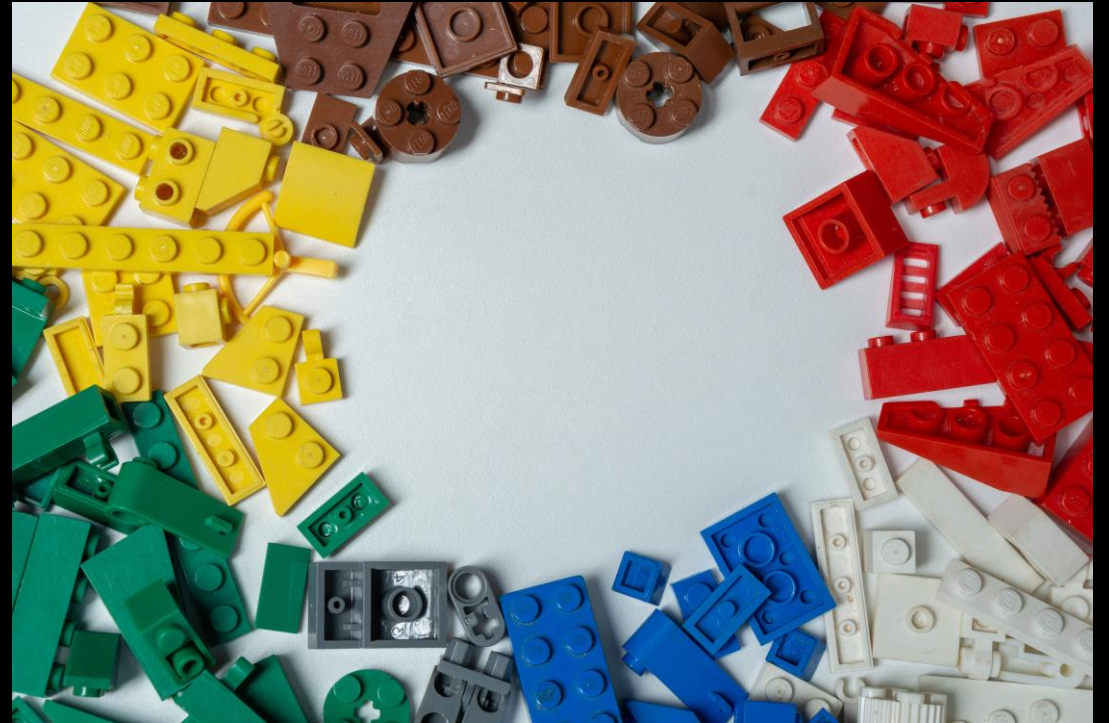
- Profound preference for predictability
- Rigidity in behaviors

Examples:

- Routines without flexibility
- Intolerance of uncertainty
- Ritualistic behavior patterns
- Resistance to change

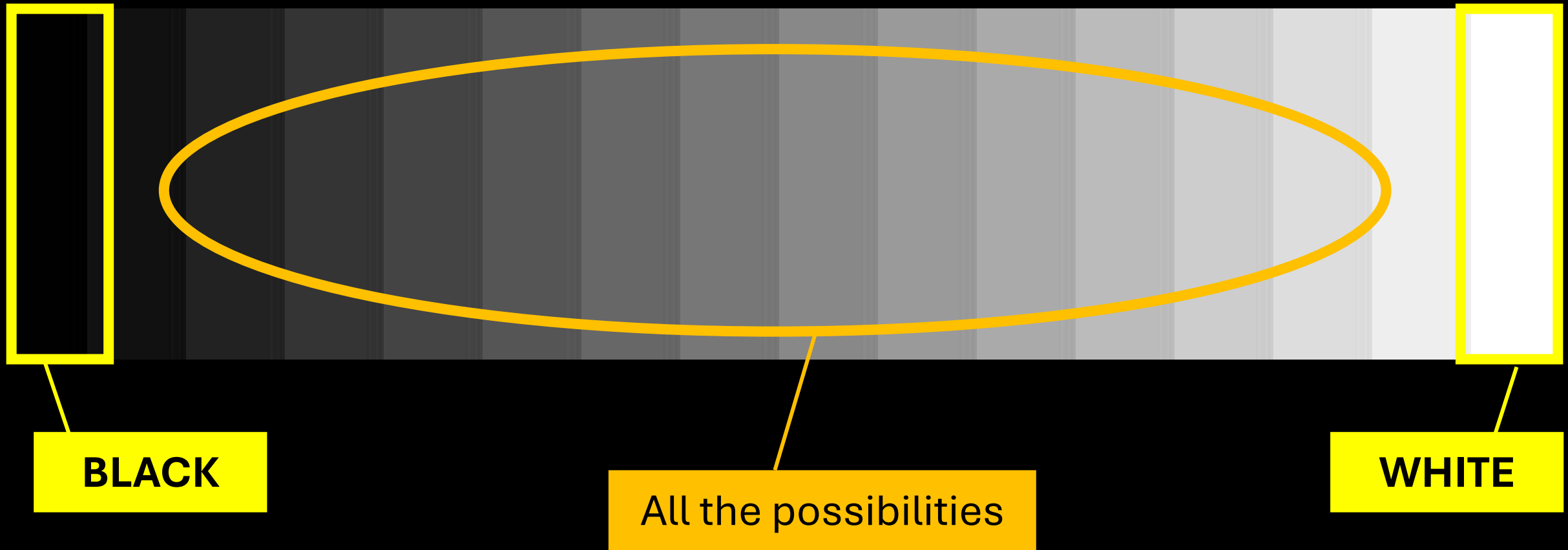
1. Cognitive inflexibility— Restricted interests

- Restricted interests are like an obsession
- In people with autism, an interest has much higher intensity



(Murray et al., 2005)

2. Cognitive inflexibility— black-or-white thinking



(Murray et al., 2005)

3. Cognitive inflexibility— literalism and legalism

**Make
sure the
kitchen
counter is
clean.**



4. Cognitive inflexibility— literalism and legalism

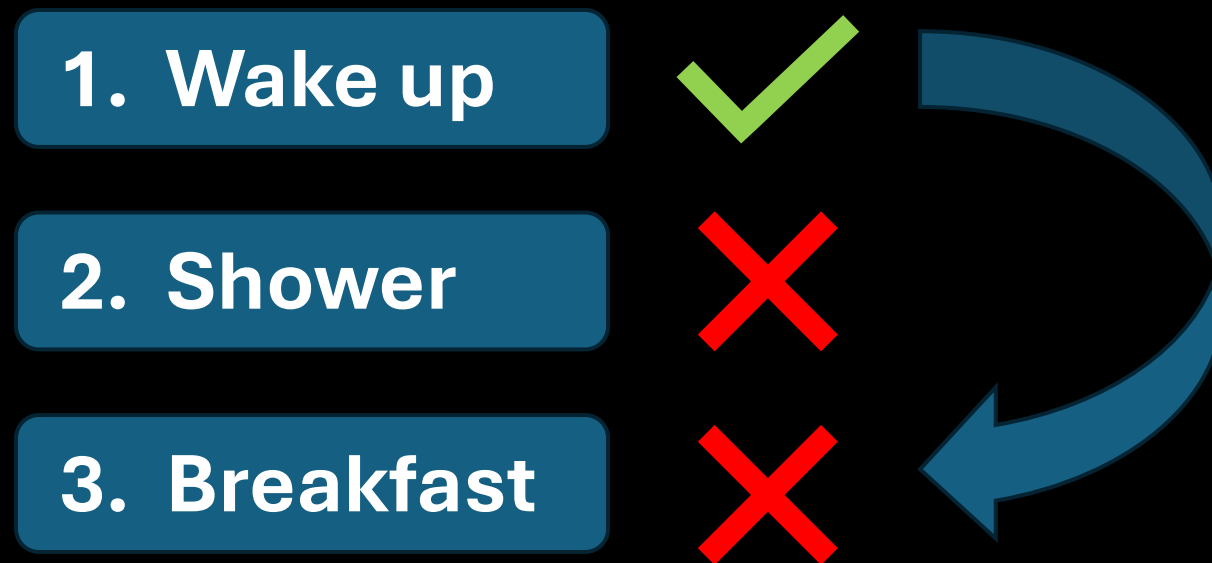
**Write
Happy
Birthday
on Both**



1. Insistence on sameness— routines without flexibility

- For autistic people, a disruption in routine can set something off

Example:



2. Insistence on sameness— intolerance of uncertainty

- It makes people with autism very anxious to not know what's coming
- Situations that are unclear can produce anxiety



The Impact of Rigidity

1. Higher levels of anxiety and stress
2. Struggles with transitions



What you can do

Make small changes

- Give advance notice before changes, and explain the “why”
 - Use visual schedules or written steps
 - Offer choices during transitions
 - Respect the natural ending of activities
 - “Do this when you’re done reading that chapter” rather than “Do this in 5 minutes”
 - Honor routines when possible
- ➔ Small changes in the environment can create big changes in belonging



Strengths in this trait (hyper...)

- Improved performance in highly procedural tasks
- Hyperfocus
- Hyper-systemizing



Famous people

Neurodiversity Affirming	
1	Sensory
2	Social
3	Emotional
4	Rigidity
Famous People	

Caveat / Disclaimer

- Many of them were not officially diagnosed during their lifetime
- Autism was not a widely known condition back then
- Researchers studied the diagnosis criteria and these biographies to know these people probably met the criteria

What am I saying? Worth not connected to strengths

What am I **NOT** saying

“Autistic people must be exceptional to be valuable.”

What I **AM** saying

“Traits often labeled as problems can sometimes be connected to strengths.”



**BOTTOM
LINE**

A person's worth does not depend on how impressive those strengths look to the world

1:Michelangelo (1475 – 1564)

Social Traits

- Unable to maintain normal relationships
- Did not get along with his family
- Frequently walked away in the middle of conversations
- Bad-tempered; frequent angry outbursts



2:Michelangelo (1475 – 1564)

Rigidity Traits

- Rarely took off his boots
- Worked on artwork until the week he died
- Fired his assistants because their work fell short of his standard



3:Michelangelo (1475 – 1564)

Achievements

- Created art for nine different Catholic popes
- Painted the Sistine Chapel primarily on his own
- Sculpted the *Pietà* and the *David* of Michelangelo



What am I saying? **Worth still complete**

What am I **NOT** saying

“
Autistic
strengths must
be impressive.”

What I **AM** saying

“ Strengths can be
big, small, or even
invisible to the outside
world.”



**BOTTOM
LINE**

Even when we cannot easily identify a strength,
their worth is still complete.

1:Isaac Newton (1643 – 1727)

Social Traits

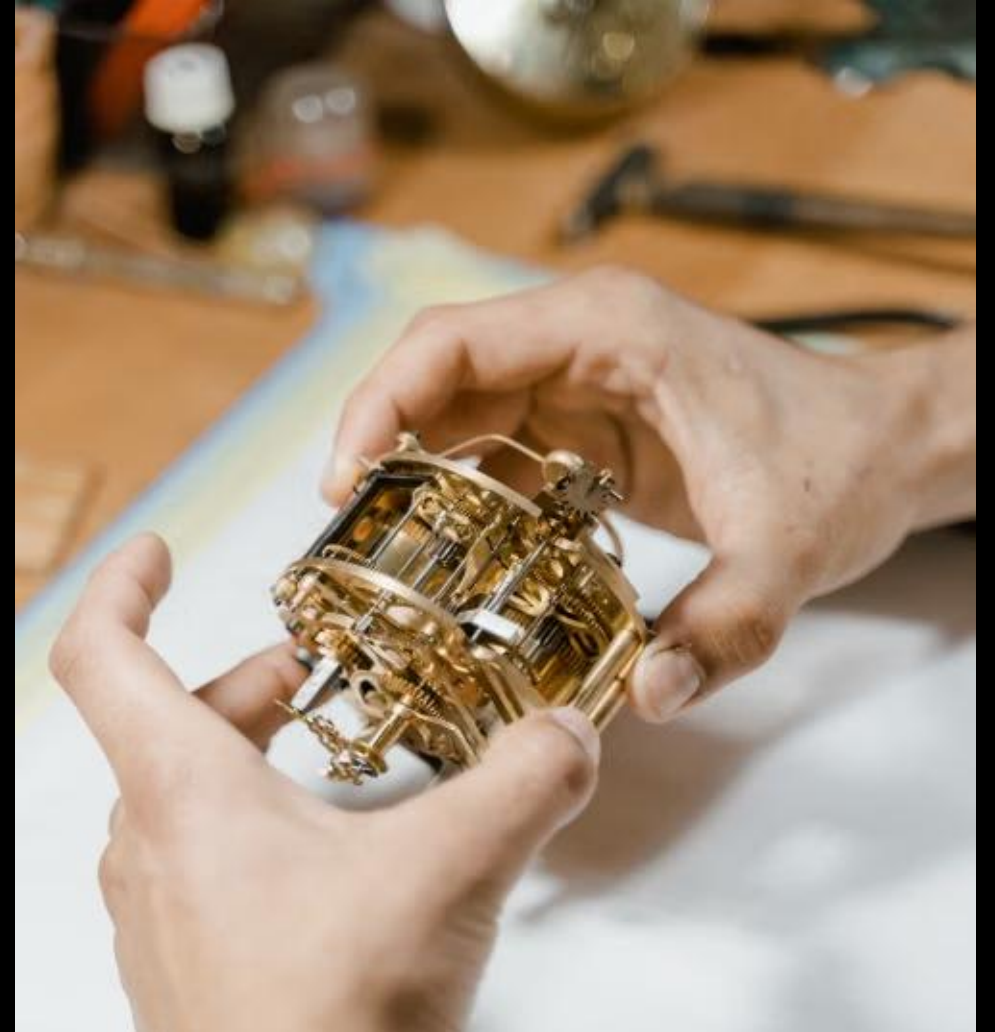
- Never played with other boys
- Rarely spoke
- Criticized for not being social
- Hot-tempered with his few friends



2:Isaac Newton (1643 – 1727)

Rigidity Traits

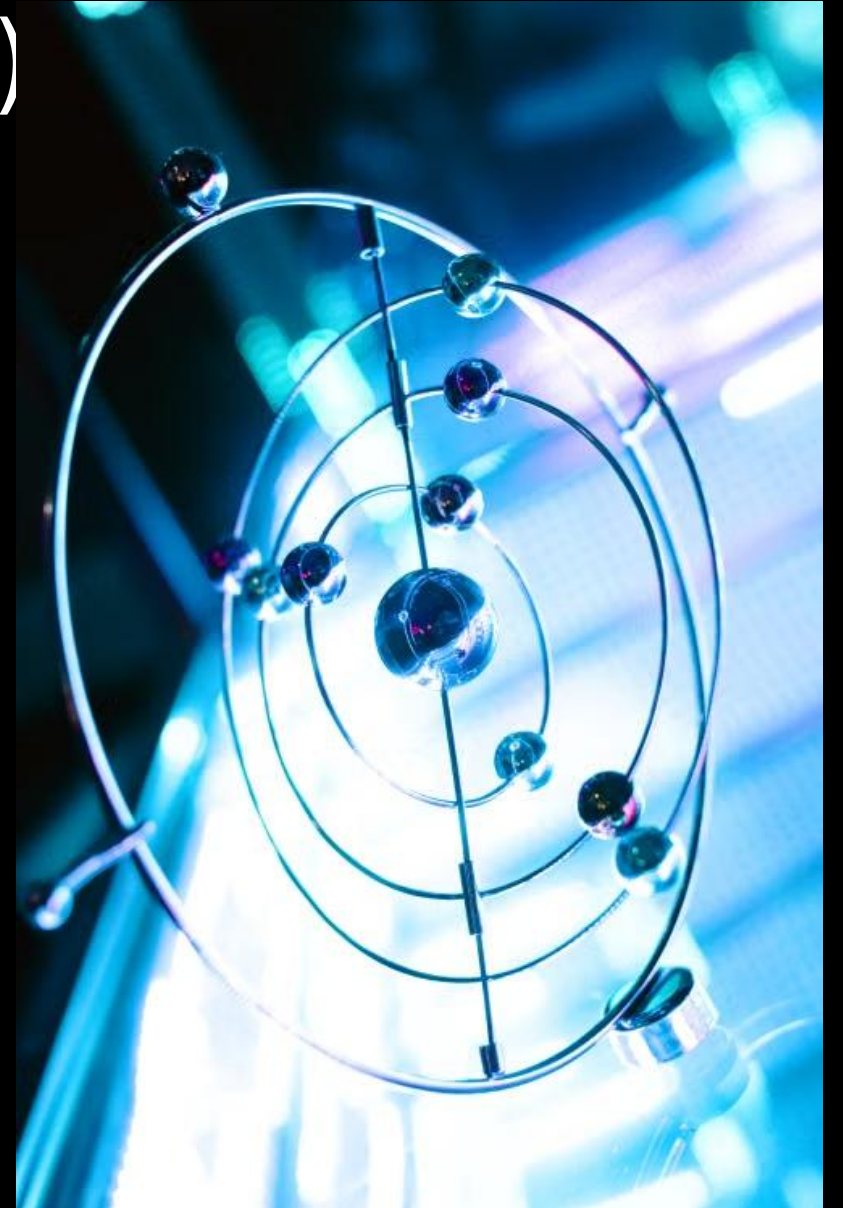
- Math, physics, and astronomy
- Built mechanical models
- Gave lectures to an empty room
- Multiple drafts of scientific papers



3:Isaac Newton (1643 – 1727)

Achievements

- Built the first reflecting telescope
- Invented Calculus
- Developed three laws of classical mechanics
- Developed the law of universal gravitation



1: Temple Grandin (1947 – present)

Sensory Traits

- Sensitivity to sounds
- Sensitivity to texture
- Sensitivity to smell



2: Temple Grandin (1947 – present)

Social Traits

- Found it hard to make eye contact
- Drew on walls instead of playing when she was little
- Didn't let her mother hug her as a baby

3: Temple Grandin (1947 – present)

Emotional Traits

- Many temper tantrums when she was little

4: Temple Grandin (1947 – present)

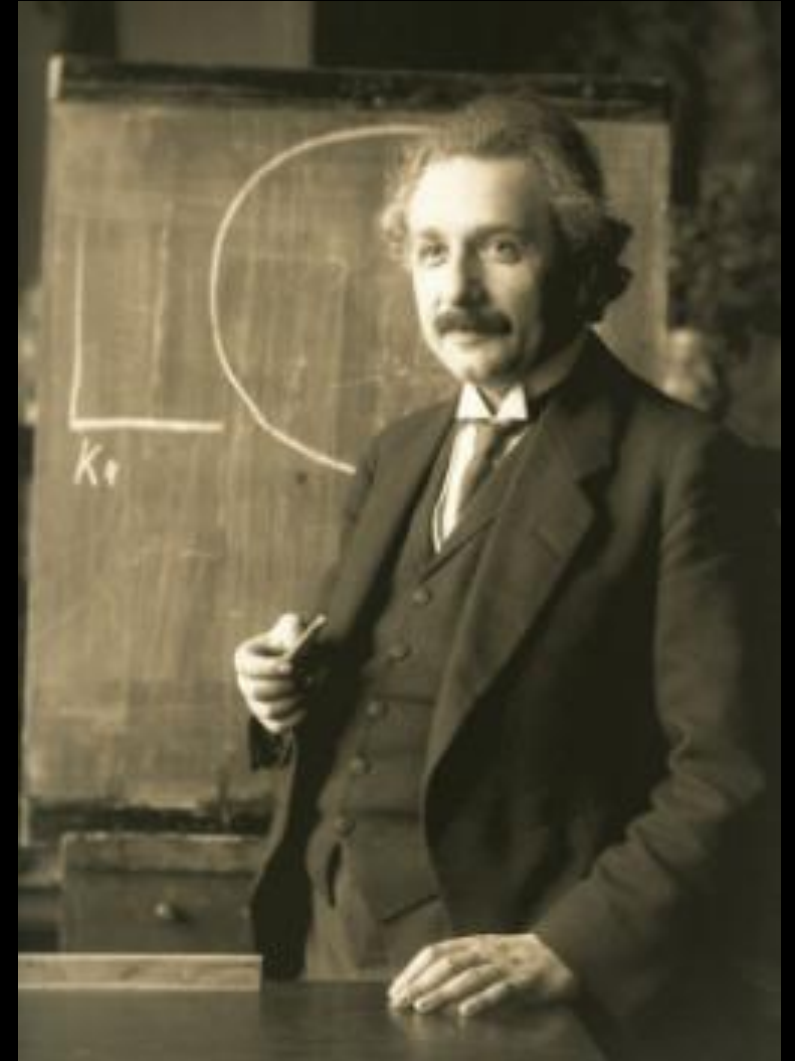
Achievements

- Written >60 articles on animals
- Established author, speaker, lecturer
- World-renowned autism spokesperson
- Authored numerous books on autism

1: Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

Social Traits

- Not a good communicator or lecturer
- Had a hard time expressing thoughts verbally
- Rarely played with other children
- Criticized for not being social



2:Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

Rigidity Traits

- Seven identical suits
- Rigid routines



3:Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

Achievements

- Theory of relativity
- $E = mc^2$
- Photoelectric effect
- Explanation for Brownian motion





No, we don't



A pair of hands, with light skin and short, clean nails, are gently cupping a small, realistic-looking globe of the Earth. The globe shows the Americas, with North and South America visible in green and brown, surrounded by blue oceans. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting foliage or grass. A semi-transparent black rectangular box is centered over the image, containing white text.

Don't change autistic people to fit the world defined by the majority.
Expand the world so autistic people can belong.

Post-Survey



Post Survey

surveymonkey.com/r/FV9TRS5

Q & A



**Comments,
Discussions**

bencoscia35@gmail.com