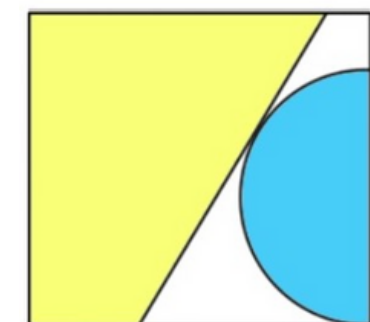


Unmasking

an online support group for autistic adults

Community Resource Toolkit



tangent
mental health
initiative

Un-Masking: an online support group for autistic persons

Community Resource Toolkit

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Introduction

From October to December 2022, Tangent Mental Health Initiative hosted a 5-session support group titled '*Un-masking: a support group for autistic folks*'. We aimed to create a safe space for people to talk about their experiences of neurodivergence and build strategies for coping through their journeys.

With consent to highlight their stories & experiences, we have co-created this toolkit for use by neurodivergent folks and mental health practitioners. Throughout, we interchangeably utilise both identity-first & person-first language (e.g. "an autistic individual" vs. "an individual with autism") to honour our participants' voices. We've also used both the words "autistic" and "neurodivergent".

We hope this toolkit will assist in informing on how to create a more inclusive, less neurotypical world in practice. Ultimately, we hope this highlights that masking and un-masking are different for all.

Introduction

This booklet is a documentation from 5 (five) support group sessions and reflective exercises. It considers neurodivergence both from the individual and societal perspectives.

We recommend this booklet be read in order so that the exercises and self-reflection prompts complement one another. Feel free to use it digitally or printed.

Please take note of the following symbols and their meanings. These will appear on pages **at the top-left corner** to indicate:



(lightbulb):
Tips or strategies



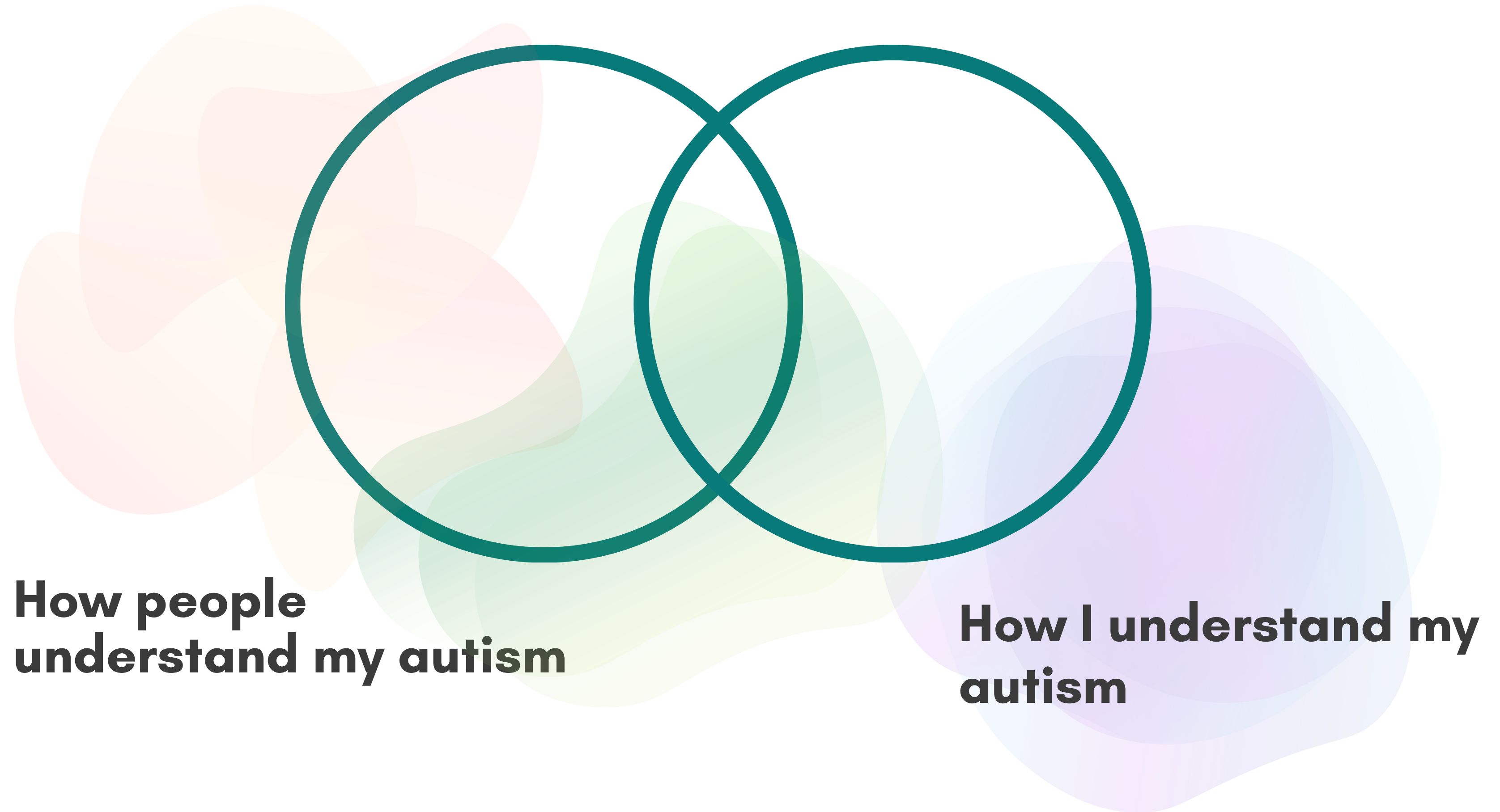
(notepad):
Self-reflection prompts/spaces



Un-Masking: an online support group for autistic folks

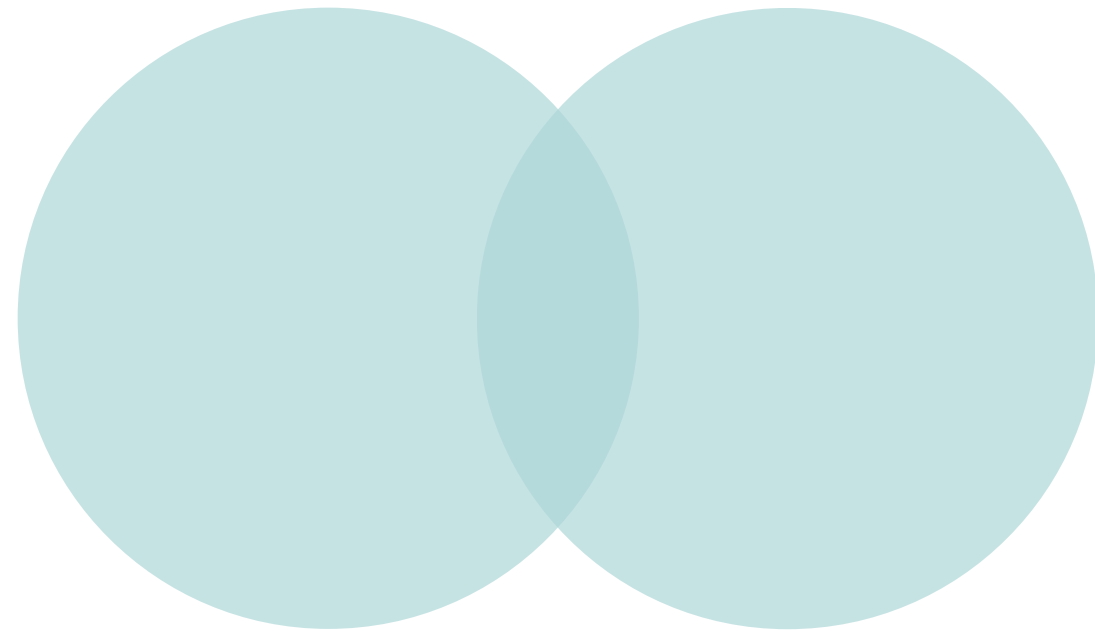
- **Navigating a Neurotypical world**

Understanding Autism Through Vent Diagrams



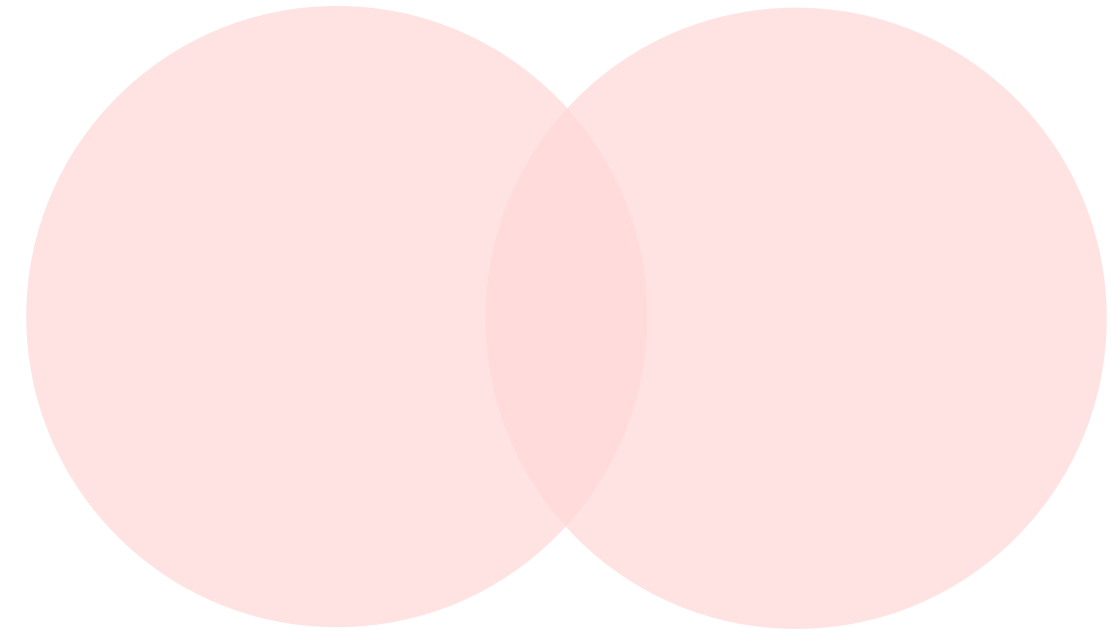
Understanding Autism Through Vent Diagrams

Responses



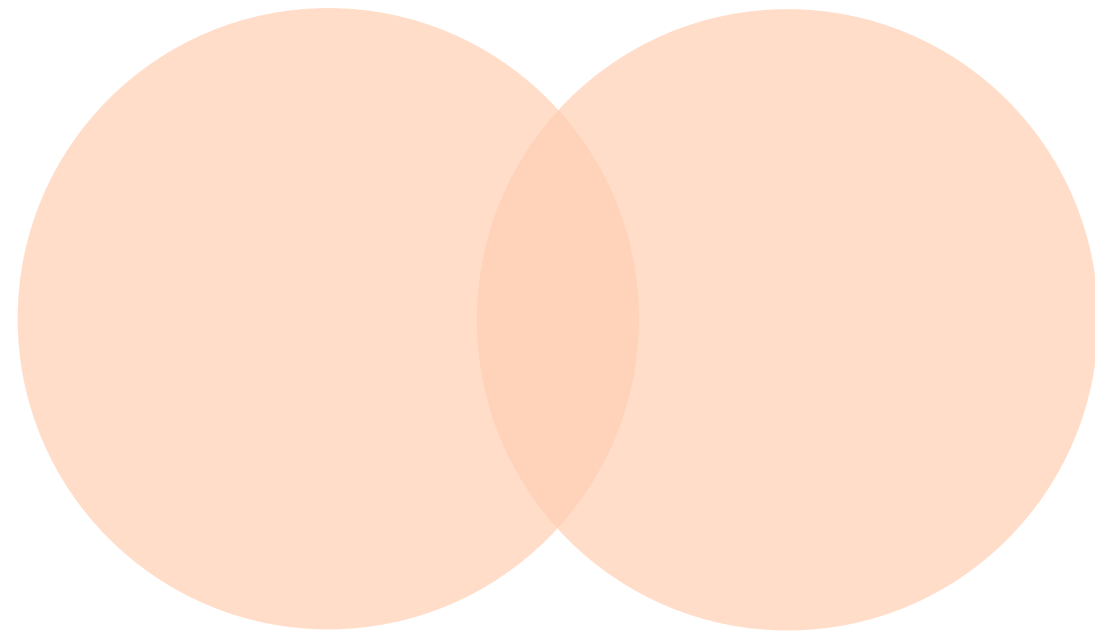
People say I
overshare

I just give people
information/context



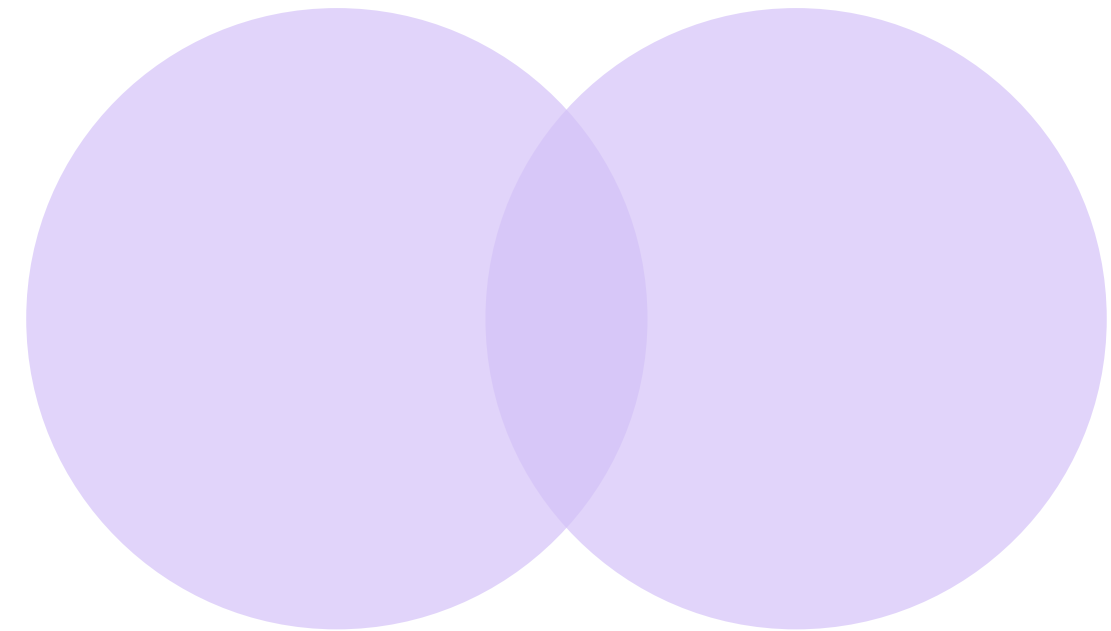
Hyperfocused,
know-it-all,
oversensitive

Limited energy,
rich inner world,
overwhelming stimuli



Gullible

Empathetic &
believing

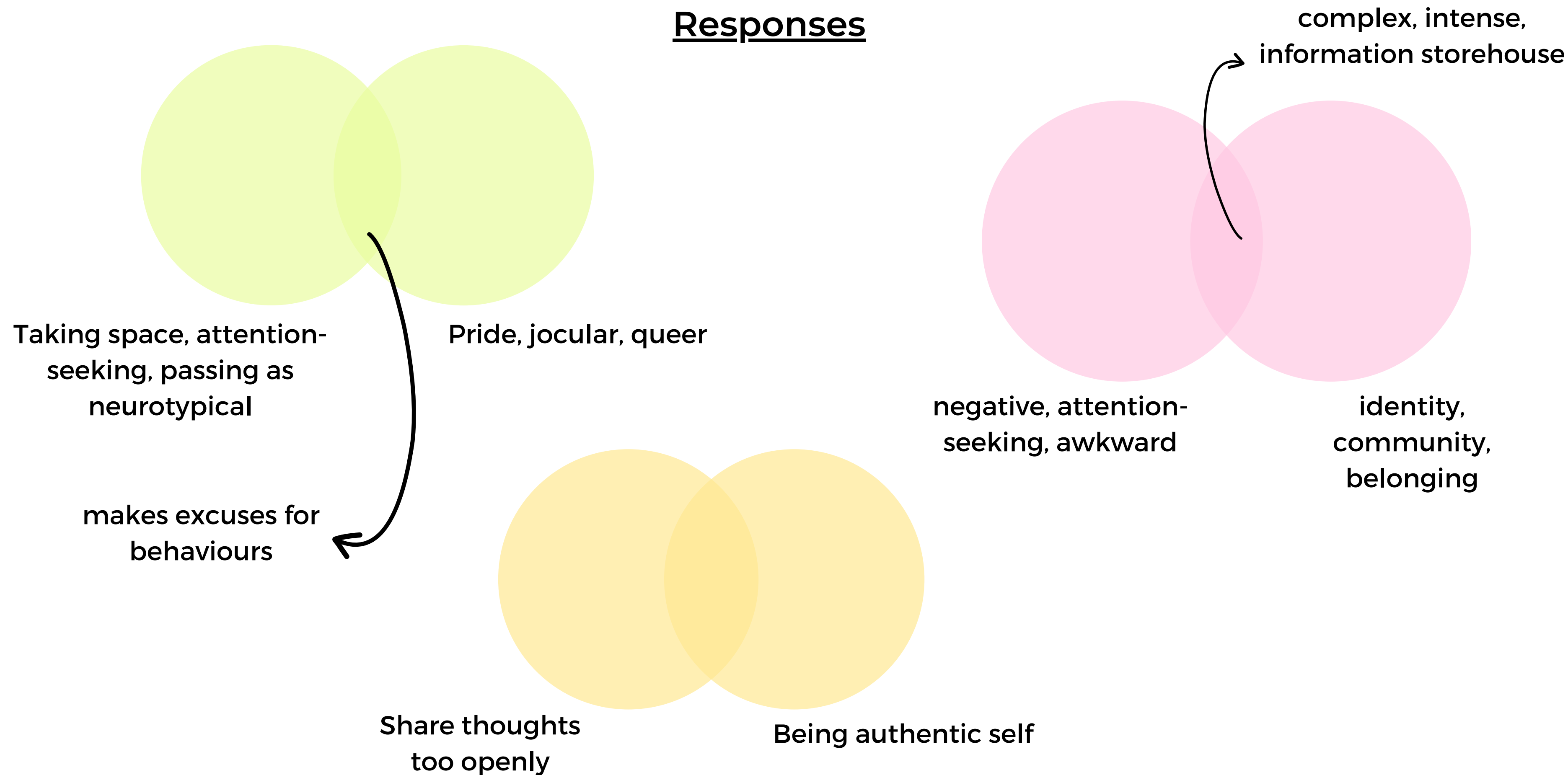


Careless,
irresponsible, lazy

Just my executive
dysfunction

Understanding Autism Through Vent Diagrams

Responses





Checking wardrobe to
make sure my safe clothes
are okay to wear.

Listen to the same song on loop to
drown out noise in my head

What do I do for me, that no one else understands?

Not accepting last-minute
changes to **my routine** that
cause meltdowns

Needing to change plans
last-minute

Everyone's autism is different.
The double empathy problem is real.

Masking is sometimes
misunderstood as being
'inauthentic'. What even is
authentic?

Thoughts on being neurodivergent

Masking can be rewarding and
validating, as well as a death sentence
(after-effects can be draining and
painful)

Differences in social
communication, processing &
perception can be invisible, but
they're real.

We need alone time to
recharge, not to be lazy.

Very attentive to non verbal
signals

Thoughts on being in neurotypical spaces

I am happy with just being.



Un-Masking: an online support group for autistic folks

- **Exploring autistic identity: the impact of ableism**

What comes to mind when you think of the terms 'productive' and 'functional'?

Mentimeter

validation
distress
excitement
stimulation
pressure
anxiety
masking
non-lazy
tiring
superiority
stress

What comes to mind when you think of the terms
'productive' and 'functional'?

Whenever I
do
something
productive,
I enjoy it, and
I find that
stimulating.

VALIDATION
MASKING
STIMULATION
SELF-CARE

I mask and become effervescent. To
unmask is to reclaim my
productivity and functionality.

My self-care appears as functional
to the neurotypical world,
and that can be validating.

The social capital of
passing, and the cost of
not passing, are so
massive. Thus, I
perpetuate "productivity
& become a 'model
minority.'

What comes to mind when you think of the terms
'productive' and 'functional'?

I am doing what I can to my fullest.
Why would anyone label that as
lazy?

**NON-LAZY
PRESSURE**

'Functional' means the
bare minimum (eg.
eating, hydrating,
bathing). 'Productive'
means cis-het
brahminical standard of
output.



What comes to mind when you think of the terms
'productive' and 'functional'?



Words that come to mind

Blue rounded rectangular box for writing words.

Light green rounded rectangular box for writing words.

Pink rounded rectangular box for writing words.



What made you choose these words?

Large dashed rectangular box for writing reasons.

Large dashed rectangular box for writing reasons.

Large dashed rectangular box for writing reasons.



Prompt

"Presenting as cis-male & having a job that allows flexibility is a huge advantage. It is more possible to be my neurodivergent self."

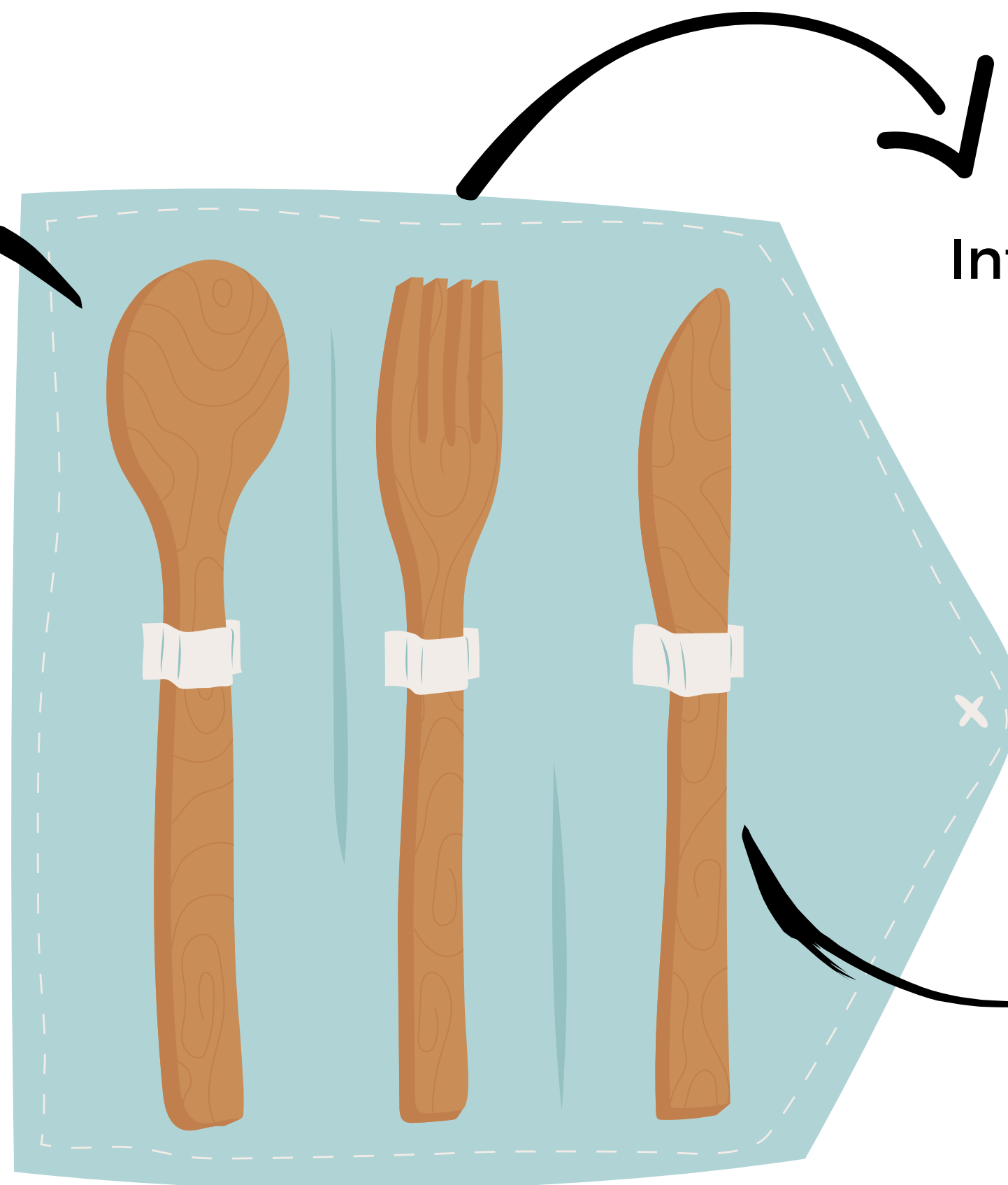
Privilege and context often determine how folks can unmask. In which spaces/situations do you feel comfortable unmasking?

Use the space to record any thoughts.

Unified Cutlery Theory.

- Combines disability and neurodivergent lenses to view energy
- By Umbral Reaver (she/her), a queer, disabled New Zealand artist
- A cutlery drawer has **spoons, forks, and knives**

Units of energy for
different tasks;
present in limited
quantity

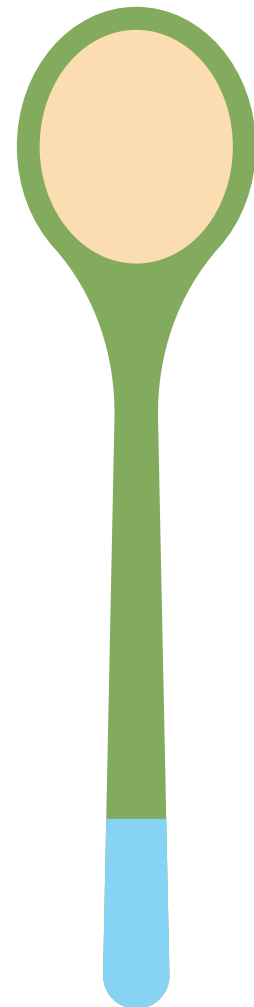


Internal/external stressors;
limit access to spoons

Overdraws of energy;
reduce access to future
spoons



What restores your spoons?



Examples

- Drawing
- Naps
- Community
- Intimacy & connection



What are your forks?

Examples

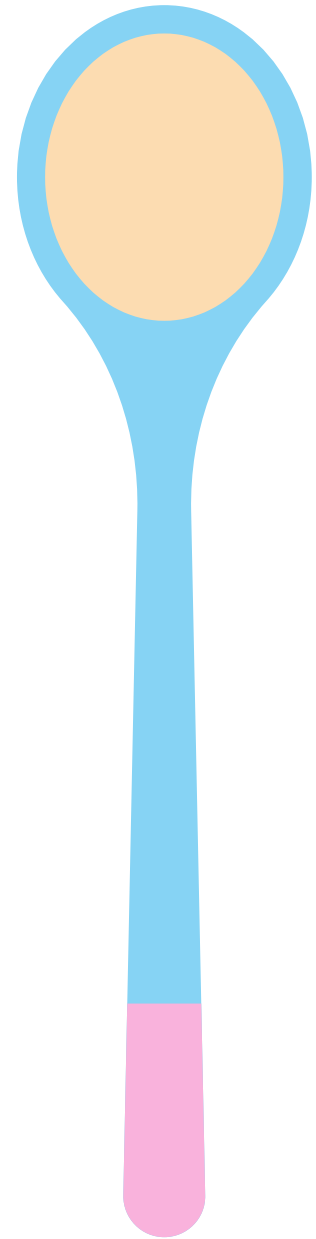
- Low introception
- Sunday socialisation
- Hand pain from drawing
- Open hair after headbath



What are your knives?

Examples

- Grad school applications
- Unannounced guests
- Need for salary



What do **you**
want to use
your spoons
for?

Examples

- Music analysis
- Being a nerd
- Reading and writing
- Cooking
- Daydreaming



Self-Reflection Prompts

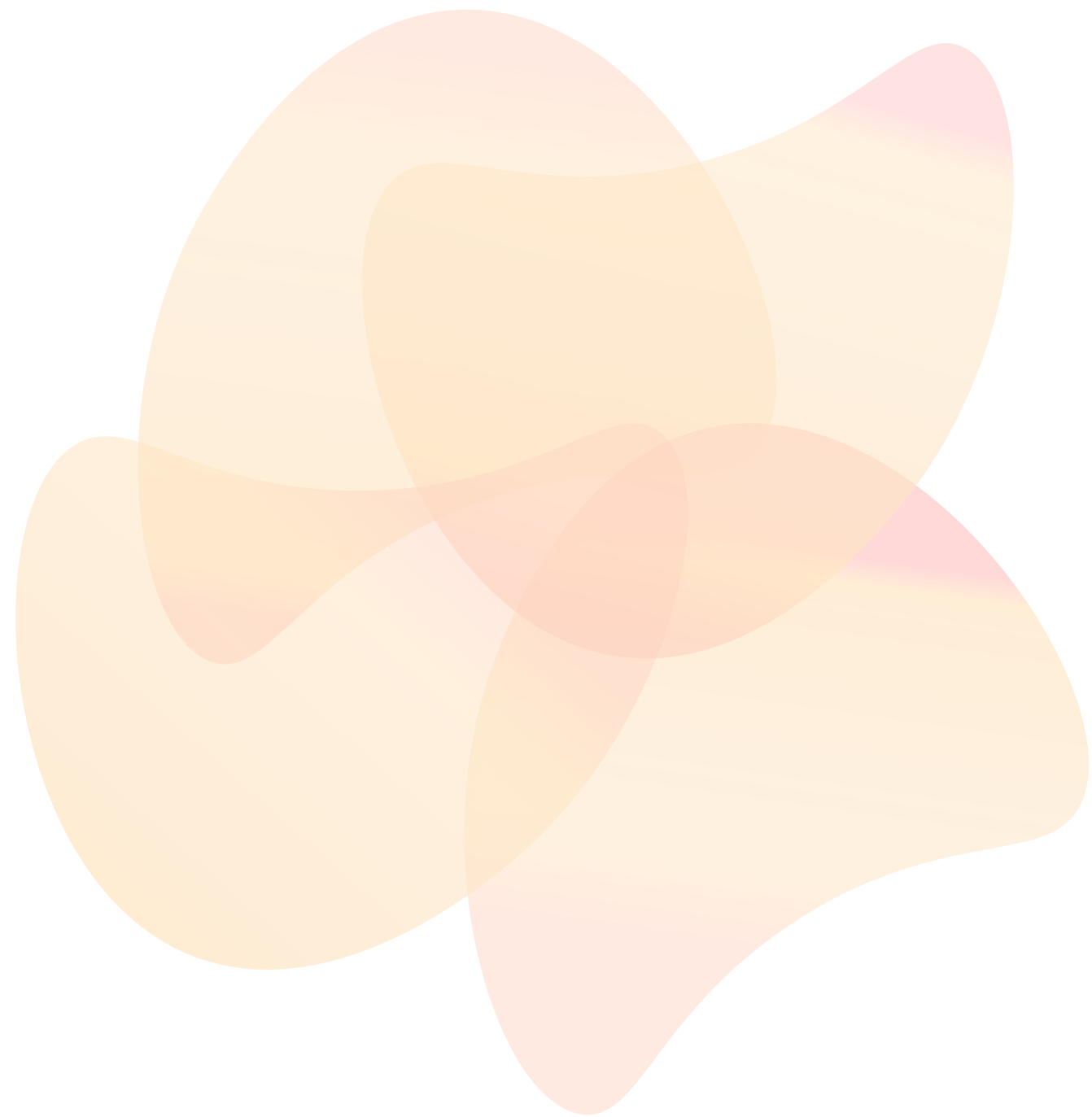
Consider any of the following:

What determines usage of my cutlery?
Am I okay/not okay with that?

Do I want to explain my "cutlery"
to trusted persons?

What does "rest" look like for
me?

Are there times I want to use my
knives? When might that be?



Un-Masking: an online support group for autistic folks

- **Exploring autistic identity: clinical and/or self-diagnosis**

How does (clinical or self) diagnosis influence understanding of your autism?

Nothing is wrong with me, fundamentally.

Gave me the ability to develop coping strategies specific to autistic brains.

Helped me engage with and relate to autistic folks in my life in a more meaningful manner.

My whole life started making sense only after my autism and adhd diagnosis. Although, in a way it is liberating, it's also been extremely frustrating for all the unfair ways I have been treated all my life.

I'm still making sense of my diagnosis before acceptance what set in was impostor syndrome

My diagnosis has come in when I'm in my early 30s so connecting the dots of my entire existence is still an ongoing process

How does (clinical or self) diagnosis influence understanding of your autism?

For me i didn't read up or explore much about autism until i got diagnosed. It was not something i could comprehend until it became realistic enough.

There is also a need to validate the diagnosis for myself and others though i know i don't owe anyone my diagnosis

Totally changed my understanding of autism before I was diagnosed/ suspected.

How does (clinical or self) diagnosis influence understanding of your autism?

I was able to understand the cognitive differences in autistic brains after learning scientific jargon surrounding autism.

I've never fit in and that's ok I'm the best version of myself is something I've understood too

The diagnosis made me much more self aware about my brain and gave me the ability to reflect upon myself in a different manner.

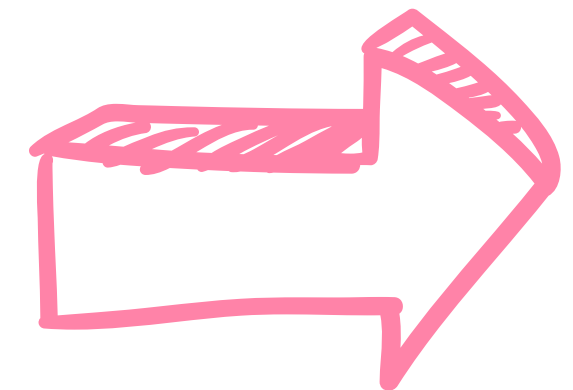
Considering Clinical & Self-Diagnosis

Diagnosis can be both self-affirming and give rise to doubt.

As language about and understanding of neurodivergence change, what are the diverse experiences around diagnosis?

Shared experiences can inform whether to pursue or forego diagnosis—clinical or self.

TW: experience-denying
by clinical
practitioners; impostor
syndrome





On Self-Perception in Childhood vs. Adulthood

"I used to think as a child, 'Other kids are so different from me, and how do I explain this? Why can't I just think?'

In adulthood, I look at the way that I process information and socialisation and asked how my brain works instead of how someone else's brain works."



Accessing Clinical Diagnosis

"After my first diagnostic test came negative, I read about autism in women and how it can be less obvious. My doctor denied my research time and again, saying my eye contact was fine, that I understand emotions well, and I am fairly independent."

It hurt me a lot that someone I trusted denied my experience. Despite this, she anyway referred me to an autism school for a diagnosis. Only then I got my official diagnosis."



On Impostor Syndrome

"My doctor kept telling me it was just anxiety whenever I suspected autism/ADHD. Now, I feel guilty to feel it's a disability because I can manage without help. I think: 'Why should I access disability services when there are so many who need support more than me?'"

Impostor syndrome has been a major hurdle since my diagnosis. Being able to figure out what it means feels really weird. Having support from my therapist is good, but I did even get a 2nd diagnosis.



On Clinical Tools

The practitioners who diagnosed me follow a diagnostic tool that is quite dehumanising with no emotions imbued. I also did not relate to their use of "functional" labels.

The questions throughout my screening process felt very monotonous, and I wasn't sure if I was being related to machines/humans.



Towards Developing Strategies: Confronting Clinical Practice

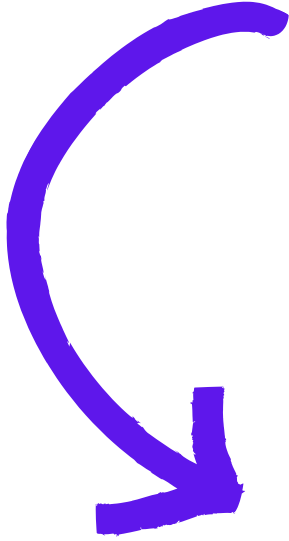
"The medical field infantilises us, and I've learnt to develop a god complex. This tells the medical field "Your assumptions/methods don't necessarily apply to the majority of autistic people." This hubris is my resistance against the medical complex."



How can one cope with the confusion/hurt of denial from practitioners?



Towards Developing Strategies: Knowing Your Agency.



"My therapist said what I brought into therapy could suggest neurodivergence. They said I **could** explore the option of a diagnosis if I wanted. I was hesitant at first. I wasn't sure about the answers that I would find."

Besides service providers, what other spaces can help one realise their agency?



Towards Developing Strategies: Finding Community

"The neurodivergent community on Instagram helped me understand myself more. I came across a lot of autism accounts that way, which felt even more relatable."

"Peer diagnosis" and
community solidarity

I've spent so much time engaging in the virtual world--a known pattern of seeking validation for me. My virtual Reddit community has been great--especially conversations with neuroqueer individuals.



What significance does self-education on your autism hold for you?

"I'm also queer, and I know that I don't need external validation for that. I now think about my autism in the same way. I validate through my community. My queerness validates my autism, and my autism validates my queerness."

"Peer diagnosis is not just self-advocacy, but it's advocacy for people who aren't well-informed. It means we're looking out for the community because many go into adulthood without any idea of their neurodivergence."



What significance does self-education on your autism hold for you?

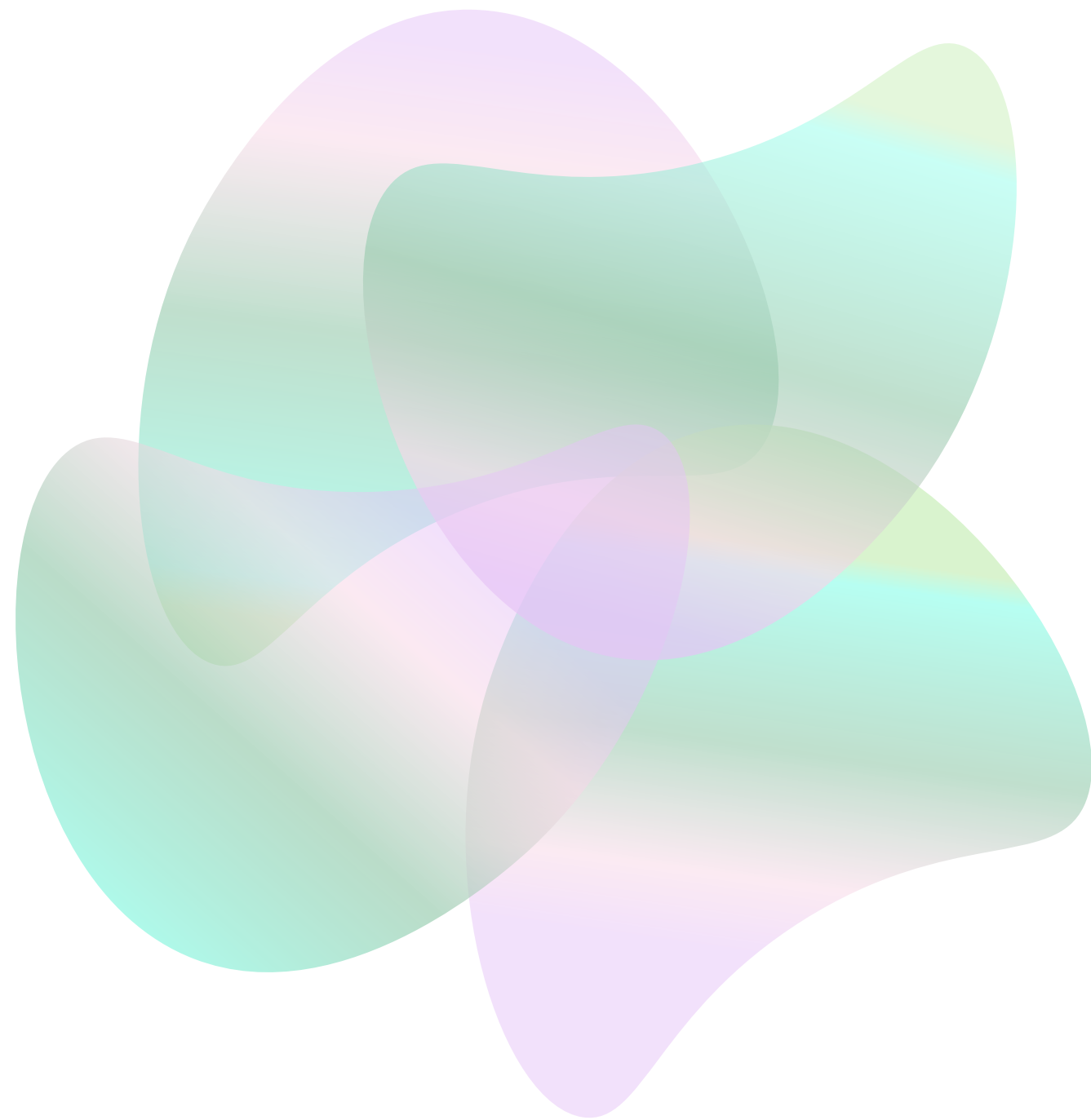
"I'm still learning to navigate my diagnoses and experiences, and having a space to have people listen to me and vice versa is something I'm learning and enjoying."



Self-Reflection Prompts

How does (self or clinical) diagnosis
influence understanding of your
autism?

What significance does it hold for you to be
well informed about your autism?



Un-Masking: an online support group for autistic folks

- **Exploring intersection of identities & Celebrating Autistic Joy**



Reflection: "The part of my identity that..."

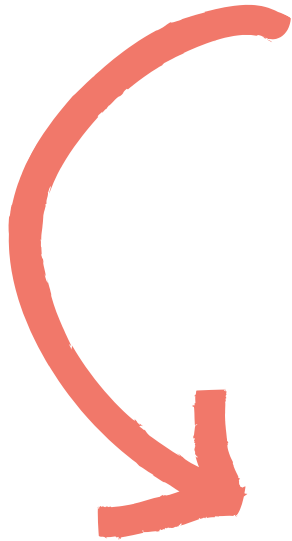
...that I am most aware of on a daily basis is _____.

...that I am the least aware of on a daily basis is _____.

...that provides me the most privilege is _____.

...that makes me feel discriminated against is _____.

...that I feel is difficult to discuss with others who identify differently is _____.



Reflection: "The part of my identity that..."

I think sometimes I am unaware of who I am in others' view & of my position in society. I don't quite think about intersectionality every day.

My gender expression and gender identity are two aspects of how I perceive myself. This inevitably leads to how others perceive me.

However, I am focused on how I want to present myself.

Reflection: "The part of my identity that..."

Age has widened my toolset so that that I'm better adjusted now as an adult.

With time and **age**, I now have those versions of me that didn't have validation earlier from family and society. Before, I had to wonder why I was like this rather than have external support.

I don't want my **age** to be contrasted with being "like a child" because of my autism.

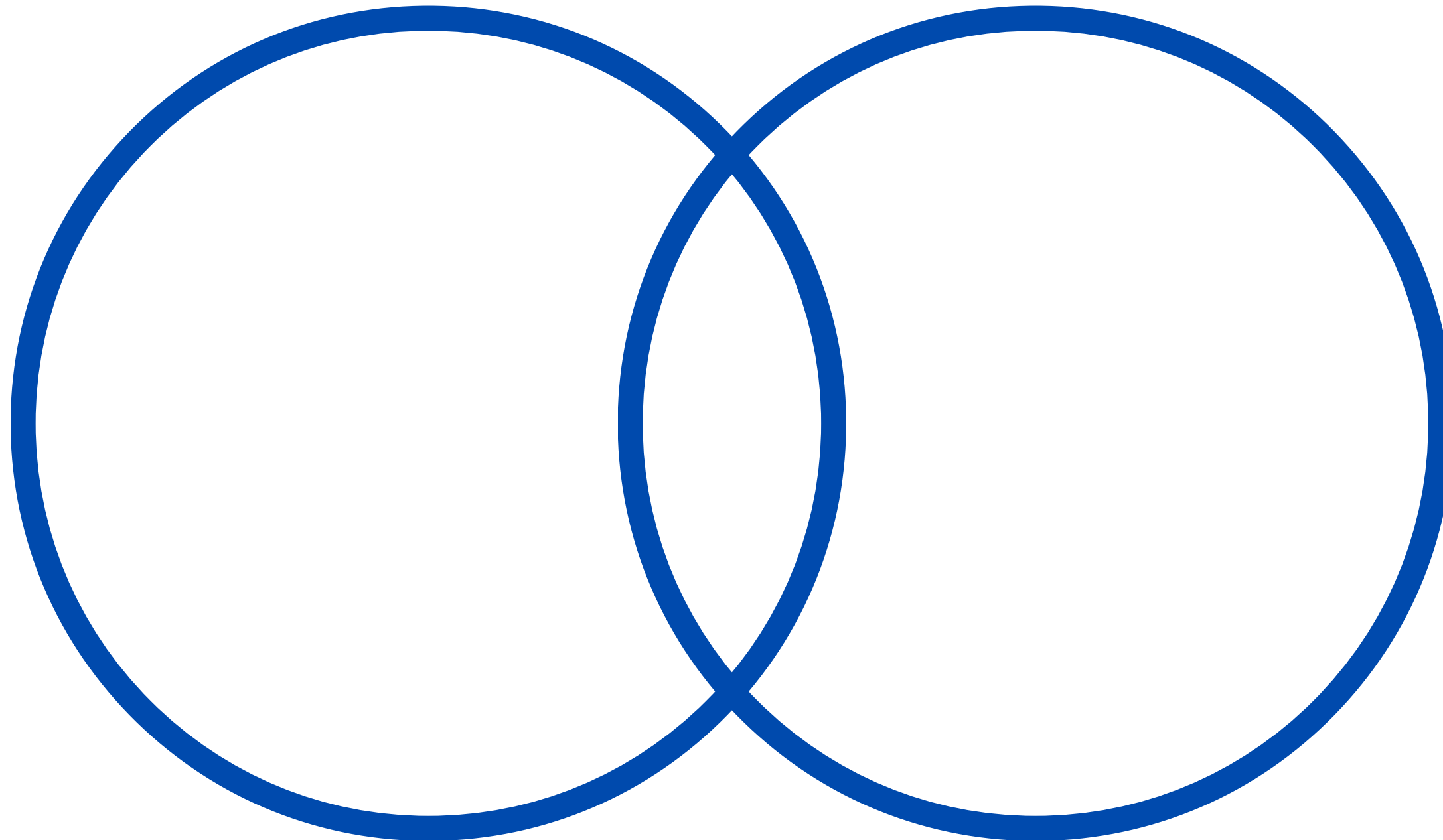
Having **access to therapy** is a huge privilege for me. I also had the privilege of being able to think about getting a diagnosis

Example | Queerness & Neurodivergence: Socialisation

Queer safe spaces can be really social and I often feel left out. Every queer person I know says they're introverts, but it seems I'm the only one who doesn't really know how to socialise.

Neurodivergent folks aren't a minority within the queer community. We need more affirming spaces and accommodations made by neurotypicals. Organisers can consider proactively assigning times for silence for protests and gatherings.

Re-visiting Vent Diagrams



How I perceive my identities

**How others perceive them/
the socialised self**



Think of a recent/distant memory where multiple aspects of your identity felt seen and affirmed.

1. What parts of you that felt seen that day?

2. What did it mean to you then to experience that?

What does it mean to you now?

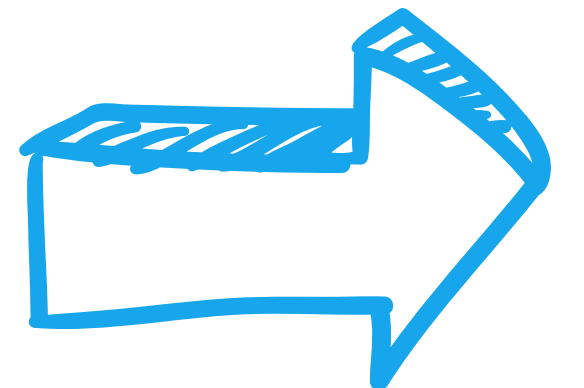
3. What are some things you wish spaces understood about your intersecting identities?

4. What are some things spaces can do differently to co-create this affirming space with you?

Looking Ahead

Given our multiple identities, what would an affirming world look like? What hopes do you have?

What would bring you joy in that world?





Looking Ahead

"I wish the world could be like a roleplaying game. In those, there are multiple ways in engaging with the world, and it's a world that YOU can create. In this world, we can all build skills and help one another in ways that would be affirming and incorporate inclusivity."

What would a world/
space look like if we
built it to celebrate
our autism and our
various
intersectionalities?
Fill this space. →

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for a drawing or response to the prompt.

Looking Ahead

What brings me joy?

- When I'm able to recharge without having to explain.
- The type of empathy only neurodivergent and autistic people can give.
- Others checking in on me means externally affirming my autism instead of labour & self-advocacy.

What are my hopes?

- I want to be OK with letting go and giving up on commitments and other enforced obligations.
- My hope is that diagnosis isn't the only way I can exist and feel affirmed.

“ Within the community, we should embrace values of love & the celebration of differences while acknowledging some of us may bond over similarities. ”



Self-Reflection Prompt

I'm still in the process of figuring out how to experience autistic joy.

”

It feels like a continuous journey and there is no endpoint per se, and every day is learning and unlearning.

”

Write a letter focusing on the joy & unlearning of your journey so far as a neurodivergent individual, plus the hopes & values you will take on the journey ahead.

Resources List - Social Media

Instagram & Twitter

[Unified Cutlery Theory](#)

[Neurodiversity and the process of psychiatric diagnosis](#)

[Hypo and hyper sensitivity in autistic people](#)

Other

[Fidget Toys](#)

[Loop \(video\)](#)

Reddit Threads & Discord Servers

- [Self Diagnosis is valid](#)
- [r/Autism](#)
- [r/AutisticWithADHD](#)
- [r/AutisticPride](#)

Resources List - Blogs, Podcasts, Books

Blogs

- [Vent Diagram](#)
- [Musings of an Aspie Blog](#)
- [Unmasking](#)
- [Living with Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria](#)
- [From Self-Diagnosis to Self-Realization](#)

Podcasts

- [The Neurodiversity Podcast](#)
- [Unmasking Autism: A discussion with Dr. Devon Price](#)
- [Autism by Autistics](#)
- [The Autistic Tea Party](#)

Books

- [Meesha Makes Friends](#)
- [The Invisible Boy](#)
- [Unmasking Autism](#)
- [Divergent Mind](#)
- [NeuroTribes](#)
- [Autism in Heels](#)
- [How to Be Autistic](#)
- [Fingers in the Sparkle Jar](#)

Resources List - Helplines, Organisations, Regulation Techniques

Organisations

- [Pause for Perspective](#)
- [The Listeners Collective](#)
- [Guftagu Therapy](#)

Helplines

- NIMHANS (24 x 7 , toll free): 080-46110007
- Mpower 1 on 1 (24 x 7,toll free): 1800-1208-20050
- iCALL Helpline (10 am to 8pm): 9152987821
- Vandrevala Foundation (24 x 7): 9999 666 555
- Lifeline Foundation (10:00 am to 10:00 pm, all days): 033-40447437, 09088030303

Shared Space/Regulation Tools

- [Being Neurodivergent](#)
([Participant Responses](#))
- [What's in your cutlery drawer?](#)
(Participant Responses)
- 5-4-3-2-1 technique
- Stimming
- A familiar playlist/song on repeat
- Doodling