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Thinking in **Patterns**

Developing a systems-based approach to helping families affected by autism

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Session materials & contact info

- All handouts can be accessed online
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About me

- Licensed as an LPC in Virginia since October 2013
- Trained in marriage and family therapy and counseling
- Spent nearly 8 years in community-based mental health
- Spent nearly 7 of those years working with autistic individuals and their families in a home-based behavior support program
- Currently in private practice while working on Ph.D. in counselor education

+ Learning objectives: Familiarity

- ... with autism and its effect on a family system
- ... with how family-systems focused counselors can benefit a family with an autistic member
- ... with common patterns and how they manifest in a family with an autistic member
- Video, case studies, and opportunities to discuss your experiences will be included

+ Setting our baseline for discussion

- A word about Neurodiversity:
 - Proposed by Hans Asperger in 1938
- The term "refers to the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and ADHD should be regarded as **naturally occurring** cognitive variations with **distinctive strengths** that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than a mere checklist of deficits and dysfunctions" (Silberman, 2015).

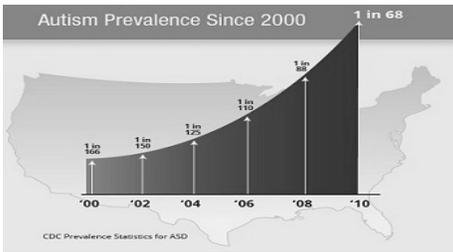
+ Setting our baseline for discussion

- A word about Neurodiversity, continued:
 - Jives well with professional counseling identity
 - We are **human development specialists**, who come from **a strengths-based perspective** (Lawson, 2016, pg. 76)

+ Setting our baseline for discussion

- Autism is ...
 - A **“brain style”**
 - Currently understood to be a manifestation of an **overconnected brain** (Keown, Shih, Nair, et al, 2013; Dominguez, Stieben, Velazquez, & Shanker, 2013; Supekar, Uddin, Khouzam, et al, 2013).
 - A feature of about **1 in 68** people (up from 1 in 166 in 2000, according to the CDC)

+ Setting our baseline for discussion



+ Setting our baseline for discussion

- Autism can lead to ...
 - Difficulties with social communication
 - Language development
 - Participation in developmentally typical friendships and play
 - Attachment concerns (hypothetically)
 - Difficulties with sensory experiences
 - Hyper-sensitivity
 - Ex.: Clothing refusal or strict preferences
 - Hyposensitivity
 - Ex.: Underdeveloped proprioception

+ Effect on the family: Rage for order

- "Immigrant" to language and culture
 - Humans thrive in relation to predictable and consistent social success
 - Have you ever experienced immersion in an unfamiliar language, culture, or both?
- Imagine that your mom, dad, sister, brother, and so forth ...
 - Speak a different language
 - Operate according to different (or even nonsensical) social rules
 - Yell at you for doing something that seems completely natural or logical to you

+ The family as a social system

- None of us live in a vacuum
- All social systems have
 - Rules
 - Roles
 - Relationships
- Families are no different

+ The family as a social system

- Can you identify the 3 Rs in this clip?
- <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70190437?trackId=14170289&tctx=0%2C21%2C3094d16c-e607-4085-90a7-1803749409cb-35083951>
- "... interactions that may be deemed pathological from the established structural" — or behavioral — "lens are an unavoidable reality in families affected by autism" (Parker & Moltini, 2017).

+ The family therapy advantage

- Idealistic therapy
 - What does a healthy family look like under these circumstances?
 - Helps family identify and focus on the positive aspects of themselves.
- Focus on the system
 - Helps the clinical team depersonalize the presenting concern.
 - Helps clinical team contextualize the presenting concern.
 - Helps the clinical team *focus on the problem-solving mechanism* rather than the problem itself.
 - Helps the clinical team and family use a common language and stay focused.

+ SFT: See it

- Please read over the hand out
- Thoughts?
- Waters, D. (personal communication, October 16, 2017)

+ SFT: Name it

- See the hand-out
- Thoughts?
- Waters, D. (personal communication, October 16, 2017)

+ SFT: Change it

- See the hand-out
- Thoughts?
- Waters, D. (personal communication, October 16, 2017)

+ SFT: Notable adaptations

- For the disengaged family: Involve more people!
- For the enmeshed family: Clarify roles among caregivers rather than the typical strengthening of boundaries between parent and child
- "Parents frequently report discomfort with the excessive time and energy that is required to raise a child with autism, which is inconsistent with a traditional view of enmeshment" (Parker & Moltini, 2017)

+ Case Study 1

- Ray is a 17-year-old young man who lives with his mother, her male partner, and two sisters in their 20s. One sister's fiancé lives with the family. The other sister has an infant daughter that is often present while the sister is at work. Ray has presented for counseling because he has recently been accused multiple times of sexually harassing behavior by female peers.
- Key features of his autistic presentation: Ray has strong expressive language skills, but he appears to often misunderstand the intentions of others.
- Key features of his family system: Birth father is relatively absent, mother has severe trauma history.

+ Case Study 2

- Victor is a 12-year-old boy who lives with his mother and his neurotypical brother (5). Though married, his parents separated within the past 6 months. Victor's mother, Angie, brought him to counseling due to his difficulties transitioning between the different ways of life at each parents' house. For example, Victor has little trouble dressing himself for school while with his mother, but he has great difficulty at his dad's house. The parents have not come to an agreement about how to best support Victor's skill development.
- Key feature of Victor's autistic presentation: He has strong language, but often does not see adults as reliable guides.
- Key feature of the family system: Transition from married parents to separated/divorced parents.

+ Case Study 3

- Monica is a 12-year-old girl who lives with her adoptive parents and brother (10). She presented for counseling because she has been refusing to go to school. Her family and community are confused because she generally does quite well academically, and she appears to have friends at school and on the cross country team. Her mother reported that doing homework at night often leads to fights.
- Key features of Monica's autistic presentation: Monica has strong language skills but often does not know how to start meaningful conversations.
- Key features of her family system: Her parents tried for a long time to have children of their own; one community leader has stated that she thinks the parents are getting "played" by Monica.

+ What is possible?

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Msh1b7ham2s>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuV8AddbXIs>

+ Additional resources

- The Interactive Autism Network, or IAN Project:
<http://iancommunity.org/interactive-features-and-videos>
- *Autism In the Family: Caring and Coping Together*, by Robert A. Naseef, Ph.D.
- *Thinking in Pictures*, by Temple Grandin
- *The Way I see it: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's*, by Temple Grandin
- *Voices from the Spectrum: Grandparents, Parents, Siblings, People With Autism, and Professionals Share Their Wisdom*, edited by Cindy N. Ariel and Robert Naseef
- *The Sibling Slam Book: What It's Really Like to Have a Brother or Sister With Special Needs*, edited by D. Meyer

+ Questions?

Thanks for you interest in helping these special families!

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