

Holding Complexity, Building Connection:

A Psychiatrist's Reflection on ASD, Mental Health, and the Power of Interdisciplinary Care

Kimothi Cain, MD, MPH

University of New Mexico

Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Weaving Today's Threads

Today's session has woven together diverse perspectives and disciplines, inviting us to see the interconnectedness of the challenges and opportunities in supporting those navigating mental health journeys. As we close, let us reflect on how we can continue to build bridges and deepen our collaborative efforts to foster a more holistic, empathetic, and inclusive approach to care.





The Patient Who Taught Me...

During my general psychiatry residency, I cared for an adult patient who likely had autism spectrum disorder.



My Son

A young man with a dry sense of humor that catches you off guard.

He is honest to a fault.

Gifted with a deep understanding of complex mathematical concepts

Struggles with social interactions, which can be painful to watch.

Navigating the Broken System: A Mother's Struggle with Neurodivergence

"You're looking for trouble" - from pediatrician

"Wait and watch" guidance - without clinical recommendations

"He's fine" - echoed by family

As a mother and psychiatrist, I faced challenges advocating for my child's well-being amidst systemic failures.

The Moment Everything Changed

In the pediatrician's office, the adult patient's experience resonated deeply.

The same dismissal, lack of understanding,

Fragmented system that had plagued them as a child were now all too familiar.

Siloed expertise is not just ineffective, but actively harmful, without seeing the whole person

Why "Holding Complexity"?

Accepting contradictions:

Gifted in math AND struggling socially

Honest to a fault (beautiful) AND challenging navigation

Philosophy: Honor full truth vs. simplifying into categories that fit our systems but fail our people.

Today's Convergence: The Landscape of Complexity

- Trauma-informed lens: Nuñez del Prado, Oppenheimer & Tregembo
- Anxiety as a bridge: Acosta, Olsen & Pomichter's work
- Workplace navigation: Mendez & Salazar's insights
- Systems thinking: Dr. Sohl's framework

Three Types of Complexity

- **Neurological Complexity** Autism as different operating system, not defective
- **Systemic Complexity** Healthcare silos vs. lived experience
- **Identity Complexity** Late diagnosis and identity reconstruction

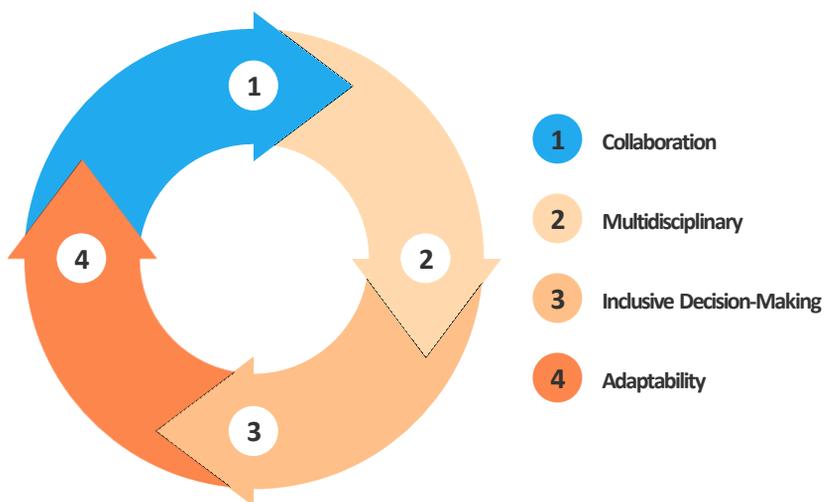
Cost of Oversimplification

- **Neurological Complexity** Autism as different operating system, not defective
- **Systemic Complexity** Healthcare silos vs. lived experience
- **Identity Complexity** Late diagnosis and identity reconstruction

Connection as Intervention

- How relationships become therapeutic tools
- Peer Support Revolution: Transforms helper/helped dynamic
- Authentic autistic community
- Healing power of "me too"

BRIDGE Model



Building Bridges Across Disciplines



Common Language

Communicate using plain, jargon-free language to build shared understanding



Mutual Respect

Appreciate each person's unique expertise and lived experiences



Coordinated Services

Integrate care and support across disciplines to address complex needs



Professional Humility

Acknowledge limitations and be open to learning from those you serve

By fostering these key principles, we can build strong, collaborative bridges across disciplines to better serve our communities.

The Importance of Mental Health

The Interconnectedness of Autism and Mental Health

Individuals on the autism spectrum often experience co-occurring mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Understanding this interconnectedness is crucial for providing comprehensive care.

Holistic Approach to Care

Addressing the mental health needs of individuals with autism requires a holistic approach that considers the unique experiences and challenges faced by this population. This may involve collaboration between mental health professionals, autism specialists, and other support services.

Reducing Stigma and Promoting Awareness

Raising awareness about the mental health needs of individuals with autism and reducing the stigma associated with seeking support can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for this community.

Empowering Individuals and Families

Providing individuals with autism and their families with the necessary resources, education, and support can empower them to advocate for their mental health needs and navigate the complex healthcare system more effectively.

The Future We're Building

Autism-Affirming Environments

Fostering inclusive and accommodating spaces that celebrate neurodiversity

Collaborative Partnerships

Shifting from compliance-based models to co-creation with autistic individuals

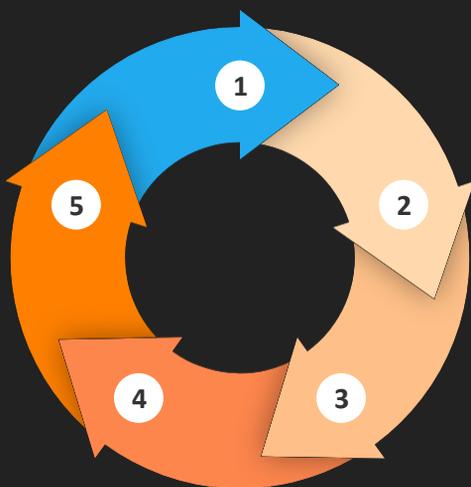
Lifespan Supports

Providing tailored resources and services across all stages of life

Technology as Connector

Leveraging digital tools to enhance communication, independence, and community

Tools for Implementation



- 1 Shared Documentation Systems**
Centralized platforms for team collaboration and knowledge sharing
- 2 Regular Structured Team Meetings**
Scheduled check-ins to align on progress, challenges, and solutions
- 3 Sensory-Informed Crisis Plans**
Personalized strategies to prevent and manage escalation
- 4 Proactive vs. Reactive Care**
Anticipating needs to provide timely support and prevent crises
- 5 Trauma-Informed Approaches**
Respecting neurodiversity and creating safe, empowering environments

The Ripple Effect

1. How interdisciplinary care changes:

- Family Dynamics
- Professional development
- Creating inclusive communities

2. The Both/And of Our Work:

- Complexity AND clarity
- Struggle AND strength
- Realistic AND hopeful

Call to Action

For Clinicians:

Seek Interdisciplinary Training

Clinicians should pursue training in areas beyond their specialty, such as psychology, occupational therapy, and social work, to provide more comprehensive care.

Educators:

Collaborate with Mental Health Providers

Educators should build partnerships with mental health professionals to integrate mental health support into the classroom and school environment.

For Administrators:

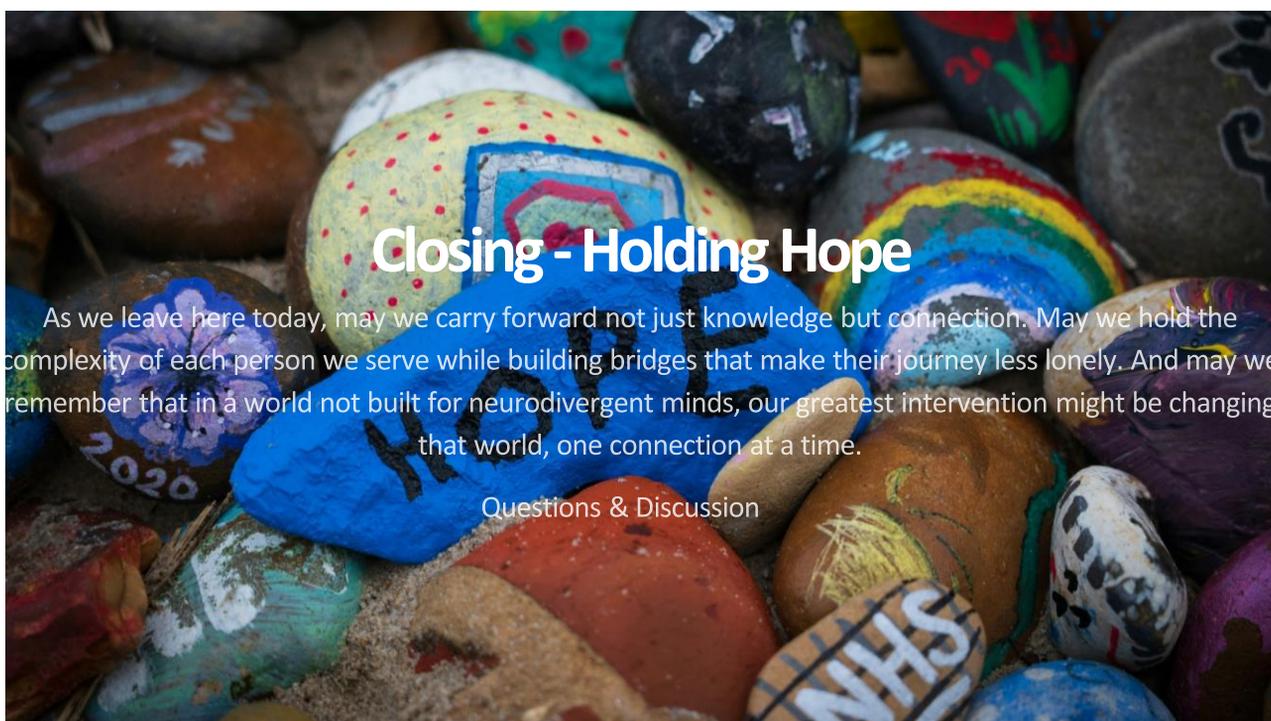
Fund Integrated Care Models

Administrators should allocate resources to support the development and implementation of integrated care models that address the physical, mental, and social needs of autistic individuals.

For All:

Center Autistic Voices

Everyone should actively listen to and amplify the perspectives and experiences of autistic individuals in all aspects of research, service delivery, and advocacy.



Closing - Holding Hope

As we leave here today, may we carry forward not just knowledge but connection. May we hold the complexity of each person we serve while building bridges that make their journey less lonely. And may we remember that in a world not built for neurodivergent minds, our greatest intervention might be changing that world, one connection at a time.

Questions & Discussion