Autism and the Libraries
First, a poll.

What should I add to this slide?
- Flashing lights
- Pink neon framing
- More cowbell
- Holy cow NOTHING.
We’ll come back to that question in a little while.
Agenda

- Characteristics of Autism
- Library issues
- Why is this of interest?
- What can we reasonably fix?
In general, autistic people prefer “identity-first” naming rather than “person-first.” But you can (should) always ask a specific person about preference.
Autism is a big, broad spectrum, and autistic people are not a monolith.

Today we’re talking about autistic adults who are independent and integrated into ordinary daily activity.
What traits do autistic library users have?

- They don’t care about other people
- They make inappropriate noises or movements
- They are anxious about social interactions
- They don’t like following the rules
Autism is about neurology.

We used to talk about different disorders that have all been folded into one.
Sidebar: more language

- Sometimes autistic people call themselves “neurodivergent.” This is in opposition to “neurotypical.”
- Another way to say ‘not autistic’ is “allistic.”
Characteristics of Autism

Issues include:

- Hypersensitivities
- Comorbidities
- Social interactions
- Perseveration
- Rule clarity
Hypersensitivities

WHY ARE THESE SLIDES SO DANG BUSY???

Because this is how hypersensitivities feel.
Ahmmm. Better.

But think about it: all day every day overstimulated and unsure where to look or what to attend to.
Hypersensitivities

- Smells
- Textures
- Unusual sounds
- Emotional responses
- Density of surrounding people
- Visual distractions
- Ordinary sounds
- Qualities of light
- Tastes
But sometimes...

Sometimes autistic people have some areas of near-insensitivity as well in these same domains.
Not all people with these conditions are also autistic, but there’s a lot of overlap, and many autistic people have:

- OCD
- Anxiety disorders
- ADHD
- Dyslexia
- Auditory processing issues
- Other neurological/neurosocial issues
Sometimes, autistic people (and allistic people) “stim” because it helps provide a point of focus or helps provide a counterbalance to something overwhelming.
Social interactions

Difficulty with:
- Entering conversation
- Exiting conversation
- Humor/lack of humor
- Facial expressions
- Body language
- Subtlety versus directness

Autistic people usually prefer direct feedback over tact!
Autistic people are sometimes perceived, because of this, to not care about other people. This is not a correct perception.
Persisting:
- Behavior
- Conversation
- Presence
- Strong interests
- Opinions that are restated until they are points of contention
No one perseverates because they are trying to be rigid or argumentative. They are “stuck,” because executive function skills in autistic people are often jumbled.

This also shows up in struggling with change in practice, policy, or routine (which all goes much better if clearly communicated).
Autistic people:

- Struggle with ambiguity
- Notice ambiguity other people may not
- Usually like clear rules
- May have a hard time articulating why a rule is unclear to them when it seems clear to neurotypical people
Unstated rules, many of which are social expectation rules, are particularly challenging.
Which of these items does not belong?

- A penny
- Mount Rushmore
- A $5 bill
- A nickel
You probably didn’t think that was ambiguous at all. And yet, this is the kind of question where rules and ambiguity come into play.
• Sensitivities to noise and light in what is expected to be an academic space
• Distractibility
• Difficulty discerning how rules apply
Library issues

- Anxiety about asking for help
- Difficulty negotiating conversational give and take
- Frustration with other users’ perceived deviation from rules
Autistic students may
• Struggle to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate responses in our spaces
• Struggle to recognize when their behavior is creating problems
Managing autistic students’ social skills is not the library’s job; however, finding ways to meet their information needs despite their struggle to articulate them probably is.

Why is this of interest?
Autistic adults may seek employment with us, and because we may interpret their needs as socially odd, we may reject their applications even though they may be excellent employees.
What can we reasonably fix?

- Space design
- Information design
- Service points
- Interviews
- Interpersonal interactions
In designing spaces

• Consider creating areas of less contrast and less crowding.

• Provide a variety of shapes and textures in furnishings.

• Include different lighting options to reduce glare in oversensitive eyes.

• Provide spaces which feel less open or visible/more protected.
In presenting information

- Consider presenting information in tables or flow charts that identify relationships.

- When information is conditional, be thoughtful about the Boolean logic (a lot of autistic people love Boolean logic) behind how it’s presented.

- Consider describing how the information is organized at the top of the page. Don’t assume it will be apparent that it’s alphabetical or most-important-first.
At service points

- Offer multiple ways to “talk” (chat/email).
- Be explicit and accurate about expectations.
- Be prepared to clarify/differentiate ambiguities.
- Be prepared to redirect focus.
- Be prepared to remove from overwhelm.
In interview situations

- Offer a written copy of questions for the interviewee to refer to both as reminder and as focal point.

- Consider interviewing practices which avoid large-group in-person scenarios; consider being explicit about where to look or offering something to look at together.

- Expect and plan to redirect answers which refer to ambiguities you hadn’t noticed.

- Be thoughtful about how interpersonal behavior is relevant to the posted job.
Interpersonal interactions

- Notice a person lingering and explicitly open or close a conversation or interaction.
- Be prepared to let the person know the social expectations have been met/exhausted.
- Describe next steps and set expectations for follow-ups/continuation. Meet those expectations.
- Understand that sustained eye contact is very difficult, and that it costs other attention.
Resources

- ASAN: the Autistic Self Advocacy Network
- Local/Campus groups that include autistic leaders
- (Autism Speaks has a history of exclusion and is not preferred by the autism community)
Questions?

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