

# Children's Mental Health Network

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May 1, 2026

Topic: Neurodiversity



**Belonging**  
*the key to wellness*



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF  
**Children's  
Mental Health**

# Agenda

1. OCMH Announcements
2. Neurodiversity
  1. Young adult video
  2. Data
  3. Panel discussion: Neurodiversity, Autism, diagnosis, crossover to mental health, myth, treatment
  4. Small group discussion with panelists/parents
3. Adjourn



# OCMH Updates

## Children's Mental Health Week

May 3-9, 2026

### Wired for Belonging

- 3 Things Everyone Can Do to Promote Belonging
- Social media posts
- Supporting Youth Belonging in Schools



See OCMH Children's Mental Health Week [web page](#)



Everyone can promote youth belonging!

Belonging is the feeling of being welcomed, accepted, respected, and valued within one's social environment, including family, friends, school, and community.

**Belonging is important because:**

- It is critical to both physical and mental health.
- It is foundational to child well-being.



### 3 Things **ADULTS** Can Do to Promote Youth Belonging

- 1** Have a 40-second positive interaction with a young person.
  - ▶ Doctors were able to substantially reduce anxiety by having a less than 40-second compassionate interaction with their patient. [\(source\)](#)
- 2** Make eye contact and smile at young people.
  - ▶ With younger children, get down to their level.
  - ▶ With teens, smile even if they don't!
- 3** Just listen.
  - ▶ Sometimes youth just want an adult to listen and not offer advice.
  - ▶ Supportive adults listen without judgment.



## 3 Things **Youth** Can Do to Promote Youth Belonging

- 1** Join an organization or activity that interests you.
- 2** Look for ways to build people up and be kind. Be an upstander.
- 3** Be curious – start a conversation with others you don't know.



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## Connection Through School Activities and Events

### Students Spoke, We Listened

We asked Wisconsin teens what activities and events schools can offer to help them connect with peers they normally wouldn't talk to. They had lots of suggestions!

#### HOLD SPECIAL DAYS

- Game & movie days
- Wellness day
- Challenge day
- Spirit day
- Mental health awareness
- Pay it forward day
- Community Day
- No judgement day

#### SCHOOL-WIDE EVENTS

- Bring your own buddy event
- Wellness circles
- Scavenger hunt
- Interactive tabling events
- Mental health assembly
- Movie/game night with a variety of games
- Team challenges
- Hot chocolate social
- Outside activities

#### EXTRA CURRICULARS

Provide opportunities for students to connect to others they normally may not. Schools should offer activities and events that encourage students to explore **sports, music, and clubs**.



#### CONNECTION IDEAS

- Form small groups of students who don't have classes together
- Small groups of students read or watch something and then have discussions on it
- Icebreakers and games during school



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## Connection At School During Lunch

### Students Spoke, We Listened

We asked Wisconsin teens what schools can do during lunch time to build connection between students. They gave us lots of ideas!

#### ACTIVITIES!

Students say schools could plan activities over lunch to build connection between students, and they offered many ideas for activities.

Games

NO PHONES during lunch

LONGER LUNCH so we can meet others, do activities

FURNITURE have seating that isn't just lunchroom tables

MOVE AROUND FREELY allow students to walk around freely, go outside, and go off campus

Clubs host tables in lunch room

Trivia

Birthday celebrations

Competitions

Music and mini-music concerts



The activities should be fun, so youth will want to get involved, and they should be helpful to students.

Wisconsin high school youth shared these thoughts at the Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2026 hosted by the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health on April 17, 2026 in Madison.



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## Connection Conversation Starters

### Students Spoke, We Listened

We asked Wisconsin teens what their go-to conversation starters are with their friends or to make new friends. They offered lots of tips!

#### ASK ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE INVOLVED WITH

- Clubs
- Sports
- Music
- Extracurriculars

#### SIMPLE QUESTIONS

Questions are easy ways to start conversations with people you know or don't know and can be on anything:

- What is your favorite color, food, music artist, song, class, teacher, animal, or way to relax?
- Do you believe in unicorns?
- What are your plans for the weekend?
- What did you do after school yesterday?
- Are you a sock sleeper or not?
- How is your day going?
- What's the scariest animal that isn't really scary?
- How are you feeling today?

COMPLIMENT A common go-to compliment is on their outfit.

TELL A JOKE



When striking up conversations remember to be nice and be yourself.

Wisconsin high school youth shared these thoughts at the Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2026 hosted by the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health on April 17, 2026 in Madison.



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# OCMH Updates

## Copy & Drop

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### Building Mental Wellness Copy & Drop

Resource for newsletters/  
communications

- Ready-to-use short messages on youth mental wellness
- Monthly
- [Sign up](#)

(select Building Mental Wellness Copy & Drop)





# Video: Nekita Krisko

[Watch video](#)





# Data



# Prevalence of Neurodiversity

- Neurodivergent is an **umbrella term** for a variety of conditions.
- Researchers estimate **about 20%** of children are not neuro-typical.
- The average classroom could have **5 neurodivergent learners**.
- Many who are neurodivergent have **more than 1 form** of neurodivergence.



# Prevalence of Autism



## AUTISM

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that some children are born with. It affects a person's ability to communicate and connect socially.



About 3% of Wisconsin children are diagnosed with autism.



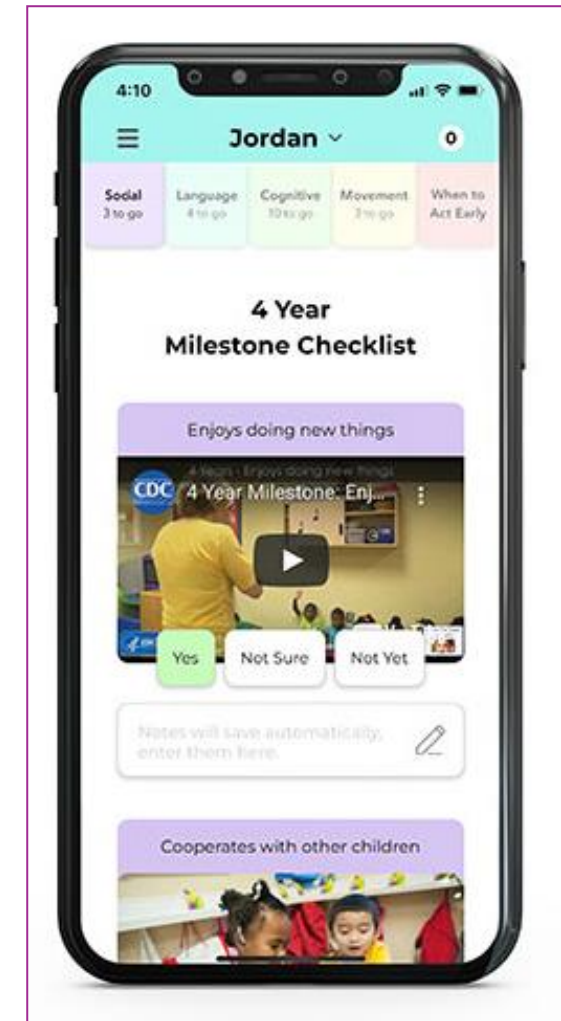
Boys are more than 3x as likely as girls to be diagnosed with autism.



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# Diagnosing Autism

- Autism can be **diagnosed at any age**.
- But **early identification** is linked with better long-term outcomes.
- In Wisconsin, the majority of kids are **diagnosed by age 4**.
- **Parents can track** their child's developmental milestones **up to age 5**. This may flag concerns and can help lead to a diagnosis.



# Mental Health & Neurodiversity

**Very few kids (1.1%) with autism are “flourishing”**

## **Flourishing (ages 0-5)**

- ✓ Affectionate and tender
- ✓ Bounces back quickly
- ✓ Curious to learn new things
- ✓ Smiles and laughs

## **Flourishing (ages 6-17)**

- ✓ Curious to learn new things
- ✓ Works to finish tasks
- ✓ Stays calm and in control when faced with a challenge



# Mental Health & Neurodiversity

**70%-80% have at least one mental health condition**

## Common Mental Health Problems

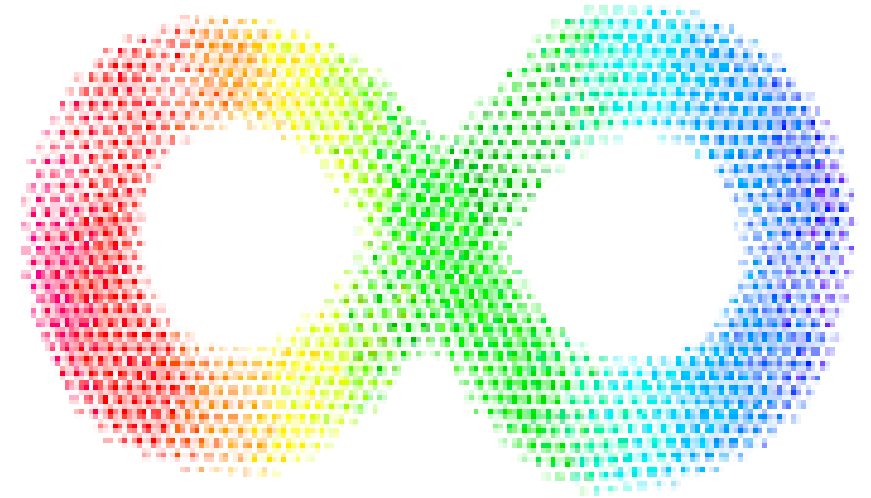
- Behavioral problems (61%)
- ADHD (48%)
- Anxiety (40%)
- Depression (16%)

## Common Undiagnosed Problems

- More loneliness
- Less belonging
- Emotional exhaustion from masking.

# Mental Health Care & Community

- Neurodiversity has evolved into a movement focused on the **strengths of neurodivergent people**. Neurodiversity has become **an identity** where many find **community**.
- **Affirmative care models** are based on belief that neurodiversity is a natural part of human diversity, not a problem in need of fixing – and the therapeutic goal is not to become neurotypical. They **center lived experience**.



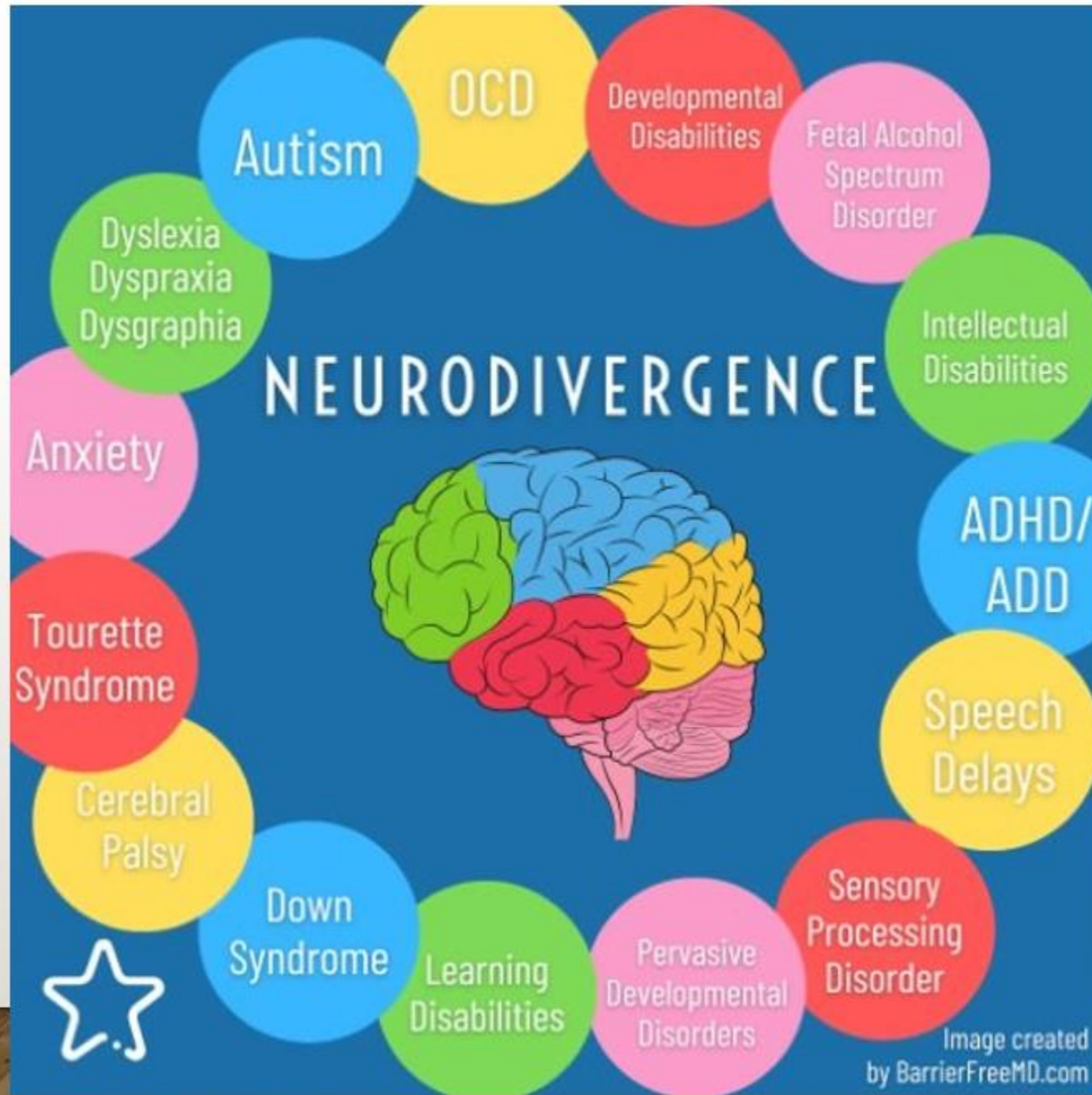
NEURODIVERSITY



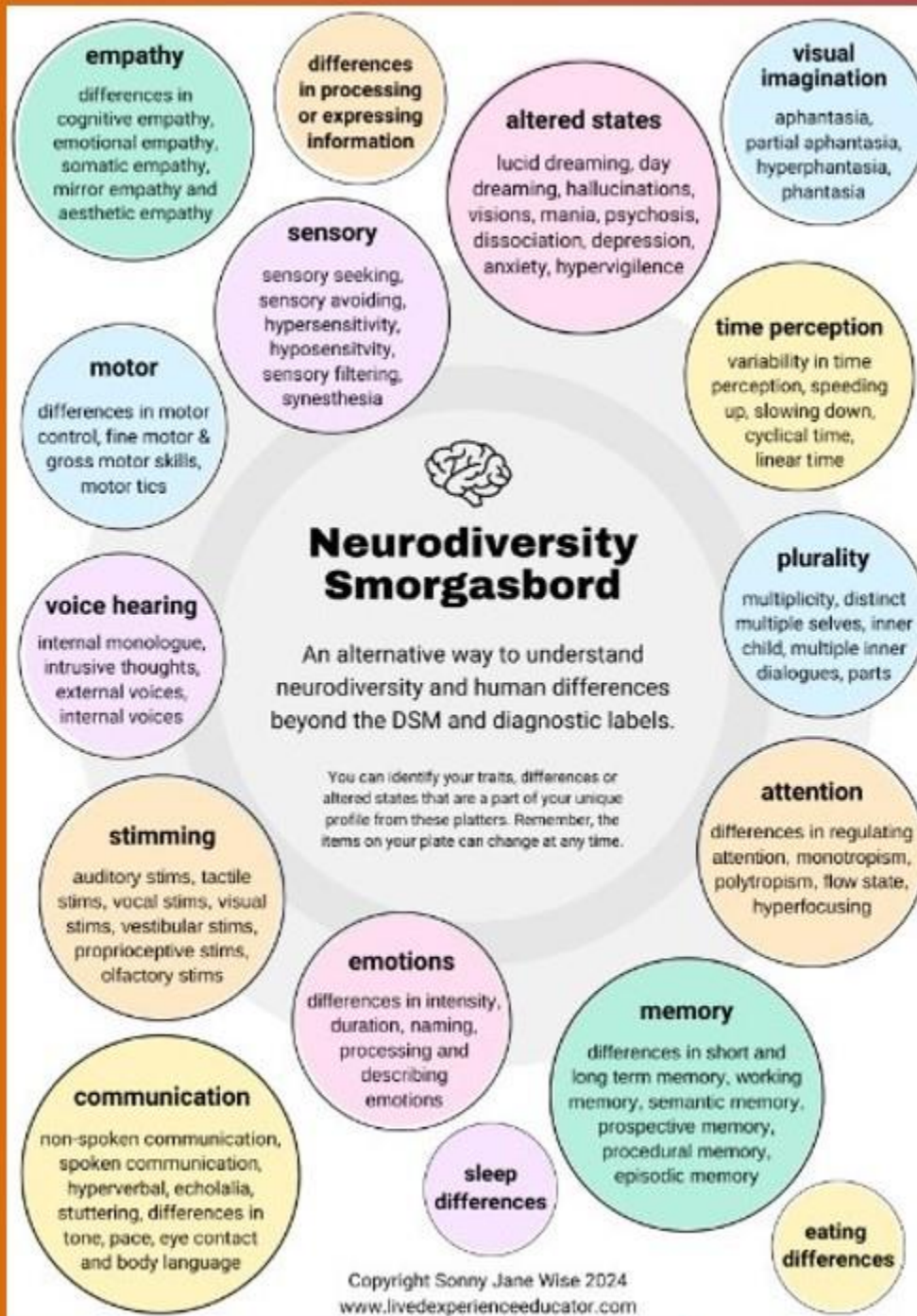
# Panel & Parent Discussion

## Panelists:

- **Madeline Barger**, Director of Adult Autism Program – Waisman Center, University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities / Family Therapist / Behavior Analyst/ Sex Therapist
- **Nicky Koon**, Supervisor – Treffort Studios
- **Becky Krisko**, Director of Services – Acceptional Minds LLC
- **Tim Markle**, Outreach Program Manager – Training and Transition Coordinator – Wisconsin Autism Transition Demonstration Project
- **Pornisha Orr**, Parent
- **Jen White**, Parent



## What is Neurodivergence?



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# Neurodiversity looks like...

# Neurodiversity vs Mental Health

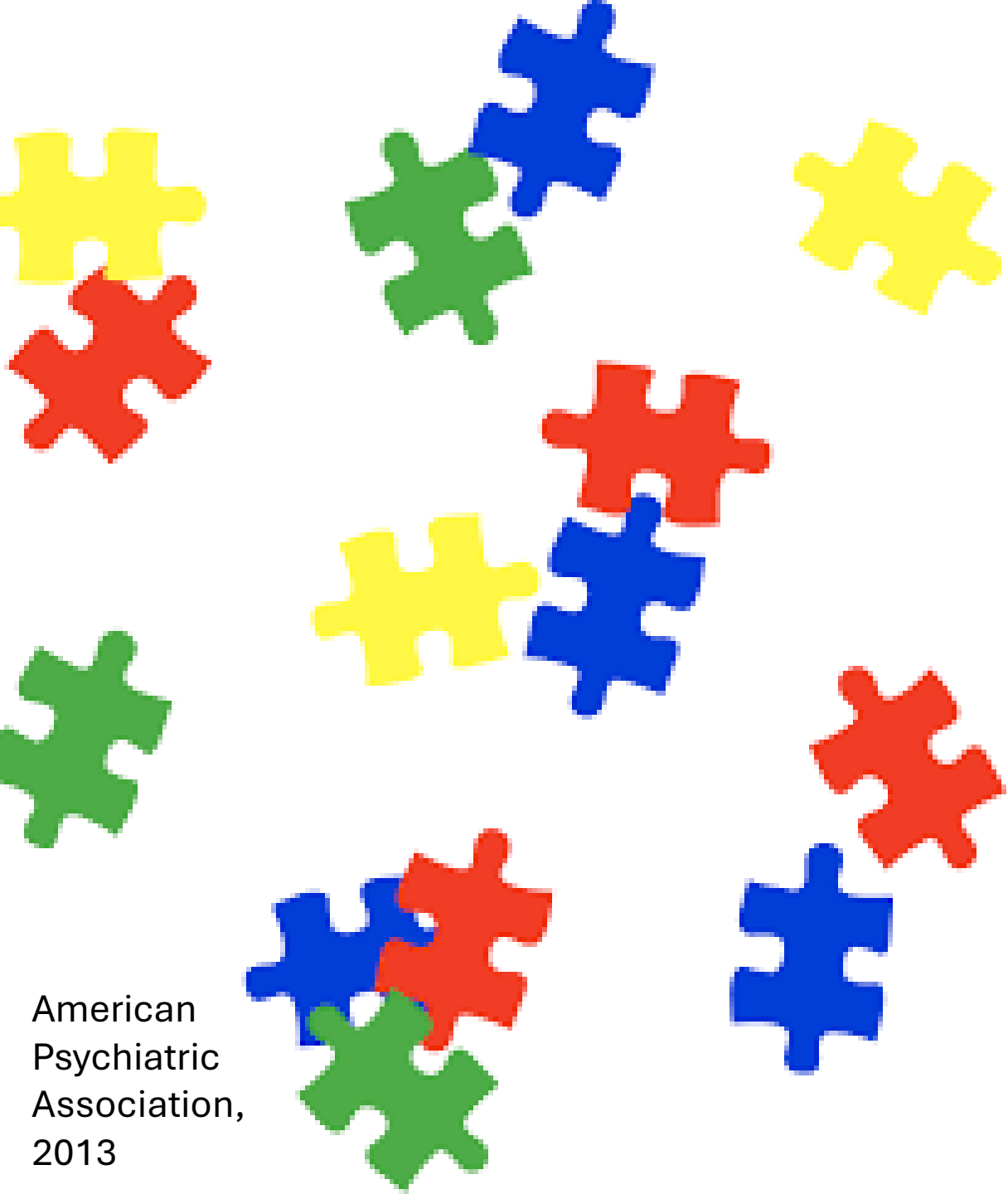
Neurodivergence refers to natural, life-long variations in brain functioning (e.g., Autism, ADHD, dyslexia)

Mental health relates to temporary or chronic emotional, psychological, and social well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety)

Neurodivergent individuals are more likely to experience mental health struggles due to navigating a world not built for them, but they are distinct, non-interchangeable concepts.

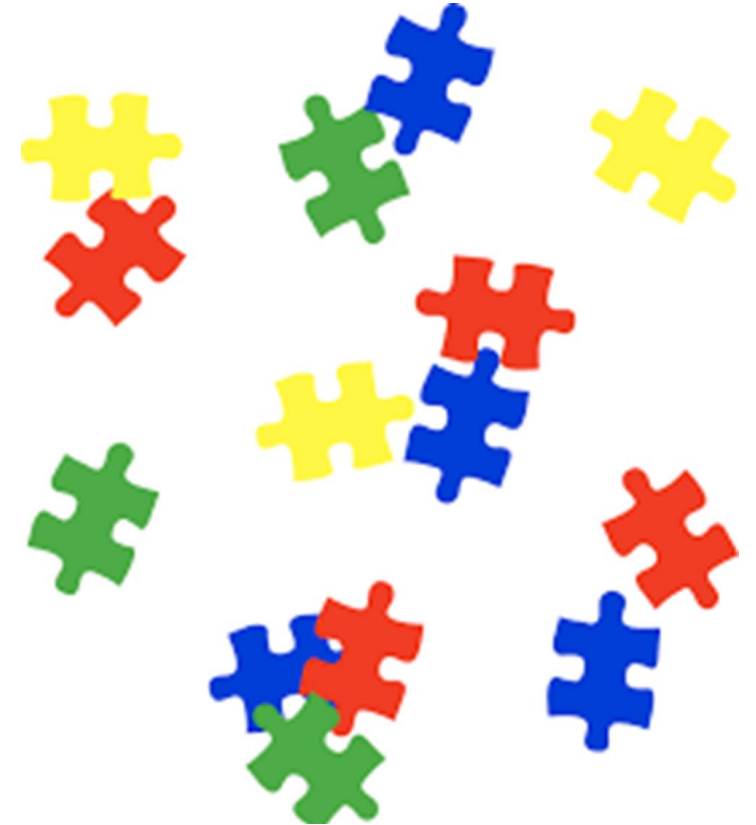
# Characteristics of Autism

- Social deficits
  - Failure to respond
  - Reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect
  - Lack of facial expressions or nonverbal communication
  - Failure to adjust behavior to social context
- Communication deficits
  - Scripting\*
  - Repeating the same phrase over and over
  - Not making sense
  - Only part of the story
- Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior
  - Stereotyped or repetitive motor movement
  - Insistence on sameness
  - Fixated interests
  - Hypo-/hyperactivity to sensory input
  - Stimming\*



# Executive Functioning

- Brain Function/Skills that allow us to:
  - Demonstrate situational awareness – “read the room”
  - Predict possible outcomes and recall past experiences
  - Generate a plan to achieve an outcome (even if it’s a novel event)
  - Initiate appropriate actions and/or response to achieve this outcome
  - Monitor performance based on self-monitoring and situational awareness of
    - Expected and unexpected outcomes
  - Shift flexibility between activities



# Exceptional Minds' Hierarchy of Behavior

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Unsafe Negative Behaviors, including threatening

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Swearing/Name Calling

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Volume (yelling, shouting) and/or Whining

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Tone

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Do you need to be right or do you need to move forward?

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Health and safety = Be Right

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Everything else = Move Forward



TIME FOR  
A BREAK!

# Small Group Discussion

## Select Your Discussion Room

- **Neurodiversity** – Madeline Barger and Nicky Koon
- **Autism** – Becky Krisko and Tim Markle
- **Parents** – Pornisha Orr and Jen White



# Children's Mental Health Network 2026 Meeting Agenda

February 6	May 1	August 7	November 6
Profile of Today's Youth – Beyond the Headlines	Neurodiversity	Technology and Children's Mental Health	Children's Mental Health in the New Year/Going Forward



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