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Thinking About Those Who Think Differently

SOME OF US ARE JUST FISH TRYING TO CLIMB TREES

BY ANDRES PERE

Picture that you are in school doing the assignments given to you by your teacher. You answer question after question, getting closer and closer to being finished with the assignment. Until you hit a roadblock. One part of the assignment catches you off guard, you try to reason through it, in every way you can think of, but nothing seems to work. Your mind is flying a million miles a minute, your heart begins racing, but you still can't figure it out. You feel as if you are being sucked into an endless abyss. Your leg begins to shake and you begin to fidget with your pencil. As the problem continues to flood your senses, several stressed noises come out of your mouth. The teacher hears you and comes to your desk. She tells you to settle down and get back to work. But you can't. Your mind is racing too fast to absorb what she is saying. She tells you again, this time with a slightly raised voice. You don't like that she raised her voice. Your teacher tells you over and over again to stop fidgeting, stop whining and to get back to work. Your mind starts rushing faster and faster. Until it all stops. Your leg stops shaking and you let go of your pencil. You stop whining, but you can't talk at all. Your brain feels like it's seizing up, not allowing you to think or do anything. You might feel trapped in your own mind, unable to escape the suffocating overflow of thoughts, emotions and stimulus. But all that your teacher sees is a loud and disruptive student finally quieting down. She looks pleased by your stillness and tells you to pick up your pencil and continue working. This might seem like a foreign and tortuous experience to you, but it is reality for neurodivergent people across the globe.

Many neurodivergent individuals, such as myself, have always had our own unique struggles. Whether it be loud sounds, strange smells, or any other form of new or overwhelming experience, we have always struggled. But there is another series of problems that neurodivergent individuals face, one that is more ever present and influential than any new smell or loud noise. These problems are school, work and social interaction. We have struggled with these social problems for a long

time and, as solutions and help become less and less accessible, we become more and more lost in this big world.

Many neurodivergent individuals feel lost or forgotten when it comes to settings such as school or work. These environments usually do not cater to our needs as individuals, and can cause severe emotional distress. Issues with organization, sensory overload and workload management are all challenges that neurodivergent individuals need to overcome in work and school in order to succeed in life. Another struggle within these spaces is that those in power, whether it be teachers or managers, often do not have the experience necessary to meet our needs and help us thrive. When asked how educators can create more inclusive environments for neurodivergent students, Dr. David Krasky, adolescent and school psychologist, said, "The most important step is including everyone in the decision-making process, not simply saying, 'This is what I'm going to do for my classroom because I think it'll help.'" Dr. Krasky notes that as every neurodivergent person is unique, accommodations may not be feasible for every stimulus. Understanding and providing acceptable alternatives may be just as important. "Headphones and lamps, instead of overhead fluorescent lights, may be helpful but when overwhelming stimuli can't be avoided, giving students a way to reorganize and settle themselves is very helpful. Chewing on things, such as gum, a pencil, or your fingernails, is such a common outlet that people find calming benefits."

A way in which neurodivergent people mitigate feelings of stress in response is by a process referred to as stimming. Stimming, or stereotypy, is defined as a repetitive performance of actions or sounds, such as tapping of fingers, shaking of legs, or biting of nails. Stimming serves as a calming mechanism by providing an outlet for the release of excess stress and energy. Stimming is not a response that can be controlled, so the next time you see someone being fidgety or noisy, remember that they may be under stress and just use those movements and sounds as a way to

mitigate those feelings.

School and work are not our only sources of stress. We also have significant trouble when it comes to the social aspects of life. Social situations can become quite stressful for neurodivergent individuals, myself included. This stress can lead to the development of a behavior known as "masking." Masking is a term used to describe the act of an individual, whether consciously or unconsciously, hiding their natural behavior, personality, or mental state in order to fit into societal norms and appear more "neurotypical" or "normal." Having to constantly conceal your true self from the world in this way can cause severe anxiety related to social interaction, as well as burnout, depression and rejection of their true selves. "Masking takes a lot of energy. People who are masking for long periods of time start to burn out a little, makes them tired or maybe can't control their emotions, tone of voice, or their ability to work, concentrate or communicate," Dr. Krasky said.

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Adolescent and School Psychologist

From the outside looking in, an individual that is masking may look and behave just like any other person. But on the inside, it feels like walking on a tightrope. Always planning and micromanaging your every action, making sure to keep the mask up for as long as possible, fearing that you will be shunned and rejected should your true self ever be exposed. There are ways that neurotypical people can use in order to make social interaction easier for neurodivergent individuals. Sometimes, people will try to "talk down" to neurodivergent people, in an attempt to make things more simple for us. However, this strategy often does not work. "Most kids, teens, young adults, want to be treated as

NEURODIVERGENT ART ARTIST STATEMENT

This picture shows how neurodivergent people have the same neurons as neurotypical people, but their neurons just take a different path. So I used that thought in this design, with all the regular colored neurons going one way, and the different colored ones taking a different path.

kids, teens and adults. They don't want to be talked down to and made to feel different," Dr. Krasky said. A way that does work, however, is to not hesitate and take the first step in the interaction. "Be the initiator and find out about the person. Not the neurodiversity. The person," Dr. Krasky said.

It's not all bad for us, however. There are strategies we can use to make interacting with neurotypical people and navigating our lives easier. A good first option, for both the neurodivergent person and those closest to them, is to seek out a therapist. Even if you feel that you may not need it, therapy can help sort out emotional and mental problems you may not have even realized you were dealing with. "My ultimate goal is [for neurodivergent people] to have the tools to deal with anything difficult that comes their way on the emotional side," said Dr. Krasky. A good tip when it comes to socializing is to find people you share common interests with. Social anxiety can be a tough mountain to summit but once you do, you will have a veritable treasure trove of friends that will support and help you. As fostering friendships can be difficult for many neurodivergent people, it is important to be able to avoid people who may try to manipulate and take advantage of you. Fake friends are an ever present problem in any social space, and it is important to learn how to spot and avoid those kinds of people. Filtering out and removing fake friends from your social circles will ensure that you are surrounded by people who will be good friends to you, respect you and be there for you in your time of need.

The world is already a difficult place, and those who see it differently are often left behind. But with the right help, we can stand tall against the wind and work toward a more inclusive society. In the words of renowned physicist Albert Einstein, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life thinking that it is stupid." Keep an eye out for the fish in your lives, who you never realized may just be struggling to climb trees.