

Do you speak fluent autistic?

- Lessons learned from 15 years of individual and group psychotherapy with neurodiverse individuals-

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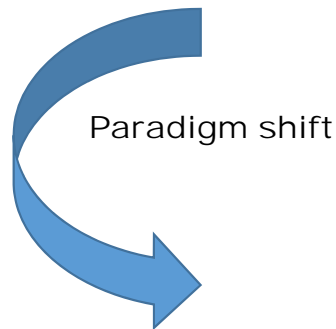
Core characteristics of individuals on the autistic spectrum

Clinical and neuropsychological profile (Dziobek& Stoll,2019):

- A. Difficulties in socio-emotional communication and social interaction due to particularities in social cognition (social perception, nonverbal communication, theory of mind, empathy).
- B. Difficulties in the perception and processing of sensory information (impairment of intermodal transfer; in all 5 senses- hyper or hyposensitivity).
- C. Repetitive and restrictive behaviors and routines due to particularities in executive functioning and a detailed information processing style (impairments in central coherence)



- **Medical model:** autism seen as a disorder.



Neurodiversity paradigm: autism is part of the range of natural variation in human neurological development.

- ``Neurodiversity: Each individual, each brain is different. There is no ONE neurobiological construction plan, but a multitude of different ones.
- Autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental disorders represent neurological variations.`` (<http://neurorevolution.de/neurodiversitaet>)
- All forms of neurological development are equally valid and equally valuable.

Barrier-free in autism spectrum

- Understanding of the different forms of autism.
 - A nuanced understanding of their unique needs and sensitivities regarding communication, perception and behavior
(Attwood, 2012; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezv85LMFx2E>)
- `` If you know one person with autism, you know exactly one!``
- Expedition in the world of autism (Preißmann, 2017)

Core aspects in the psychotherapeutic work

- Most clients search therapy because of the comorbid symptoms (depression, anxiety disorder, autistic burn-out, OCD, ADHD, suicidality, low self-esteem, relational difficulties and problems at work). (Preißmann, 2017)
- Psychotherapy for clients on the spectrum is a long term treatment.
- Our methods and interventions need to be tailored taking into account the specific particularities of the spectrum.
- Common objectives: increase self-esteem, identity finding with AS particularities as an integrated part, reduce comorbid symptoms, improve socio-emotional competency, develop functional coping strategies, improve stress management, acceptance of one's own limitations. (Dziobek & Stoll, 2019)
- Highest therapy goal is to improve quality of life while acknowledging one's particularities (Meer-Walter, 2023)

Dos & Don'ts in the psychotherapy with individuals on the autistic spectrum

1. Regarding the therapeutic frame and stance
2. Regarding communication
3. Regarding method and therapeutic relationship



1. Dos & Don'ts regarding the therapeutic setting and stance

(Gawronski, Pfeiffer & Voegeley, 2012; Dziobek & Stoll, 2019; Spek, 2014; Preißmann 2017)

• Dos

- Ensure a safe and predictable environment: minimize changes in the environment and routine to avoid causing distress or anxiety.
- If possible: Same space, same seat, same day, same time
- Any changes in the schedule, therapy room, etc. should be announced a priori.
- Setting appointments is easier via email or SMS;
- Respect Sensory Sensitivities: Be aware of and accommodate various sensory sensitivities. This could include adjusting lighting, reducing noise, or avoiding certain textures.
- Make clear house rules and if possible with visual cues (ex: a written message: Wait until you are invited in!)

• Don'ts

- Make spontaneously changes in appointments
- Make phone calls if something needs to be discussed, changed. Better write an SMS.
- Move furniture and decoration without letting them know about the change before the session.

2. Dos & Don'ts regarding communication

(Gawronski, Pfeiffer & Vogeley, 2012; Dziobek & Stoll, 2019; Spek, 2014; Preißmann 2017)

• Dos

- Clear, concrete and simple communication.
(`how do you leave today after the session?`)
- Keep it short when explanations or information are necessary
- Ask open questions about their sensory sensitivities, so you can adjust the environment and reduce stress.
- Establish turn taking rules in communication explicitly:
In individual or group setting, some individuals struggle to say anything, some others have problems to regulate their communication needs.
- Explain your question or behavior (ex: mirroring, reflecting back)
- Incorporate Visual Aids: Many individuals with autism are visual learners. Use visual schedules, charts, or diagrams to communicate information.

• Don'ts

- Rely on using nonverbal communication (mimic, gestures, corporal position, tone of voice)
- Rush with questions in case of delayed answers, reactions.
- Avoid words that are unclear or require imagination skills(`let the breath go to your toes`)
- Misinterpret their looking away and avoiding eye-contact.

3. **Dos and Don'ts** regarding methods & the therapeutic relationship

(Gawronski, Pfeiffer & Vogeley, 2012; Dziobek & Stoll, 2019; Spek, 2014; Preißmann, 2017)

• Dos

- Tailored psychotherapy adapted to the difficulties and resources of the client using combined methods from different psychotherapy schools. (structured, resources oriented, understanding of the spectrum)
- PPT as a resource and strengths oriented method, tailoring the Balance Model to cater the needs and sensitivities of AS, basic conflict
- Psychoeducation, Skills Training and Mindfulness
- Requires more concrete assistance for practical and organizational life tasks
- Structure the session right at the beginning: ex: present themes, homework, address the planned theme, brief summary of the current session, plan together for the next time.
- Focus on Individual Strengths: Tailor your approach to leverage the unique strengths and interests of each group member.
- Personal attributes of therapist: acceptance, genuineness, empathy and a good portion of patience 😊

• Don'ts

- Use a socratic questioning style
- Get frustrated if the relationship needs longer to build
- Get frustrated about rigidity and difficulties in changing perspective and behavior
- Take personally comments and direct critical affirmations about your person

Why does it make sense to see autistic clients?

- Significantly growing incidence of late diagnosed autistic adults.
- Hard reality when searching therapy services in ambulant settings.
- Average life expectancy by 54years
- We need a paradigm shift!
- We need services and support to help individuals on the spectrum live a long, happy and fulfilling life, while respecting their right to be autistic.
- Individuals on the spectrum are reliable, come regularly
- Perseverent and consistent in doing the work of therapy
- Honest and authentic

In honor of Lena!

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