AUTISM TRAITS EXPLAINED

Think Less Spectrum

And More Wheel

Source: Megan Anna Neff @ www.neurodivergentinsights.org
The linearity of the spectrum gives the illusion that you can be more or less autistic, which doesn’t provide much substantive context or nuance. In reality, some people will be heavily impacted by some traits, while other traits are absent. It is for this reason that Autism can present in a multitude of ways. As the saying goes, when you’ve met one person with Autism, you’ve met ONE person with Autism. It can present vastly differently from person to person. The spectrum language tends to prioritize how impacted a person is on specific traits (generally the more typically male presenting traits (repetitive behavior and social-communication deficits) while minimizing other traits.

The traits measured on the spectrum tend to be based on Neurotypical bias (the traits that impact how well a person fits into a Neurotypical world). This tends to minimize the more internal experiences around health issues, emotional regulation and mood concerns, sensory issues, internalized repetition, difficulty with executive functioning and physical touch.

On the other hand, the wheel of traits takes a more contextual approach. It creates space for complexity and nuance and captures traits that may be more “invisible” to the outside onlooker.

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The wheel helps provide language for understanding how Autism can present in a myriad of ways. For example, a person may have strong social and communication skills (through practice, masking, and learning communication methods), but it doesn’t mean they don’t suffer. They may experience intense sensory struggles, difficulty with information processing, difficulty task switching, or difficulty with executive planning, and difficulty with intimacy related to physical touch difficulties. However, when a person is deemed “High-Functioning,” they will often opt to push through physical, cognitive, and emotional exhaustion in order to meet Neurotypical standards/expectations. This can lead to severe Autistic burnout and mental health issues (depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal, eating disorders, and suicidality).

It’s important to remember that just because a person may not “look” autistic, their suffering and struggle are real. The wheel helps recognize, visualize and validate this layered experience with Autism. While having less of certain traits may lead to lives that look more “functional” (based on NT criteria), it doesn’t mean that the fatigue, burnout, and emotional-mental struggle are less. Hence we need to move away from “Less” and “More” thinking toward an intersectional and contextual understanding of traits and ASD.

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