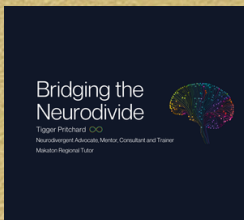


A FREE COMMUNITY
E-BOOK CREATED FOR
PANDA THE CHARITY
NOVEMBER 2023

EMBRACING MONOTROPISM & SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS

SUPPORTING THE PRESENTATION DELIVERED
BY
TIGGER PRITCHARD
(BRIDGING THE NEURODIVIDE)
&
HELEN EDGAR
(AUTISTIC REALMS)

BY HELEN EDGAR



Introduction

I am Helen, and I developed Autistic Realms to advocate for a better understanding of neurodivergence and mental health in education and for families.

I am late identified autistic and worked as a primary teacher for almost 20 years in SEN settings near Birmingham. I am also a parent to two neurodivergent children.

I want to thank all the amazing people that I have met through the neurodivergent and Autistic community and across all different online platforms and groups that I feel privileged to be a part of and that I continue to learn from.

Disclaimer

Autistic Realms is a reflection of my own experiences. I am not a medical professional, psychologist or therapist. Please seek professional advice and support to meet the personal needs of you and your family or those you are supporting.

This free community ebook has been created to support the Hot Topics Community event by PANDA The Charity November 2023 with Tigger Pritchard, Helen Edgar, Magnus McCormack and Naomi Fisher.

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A message from PANDA The Charity:

“Thank you very much for joining us in supporting young autists in North Devon get vital access to the expertise, support, acceptance and equipment they need. And spreading autism news and views Worldwide.

Please read all about PANDA’s emotional conception and creation under our first two blog posts. But essentially we intend to make a big difference in the lives of autists and those who love and teach and support them by raising public awareness, building public acceptance, bringing internationally-renowed experts and trainers to North Devon to cascade Gold Standard support amongst families, educators, therapists and all interested parties.”

Panda Charity Website: www.pandacharity.org

Dr Naomi Fisher: www.naomifisher.co.uk

Dr. Magnus Cormack: mcormack@nhs.net

Tigger Pritchard: www.bridgingtheneurodivide.com

Helen Edgar: www.autisticrealms.com

What is Monotropism?

Monotropism is a non-pathologising theory of autism developed by Dr Dinah Murray, Dr Wenn Lawson and Mike Lesser (2005) in their article, Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for Autism. They stated, "At any one moment, the amount of attention available to a conscious individual is limited'. The authors suggest that 'competition between mental processes for scarce attention is an important factor in shaping the cognitive process.'"(Murray et al., 2005).

Monotropic people focus more energy (resources) on a smaller number of things at any one time. This has been likened to having **tunnels of attention** where monotropic people become so highly engaged in their specific interest that they may not notice what is happening outside of that space but equally could be **hyper-vigilant** within that attention tunnel. This can make work highly productive and enable people to enter **flow states**, allowing deep, focused creativity and providing joy.




Monotropism is often thought to be the central underlying feature of Autism. Monotropism could be seen to be a core thread that weaves through every aspect of a person's being and ways of experiencing and processing the world.

"In a nutshell, monotropism is the tendency for our interests to pull us in more strongly than most people. It rests on a model of the mind as an 'interest system': we are all interested in many things, and our interests help direct our attention. Different interests are salient at different times. In a monotropic mind, fewer interests tend to be aroused at any time, and they attract more of our processing resources, making it harder to deal with things outside of our current attention tunnel."

Fergus Murray (2018)

**Autistic/ADHD People
are more likely to be monotropic***



Monotropism


- More attention resources are concentrated into fewer channels at any one time.
- This may enable a more intense hyper or hypo focus/response/experience.
- Flexibility, time and an environment that meets needs will help manage flow.

Polytropism

- Having multiple channels of attention at any one time enables a more even distribution of internal resources.
- This allows greater flexibility of processing.
- Less energy may be needed to change attention channels and manage flow.

*Grau et al. (2023) The Monotropism Questionnaire <https://orf.li/wpsq/>

Infographic based on personal interpretation, the image created to encourage discussion



Autistic and ADHD people are more likely to be monotropic than the rest of the population

(Garau, V. et al., June 2023).

“

If you are monotropic you focus more energy and resources on fewer interests/tasks/ sensory input at any one time compared to polytropic people.

”



The theory of monotropism is helping to positively reframe autistic traits that may previously have been described as ‘narrow, restricted, obsessive, repetitive interests’ that needed interventions from teachers and therapists.

Monotropism is an intrinsic part of autistic identity and it is neurodiversity affirming. It is a move away from the deficit based medical model that has previously been used to describe autistic people.



If you are monotropic, it may feel quite distressing and take a lot of energy to switch channels of attention to different tasks/activities. Without careful planning and support, this could harm a person's well-being and mental health.

In a school setting, with the many changes of subjects/teachers and a busy classroom, this could be a really difficult environment if you are monotropically minded. Without understanding and support, it could contribute to autistic young people eventually struggling with school attendance and increased CAMHs (Children and Adolescent Mental Health) referrals for mental health concerns and burnout.

At home, an understanding of monotropism will help to develop ways of managing energy flow and regulating sensory systems and attention tunnels. If a person has more input than they can manage, it could result in sensory and social overwhelm (meltdowns/shutdowns) and family life can be very stressful.

Opportunities for **Self-Directed Learning** as discussed by Dr Naomi Fisher '*A Different Way to Learn*' (2023) can be hugely beneficial for monotropic learners. It embraces the unique strengths of autistic and other neurodivergent minds and enables children to develop their interests and skills at their own pace in ways that meet their needs.

MONOTROPISM

the benefits of an all
consuming hyper-focus

helps regulate
your sensory
system

gain deep
knowledge and
skills



feel less stressed

interests are
predictable and
reassuring

feel in control

a wonderful
flow state
which makes
you feel happy

Follow @autisticrealms

“Embracing monotropism can lead to exciting new possibilities; it allows the potential for deep knowledge, new skills, and the engagement of flow states, which support sensory regulation and good mental health for monotropic people.”

Helen Edgar

Supporting Flow States

For many autistic /ADHD monotropic people, their 'special' or 'strong' interests create a flow state, possibly due to their interests being a source of safety, reliability, and predictability. Instead of learning being an effort, it may feel like a joyful and meaningful experience if you are in a flow state.

Allowing time: It takes time to enter a flow state. Therefore, it might be easier for monotropic learners to have more topic based projects and a more flexible timetable to allow time for deeper knowledge and skills.

Minimizing interruptions: Distractions and interruptions make entering and maintaining a flow state more difficult.

Adjusting the task: Dull, repetitive, or too easy tasks are not likely to enable a flow state. Work needs to be meaningful and of interest. Opportunities for more **self directed learning** is important to consider.



Monotropism and Environment

Monotropic learners have different sensory, social, and communication needs compared to **polytropic people** due to how their attention resources are used. Polytropic people are able to spread their attention and energy resources across more channels at anyone time compared to monotropic people. This means that consideration of the environment is really important for monotropic people to support regulation. Beardon (2017) highlights the importance of the environment for autistic people in his famous golden equation:

‘Autism + Environment = Outcome.’
(Beardon, 2017)

If your environment supports your needs, you will be more able to manage your attention tunnels as you will be more regulated. Being in the right environment is hugely important for positive education and mental health outcomes.

Environment & Transitions

It can be exhausting for a monotropic person to divide their attention across multiple channels (topics/subjects/people/sensory input) and change channels to a new task/event/input. If you are monotropic, navigating and dividing your attention into other channels can feel exhausting and overwhelming; Adkin (2022) describes this as 'monotropic split'. This can affect people at home and school. Planning, giving notice, factoring in extra time, and having a flexible approach will help make this a bit easier. Difficulties with transitions may include:-

Home



- Washing /dressing routines
- Moving from play or TV to another activity (eg meal times/homework)
- Leaving the house for school/shopping
- Any demand or task you ask them that is different to what they are doing in that moment!

School



- Journey from school to home
- Timetable – change of subjects/teachers/rooms/groupings and also thought processing. Difference between art and science.
- Dinnertime and breaks

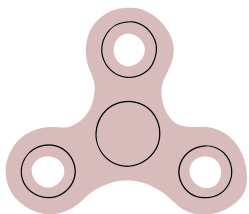
Supporting Monotropic Learners

As Ross Greene (2008) famously said, '**Children do well when they can.**' The following ideas may help support transitions and make day-to-day life flow a bit smoother:

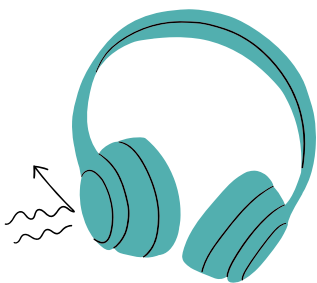
1. Collaborative planning – what works for them?
2. Providing flexibility around the timetable for sensory breaks when needed.
3. Extra transitional time between subjects
4. Key worker approach for consistency
5. Time to **REST, REGULATE & RECHARGE** when moving between attention channels
(staff/subjects/rooms)



Supporting Monotropic Learners



Sensory Tools and Movement can help improve concentration and learning outcomes and make learning a more enjoyable, less stressful experience for many children by regulating the sensory system



Sensory tools such as wobble cushions or fidgets may help focus and keep the flow going for some children. Other children may need tools such as headphones to filter out distractions.



What works for one person may not work for another, and needs may vary from moment to moment depending on many social, physical, and sensory factors.

Interest Clubs

For many autistic young people, playtimes and dinnertimes can be a source of increased anxiety, masking, social and sensory overwhelm and it may not feel like a 'break.' Having a club to go to or a chance to enjoy their interests may give young people something to look forward to (as long as it isn't used as a reward system). It could provide moments of relief, joy, and an opportunity to socialise and build meaningful relationships with those who share their interests too (Dr. Rebecca Wood, 2019).

Teachers may even find an improvement in their student's learning after they have had time to engage in their interests, as they may feel recharged and rested. Sharing interests can boost morale and self-esteem – an opportunity for EVERYONE to benefit and learn together. The research by Dr. Rebecca Wood (2019) highlights some of the wonderful benefits of embracing flow states and the strong interests of autistic children, such as:

- Incorporating the interests of autistic children in all aspects of their time in school can be highly beneficial for children and staff. (Children need less support if they are motivated)
- Enabling autistic children to focus on their interests can positively impact communication.
- Enabling autistic children to access their interests could help socialisation, especially with like-minded peers.

Benefits of Montropism

Joining in shared interest groups online or in person can enhance quality of life and enable deeper friendships

Neurodiversity affirming theory, promotes positive identity to support well being

Allowing time for flow states can enable deep knowledge & skills (play/subject/interest/activity/sensory)

Understanding monotropism can help with energy management and organising your day

Understanding monotropism can help sensory and social regulation and reduce overwhelm (meltdowns/shutdowns)

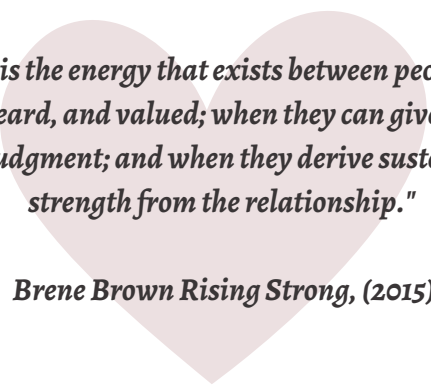
Embrace Monotropism

Encouraging children and young people to embrace their neurodivergent identity through a neurodiversity-affirming approach can greatly enhance their overall well-being and mental health.

Learning about and embracing the theory of monotropism could be a great way of developing understanding through an affirming lens and providing meaningful support.

Above all, we need our children and young people to have the support of adults who truly make the time to understand them, meet their needs, join them, share their interests and flow states and and form a deep, meaningful connection.

If you'd like to learn more, please explore the recommended reading and references list at the end of this booklet.



"Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."

Brene Brown Rising Strong, (2015)

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Mental health support

- YoungMinds Mental Health Support for Young People and their Families www.youngminds.org.uk
- Papyrus UK Suicide Prevention www.papyrus-uk.org
- Hub of Hope -Mental Health Support Network
www.hubofhope.co.uk
- National Autism Society - www.autism.org.uk

You can also phone and get advice from your local CAMHs (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service)

Recommended Neurodiversity Affirming Websites and Organisations:

Autism Understood

Autism Understood is a wonderful website about autism, for autistic young people. The website was created by Spectrum Gaming, a registered charity. Spectrum Gaming is a community for autistic young people which has three main intended outcomes: Building friendships, Increasing Self-Acceptance, Advocacy.

Epic Autism Resources (padlet)

A collection of THE best neurodiversity affirming Autism Resources
(all free open access for everyone)

Autistic Parents UK - Peer support charity for Autistic parents

Ausome - Autism support, training and resources

AMASE – Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh - lots of great info & signposting

Aucademy - Educators of Autistic Experience, training and resources

Beacon NeuroConnect - helps children and their parents, carers and professionals develop and build strong connections

Bridging the Neurodivide - Website by Tigger Pritchard, Autism advocate, resources and training

Emergent Divergence - Advocacy, training and resources

Kelly Mahler - Interoception Curriculum - lots of great info & and signposting

Kieran Rose, The Autistic Advocate, Autism training and resources

Kristy Forbes - Autism & Neurodiversity Support Specialist - - lots of great info & signposting

Monotropism - Website by Fergus Murray, Writing/research and resources on Monotropism

Naomi Fisher - Low-demand parenting, educational training, advice and resources

National Autistic Society (UK) - National charity and support service

Not Fine In School - School attendance support and advice

A Novel Mind: A Resource for Neurodiversity/Mental Health in KidLit

Neurodiverse Connection - Resources, training and support to help improve outcomes for neurodivergent people

The PDA Space - Family Support Community & Resources & training

ReachOut ASC - lots of great info & and signposting

SEDSConnective - Supporting the lives of people with symptomatic hypermobility and associated conditions and neurodivergence

Spectrum Gaming - Autism-affirming online community for young people

Thriving Autistic - Neurodiversity affirming therapists and resources

Viv Dawes, Autistic Advocate - Burnout support and resources

Educational Resources

LEANS-C -Salvesen Mindroom Centre -

Neurodiversity affirming focused teaching resources and curriculum

Neurodiversity and anti-ablism reflection tool for Early Years by Famly / Kerry Murphy

Pandas (pandasonline.org) - Neurobears

Neurodiversity affirmative information for young children

Spectrum Gaming, Barriers of Education - Neurodiversity Affirming Guide for parents and professionals

Mental Health Training for Families and Professionals

MHFA England Mental Health First Aid course

Disclaimer

Autistic Realms reflects my personal understanding of autism and neurodiversity.

I am not a medical professional, psychologist or therapist. This booklet is to promote discussion and to support you to develop your own understanding of the topics covered.

If you need mental health support, please seek professional advice.

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