

NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING

# EXPLORING NEURODIVERSITY



## 3 Layers of Autism



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# THREE LAYERS OF AUTISM

I like to conceptualize autism as comprised of three separate layers.

This idea came to me as I was recalling paging through my grandmother's encyclopedias when I was younger. I really liked the one about whales (because whales are awesome) and the one on human anatomy that contained the transparencies where you could overlay different parts from the skeleton to muscles to circulatory system to skin/clothes.

When I conceptualize autism, and neurodiversity more broadly, I think of it like those transparencies.

The skeleton is a metaphor for the diagnostic criteria as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM).

You then overlay this with the musculature system, which includes the things that the person experiences that may or may not be a part of the DSM criteria.

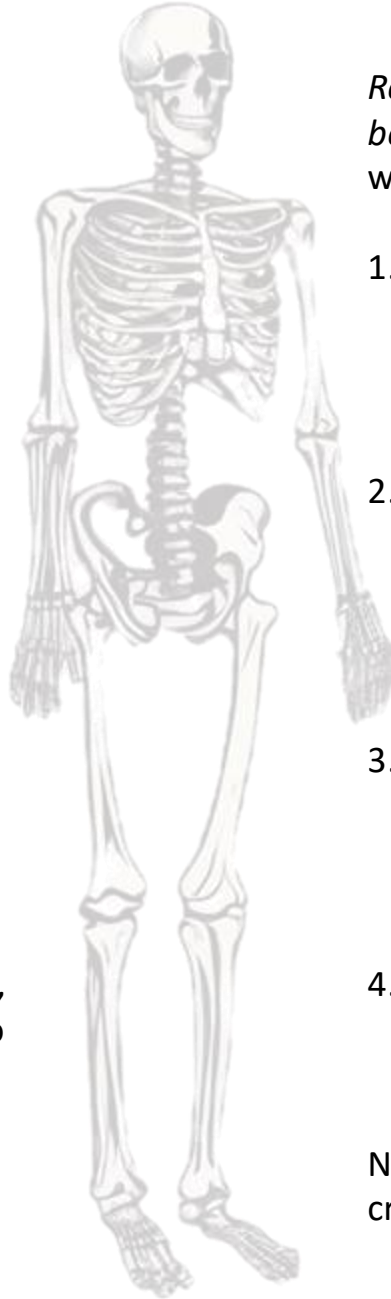
Finally, the overlay with the skin/clothes represents the mask or the concept of self that one presents to the world.

# Layer 1: THE SKELETON OF THE DSM

*Social communication and social interaction differences across multiple contexts which looks like:*

1. Differences in social-emotional reciprocity, (e.g., difficulty in conversational turn taking)
2. Differences in nonverbal communicative behaviors (for example, differences in eye contact or gesture use)
3. Differences in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (for example, not adjusting behaviour to suit different contexts)

Need to meet all three criteria above

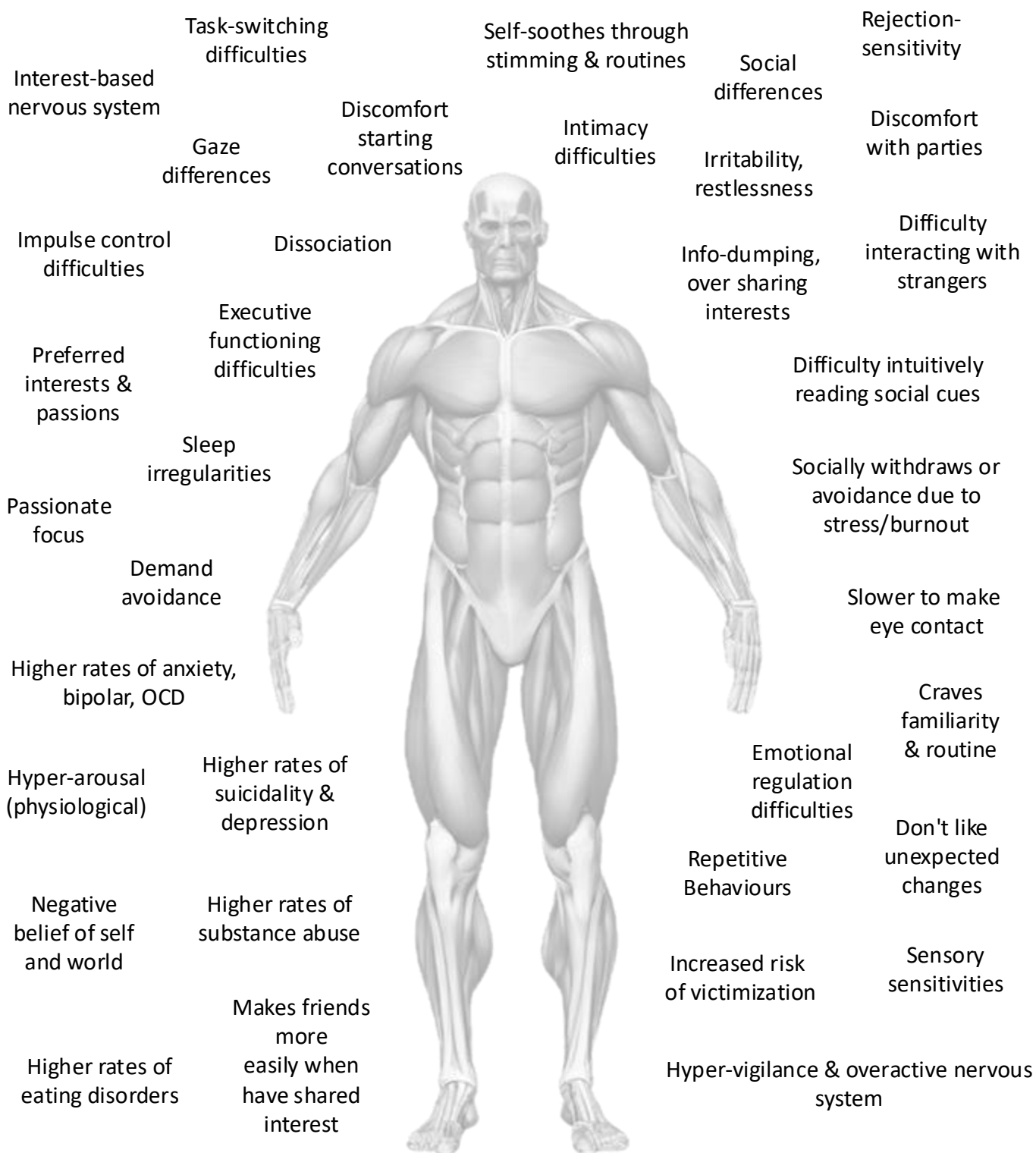


*Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities which looks like:*

1. Repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., lining up objects)
2. Insistence on sameness, need for routines, or rituals (e.g., need to go to work using the same route each day)
3. Preferred interests that are intense or focuses (e.g., a lot of knowledge on a specific topic)
4. Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input (e.g., aversion to certain textures)

Need to meet 2 or 4 above criteria

# Layer 2: SOFT TISSUE OF AUTISM



# Layer 3: THE MASK OF AUTISM

Copy other peoples' behaviours, body language, or expressions during social interactions

Tend to repeat phrases exactly as others have said them

Create scripts to help navigate social situations

Research how to use social skills

Adjust facial expressions and body language to appear relaxed

Practice making facial expressions or using body language (could be in front of a mirror)

Watch others interact to learn or understand social skills

Feel as though the conversation doesn't naturally flow when talking to others

Thinking about impression made to others

Monitor own body language to appear relaxed)

Monitor body language and facial expressions to appear interested in other people

Feel the need to make eye contact with others, even if I don't want to

Learn how to use social skills by watching TV shows and movies

Feel like pretending to be "normal" in social situations

Keenly aware of the impression made to others

Adjust body language to appear interested in the conversation

Use behaviours that are learned from watching other people interact

Feel like forcing self to interact with others in social situations

Heavily focused on own facial expressions and body language in social situations

Try to avoid interacting with others in social situations

Feel the need to put on an act to get through a social situation

Need the support of others in order to socialize

Believe cannot be true self with others

I feel a sense of "performance" versus being authentic in social situations



# About the author

Lori Sacrey is a registered provisional psychologist in the province of Alberta, Canada. She focuses on helping her clients manage their perceived challenges from a neurodiversity-affirming lens.



Lori also has a PhD in neuroscience and works as a research associate at the University of Alberta, where she continues to engage in research and stay up to date with the latest findings.

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