

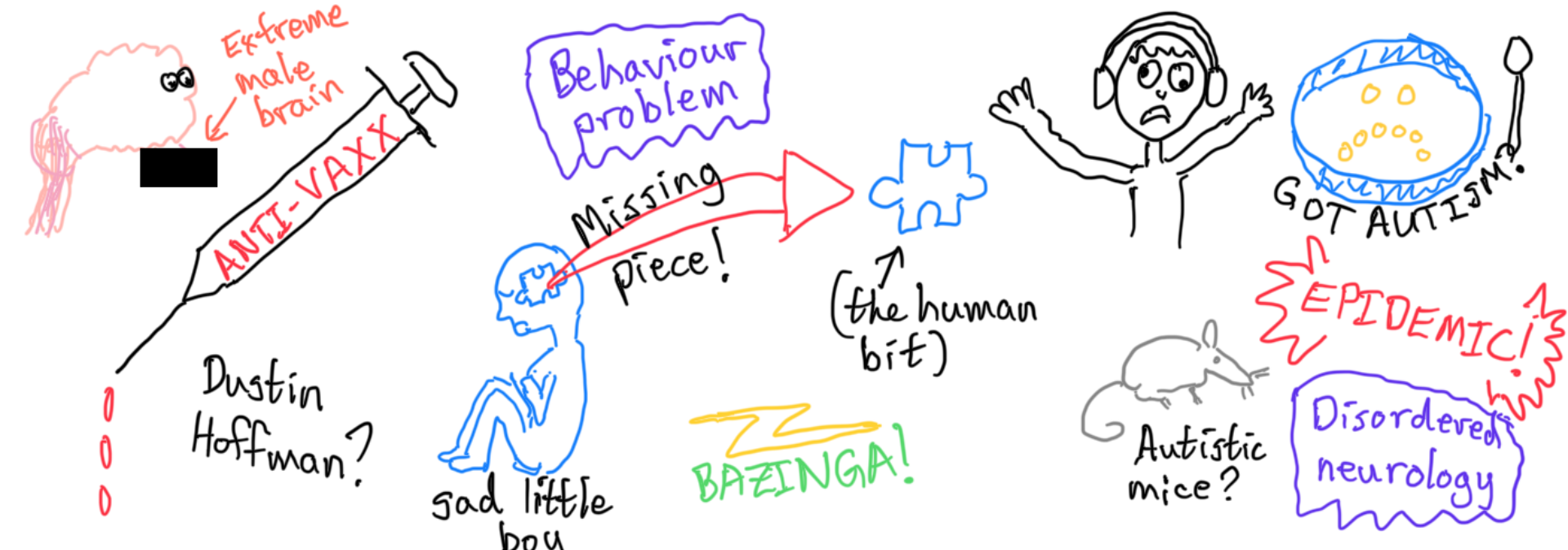
HOW TO MAKE YOUR RESEARCH GROUP MORE INCLUSIVE FOR AUTISTIC TRAINEES

Dispel your misconceptions

Neurodiversity paradigm

- Autistic people are a natural part of human biodiversity and important for health of the species
- ~3–4% of the population – it's genetic!
- Girls just as likely to be autistic, but still dramatically underdiagnosed in Canada (gender bias)
- > 80% of autistic adults over 30 still unidentified

Stereotypes harm autistic people!



- Pathologization → stigma → discrimination, stereotype threat, fear of disclosure → hostile environments, unmet needs, wasted capacity

We are already here

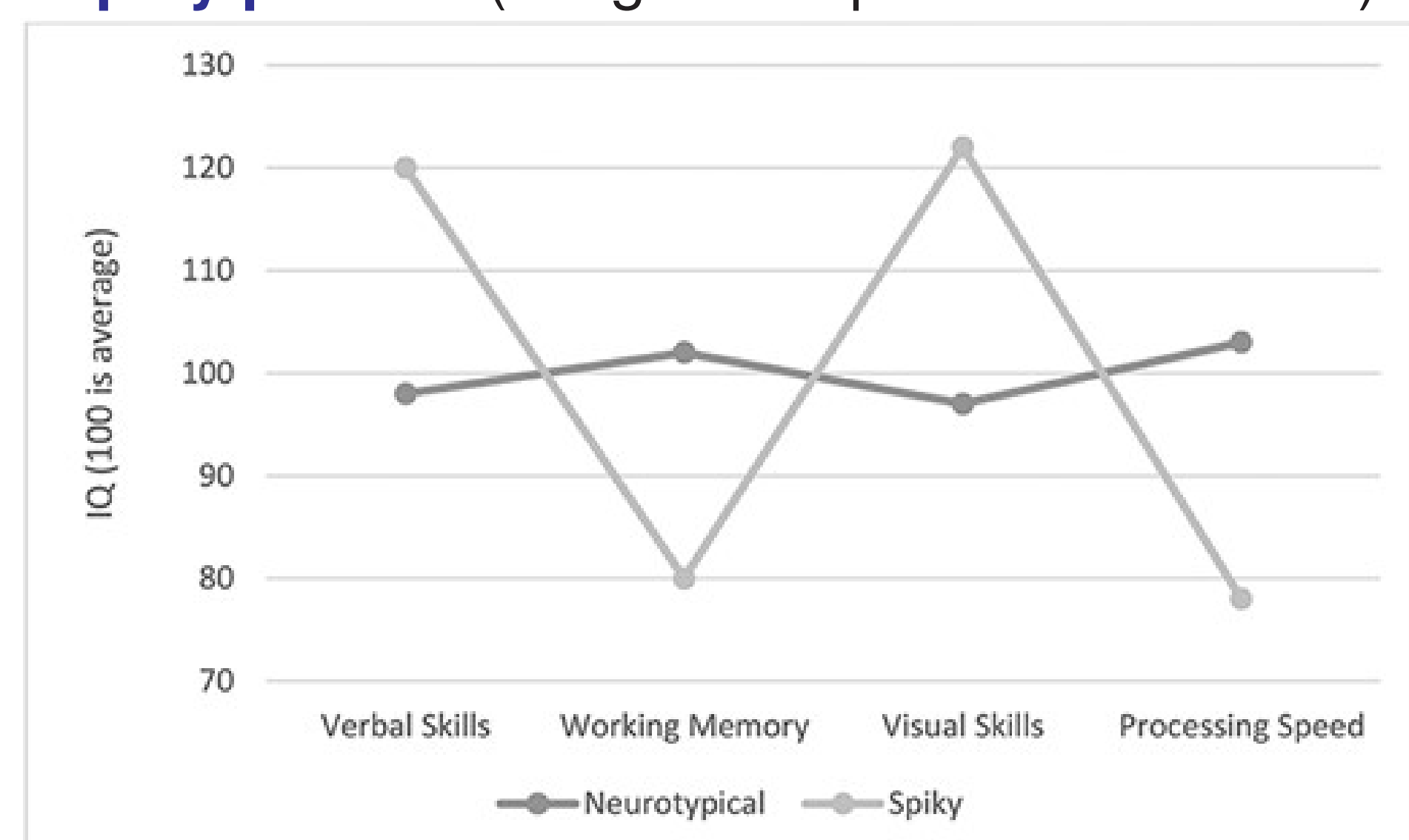
- Any of your students/postdocs/colleagues could be autistic – there's no special "look"
- Vital to proactively create autistic-friendly working & learning environments
- Flexibility benefits everyone (universal design)

Appreciate cognitive diversity

Diversity of thought is an asset!

- Autistic people often take different approaches and notice different details & patterns than others
- Make space for "bottom-up thinking": autistic people often take time to build a detailed mental model of a problem before developing solutions – give concrete examples & enough detail

"Spiky profile" (image: Stimpunks Foundation)



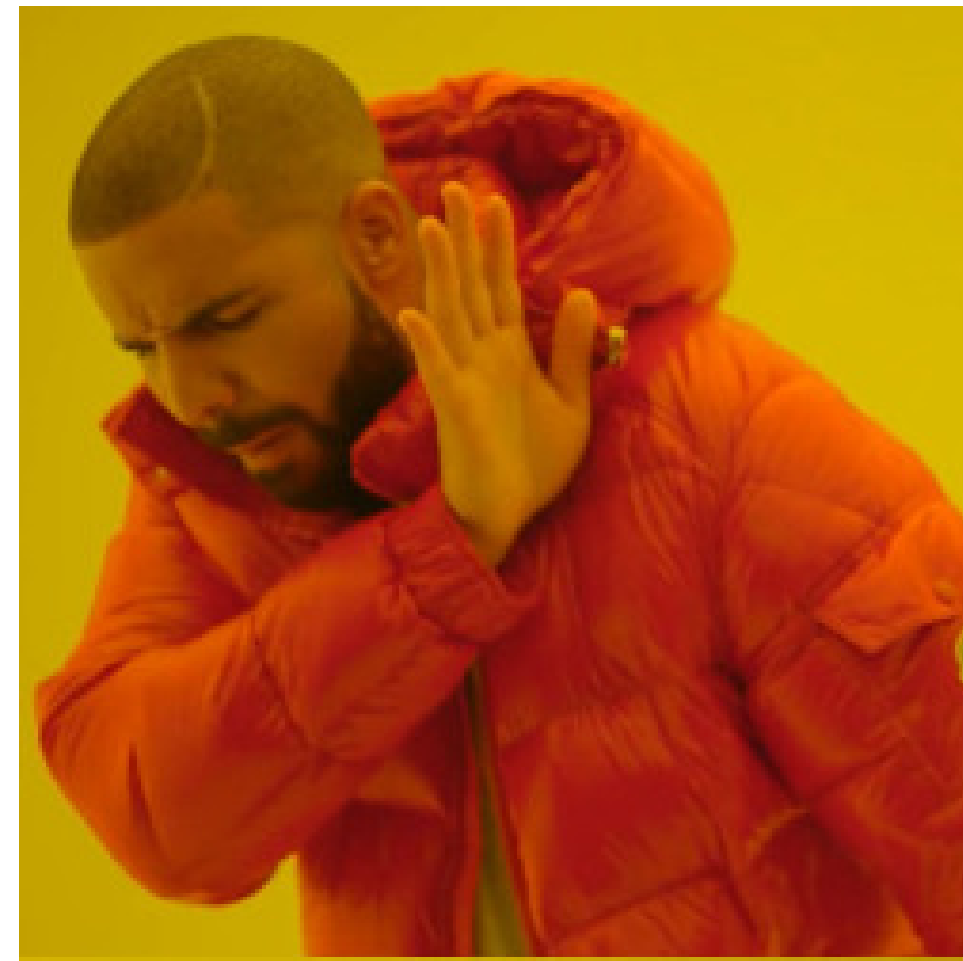
- Much larger variance between strengths and weaknesses than typical – believe your trainees!
- Encourage self-accommodation & combine complementary skillsets

Predictability & processing time are essential

- Provide meeting agendas, materials, etc. in advance so people can prepare offline
- Communicate schedule or environment changes at least a day in advance
- Avoid requiring multitasking
- Unfamiliar environments (travel, fieldwork, retreats) can be particularly challenging

Communicate clearly

"Double Empathy Problem"



Persistent deficits in social communication (DSM-5 2013)



Two-way mismatch in communication styles (Milton 2012)

- Build a culture of clear, explicit, respectful communication
- Avoid making assumptions based on body language, tone, or facial expressions – autistic people move and express ourselves differently
- Avoid reliance on metaphors, colloquialisms, or unspoken messages

Expose the "hidden curriculum"

- Put critical information in writing – lab handbook, shared project notes, etc.
- Give direct instruction on research practices like record-keeping, but allow trainees to adapt their systems to fit their needs
- Provide timelines and context to help trainees understand how each step fits into the bigger picture
- Provide direct feedback: if you think a trainee should apply for a scholarship, job, graduate program, or conference, tell them!

Counteract communication anxiety

- Establish a regular meeting schedule & clear instructions on how trainees should contact you
- Give trainees enough time to process new information & prepare their responses
- Take all questions seriously, especially the "obvious" or repeated ones

Model inclusivity to your group

- Ensure your lab is a safe space for people to be themselves, free from bullying, harassment, & status competition
- Recruit mindfully to build a diverse group & expose group members to diverse influences
- Start conversations about equity & accessibility
- Encourage group social relations but avoid forced socialization
- Speak up when you witness bias or ignorance

Think about how your trainees will know that you are "safe" to disclose to!

Check the sensory environment

Sensory processing differences

- Background noise, lighting, temperature, smells, textures, visual distractions, touch, and unfamiliar foods can cause sensory distress
- Frequent interruptions, even small ones, can disrupt thought processes & sap energy
- Noisy & crowded environments can be overwhelming – **conference poster sessions**, convocation ceremonies, unstructured networking events, departmental gatherings, coffee hours
- Intense pressure to pretend everything is fine

Make it safe to pursue adjustments

- Encourage trainees to experiment with different work environments & identify conditions under which they function best
- Advertise availability of adjustments & alternative ways to fulfill degree requirements
- Normalize nonconformity to standard social expectations – e.g. casual dress for thesis defences
- Watch for signs of distress or disengagement and check in with trainees in private

Common sensory accommodations

- Earplugs, adjustable lighting, quiet/private workspaces, alternative clothing
- Quiet breaks between meetings or social events
- Explicit turn-taking or alternative contribution modes (e.g. written) in group meetings
- Work-from-home, flexible hours, videoconferencing, assigned space (no hot-desking)
- Alternative media, e.g. visual vs. auditory, transcript vs. video, static & uncluttered interfaces

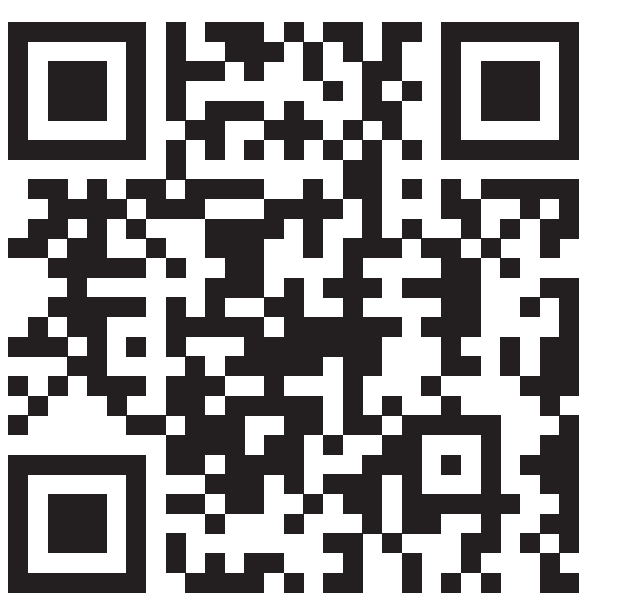
Learn more

Read the associated guide

6-page pdf, lots of references

QR code opens this link:

<https://arxiv.org/pdf/2410.17929>



Seek out information from autistic sources

- Much less likely to be pathologizing nonsense
- Many high-quality resources available – see references linked in the guide above
- Read memoirs by autistic authors to learn about our diverse experiences and ways of being

Access your university's resources

- Attend EDI events – lots of crossover principles
- Learn how accommodations work at your institution so you can help trainees navigate them
- Request a neurodivergent student support training for your department

Learn from your autistic colleagues

- Some of us have disclosed and may be willing to answer questions or help you find resources
- Respect our time & boundaries and do your own homework first

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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