

# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Childhood Experiences and Communication Patterns

As a girl with ADHD, you likely had unique communication differences. Others around you may have responded unkindly to these differences. The best you could do may have been to adapt to their responses, typically through masking behaviors. Most girls conclude there is something wrong with their communication.

In this module, we will explore communication through a neurodiverse affirming framework.

Communication can be broken down into three parts—speech, language, and pragmatics.

### Speech

Speech refers to the physical act of producing sounds and involves:

- Articulation (how sounds are made).
- Voice (the use of vocal folds and breathing to produce sound).
- Fluency (the rhythm of speech).



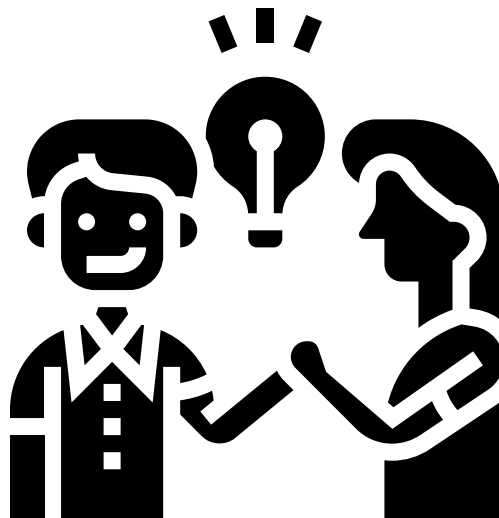
# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Childhood Experiences and Communication Patterns

### Language

Language is a system of communication that utilizes symbols - such as words or gestures - agreed upon by a community to convey meaning. The community we are referring to is usually the neuro-majority or neurotypical community. Language involves both understanding and expressing.

- Receptive language is how you understand.
- Expressive language is how you express your thoughts.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Childhood Experiences and Communication Patterns

### Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the aspect of communication that focuses on how context influences the interpretation of meaning. It includes:

- Using language "appropriately" in social situations.
- Interpreting body language.
- Understanding and using idioms.
- Recognizing the intent of sarcasm or humor.

Pragmatics is critical for understanding intended meaning.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

What Do We Know About the Speech, Language, and Pragmatics of ADHD Children?

## Speech and ADHD

Research shows that ADHD might result in differences in speech patterns. ADHD children often exhibit differences in the volume, pitch, and frequency of vocal pauses. When neurotypical children notice these differences, their reactions are often impatient rather than understanding.

## Language and ADHD

ADHD children may have trouble with word finding and constructing sentences. They may prefer to go off-topic when they become disinterested or have nothing to add. Other children may get annoyed and even bully them for these communication differences.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Pragmatics and ADHD

ADHD children may interrupt if excited. They may also have differences in their ideas of turn-taking. Neurotypical children may mock them in response, and adults often resort to correction and shaming for these differences.

## Listening Comprehension and ADHD

ADHD can also affect a child's ability to process spoken language. If the pace or the environment is “distracting”, this is likely. They may miss details or misinterpret what was said. Others will **accuse them of intentionally ignoring when**, in fact, this is a manifestation of ADHD-related brain differences. Children may be punished and reprimanded by adults for their communication differences.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## ADHD Women's Communication

As adults, women with ADHD often grapple with communication differences that can be traced back to their childhood experiences. You may have trouble with how you receive and express language, and how you interpret, use, and contextualize it in the world as a neuro-minority.

Your experiences of shame and criticism may impact some of these challenges. Rejection sensitivity is an example of this. While research isn't definitive, rejection sensitivity may also have an environmental component.

Some of how you express yourself through language may have to do with past experiences and some with your ADHD brain differences. For example, you may have had trouble knowing what to say when younger. Others may have made fun of you or treated you differently because of this. Now you may feel insecure about verbalizing your needs or thoughts. We discussed this in our silencing and people-pleasing units. We will continue to build on skills that **will help you to be heard.**

# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

Both language and pragmatic skills can be more challenging in the world if you:

- Need help to focus on someone who talks too fast or too slow.
- Struggle to process large amounts of information delivered at one time.
- Get distracted in environments with multiple stimuli.
- Become overwhelmed when multiple people are talking at once.
- Have sensitivity to bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, or something unique to your sensory profile.
- Struggle to absorb the information being conveyed when emotionally dysregulated.
- Have trouble if you are absorbed in another task and cannot shift focus.
- Forget or miss information due to information overload.
- Struggle to process information when socially anxious.
- Have difficulty processing information due to slow processing.
- Feel frozen when put on the spot.

## COMMUNICATION

# CHECKLIST

Reflect on areas of communication that cause you stress:

- ☐ Talk too fast or slow
- ☐ Large amounts of info at one time
- ☐ Environments with lots of distractions
- ☐ Multiple People talking
- ☐ Feel Frozen or put on spot
- ☐ Forget or miss info that was said
- ☐ Process info Slow
- ☐ Social anxiety gets in the way of me processing info
- ☐ One sensory issue makes it hard to listen or understand
- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_





# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Pragmatic Communication and ADHD Women

Remember, pragmatics is the study of how context influences interpretation.

Pragmatics can vary greatly depending on the geographical location or cultural group. It's different among people who are neuro minorities than it is for neurotypicals. It is related to non-verbal cues and social norms within a conversation.

Here are some more key concepts within pragmatic communication:

- Sarcasm,
- Politeness,
- Implicit requests,
- Metaphors.

Pragmatics is a major area neurodivergent women struggle with. If you struggle with "neurotypical" pragmatics you might have issues with: determining when to join a conversation, interruptions because of fear of forgetting what you want to say, responding to someone's sharing by sharing your own experiences, blurting out thoughts during a conversation that might seem "inappropriate" to these accepted patterns of communications.

**Your neurodivergent friends might understand and accept these differences.**

The neuro majority may misinterpret them as rudeness or disinterest. Guess what? Research shows that these issues don't exist among neuro minorities. Research done by Catherine J. Crompton shows that autistic people communicate well among their own neurotype but struggle outside their group. **Your social problems are not problems in your own group.**

# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

**Your neurodivergent friends will intuitively understand and accept these differences.**

The neuro majority may misinterpret them as rudeness or disinterest. Guess what? Research shows that these issues don't exist among neuro minorities. Research done by Catherine J. Crompton shows that autistic people communicate well among their own neurotype but struggle outside their group. **Your social problems are not problems in your own group.**



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

If you can relate to these experiences, know you are not alone. Experiencing criticism or shame for these natural communication differences is harmful!

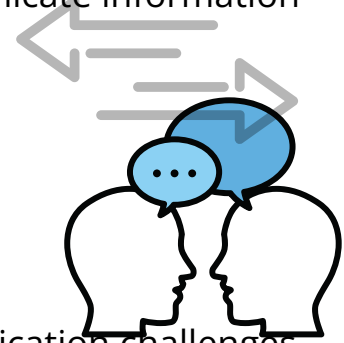
It might also affect your beliefs about your **"social skills"**.

This can lead to avoidance of social situations out of fear of being judged. Often, this can create an anxiety disorder called social phobia.

## Reflection:

Reflect on your experiences of how you've been labeled, stigmatized, or judged because of your unique way of communicating and processing information.

Reflect on how you may listen and process and communicate information differently. What particular things do you notice?



Often, it's a misunderstanding that leads to all communication challenges. Neurotypical individuals may misconstrue your communication style as uncaring or unreliable.

Even therapists or others may unintentionally send you the message that you must be fixed because you are different and need to fit in.

Remember, these communication differences are not deficits; they are simply variations.

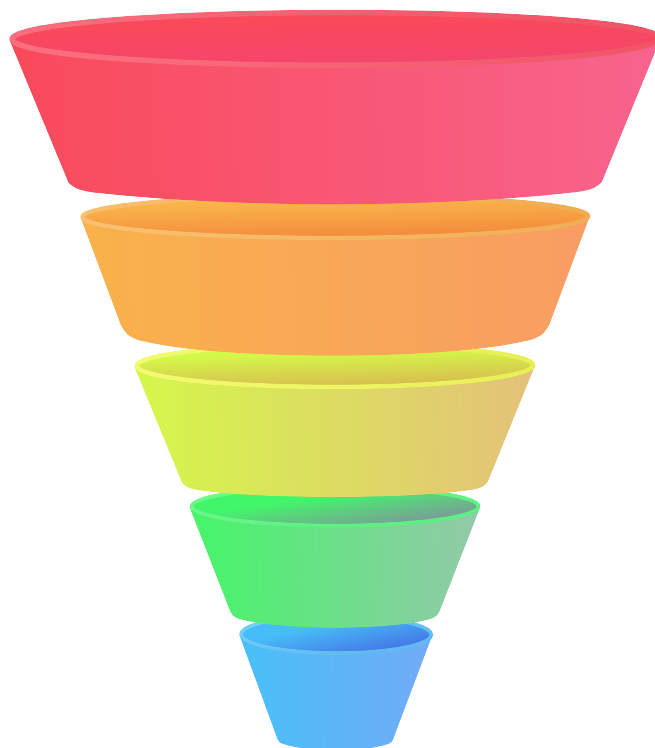


# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## ADHD, Autism, and Monotropism

Monotropism is a theory that PhDs Dinah Murray, Mike Lesser, and Wenn Lawson first put forth. This theory suggests ADHD and autistic minds work like an "interest system," where attention gets caught up by interests.

A lot of brainpower is poured into a small set of interests at any given moment. This results in an intense focus or 'attention tunnel'. Interests pull ADHD and autistic people in more strongly than most people. This theory was crafted by autistic people to help explain how they experience the world. It's also proven helpful in explaining many ADHD people. It can be helpful to explain how you understand conversation, communicate about interests, and transition when communicating.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Respecting and Understanding Cognitive Differences

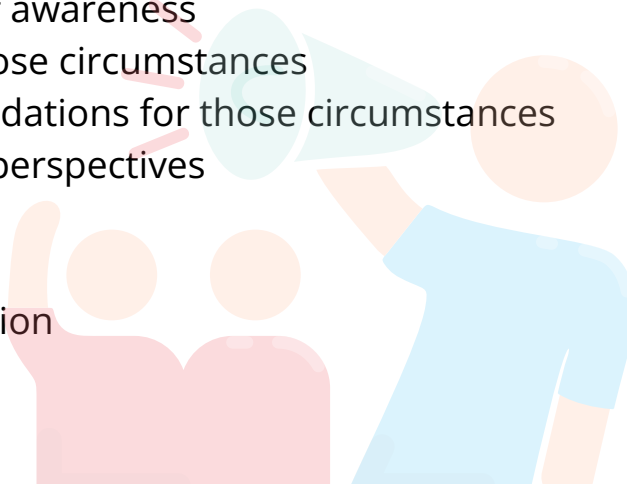
It's important to understand each other's perspectives and find ways to bridge differences. This is how we approach couples or family therapy. Yet for some reason, we insist on forcing ADHD and autistic people to communicate in the same way by teaching them "skills." Instead of imposing "normal" communication rules or encouraging masking behaviors, it's important to promote mutual understanding and empathy.

Practices like insisting on eye contact, expecting small talk, or discouraging the deep focus typical in monotropic interaction can cause harm. These actions can lead to feelings of shame, trauma, and overall negative effects on well-being.

Instead, you can **choose your own communication practices**. It's important to understand what the people you love, interact with, and care **for mean when they communicate and how they function**, but it isn't necessarily important for you to function exactly like them at the cost of your authentic self.

Some good goals are:

- to learn how to express your own thoughts effectively,
- to understand your rights
- become aware of optimal circumstances for you to give and receive information self awareness
- advocate for those circumstances
- make accommodations for those circumstances
- articulate your perspectives
- set boundaries
- ask for help
- ask for clarification



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

We don't want to teach you skills that encourage masking. This is already pushed by environments that don't affirm neurodivergence, such as certain therapists who are untrained in working with neurodivergent clients, schools, parents, and programs.



# COMMUNICATION ADVOCACY GOALS CHECKLIST

Do you have any goals? If not that's ok.

- ☐ Understand and know your rights
- ☐ Become aware of optimal circumstances for you to communicate
- ☐ Advocate for those circumstances when necessary
- ☐ Teach others about your communication style or preferences
- ☐ Set boundaries to help with communication
- ☐ Learn and understand neurotypical communication
- ☐ Ask for help if you need it
- ☐ Ask for clarification if you are confused
- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## The Double Empathy Problem

The concept of the "Double Empathy Problem" was first introduced by Dr. Damian Milton. It was originally designed to help us understand how we have harmed autistic people.

The "Double Empathy Problem" refers to mutual misunderstandings between neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals.

This theory points out that challenges aren't solely due to the neurodivergent person's characteristics, but also stem from the lack of understanding or empathy from the neurotypical side.

Historically, we have treated neurodivergent people as if they need to be fixed. Similar to conversion therapy meant to force conformity to sexual orientation norms, therapy designed to fix, suppress and change the very nature of who autistic and ADHD people are and how they experience and relate to the world, does harm because of this approach.



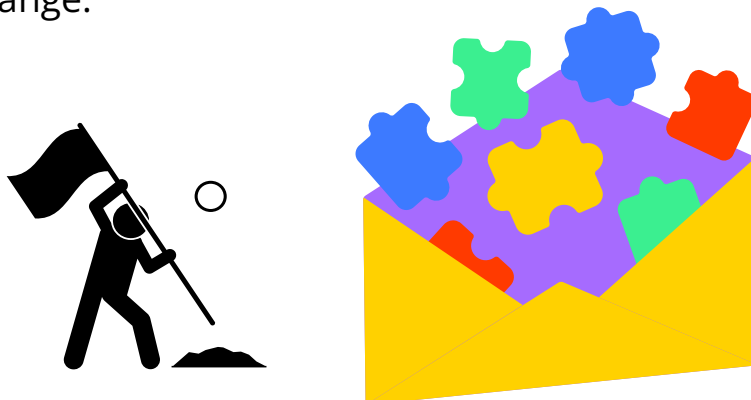


# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## The Double Empathy Problem

Mutual understanding and accommodation of differences, as proposed by the "double empathy problem," is key to reducing stigma and fostering empathy in society. It's crucial not only to adjust behaviors of individuals with autism or ADHD, but also to educate society on neurodivergent experiences. The issue of ADHD women often feeling defective, even in therapy, must be addressed. By embracing the double empathy theory, we can counteract the notion of being 'broken' and needing 'fixing'.

The neuromajority imposing their communication norms on neurodivergent individuals parallels historical events where conquerors enforced their practices on perceived "backward" cultures. Similarly, neurotypical individuals often mistakenly view neurodivergent communication styles as flawed, trying to impose their norms. This needs to change.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

Please know:

Your communication style is distinct and unique, and there's no reason to label it as wrong, bad, or broken.

Consider this quote from Julie Roberts of the Neurodiversity Affirming Collective:

*"Social skills training is a pseudoscientific and archaic model of therapy that is on par with other harmful therapies of the past. The highly biased clinical expectations for neuro minority populations to conform to neuro majority social standards are naïve at best, and ableist, domineering and elitist at its core."*

What do you think when you hear this quote?



---

---

---

---

---

---

# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Self-Accommodation:

Self-accommodation is a great way to support yourself with communication. Here are some ways to practice to make communication go smoother for you.

- Avoid conversations when you're distracted or stressed.
- Recognize when you need a break from a conversation and ask for it.
- Be open about needing more time to process information during conversations.
- Establish a cue with your partner to remind each other to take a break when conversations go off track.
- Ensure you are in optimal circumstances when you are receiving information or relaying it.
- Tell friends, family, and others when you are overwhelmed or need time to process something.
- Use 'do not disturb' buttons or signs to ensure you are not interrupted during important communication.
- Choose how you respond or communicate information to others or receive information.
- Ask for written information at work.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Self-Accommodation:

- Ask to record information at work (online meeting software now makes this quite easy.)
- Ask someone to text or email you something so you don't forget it.
- Recognize when your nervous system is overwhelmed and respond by taking regular breaks.
- Choose calm places in your house where you feel like you are more able to receive and process discussions or deliver communications such as email or texts.
- Ask to have a conversation at a later time if you are focused on something else.
- Ask to have a conversation at a later time if you feel overwhelmed.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Self-Accommodation:

Develop key phrases to have on the ready:

- "I can't do this right now because I can't give you my full attention. Can we do this later?"
- "Can you get back to me at such and such a time? It would work better for me to focus fully on you."
- "I'm overwhelmed right now; can we please talk about this difficult topic after dinner or check with me then to see if I'm in a better place?"
- "Can you check in with me tomorrow when I'm feeling less tired?"
- "I had a hard day at work today and I might not be able to process this well, can you save it for tomorrow?"



Reflect on an accommodation that you think would help you with communication? Right it down here.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Cultivating Self-Compassion

Understanding how things have been difficult and offering kindness to oneself is crucial.

Reflect on moments of self-criticism around your communication.  
Why do you think they happened?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



How can you extend compassion to yourself for these moments?  
Write down your thoughts here.

---

---

---

---

# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## The Power of Self-Advocacy

Remember that your communication style is unique and valuable.

Identifying your sensory sensitivities, preferred communication modes, and energy levels can help you advocate for yourself and seek suitable accommodations.

Asking for help can be hard. Perfectionism can get in the way, making you feel like you should be able to handle everything on your own without assistance. Along with this, feelings of shame and rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD) can act as barriers to seeking help.

It's common to hide your needs and vulnerabilities to appear strong. But this can lead to misunderstandings.

Self-advocacy is critical to overcoming these obstacles. This involves working on new skills to replace the old ones, like reaching out to ask for clarification if you are confused and articulating your needs and thoughts. It's about building a stronger, more resilient version of yourself who knows she deserves to stand up for and communicate her needs.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

Let's talk about some critical times to practice or work on new self-advocacy skills that have to do with communication.

1. Expressing confusion: If you are unsure about what someone means in a conversation, don't hesitate to ask for clarification or a deeper explanation.

Example: "I'm not sure I understood what you just said. Can you please explain it again?"

2. Asking for what you need: If certain changes would make you feel more comfortable or enhance your communication, work towards voicing these needs. This could be anything from a quieter environment to taking breaks during a long discussion.

Example: "Would it be possible for us to continue this conversation in a quieter place? I find it easier to concentrate that way."





# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

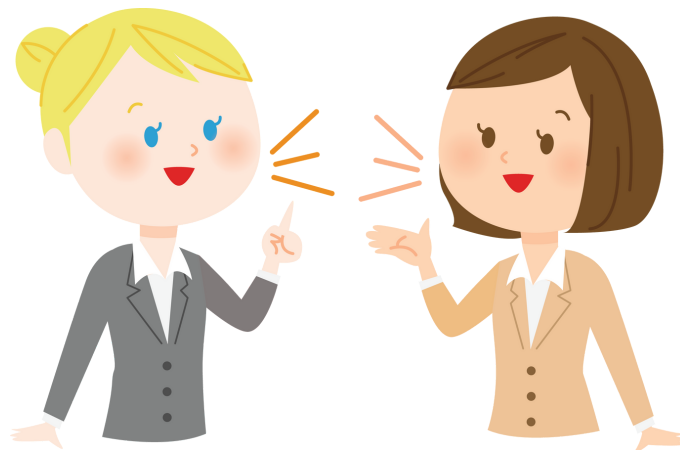
3. Sharing your perspective about your experience in conversation: While understanding the other person's point of view is important, it's equally vital to express your own thoughts and feelings. Remember, there's no "right" perspective in a conversation.

Example: "I know you said you feel Z, and I hear you. When I am focused on X it's hard for me to shift and do Y. I'd like to share the idea of monotropism with you. Would you be willing to learn about it?"

4. Setting boundaries: Defining what you are comfortable with in terms of conversation content, timing, and location can greatly enhance your communication experience. This could involve stating that certain topics are off-limits, specifying times you're available for conversation, or expressing preferences for a particular setting.

Example: "Right now I am feeling overwhelmed, would you mind checking in with me a little later to see if it's a better time to talk about this issue."

Remember, self-advocacy is a crucial skill that helps you communicate more effectively, and it's entirely appropriate and beneficial to express your needs and preferences.



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Letter to My Childhood Self Self Compassion

### Self Compassion

This exercise offers you an opportunity for self-reflection and self-compassion. You'll write a letter to your younger self, addressing past struggles with communication and social understanding, offering understanding and compassion, and asserting the validity of your experiences.

1. Begin by grounding yourself. Find a quiet, comfortable space, and focus on your breath.
2. Imagine your younger self, particularly during a time when you were grappling with communication difficulties.
3. Start your letter with a form of address:  
"Dear Little (Your Name),
4. Acknowledge her struggles: Write down the struggles she experienced around communication, social cues, and feeling misunderstood.

"I see you there, trying to navigate a confusing and overwhelming world. I know how difficult it was for you to find the right words, to understand others and what they were communicating and saying all the time, or to listen and remember, or to decipher those nuanced social cues that others seemed to grasp so naturally.

—



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication

## Letter to My Childhood Self Self Compassion

### 5. Validate her feelings:

Acknowledge her feelings - the confusion, isolation, perhaps even shame. Remember, these feelings were real and valid.

"I can see how you felt alone, confused, and different. There might have been times when you felt ashamed, wondering why things that seemed so simple for others socially were so hard for you..."

### 6. Show Compassion:

Offer understanding, comfort, and the reassurance that she was not alone.

"I want to tell you that you were not alone. There were, and still are, many other girls and women who have had similar experiences, who've felt and feel just as you did. I'm sorry you had to go through that and feel that way. It's normal and okay to have those feelings given what you were dealing with."



### 7. Empower her:

Reassure her that she did the best she could and that it's not only okay but commendable how she got through, trying to fit in, trying to do her best. Let her know that she deserved more understanding and compassion than she received. Let her know that who she was and who she is, is actually okay.

"You did the best you could, and I am so proud of you for that. You deserved so much more understanding and compassion from ..."

***This exercise is about mindfulness, understanding that you weren't and aren't alone, and cultivating kindness towards yourself. It's an opportunity for self-understanding, compassion, and validation. It's an invitation to release any self-judgment or blame and to appreciate your journey, resilience, and the person you have become.***

# notes



# A Neuro-affirming Approach to Understanding ADHD Women's Communication



## Group Discussion Questions

1. Can you recall any instances where you felt misunderstood due to your unique communication style?

b) How did you handle it?

2. How often do you find yourself masking or modifying your communication behavior to fit into 'neurotypical' norms?

b) How does this affect you?

3. Some good communication goals that are neurodivergent affirming are:

- to learn how to express your own thoughts effectively
- to understand your rights
- become aware of optimal circumstances for you to give and receive information
- advocate for those circumstances
- make accommodations for those circumstances
- articulate your perspectives
- set boundaries
- ask for help
- ask for clarification

which of these resonate for you?

Discuss :)

