



Naomi Ruth Cohen
Institute for Mental Health Education



TheChicagoSchool®



23rd Annual Community Mental Health Conference

Neurodiverse Brains: Understanding Differences, Empowering Potential





**American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention**

Illinois

ROGERS
Behavioral Health

TRILOGY

Mental Wellbeing



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Naomi Ruth Cohen

Institute for Mental Health Education
at The Chicago School

Mission Statement

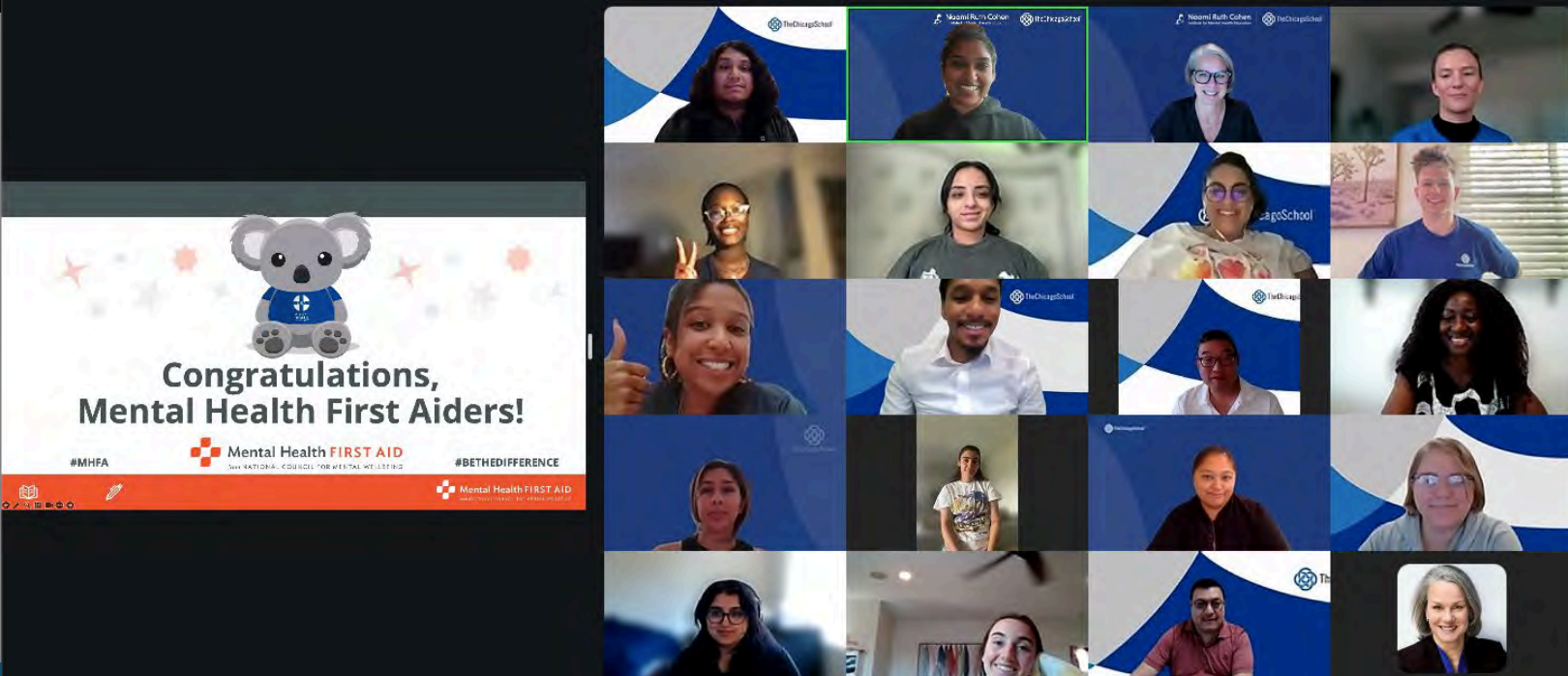
The Naomi Ruth Cohen Institute for Mental Health Education at The Chicago School is committed to ending the stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide. We empower individuals, families, and communities by fostering understanding, expanding access to support, and encouraging honest conversations about mental health.

Through community outreach, training programs, and events, we provide education, elevate lived experiences, and inspire hope. Our work amplifies voices too often unheard, creating a more compassionate, informed, and stigma-free world.





Impact in Higher Education



Impact in Higher Education

"This domain of life is one which is often not comfortably discussed. In a society where independence and self confidence often are viewed as paramount, and need for help viewed as a sign of emotional weakness, we need all the mitigation of myth we can muster". *JA*

"I'm pleased to share the positive outcomes of previous mental health trainings for students, staff, and faculty... These workshops are a meaningful step toward prioritizing student well-being campus wide." *-Mayra Salgado, Roosevelt University*



Impact in Schools



"The class helped the way I view and help my friends and stuff."



Impact in Schools

“Youth Mental Health First Aid has been a powerful resource for staff across our Options Schools. It equipped educators with practical strategies and a shared language to better recognize and respond to students in emotional distress, which is something our schools urgently need. The training helped shift mindsets and strengthened our commitment to building trauma-informed, student-centered environments.”

- Brigitte Swenson, Deputy Chief of Options Schools, CPS



Impact In Community



Impact In Community

“I enjoyed & appreciate the course and instructor. It was very informative and refreshing to know that there is help, support and I can play an intricate part. Helps me be able to identify & assist others as well as myself. Better understanding to focus on the other person not myself. How to balance. And learning & understanding available resources to assist in various aspects of crisis & non crisis situations.” AD

“I appreciate the training. It opened my eyes to some of my own challenges and the importance of self-care.” LB



Impact in Community – City of Evanston Partnership!



Mental Health FIRST AID

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MENTAL WELLBEING



Impact in Community – City of Evanston

“Everyone should take this course!” LM

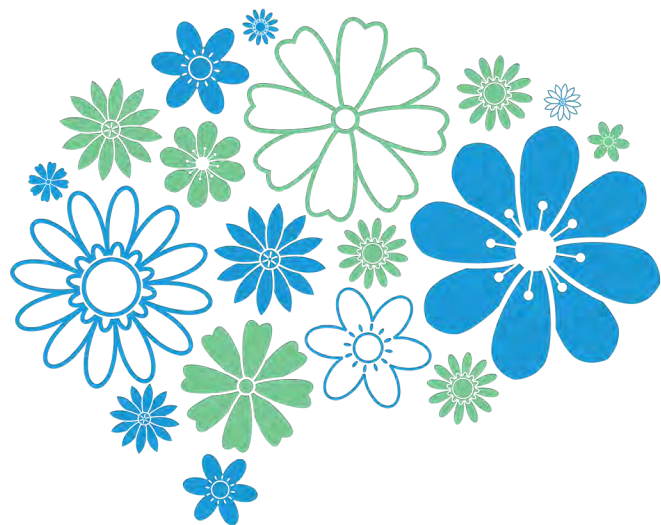
Evanston Public Library

Wednesday, May 21 9:30am-4:30pm

Tuesday, May 27 9:30am-4:30pm

Registration Required





Neurodiverse Brains:

Understanding Differences, Empowering Potential



Panel Presentation



Neurodiversity: The History, A Paradigm Shift, and A New Approach

Samantha V. Kolkey, LCSW



DEFINING NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity is another form of human diversity. It is a biological fact, part of human evolution, and natural, and valuable; the diversity among minds.

First used in 1996 by autistic folks in online forums. Entered into the clinical field by Judy Singer in her 1998 thesis. Then, further popularized when mentioned in an article in The Atlantic by Harvey Blume.



DEFINING NEURODIVERSITY

“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?”



HOW TO USE THE LANGUAGE

Neurodivergent (adj)

NEURO

Greek prefix meaning “nerve”

+

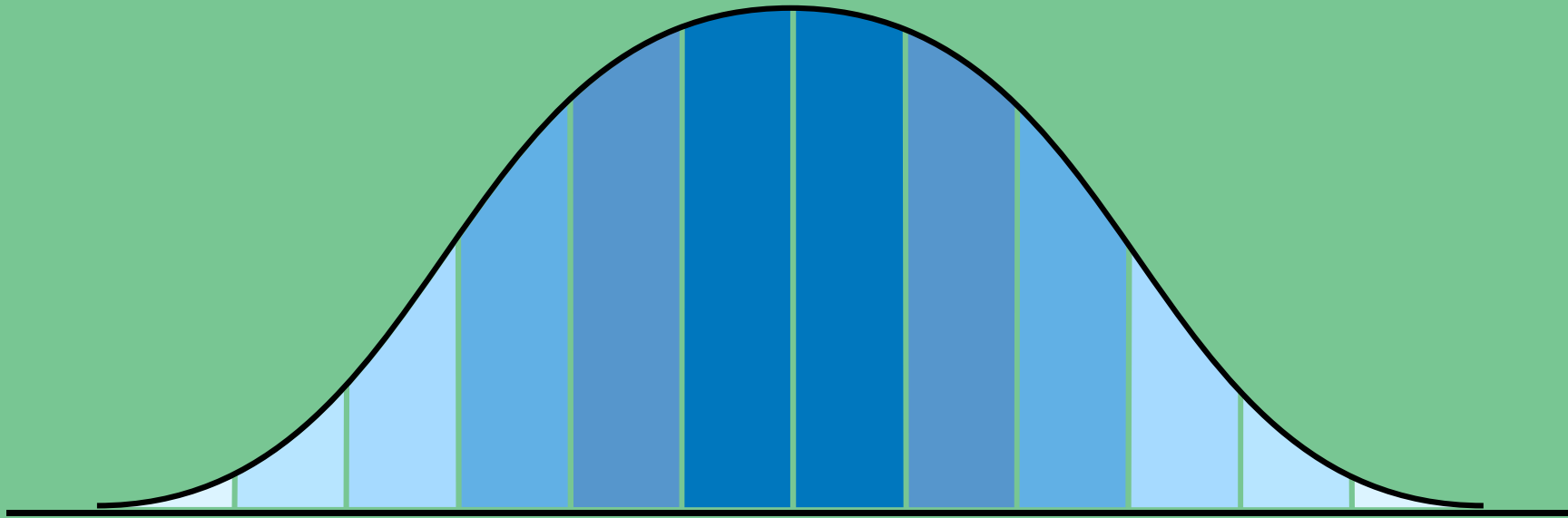
DIVERGENT

Adjective meaning to “differ” or
“deviate”

If a person is neurodivergent, it means they deviate from the neuro normative majority (“neurotypical”).

HOW TO USE THE LANGUAGE

A Visual Understanding: The Bell Curve



Individuals that are neurotypical fall within the center of the bell curve, and individuals that are neurodivergent fall on the edges.

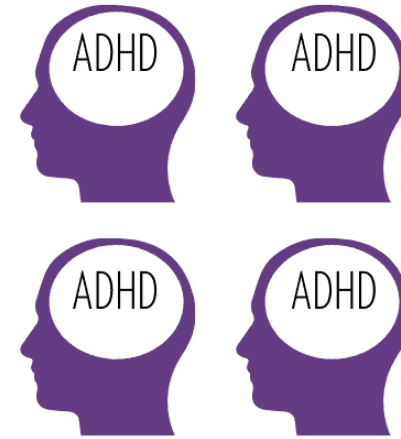
HOW TO USE THE LANGUAGE



Each of these people are neurodivergent



This person is neurotypical



These people are each neurodivergent, but individually they are not neurodiverse



This group is neurodiverse



This person is multiply neurodivergent

Only groups of people can be described as neurodiverse.

Individuals are not neurodiverse, but can be neurodivergent

HOW TO USE THE LANGUAGE

“Functioning”

Functioning labels are static and therefore are assumed to be fixed and permanent. They undermine the nature of a person’s capabilities by overemphasizing the challenges a person faces.

Use “Support Needs” over Functioning.

Support needs can be fluid and context-dependent. “Support needs” allows us to be specific about what supports, tools, or accommodations may be needed based on the environment, situation, and other factors.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE SHIFTS



Directly related to the way we view and treat others.



Can reinforce negative stereotypes, or it can challenge them.



Aligns with the principles of neurodiversity and the disability community's preferences

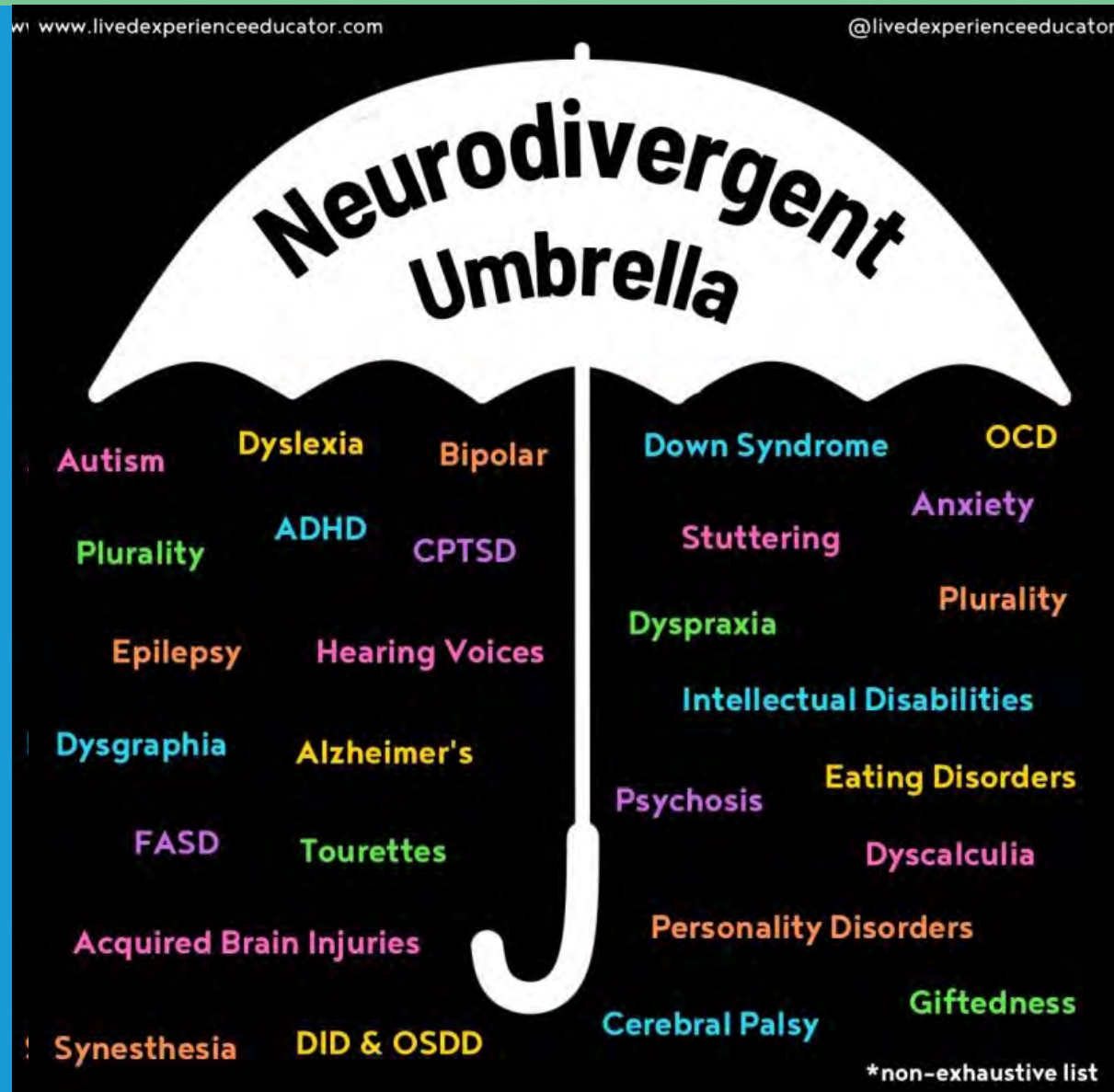


Supports destigmatizing disability and promoting inclusion.



Accurately reflects the lived experience of disability, and challenges the belief that disability is inherently “bad.”

The Neurodivergent Umbrella



SHIFTING PARADIGMS

A paradigm is a lens through which one views reality.

Historical practices have led to the “pathology paradigm,” in which disabled individuals are seen as less-than, broken, shameful, deficient, and in need of a cure or fixing.

Disability justice scholars and advocates describe the standard American view of disability as “pathologizing.”

SHIFTING PARADIGMS

The neurodiversity paradigm's fundamental principles include:

1

There is no “normal” or “right” style of human mind, any more than there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture.

Therefore...

2

No one type of brain function is “right” or “best.” Ideal neurocognitive function is a social construct.

And so...

3

Like other forms of diversity, neurodiversity is subject to social inequity, but is also a source of creativity and empowerment.

THE NEURODIVERSITY APPROACH

The neurodiversity approach is grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm and informed by the neurodiversity movement.

ACCEPTANCE

Embrace neurodiversity by viewing developmental disabilities as differences, not deficiencies.

LEADS TO...

LANGUAGE

Moving away from pathologizing language.

SO WE CAN...

SUPPORT

Recognize the root causes of a neurodivergent person's challenging experiences; assist them in discovering ways of living that align with their natural brain wiring.



Samantha Kolkey, LCSW

Center for Independent Futures
Ashley Allis Therapy, PLLC

Phone: 847-404-7264

Email: svkolkeyanderson@gmail.com

Center for Independent Futures Information:

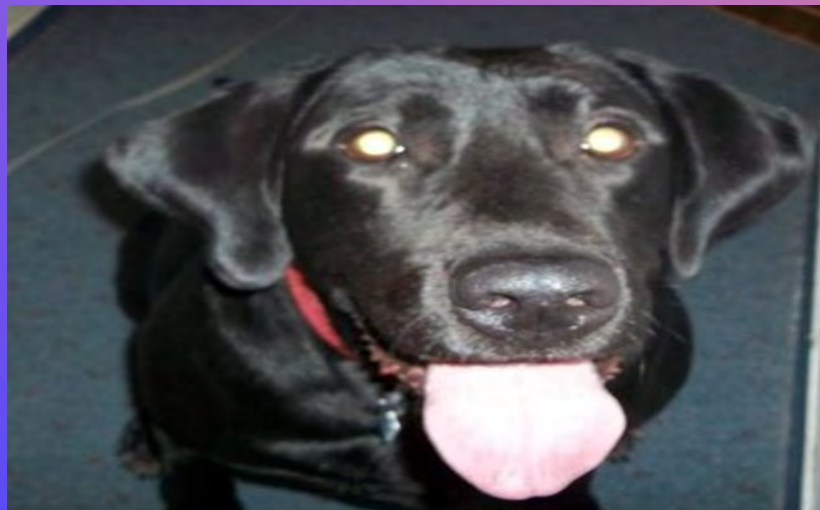
Amanda Marks, Intake Manager.
amarks@independentfutures.org

Center for Independent Website:

independentfutures.com



The Kid Life





To me, being
neurodivergent has been
like being a wolf trying
to blend in a world of
foxes



x •
o
**For a long time, I felt less
than and that I needed to
change who I am to be
“good enough.”**

this led to problems....



+

•

○

I started to disappear



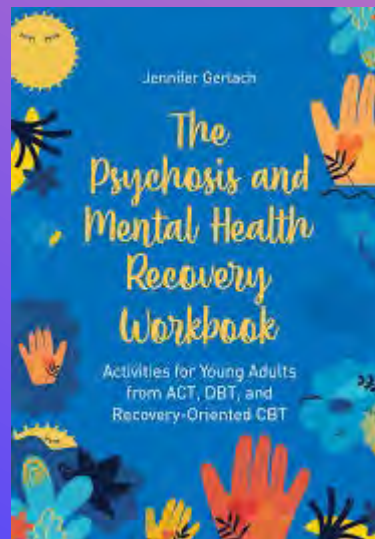
**and then came the hardest
days**



**To me, neurodiversity means
that I am not a broken fox, I am
a wolf.**



A MEANINGFUL JOURNEY





**Neurotypical social norms
have often been rebranded as
social skills. Let's take about
some common autistic social
norms**

Autistic Social Norm

1. Be direct and tell the truth

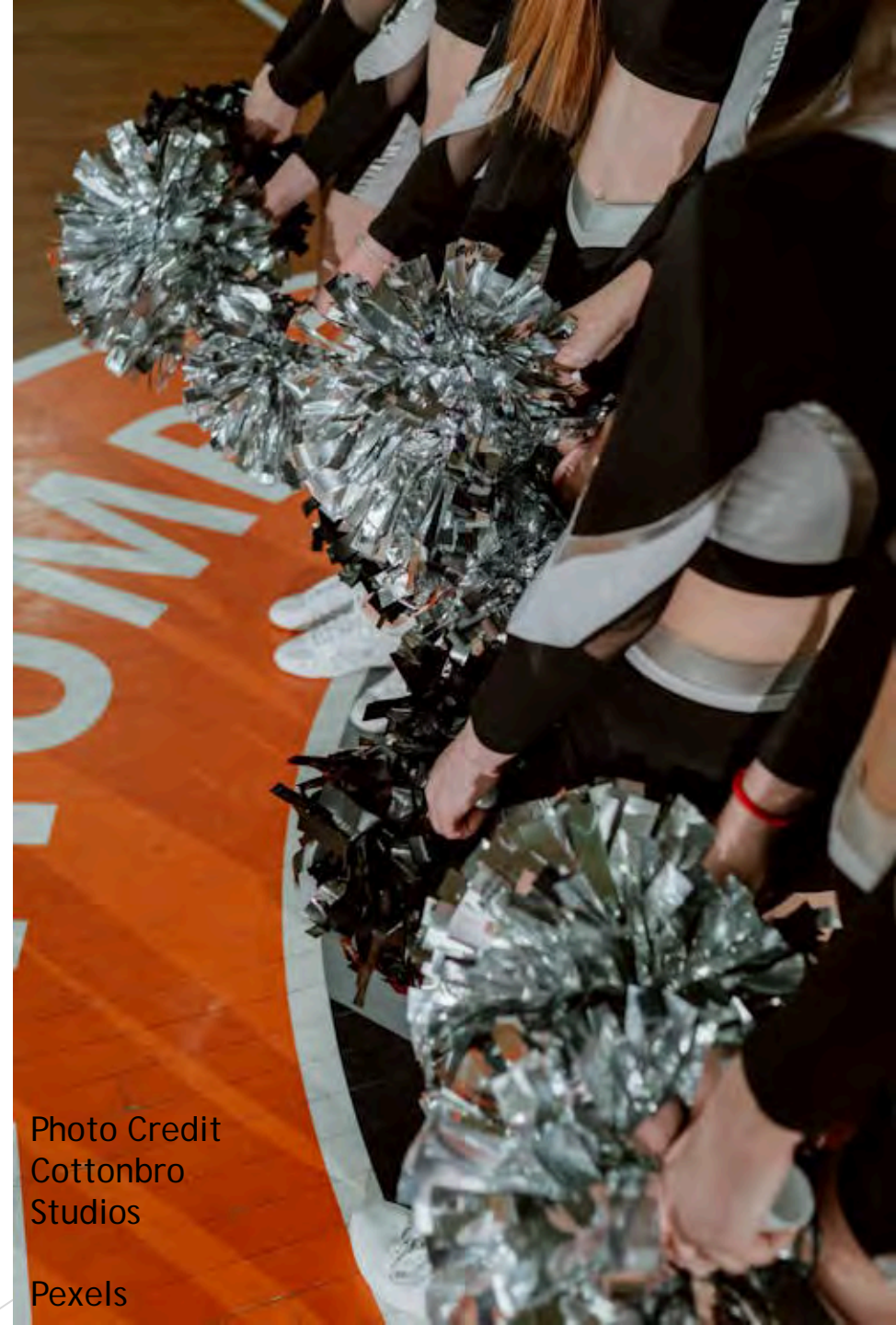


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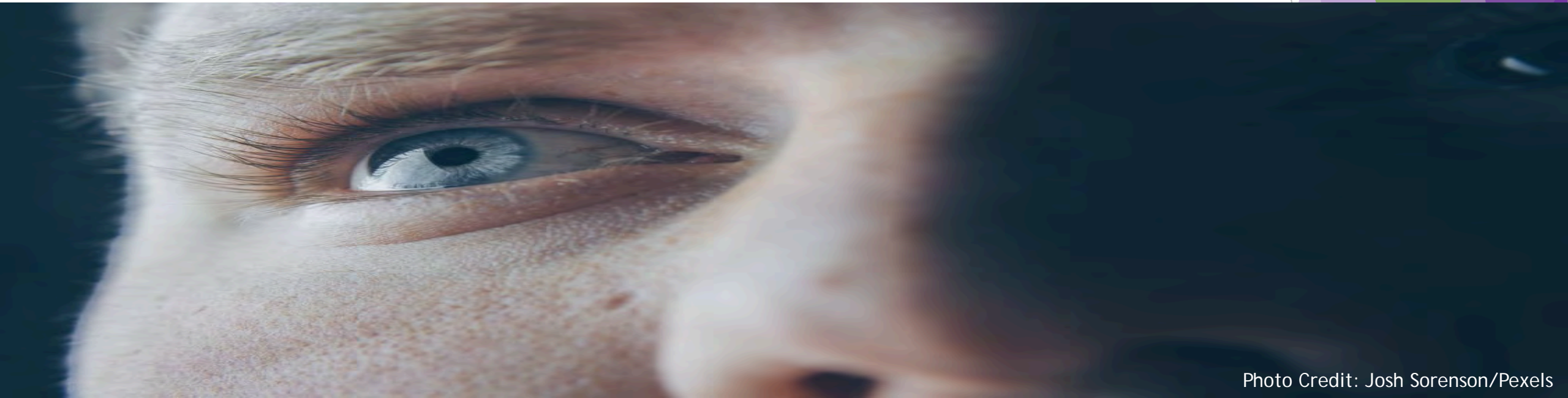


Autistic Social Norm

2. Small talk is pointless and rude

Autistic Social Norm

3. Eye Contact is Optional



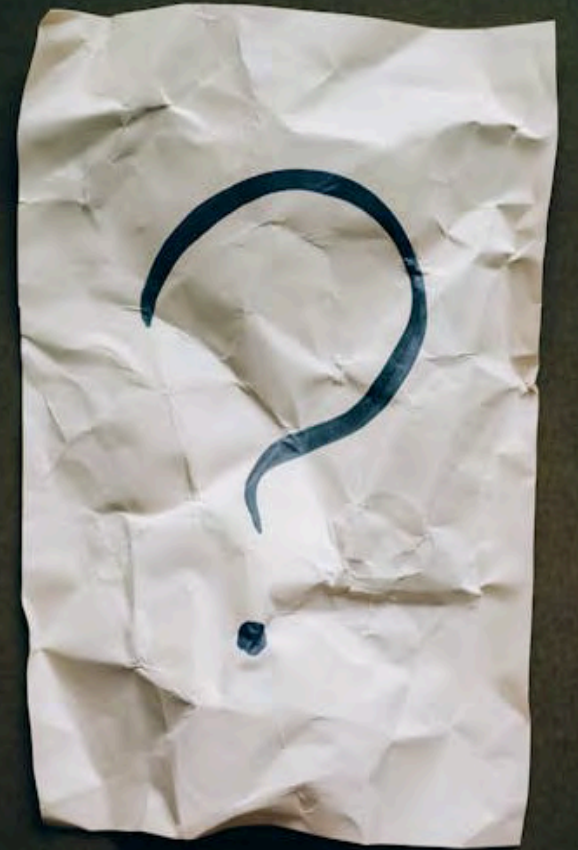
Autistic Social Norm

4. Sharing Information is an excellent way to connect!



Autistic Social Norm

5. Ask Questions and Expect A Lot of Questions





Autistic Social Norm

6. Headphones are
OK!

And so is walking
away when you
need to

Autistic Social Norm

7. Talk to everyone the same,
don't switch up your speech
for friends, your doctor, or your
boss.



Autistic Social Norm

8. Your Voice and Body Might Reflect Your Energy, or It Might Be Monotone

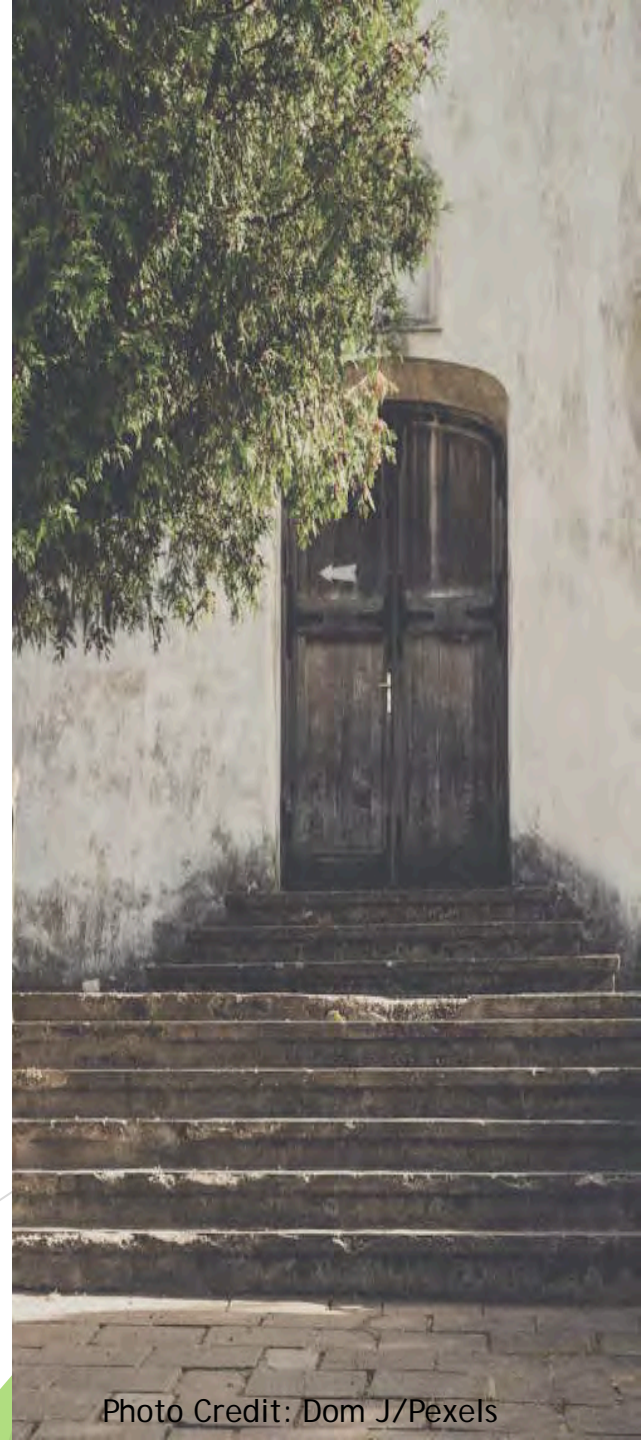


Photo Credit: Dom J/Pexels

Autistic Social Norm

9. Deep Diving into One Topic



Autistic Social Norm

10. Conflict Might Be Very Uncomfortable and all you can think about.

Resolve it As Soon as Possible



**Loneliness is epidemic
among neurodivergent
people, and it's something
we can change. Curiosity
before judgement goes a
long way 😊**



Jennifer Gerlach, MSW, LCSW
True Story Counseling
636-358-1800

Moderated Questions and Discussion



WRAP UP



12pm-12:50pm



1pm-4:30pm



4:30pm-5pm

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CAFE





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