

Layer 1: The Skeleton (DSM-5-TR Criteria)

Social communication and social interaction differences across multiple contexts which looks like:

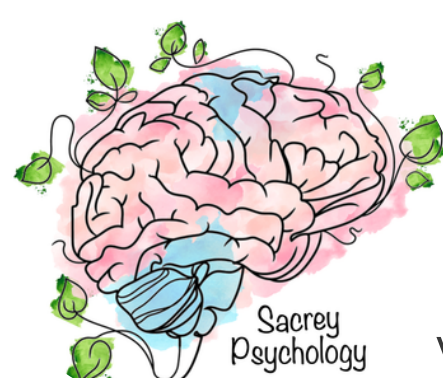
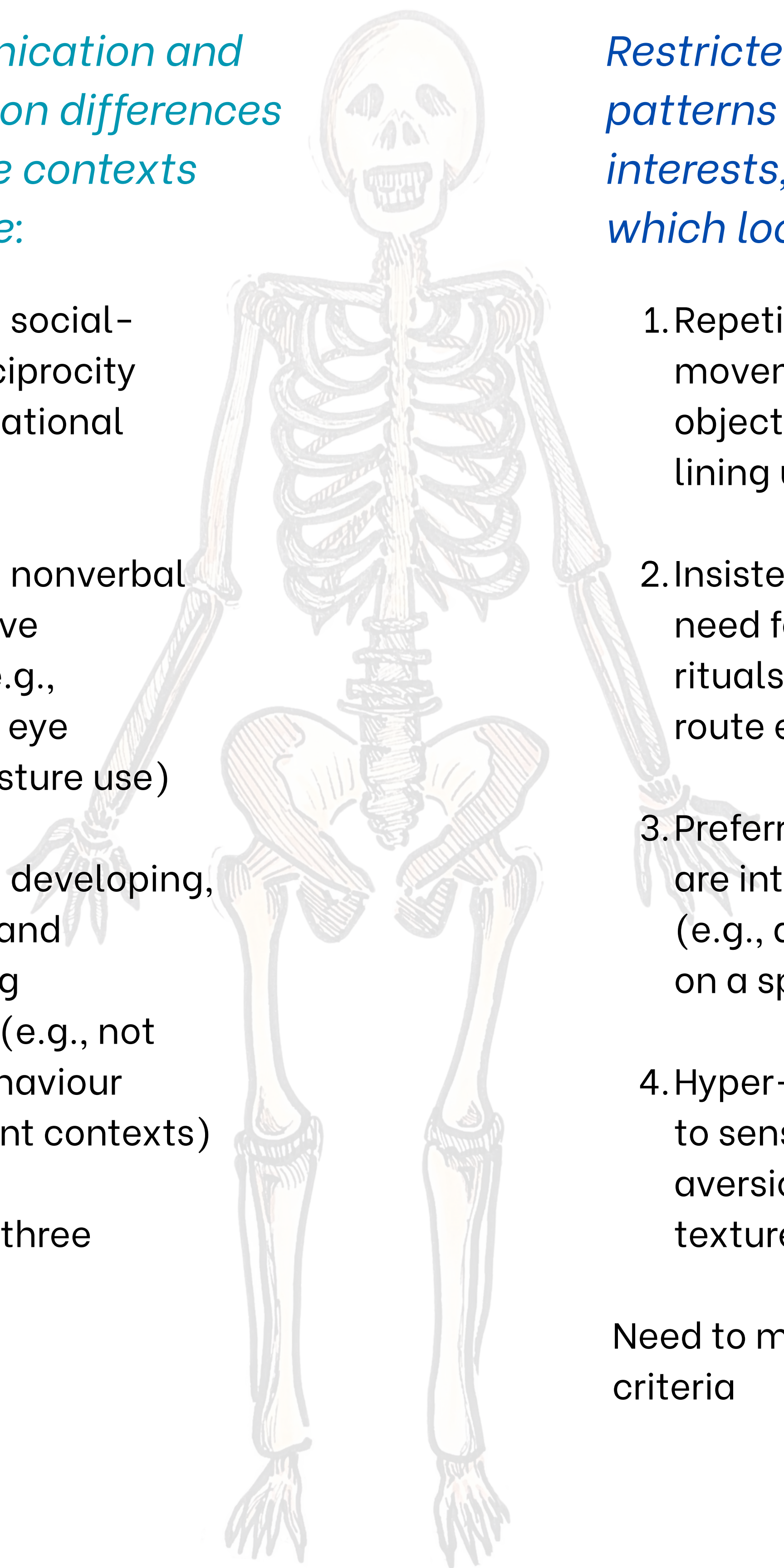
1. Differences in social-emotional reciprocity (e.g., conversational turn taking)
2. Differences in nonverbal communicative behaviours (e.g., differences in eye contact or gesture use)
3. Differences in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (e.g., not modifying behaviour across different contexts)

Need to meet all three criteria above

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities which looks like:

1. Repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., lining up objects)
2. Insistence on sameness, need for routines, or rituals (e.g., use same route each day)
3. Preferred interests that are intense or focused (e.g., a lot of knowledge on a specific topic)
4. Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input (e.g., aversion to certain textures)

Need to meet 2 or 4 above criteria



Layer 2: Soft Tissue (Lived Experience)

Social Communication

- Gaze/ eye contact differences
- Gesture differences
- Makes friends more easily when have shared interests
- Differences starting conversations
- Challenges with intuitively reading social cues
- Intimacy challenges
- Over sharing information about interests
- Challenges interacting with strangers
- Socially withdraws following stress/burnout

Health and Wellness

- Values social justice
- Sleep irregularities
- GI challenges
- Higher rates of anxiety, bipolar, OCD, ADHD
- Higher rates of unaliving & depression
- Higher rates of eating disorders and substance abuse
- Negative belief of self and world
- Higher rates of hormone related challenges in women and girls

Repetitive Behaviours and Restricted Interests

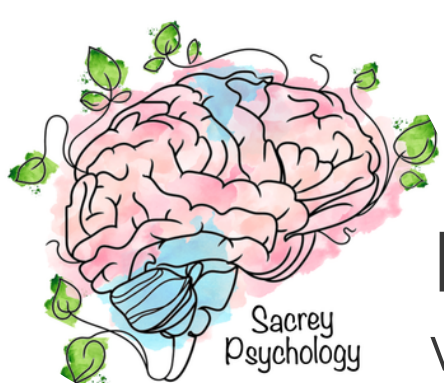
- Preferred interests
- Passionate focus
- Self-soothes through stimming
- Prefers routines
- Engages in repetitive behaviours (“stimming”)
- Thrives on familiarity & routine
- Unexpected changes stressful
- Sensory differences

Executive Functioning

- Task-switching difficulties
- Increased risk of victimization
- Impulse control challenges
- Memory recall
- Pervasive drive for autonomy

Emotion Regulation

- Interest-based nervous system
- Dissociation
- Overwhelm and shut-down
- Demand avoidance
- Emotional regulation difficulties
- Hyper-vigilance
- Overactive nervous system
- Irritability, restlessness
- Rejection-sensitivity



Layer 3: What is Presented (Masked Experience)

Compensation

- Copy other peoples' behaviours, body language, or expressions
- Research how to use social skills
- Create scripts to help navigate social situations
- Watch others (including on media) to learn or understand social skills
- Use behaviours learned from watching other people interact
- May repeat phrases exactly as others have said them
- Practice making facial expressions or using body language

Components of the Mask

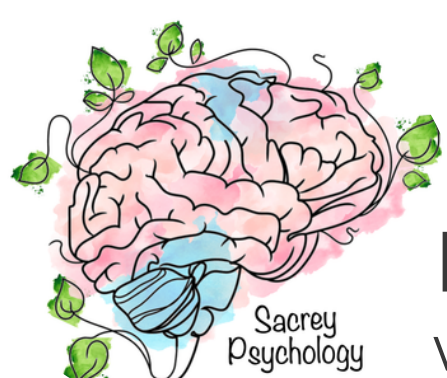
1. **Compensation:** Mimicking neurotypical behaviours to navigate social interactions
2. **Masking:** Actively suppressing autistic traits
3. **Assimilation:** Push self to engage in behaviours that do not feel comfortable

Masking

- Focused on own facial expressions and body language in social situations
- Adjust facial expressions to appear relaxed and/or interested
- Adjust body language to appear relaxed and/or interested
- Feel need to make eye contact with others, even if they don't want to
- Thinking about the impression made to others
- Avoid talking about preferred interests
- Avoid stimming in public
- Go along with changes even if uncomfortable
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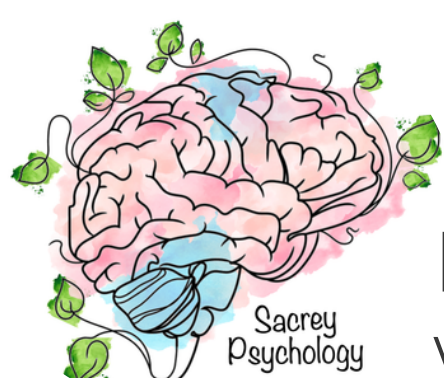
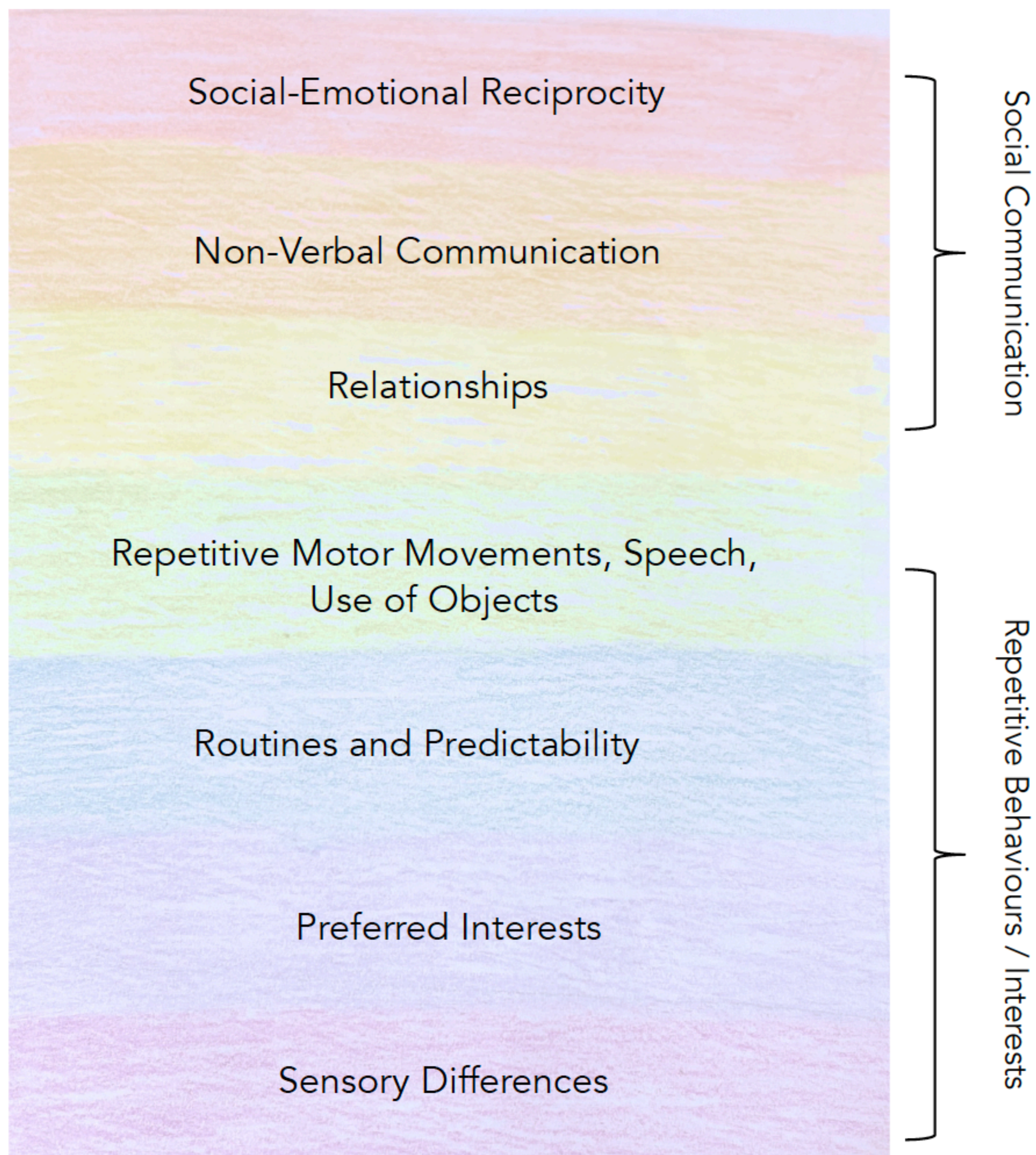
Assimilation

- May feel conversation doesn't naturally flow
- May play a role versus being authentic in social situations
- May need support of others (e.g., partner, friend) to socialize
- Engage in small talk
- Make eye contact
- Feel a sense of "performance"



Diagnostic Criteria in 'Real Life'

The diagnostic criteria for autism are not well-described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), the manual used by medical professionals to diagnose mental health conditions, as well as conditions that emerge in childhood or aging. Let's explore how each of the seven diagnostic criteria for autism present in real life. Below is a reminder of the seven criteria (also presented on Layer 1 - The Skeleton)



Social-Emotional Reciprocity

Communication Differences

Direct, concrete, and pragmatic communication style

Can miss innuendo, sarcasm, abstract or ambiguous communication

May come off as “too honest” or blunt

Tend to understand words that are said at face-value

Ask clarifying questions in ambiguous situations



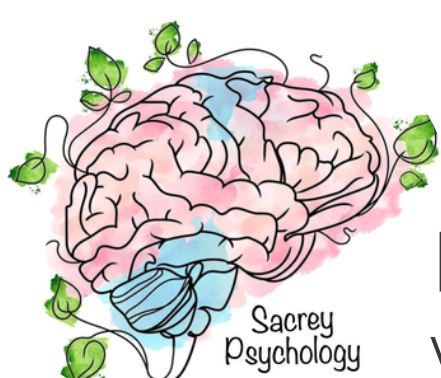
Communication Challenges

- May not like chit-chatting
- Chit-chat may drain energy
- Discomfort starting conversations
- Back-and-forth conversation differences
- Challenges sharing emotional experiences
- Not sure when it's their turn to speak
- Conversation may not naturally flow
- May take things literally
- Miss indirect messages



Masking Challenges

- Develops scripts
- Engages in chit-chat
- Use phrases heard from others
- Ask questions to keep conversation going
- Practice conversation beforehand
- Watch others to learn social skills
- Not talk about preferred interests
- Find way to talk about interests
- Use AI to help with direct and indirect parts of communication



Non-Verbal Communication

Non-Verbal Differences

Maintaining eye contact can feel uncomfortable	May keep gaze with someone for long duration (i.e., staring)
May miss or take longer to notice non-verbal cues	May misunderstand others non-verbal cues
Social interactions may feel like a “role” or performance	May miss sarcasm or irony
May gesture very little or may gesture a lot	May not pick up on difference between words and non-verbal cues

Challenges being Misunderstood

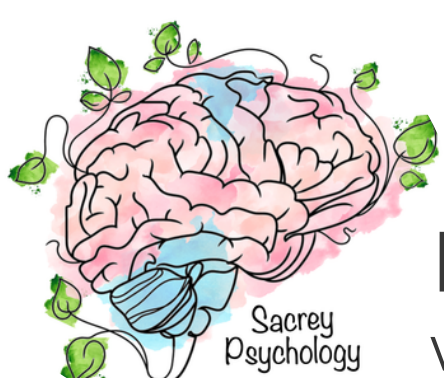
Tone of voice may not match intent (e.g., neutral tone may come off as angry or bored)

Body language may not match intent (e.g., appear disinterested when interested)

May not use “socially expected” cues (e.g., neutral face rather than social smile)

Masking Non-Verbal Communication Differences

- Develop rules for understanding non-verbal cues
- Copy other peoples’ behaviours, body language, or expressions
- Practice making facial expressions or using body language
- Adjust facial expressions to appear relaxed and/or interested
- Adjust body language to appear relaxed and/or interested
- Make eye contact with others, even if they don’t want to



Relationships

Relationship Differences

Challenges making new friends

Challenges keeping friendships

Feels socially different from others

Social interactions cost energy

May avoid social events

Does not reach out often or reaches out too often

Relationship Misunderstandings and Challenges

Misunderstand or disagree with social norms

Misses flirty behaviour from others

Unsure of difference between friend and acquaintance

May not feel included because of indirect invitations (i.e., come if you want)

People may stop being their friend and they are unsure why

May overstep other's boundaries

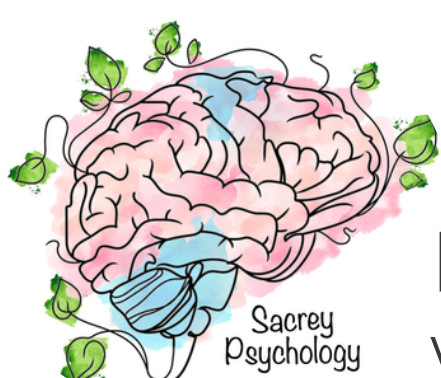
May not share or may overshare personal details

Friendships may be context-dependent (e.g., school or work friends)

Masking Differences



- May play a role or “performance” versus being authentic in social situations
- Brings a support person with them to help navigate social interactions (e.g., partner, friend)
- Laughs when others laugh even if unsure of joke
- Develop scripts to navigate social interactions
- Prefer to work remotely vs in person



Repetitive Motor Movements, Speech, and Use of Objects

Repetitive Movements

Play with hair (e.g., put hair up and take it down, twirl hair)

Hand movements (e.g., flapping, finger tapping, finger twisting, pick at nails, use of fidgets)

Repetitive rubbing (e.g., petting animals, rub hand along textured surface, rub tongue along teeth)

Complex movements (e.g., toe walking, body rocking, swaying)

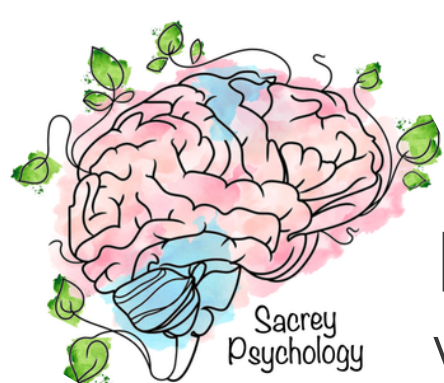
Pain movements (e.g., skin pick, use pain stim, bite inside cheek)

Organization

Organization can be regulating

Unique organization rules (e.g., ROYGBIV)

Things have a 'home' and



Lori Sacrey, MC
www.sacreypsychology.com

Repetitive Sounds

Echolalia (repeat what someone else has said)

Sing or listen to (part of) song repetitively

Internally count

Internally repeat word or phrase

Taste and Smell

Flavour Stim (e.g., gum)



Scent stim (e.g. lavender)

Repetitive Visual

Watch moving stimuli (e.g., fans, fire, fish tank, lava lamp)

Watch same clip over and over

Watch favourite show on repeat

Twinkly lights

Visual inspection of objects

Masking Repetitive Behaviours



- Suppress stimming
- Use socially acceptable stim (e.g., hair twirling, rings)
- Use phrases heard from others when unsure of what to say
- Script conversation ahead of time
- Suppress desire to organize at work, school, or others home