

Neurodivergence and Gender-Based Violence

Supporting Neurodivergent Survivors in GBV Contexts

PATTY DOUGLAS | CREVAWC | WESTERN UNIVERSITY, AUGUST 26, 2025



Gratitude

I am grateful to be gathering with you online today. I am joining you from Queen's University, which is in Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek territory. Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge the many territories we are collectively joining from. As a white settler ally working toward reconciling past and ongoing colonial harms, I am grateful for the Land and for the many ancestral and present-day Indigenous caretakers of the Land that sustains us.



An image of a path by Lake Ontario close to Queen's lined with purple wildflowers and rocks.

Introduction & Context



Learning Objectives

By participating in this webinar, participants will be able to

- Recognize **how neurodivergent communication, sensory, and regulation differences** may shape experiences and disclosures of GBV.
- Identify **systemic and structural barriers** that neurodivergent and disabled survivors may encounter.
- Reflect on **dominant narratives** about disability, care, and harm within GBV systems.
- Consider **creative, affirming, and accessibility-oriented approaches** that support safety and inclusion.

An Overview of The Talk

1. Introduction & Context
2. The Pathology Paradigm
3. The Neurodiversity Paradigm
4. Implications for Practice: Toward Neuro-Affirming Approaches
5. Wrap-up
6. Questions?



Braided sensory strings. Art credit Kat Singer.

Animating Neuro-Accessibility During Our Time Together

Please feel free to:

Move around

Doodle or fidget

Come and go

Ask questions, or chat/email with me later

On the screen to the right is an image of a young person stimming in various positions. The words 'Respect the Stim' appear. Art by Meredith K. Ultra.



Art by Meredith K Ultra

Limits of the Talk

I am a researcher in critical autism studies, care and neuro-affirming practice in education and service systems:

- I am not a GBV researcher; however, my work touches on violence including GBV.
- You won't learn everything about neurodiversity and affirming approaches in a day.
- I encourage you to approach neuro-affirming support as an ongoing, relational process rather than a checklist (although these are good too).



Art credit Kat Singer

Key Message of the Webinar: Widening the Path of Support

Neuro-affirming practice begins with **examining the assumptions we bring** about neurodivergence.

By noticing where deficit-based thinking shows up in everyday interactions and services, we **can begin to shift toward more affirming** and inclusive approaches.

Reflection: Where do deficit assumptions about neurodivergence show up in your own work, research, or service setting?



Image of a garden path.

The Re•Storying Project

The art, videos and interview data I share today come from the Re•Storying project.

The [Re•Storying Project](#) is an umbrella of multimedia storytelling research projects in Canada, England and Aotearoa that engage autistic and neurodivergent individuals, family members and practitioners through the arts to re-think neurodivergence, practice and research in affirming ways (Douglas et al., 2021).

Art credit: Untitled by Nyle Miigizi Johnston.



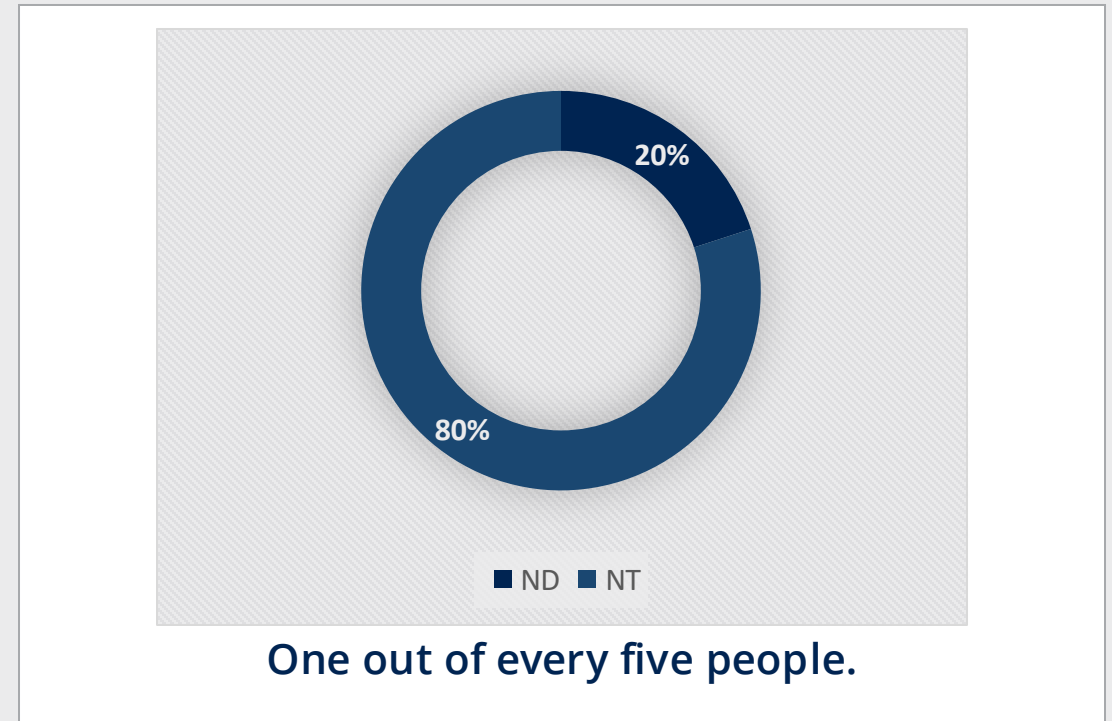
The Pathology Paradigm

An Inherited Legacy

Neurodivergence According to the Pathology Paradigm

Neurodivergence (ND) refers to diverse ways of communicating and interacting. These differences are often seen as 'abnormal' by medicine, psychology and psychiatry (Douglas, 2024; Walker, 2021). ND is an umbrella term including Autism, ADHD, intellectual disability, mental health conditions, Tourette's and more (Livingstone et al., 2022).

Approximately **one out of every five** people identifies as or fits the criteria of neurodivergence (Henley, 2020). We will be challenging the pathology paradigm.



The Pathology Paradigm

We have inherited the **pathology paradigm of disability, care and neurodivergence** (Chapman, 2023). In this model:

- Neurodivergence is understood as a deficit or disordered development located in brains.
- Care is understood as diagnosis, intervention and fixing by professionals, enlisting parents (mothers).
- Neurodivergence has historically been seen as tragic, pitiable or strange.

DSM-5 Autism Diagnostic Criteria

A. *Persistent deficits* in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts.

<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm/>

Stereotypes & Stigma: Considered 'Not Quite' Human

- A savant/genius
- Alien/not like 'us'
- A computer-like individual/unfeeling
- Uninterested socially
- Perpetually a child
- Lazy
- White and male (and possibly dangerous)
- The result of bad parenting/mothering



Collage of 'The Good Doctor' and 'Refrigerator Mothers' documentary. See Douglas, 2024.

Systemic Ableism, Exclusion & Violence

Between 2019-2022, Re•Storying Autism:

- Interviewed 55 autistic people in Manitoba and Ontario about experiences of education (Douglas et al., 2021; Straus, Douglas, & Rice, 2025; Douglas et al., in press). Held 8 storytelling workshops.
- Half of participants were girls/non-binary/femme or trans, and 40% people of colour.
- Despite human rights and accessibility legislation, experiences were negative and harmful. **Ableism systemically devalues disability** (Goodley, 2014).

- Stigma, violence and exclusion
- Sensory overwhelm
- Exhaustion from masking
- Racism and ableism (misdiagnosis)
- Distress in ableist systems
- A 'misfit' between preferred learning styles and educational approaches
- Lack of culturally safe supports
- Small acts of care make a big difference.

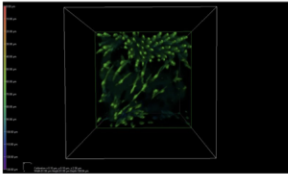
Intersectionality & Neurodivergence

- Women, girls and gender-diverse people have often been excluded and/or misdiagnosed.
- Black, Indigenous and racialized people have often been misdiagnosed (e.g., behaviour, psychiatric).
- This has cut off important avenues to support, services and understanding for ND survivors.
- Culturally relevant supports and services for ND people are also underdeveloped.
- See Bruno et al., 2024; Douglas, 2024.

[Home](#) / [Archives](#)
/ [Vol. 4 No. 2 \(2018\): Special Section: The Processes of Imaging/ The Imaging of Processes](#)
/ [Original Research](#)

Disturbing Behaviours: Ole Ivar Lovaas and the Queer History of Autism Science

CATALYST
feminism, theory, technoscience
Issue 4, Vol. 2, FALL 2018
With a special section on
The Processes of Imaging/ The Imaging of Processes
Edited By: Bettina Papenburg, Lis Haucken and Sigrid Schmitz



Margaret F. Gibson
Renison University College, University of Waterloo

Patty Douglas
Brandon University

Abstract

This paper “queers” the history of autism science through an examination of the overlap between the regulation of autism with that of gender and sexuality in the work of Ole Ivar Lovaas. Lovaas is the founder of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), the most commonly used and funded autism intervention today that seeks

Histories and presents of containment—a screen shot of my co-authored article on intersections of queer and autistic conversion therapy.

Neurodivergence and GBV

***Also find it in the Learning Guide** (Lopez, 2026):

- Neurodivergent people experience systemic and existential violence (Douglas, 2024; Straus, Douglas, & Rice, 2025).
- Neurodivergent people experience interpersonal violence more frequently than neurotypical people (Gibbs et al., 2024; Hughes et al., 2012; Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Griffiths et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2022; Trundle et al., 2023).
- Rates of sexual and interpersonal violence are elevated for autistic women and gender-diverse women (Cazalis et al., 2022; Cooke et al., 2024; Gibbs et al., 2023).
- It is important to examine how ableism and normalized violence shows up in service settings.



The Re•Storying Project Film Viewing Guide

Raya's film: Challenging the pathology paradigm through lived experience

Questions to reflect on:

- How does **pathology paradigm** show up in the film?
- How does it show up in your **life and work**?
- What is the storyteller asking us to **see, hear, feel or sense** that might be new?



A rainbow swirl close-up of the Re•Storying logo.



AN Unexpected body
Grammar
STRANGE
Mind
EMOTION
EMPATHY IS AN
RAISING A
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The
Autis
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The **pathology paradigm persists in supports and services including GBV contexts**—as miscommunication, stigma, taken for granted assumptions about behaviour, inaccessible practices like complicated bureaucratic processes, inaccessible sensory environments and more.

Take a moment to reflect again: **Where do deficit assumptions about neurodivergence show up in your own work, research, or service setting?**



The Neurodiversity Paradigm

A future of support



The Neurodiversity Paradigm: Nothing Without Us!

- **Neurodiversity** describes a state of being, akin to biodiversity. We are all part of neurodiversity.
- **Neurodivergence** refers to variations in communicating and interacting that are valid.
- The **neurodiversity movement**, founded by autistic self-advocates in the 1990s, advocates for human rights, akin to other justice seeking movements.
- Key theorists are Nick Walker, Steven Kapp, Robert Chapman, the [Re•Storying Autism Project](#) and more!

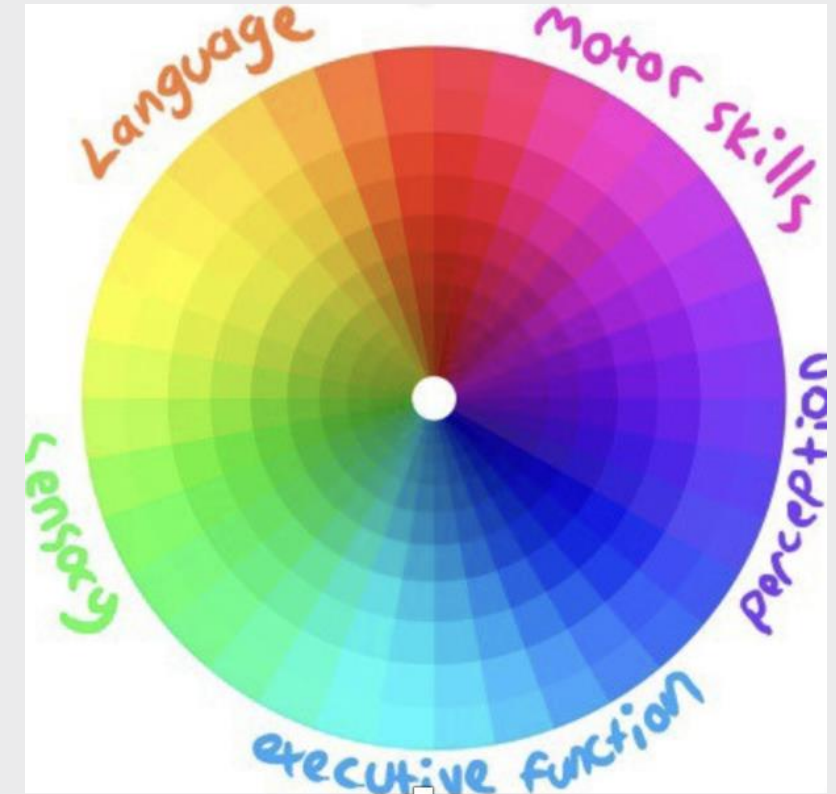


The neurodiversity infinity symbol created by Alex Vojnov, the logo for Neurovibes, a knowledge translation event at Queen's University I co-founded in 2024.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

- The **neurodiversity paradigm** is the theory behind the neurodiversity movement. It affirms:
- Neurodiversity as an expected part of being human.
- The need to deconstruct norms of communication, behaviour and perception.
- Ableism (neuronormativity) and its interconnections with other systems of power such as gender and race oppression.
- The right to support.
- You might also encounter terms such as **neurotypical**, **neurominority** and others (Chapman, 2023; Walker, 2021)

One out of every five people is *neurodivergent*!



Artist credit Rebecca Burgess

Decolonizing Neurodivergence: Shifting to a Relational View

Ableism and settler colonialism have **parallel histories** of dehumanizing and containing difference.

- “The label of disability is a construct that exists as a mechanism of colonialism which does not align with Indigenous perspectives of difference” (Ineese-Nash, 2020, p. 28; also see Robinson, 2024).
- Indigenous perspectives of difference are grounded in relationality; all people offer gifts to the community.

- No word for deficit in Māori; taonga takiwātanga (in their own space and time; Douglas et al., in press)
- “These approaches don’t work for our people.” (~Manitoba interview with Cree participant)



Image of the Re•Storying Autism Collective's 2025 Knowledge Exchange Series.

Aligning GBV Services with Disability Justice

Disability justice is a movement led by Black, Indigenous, queer, ND and disabled folx. At its heart is radical care and dreaming accessible futures. Leaders: Patty Berne and SINS Invalid, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

10 Principles of Disability Justice (see [SINS Invalid](#))

Intersectionality

Anti-Capitalist Politic

Leadership of Those Most Impacted

Cross-Movement Organizing

Recognizing Wholeness

Recognizing Wholeness

Interdependence

Sustainability

Collective Access

Cross-Disability Solidarity



The Re•Storying Project Film Viewing Guide

Angelina's film: Rethinking neurodivergence through the neurodiversity paradigm

Questions to reflect on :

- How does **neurodiversity paradigm** show up in the film?
- Where might you bring it to your **life and work**?
- What is the storyteller asking us to **see, hear, feel or sense** that might be new?



A rainbow swirl close-up of the Re•Storying logo.



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A rainbow swirl close-up of the Re•Storying logo.

Unlearning 'Deficits' & Stereotypes Through the ND Paradigm

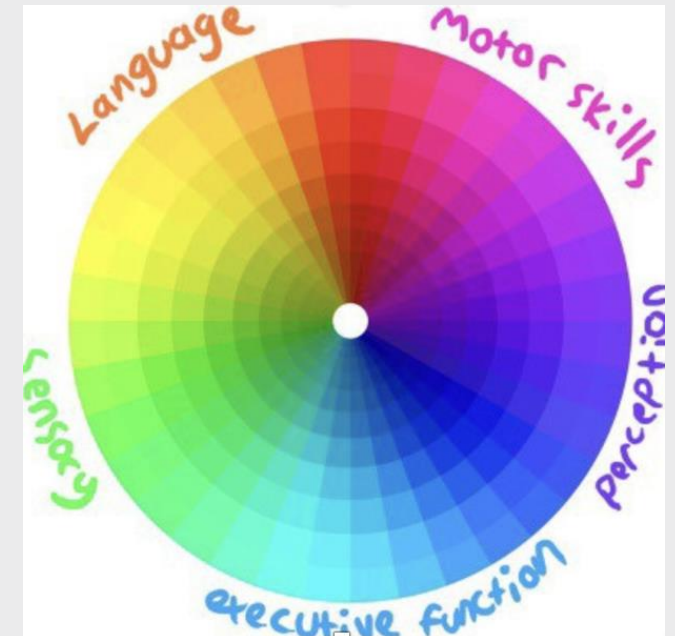
Practice 'double empathy'—misunderstanding goes in both directions due to 'mismatch' in communicating and interpreting the world (Milton, 2012).

Unlearn this...

- A savant/genius
- Alien/not like 'us'
- Computer-like
- Asocial
- Perpetually a child
- Lazy, unorganized
- White, male, danger
- Bad mothering

Try this instead...

- Divergent thinker, specialist
- Creative; attention to detail
- Quiet affect; variations in interaction
- Honest, literal; variations in time/space
- Innovative; free spirit; creative
- Ability to intensely focus, multitasking
- Diverse, empathetic, justice, attuned
- Activism; deep knowledge



Artist credit Rebecca Burgess

Implications for Practice

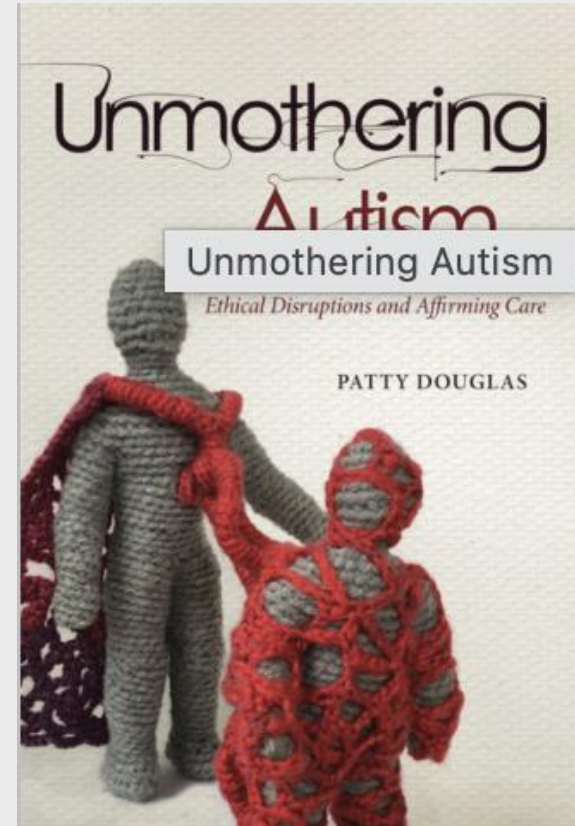
Toward Neuro-Affirming Approaches



Supporting Neurodiverse Survivors in GBV Contexts

- Using insights from neurodiversity paradigm, disability justice and decolonizing, instill an “**ethic of disruption**” to interrupt the “violence of making others identical” (Douglas, 2024, p. 24).
- “The line that separates care from violence also tethers care to violence and is always shifting and permeable.” (Kelly & Chapman, 2015, p. 47)

To the right: Image of cover of *Unmothering Autism* by Patty Douglas; art by Kat Singer.



The Re•Storying Project Film Viewing Guide


Viewing the films: Supporting neurodivergent survivors by drawing on the neurodiversity paradigm

Questions to reflect on :

- What is the storyteller asking us to **see, hear, feel or sense** that might be new?
- Returning to the **message of the webinar**: Examine assumptions about ND to tangibly shift services toward more neuro-affirming and inclusive approaches.



A rainbow swirl close-up of the Re•Storying logo.



[Teacher] ... and we still have the question of,
what is stress? [Ongoing lecture]

unrestricted

The Re•Storying Project Film Viewing Guide

Viewing the films: Supporting neurodivergent survivors by drawing on the neurodiversity paradigm

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Supporting Neurodivergent Survivors in GBV Contexts

- **Communication**—may require direct, concrete communication; may mask, shut-down or experience 'melt downs'—create safe space and affirm diverse modes of communicating.
- **Executive function**—may need concrete 1-1 support and added time in planning, organizing and understanding implications of choices.
- **Mental Health**—ND people are more likely to experience depression (37%) and anxiety (42%) (Hollocks et al., 2019).
- **Self Advocacy**—Survivors may have difficulty accessing complex systems and expressing.
- **Social Interaction**—Support may be desired but exhausting (slow down the pace and process; provide explicit expectations; provide support).
- **Sensory**—Address sensory access (sound, touch, smell heightened or diminished).
- *For more ideas also see the accompanying **Learning Guide** (Lopez, 2026).

Principles of Neuro-Affirming Practices

*Parallels with TVI practice in the **Learning Guide**—safety, choice, respect (Lopez, 2026).

Nothing About Us Without Us

- Access ND led resources and research
- Employ neurodivergent staff or peer mentors

Presume Competence

- Practice double empathy—diverse communication
- Believe what ND survivors are saying

Practice Respectful Engagement

- Sensory: Turn the lights down, scent free environment; try red/yellow/green system
- Access: Reduce complexity and duplication
- Recognize intersectionality (affirm self-identification, culturally affirming practices)
- Use respectful language—identity or person first
- Challenge neuro-normativity—train staff

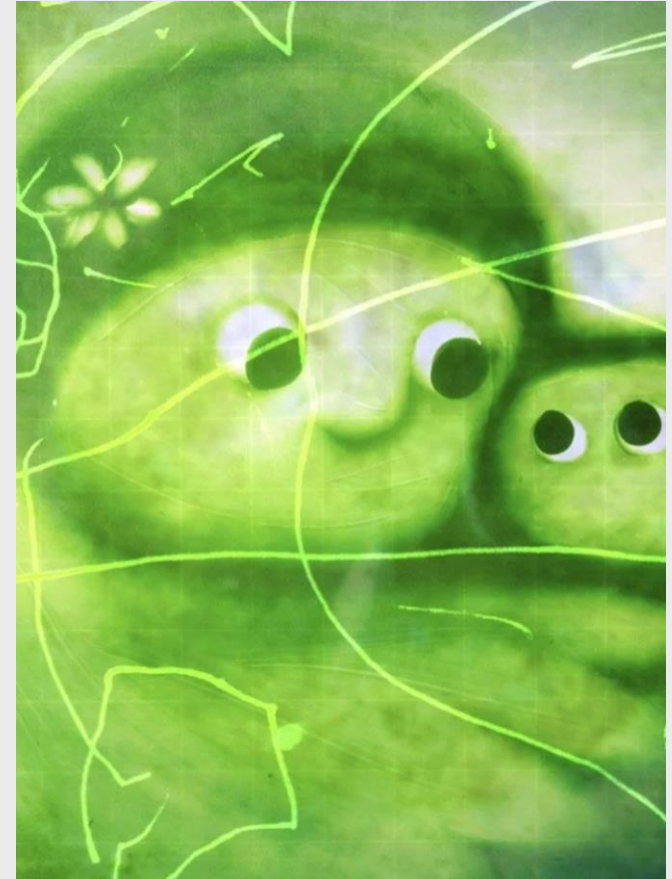


Wrapping Up: It Doesn't Take Much

By recognizing the pathology paradigm and how it shows up in assumptions and services, you can make **small shifts toward neuro-affirming practice** and have a **significant positive impact** in neurodivergent survivors' lives.

It is my hope that you **will each make *at least one small shift this year.*** You've already started by being here!

Still image of mother and child from the award-winning film *Two One Two* by Shira Avni, a collaborator on the Re•Storying project.



Helpful Resources

Re•Storying Autism Project

www.restoryingautism.com

Re•Storying Autism Module

<https://worldingdifference.ca/modules/restorying-autism/>

Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions

<https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>

Autism Alliance Canada

<https://autismalliance.ca>

Institute on Neurodiversity

<https://ioneurodiversity.org/research-rpdu/>

Autistics for Autistics

<https://a4aontario.com>



Helpful Resources

Ask an Autistic (Neurowonderful) - multiple videos about meltdowns, shutdowns, self-injury, and other important topics

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAoYMFsyj_k1ApNj_QUkNgKC1R5F9bVHs

Agony Autie (multiple videos on meltdowns and shutdowns)

<https://www.youtube.com/c/AgonyAutie/videos>

Films to Explore

S/Pace by Adam Wolfond and Estee Klar:

<https://vimeo.com/user14085709>

Deej

<https://www.deejmovie.com/>

Unspoken

<https://www.unspokendoc.com/>



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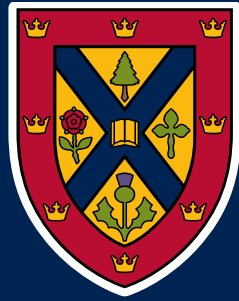
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Thank you!

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