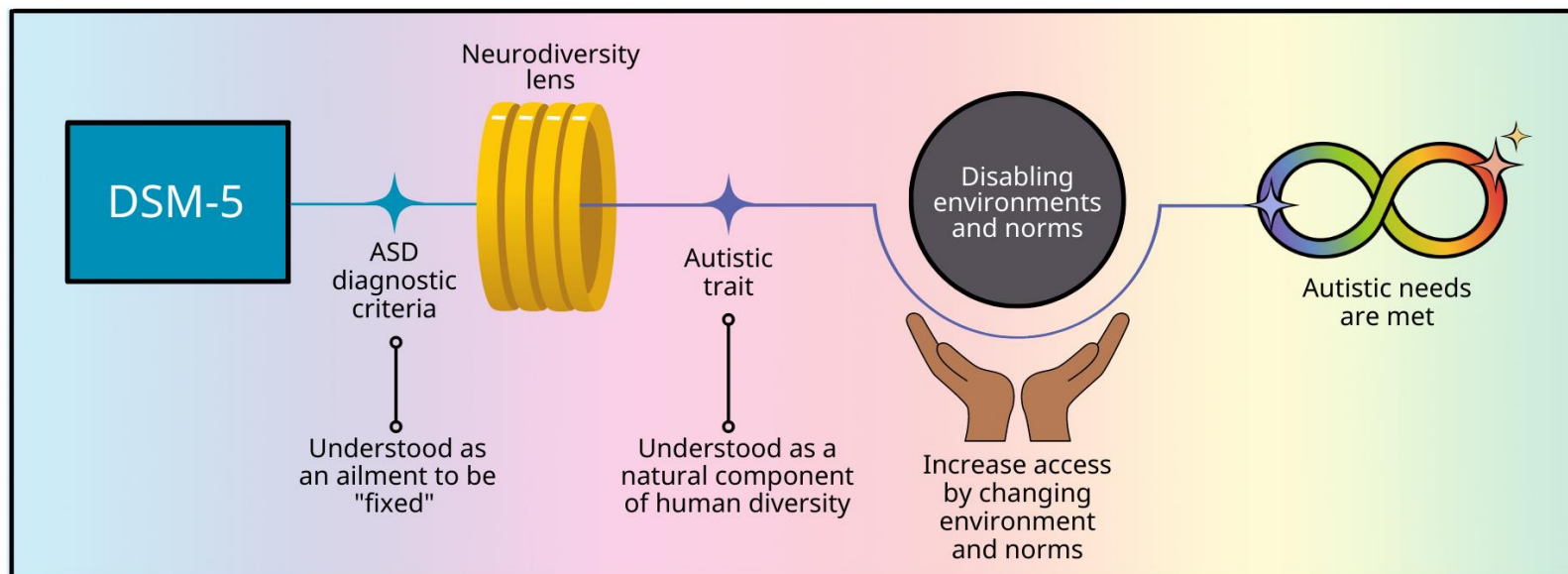


Reframing Autism Using the Neurodiversity Paradigm

A Bridges Learning System resource for neurotypical allies working with neurodivergent youth

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual 5th edition or DSM-5 is the “authoritative volume that defines and classifies mental disorders” and approaches autism as a problem to be fixed; a series of deficits that must be absolved in order to be a “fully functioning” (e.g. neuro-normative) individual.

This medical-model is an outdated, ableist approach to understanding neurological difference. The neurodiversity paradigm reframes autism, understanding this neurotype and all others as normal, natural components of human diversity. It is only in the face of socially constructed barriers that autistic traits truly become disabling. When we view social barriers as obstacles to overcome rather than an unchanging reality, we are able to increase access by changing the disabling environment and norms. It is only through changing this disabling context (NOT changing the disabled person) that autistic needs can be truly met.



DSM-5 Autism Diagnostic Criteria	Autistic trait through the lens of <i>neurodiversity</i>	Disabling environments and norms	Solutions: Embrace autistic strengths and support needs
Abnormal social approach	Autistics socialize and connect in different ways than neurotypicals.	Those who socialize in ways outside of implied “social norms” are weird, inept, eccentric, or dangerous.	Remove labels attached to autistic ways of relating and be open to different forms of social interaction.
Deficits in communication	Nonverbal behavior expectations (i.e. eye contact) may not be comfortable or natural for autistics. Direct, rather than pragmatic, communication is valued. Speech is not the preferred or most readily available mode of communication for many autistics.	“Reading” nonverbal cues is heavily relied on as tool to communicate. Literal and transparent communication is considered brash. Speech is the most valued and prioritized form of communication.	Share the burden of understanding a different communication style. Don’t automatically expect autistics to learn and adopt an unnatural form of communication. Validate and normalize nontraditional ways of speaking, such as using an AAC device.
Difficulty developing and maintaining relationships	Autistics want to connect with other people and often do so in a way that doesn’t adhere to neurotypical social norms. The double empathy problem clarifies that neurotypical people also have trouble relating to autistic people.	It is considered acceptable to ostracize, isolate, or make fun of those who socialize in different ways. Neurotypicals are not expected to try to understand unmasked autistics and when they do, it is viewed as charitable.	Embrace different ways of connecting and work to create opportunities for developing friendships that honor different styles of interaction.
Hyper/hypo-reactivity to sensory input	Autistics experience sensory stimuli in a different way than neurotypicals.	Schools and other public spaces are calibrated according to neurotypical sensory needs.	Make your space sensory-friendly. Take sensory needs into account when planning events. Do not assume everyone experiences sensory stimuli in the same way.

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Repetitive movements	Stimming is a tool to regulate the nervous system and is used by people of all neurotypes. Autistics may need to stim more often than neurotypicals, and some of these stims might be involuntary.	Neurotypical stimming is widely accepted however neurodivergent and autistic stimming is viewed as distracting, inappropriate, and unnecessary which implicitly and explicitly discourages autistics from regulating in this way.	Normalize stimming in ways that support individual needs. Create a system where individuals have space and opportunities to stim how they need to.
Insistence on sameness	Predictability creates a sense of safety and a clear understanding of what will happen next.	Following a strict routine is viewed as inflexible and inconvenient. When autistics become distressed as the result of a change in their routine, it is viewed as a disproportionate reaction.	Validate routine and sameness as a need. Stick to a routine that meets the needs of an autistic individual. If a routine simply can't be completed per usual, support the individual to co-create an alternate rather than imposing one upon them.
Highly restricted interests	Autistics are often passionate about specific subjects/topics and disinterested in (or neutral about) topics outside of those passions.	“Well-rounded” and varied interests are highly valued. Having a singular, passionate interest is considered strange, intense, or limiting, unless it is a socially approved interest like participating in a sport.	Encourage and create opportunities for autistics to explore passions. Remove the phrase “special interest” from your vocabulary.