



How we can best support autistic SLTs and service users

My experiences as an autistic SLT student



This presentation

- Introduction
- My experiences as an autistic SLT student
- How universities and workplaces can best support neurodivergent staff and students
- How we can best support neurodivergent service users
- Questions

Autistic vs person with autism

- I use identity first language when talking about myself and my disabilities. This is a personal choice.
- Identity first language is important for me, and many other autistic people, because I do not see my autism as an accessory to who I am.
- My autism is not something I have or have with me, it is as much a part of my identity as my gender, sexuality, height, race, or hair colour.
- Many autistic people I've spoken to prefer identity first language
- Some people will prefer person first language because they feel that their disability is not a core factor of their identity.
- If you're unsure how best to describe a colleague or client – ask!

Reframing neurodiversity strengths and focusing on competence

Deficits	Strengths
Inability to see the big picture	Attention to detail
Inability to talk in the present	Excellent memory
Repetitive or restrictive thinking	Excellent pattern recognition
Oversensitivity to stimuli	Heightened environmental awareness
Lack of empathy	Differing emotional awareness, increased self awareness
Unconventional ways of interacting with others or the environment	Creativity in interactive style
Restrictive and repetitive interests and activities	Researching ability, excellent sustained focus and passion for special interests
Copying others, seeming dishonest	Social camouflaging
Social difficulty	Social communication difference

My journey to my own autism acceptance

- I have always been autistic, I just didn't always know it.
- Because of my ability to mask my difficulties I received no specialist input as a child or teenager.
- I have received countless other diagnoses prior to autism and ADHD.
- In 2017 I began working with children and young people with disabilities as a specialist playworker.
- Through this experience I started to notice similarities in my own thinking style and behaviours to those of autistic service users.
- I began researching autism and came across the neurodiversity movement online. I felt a strong familiarity with the experiences of autistic women.
- I was able to access formal assessment and diagnosis through my university. I was diagnosed with autism and ADHD in August 2019.

Experiences as an autistic SLT student

What helped:

- Access to disability support services, including a specialist mentor
- Learning support and placement adjustment plans
- Memory aids, focus aids, planning aids, access to technology
- Access to formal diagnosis and disabled students allowance
- The ability to talk about my needs with lecturers and practice educators
- Clarity (e.g. about reading lists, placement timetables, deadlines)
- Accessibility of information, materials, locations, content, etc
- Transparency
- Reflective practice
- Acknowledgment of different approaches to learning
- Support from department members, practice educators, and fellow students

Experiences as an autistic SLT student

What wasn't so helpful:

- Accessibility issues (e.g. physical access, poor clarity of information, breaks)
- Lack of transparency
- Lack of awareness about how autism can present in adults (“you don’t look autistic!”)
- The way we talk about disabilities as deficits or problems
- Content that was “about us without us”
- Lack of discussion or acknowledgment of support plans at university or on placements
- Lack of sensitivity from others
- Stigma around disclosing my diagnosis
- Burnout and stress
- Lack of representation of disabled and neurodivergent SLTs
- Unclear communication



What we can improve as clinicians

- Be person centered!
- Listen to the lived experiences of neurodivergent colleagues and clients. Understand sometimes these may differ from expert opinion.
- If a client expresses a dislike for a particular therapy method, listen to and learn from them.
- Consider sensory needs, preferred communication method, and individual differences.
- Create spaces for university students and staff with disabilities to access peer support and opportunities for reflection.
- Make internal communication accessible too!



What we can improve as clinicians

- Work to our strengths.
- Consider the goal of therapy – Who is it for? How will it make a difference in the life of the client? Are you considering their preferences and needs? Are you merely training compliance or masking?
- Understand that the aim of therapeutic work with neurodivergent people should not be curative.
- Focus, where possible, on self-advocacy skills and building independence
- Think about how you talk about autism/ neurodiversity in the workplace

Useful Resources

- The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (@autselfadvocacy on twitter)
- The Therapists Neurodiversity Collective (<https://www.facebook.com/NeurodiversityCollective>)
- The Therapists Neurodiversity Collective Study Group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NeurodiveristyCollective>)
- #ActuallyAutistic or #AskingAutistics
- Autscope (@autscope on twitter or <http://www.autscope.org/>)
- Autism Inclusivity (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/autisminclusivity>)



Questions?