


**Keeping with the Times:
Modern Evidence-Based Supports for
Autistic Learners**



Kelly Mahler OTD, OTR/L
www.kelly-mahler.com

Historical Beliefs

Examples:

- Handwashing in Healthcare
- Gin as a treatment for Gout

WHY did they exist?:

- Based on outdated information



How do we Learn & Grow?

Evidence + Facts:

- Learning from science

Experience + Voice:

- Learning from experts of lived experience



How do we Learn & Grow?

Evidence + Facts:

- Learning from published research

Experience + Voice:

- Autistic clients, friends & colleagues
- Websites/Blogs by Autistics
- Autistic lead advocacy (e.g., Therapist Neurodiversity Collective)

Keeping with the Times

FACT: We are all 'guilty' of operating in a way that is outdated at times.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT: That we continually update our operations as new facts and experiences emerge. In other words, 'keeping with the times.'

How to Keep with the Times

CONTINUALLY CONSIDER: Am I operating in a way that is based on the most current facts and autistic voice?

Keeping with the Times:
Modern Supports for Autistic Learners


Old View	Updated View
Trauma-Blind	Trauma-Informed
Sensory Exposure	Sensory Safety
Cognitive-Based	Interoception-Focused
Compliance-Driven	Regulation-Driven
Fix your Deficits	Emphasize your Strengths

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Keeping with the Times:
Modern Supports for
Autistic Learners

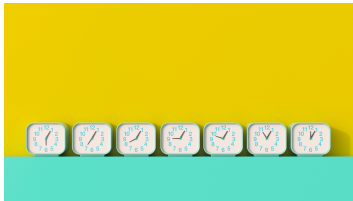
First things, first

- Person first language → Identify first language
- Autistic or Autistic person/child/adult/learner



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Trauma-Blind to Trauma-Informed



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Trauma-Blind to Trauma-Informed

Outdated Method:

A narrow view of the causes of trauma (e.g., those defined by ACEs study). Not considering how many situations are traumatic to the autistic neurology especially when living in a world ruled by the neuromajority.

Updating our Methods:



Support from Evidence & Autistic Voice:

- Up until recently, autistics were considered to have similar rates of PTSD when compared to non-autistics (about 3%). Was not widely studied.
- Given that 70% of autistics have a mental health co-morbidity, more careful investigation into trauma and the autistic experience is occurring. Researchers are finding this number to be much higher (32%) (Lamdan, 2020)
- Commonly reported causes of trauma
 - Sensory Trauma -Social Trauma -Medical Trauma
 - Neurological Trauma -Compliance Trauma

Trauma Blind to Trauma Informed

Modern Method:

Our number one job is to help an autistic person feel safe within their bodies and environments.



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Trauma Blind to Trauma Informed

Practical Tips

- Understand and honor each learner's unique sensory profiles, strengths and interests
- Provide frequent, proactive feel-good activities that are a match to each unique learner
- Comfort & safety should never be contingent on:
 - 'Appropriately' requesting it
 - Completing a demand first (First math, Then swing)

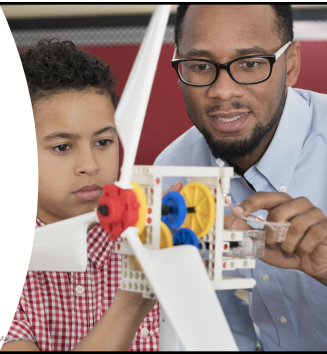


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Trauma Blind to Trauma Informed
Practical Tips


Develop a trusting alliance with the learner:

- Show genuine interest
- Be predictable
- Offer choice and voice
- Banish the view of "attention-seeking" as problematic. Rather view it as 'connection-needing'

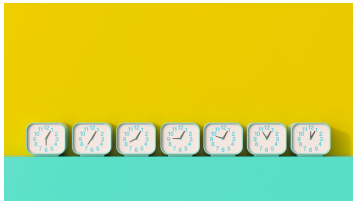


Trauma Blind to Trauma Informed
Practical Tips

- Seek training in trauma-informed care
- Keep with the Times



Sensory Exposure to Sensory Safety



Sensory Exposure to Sensory Safety

Outdated Method:

Repeated exposure to aversive sensory stimuli will help someone get 'used to it' or 'adapt to it' or 'habituate to it'

Updating our Methods:



Support from Evidence & Autistic Voice:

- Brain images of autistic children have shown no habituation to sensory input when compared to non autistic people (Green et.al., 2019)
- Exposure therapy is based on the neuromajority experience
- Repeatedly exposing someone to an experience that makes them feel unsafe is traumatizing
- Repeatedly forcing someone to endure a painful sensory experience conditions them to ignore their interoceptive bodily signals indicating they want to avoid, avoid...thus dampening the foundation of self-regulation

Sensory Exposure to Sensory Safety

Modern Method:

Nurturing sensory comfort by-

- adapting the environment
- exploring sensory comfort strategies
- celebrating/normalizing the use of preferred sensory comfort strategies



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Sensory Desensitization to Sensory Safety: *Practical Tips*

Know the learner and their sensory profile (partner with a sensory-based OT)

- Ask for learner's input
- Observe the learner thru a sensory lens and watch what they seek and what they avoid. Use this information to honor their interoceptive needs and help them get even more/less of it
- Explore a variety of environmental adaptations in order to find the perfect match




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Sensory Desensitization to Sensory Safety: *Practical Tips*

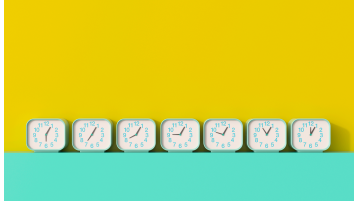
Help the learner discover their sensory profile:

- Use a strengths-based method (eye for details, super-sonic hearing)
- Help the learner concretely identify what promotes comfort
- Collaborate & problem solve how to get more comfort in more environments (Sensory Comfort Bag)
- Create Sensory Safety Plans (what do you need from me in sensory intense moments?)



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From Cognitive-Based to Interoception-Focused



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Cognitive-Based to Interoception-Focused

Outdated Method:
Using methods that require high level thought and reasoning to support mental health and emotion regulation


Updating our Methods:

Support from Evidence & ND Voice:

- When it comes to dysregulation, higher levels of the brain may not be accessible to a person (their brain is in survival mode)
- You need to clearly understand the way that you feel in order to know what to do next...to know what you need to promote comfort within the body
- Memorizing coping skills, self-regulation programs, stress thermometers, etc. only to not be able to 'use it in the moment'. Is it a lack of generalization skills? Probably not!



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I was the encyclopedia of coping skills. I could probably name over 100 strategies that I've been taught. The number of strategies that I could use in the moment? Zero.
It doesn't work without interoception!!

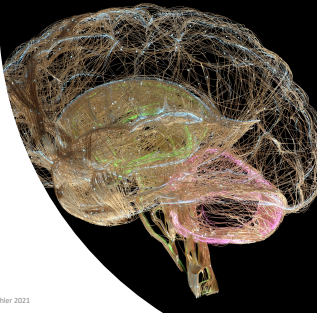


Chloe Rothschild
www.chloe-rothschild.com

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Cognitive-Based to Interoception-Focused

Modern Method:
 Once co-regulation is in place, helping each learner explore and discover their own inner experience. Empowering them with self-understanding and self-knowledge. Only then will cognitive strategies be successful

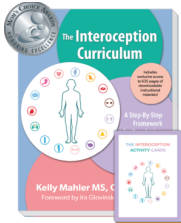


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Cognitive-Based to Interoception-Focused: Practical Tips

Nurture interoceptive awareness (noticing and understanding body signals)

- There is no wrong way to feel
- Interoception work is not done in a way to 'fix deficits' and normalize the inner experience. It is a process that guides the learner in exploring and learning more about their own personal body signals and what their body uniquely needs for regulation
- Start with body signals first (our tendency is to jump right for emotions):
 - How do your hands feel right now?
 - How do your ears feel?



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Cognitive-Based to Interoception-Focused: *Practical Tips*

Co-Regulation first:

- What: Proactive and reactive comfort provided by supporters. Not contingent on the learner monitoring how they feel and seeking out support
- Why: A person needs to feel safe in their body and in the world to have the motivation and attentional safety to turn attention inside.
 - Body=are you motivated to attend to discomfort?
 - World=if you chronically feel unsafe in your environment, where will you attention likely be focused out of protection?

Co-Regulation
A back and forth partnership where one is **RELYING ON OTHERS** to help identify and manage emotions

Interoceptive Awareness

Self-Regulation
The ability to identify and manage emotions **INDEPENDENTLY** with minimal help from other people

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Cognitive- Based to Interoception-Focused: *Practical Tips*

Meet the learner where they are at:

- Check your expectations:
 - Self-regulation goals of seeking out a break, getting a sensory strategy, using a help card, identifying stress level on a thermometer, etc. require clear IA
 - Are your supports a match for the learner's regulation needs?

Co-Regulation
A back and forth partnership where one is **RELYING ON OTHERS** to help identify and manage emotions

Interoceptive Awareness

Self-Regulation
The ability to identify and manage emotions **INDEPENDENTLY** with minimal help from other people

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Cognitive Therapy to Interoception-Based Support: *Practical Tips*

Curiosity is key!

- Shift away from labeling emotions to a place of nurturing curiosity
- Nonjudgemental observations during periods of regulation
 - I noticed that....
 - I see that....
 - I wonder if....
 - Can you help me understand more about....

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Compliance-Driven to Regulation-Driven

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Compliance-Driven to Regulation-Driven

Outdated Method:
Using a neuromajority experience to understand an autistic's observable behavior. Establishing authority and control over the autistic person and using external reinforcement (manipulation) to force the autistic person to operate within majority neurology at the expense of ignoring their own neurology.

Updating our Methods:

Support from Evidence & Autistic Voice:

- This is a human rights movement
- Compliance approaches are traumatizing (Kupferstein, 2018).
- Ironically, many learners who are identified as needing compliance-based approaches experience chronic dysregulation (aka "challenging behaviors"), yet compliance further diminishes a learner's IA. Thus, leading to even more dysregulation (aka "challenging behaviors")

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Compliance Driven to Regulation Driven

Modern Method:
Full effort to understand the deep 'whys' behind our observations. Shifting from behaviors as 'challenging' to behaviors as solutions for dysregulation & communication.

Regulation needs are ahead of all else (yes, even completing that math lesson!).

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Compliance-Driven to Regulation-Driven:
Practical Tips

A Team Approach is essential:


- Each profession brings a unique perspective and training that helps us to get to the deep 'whys'.
- Autistic learner is the expert and leader of the team



Compliance-Driven to Regulation-Driven:
Practical Tips

Shift from Blaming to Empathizing:

- "Challenging Behavior" is the result of someone feeling unsafe or dysregulated. (e.g., it is not avoidance for the sake of avoidance; WHY does that person need to escape—what are they protecting themselves from?)
- Often the surface labels are given by people that are not trained to understand the deep 'whys'



Compliance-Driven to Regulation-Driven:
Practical Tips

Shift from Blaming to Empathizing:

- Neuromajority modifying their behavior in order to promote autistic success
 - What do we need to change?
- Co-Regulation & Safety before anything else
 - Predictable (Visual Supports, Routines, Do what you say)
 - Sensory Regulation (All day, everyday)
 - Providing communication supports for all learners



Compliance-Driven to Regulation-Driven:
Practical Tips

Do your very best to understand the autistic neurology-

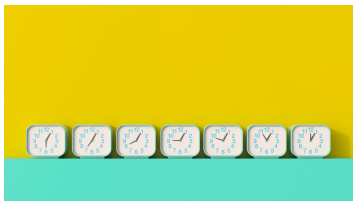
- Read books/blogs written by autistic people
- Take courses taught by autistic people
- Follow autistics on social media,
- Ask autistics questions
- Join autistic lead movements:
 - Therapist Neurodiversity Collective
 - <https://therapistndc.org>



Therapist Neurodiversity Collective International
Therapy • Advocacy • Education
Established January 2018

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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths



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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths



Outdated Method:
Analyzing and identifying 'areas of need' and providing services that aim to fix or improve the autistic learner's 'deficits'; goal is to normalize, cure or lessen 'symptoms'

Updating our Methods:

Support from Evidence & Autistic Voice:

- A focus on deficits=continual conditioning of 'all you do is wrong'. Identity becomes rooted in this. This starts from the very beginning at diagnosis
- Emotion regulation approaches sort emotions into positive and negative categories thus sending continual messages that dysregulation is shameful
- Passions as strengths: using a learner's interests to promote success and fulfillment (e.g., Dollar Store to Pet Store) (Donaldson, 2017)

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When we are younger, we don't realize that the way we experience the world is different from others, but we do start to realize that we act differently than others. We start to make up stories about ourselves— *'I'm a naughty kid, a big loser, stupid; All other kids are better than me, smarter than me, etc'*. I've never met an autistic that created a positive story about themselves.

We need to help autistics receive real info about their experiences and help them create positive stories about themselves.


Judy Endow
www.judyendow.com

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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths

Modern Method:
Emphasizing their strengths, building confidence, and concretely showing all of their greatness. Creating positive self-stories & getting more of the good stuff.




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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths:

Practical Tips

Capitalize Passions & Talents:

- Interests should be used a method of inspiring participation --creating meaning and joy behind each task (e.g., reading a book on weather vs. reading a generic book just for the sake of reading it)
- Interests should never be withheld and used as 'rewards'
 - NO: First do math, then you get Yu-gi-oh
 - YES: Let's use Yu-gi-oh to help us with math



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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths: *Practical Tips*

Shifting Supports & Assessments:

- Skill teaching is based on the autistic person's goals and is aimed at helping them to capitalize on their strengths and talents in the most robust manner
 - Statistician=wanting to learn about college social life to make it more predictable
 - Zamboni=exploring strategies to promote sensory comfort in the hectic arenas
- Assessment should focus on what is going well and try to get more of the good stuff



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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths: *Practical Tips*

Transition Planning should be centered on strengths & interests

- Explore jobs that will be meaningful to the learner
- Presume competence
- Build skills that will assist the person in reaching their transition goals (not aimed at normalizing!)



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Fix your Deficits to Emphasize your Strengths: *Practical Tips*

Shift Emotion Regulation Supports

- Start with nurturing interoceptive understanding. Body signals are clues to emotions
- Emotion equality!
 - Avoid sorting emotions into 'negative' and 'positive'
 - Ensure that there is equal if not more emphasis on understanding comfortable feeling body signals
- Emotion Regulation supports should be used to empower someone with self-agency NOT as behavior management



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Vermeulen & Mahler, 2020

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