

# Herding cats, sloths and butterflies

Working with groups of autistic people

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# Outline

Introduction  
Ways of working  
Productivity  
Conclusion

# Introduction

Why am I qualified to talk about autistic people working together?

- Manage a large autistic family (with one NT oddball)
- 3 years with the National Autistic Taskforce
- 17 years with Autscape
  - Now attended by over 200 autistic people of all ages.
- Previously presented similar at Aut.Scot







# Ways of working





# Autistic Utopia (Autopia)

- Everyone will understand me
- It will be quiet and peaceful
- I will have space to myself
- All my problems will be irrelevant





# Autistic communication

## PLUSES

Tend to focus on content

Text

Slow to process, plan, respond

Balance between detail and clarity

## MINUSES

May miss nuances

Often slower than talking

May not respond at all

Can be overwhelmed with detail



# Autistic space

## PLUSES

Tolerance for unusual behaviour

Personal space

Shared experiences & interests

Space to manage own needs

Being normal for a change

## MINUSES

Requires tolerance

Sometimes no one initiates

Can't get a word in

Sometimes no one notices distress

Being normal for a change!







# Cats, sloths, butterflies and rhinos

Different ways of  
working



# Cats

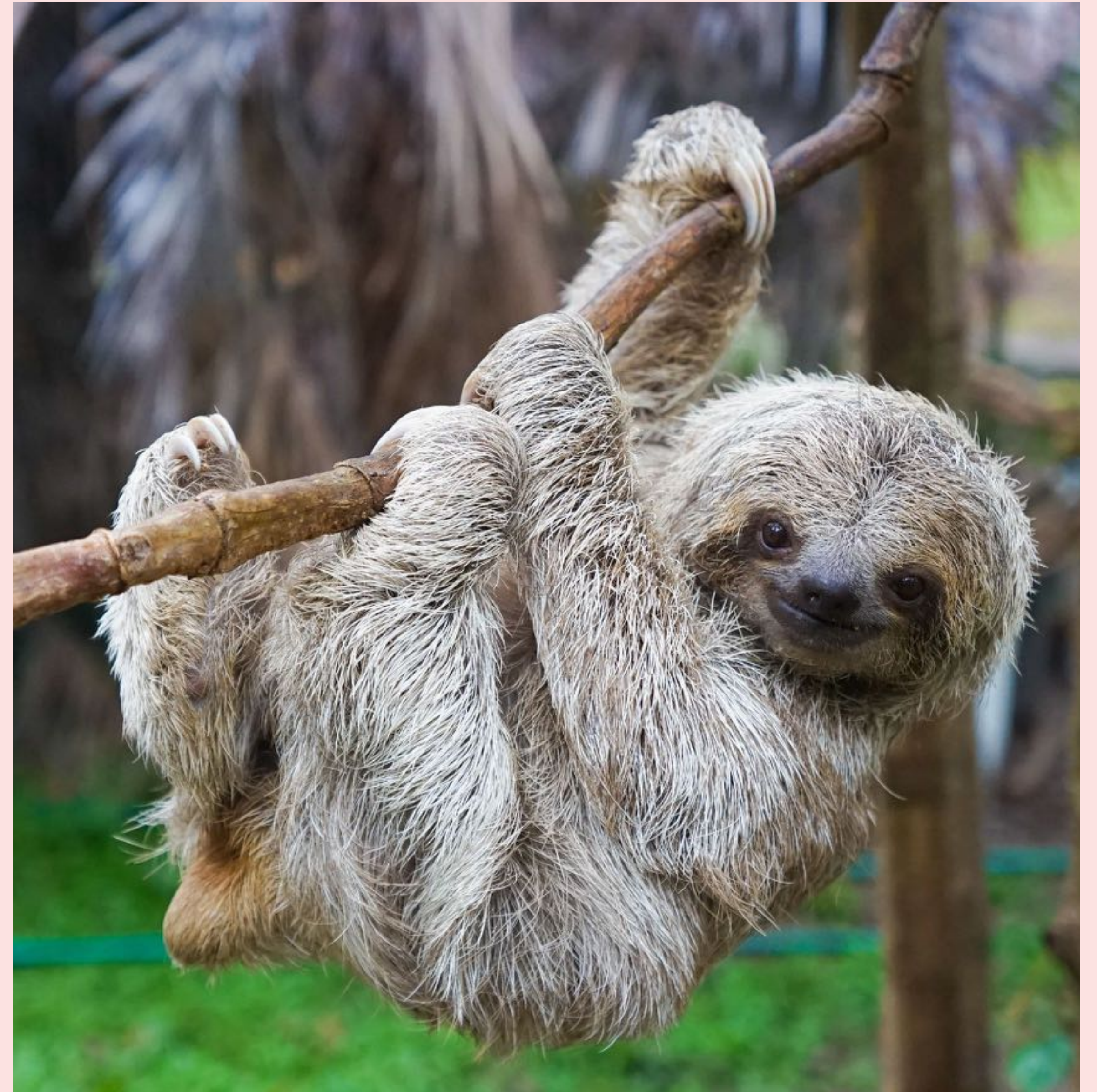
- High standards
- Independent minded
- May not express needs and feelings until there's already a problem
- Don't like too much supervision
- One of the most likely to end up in leadership roles, but may forget there is a team
- Needs:
  - Autonomy
  - Clear parameters for tasks and responsibilities





# Sloths

- Produce high quality work
- Great tenacity
- Usually chilled
- Only get moving in an emergency
- May seem not to care, but really just can't get their enthusiasm up
- Needs:
  - Prompting, not pressure
  - Lowering thresholds
  - Patience, deadlines and tolerance





# Butterflies

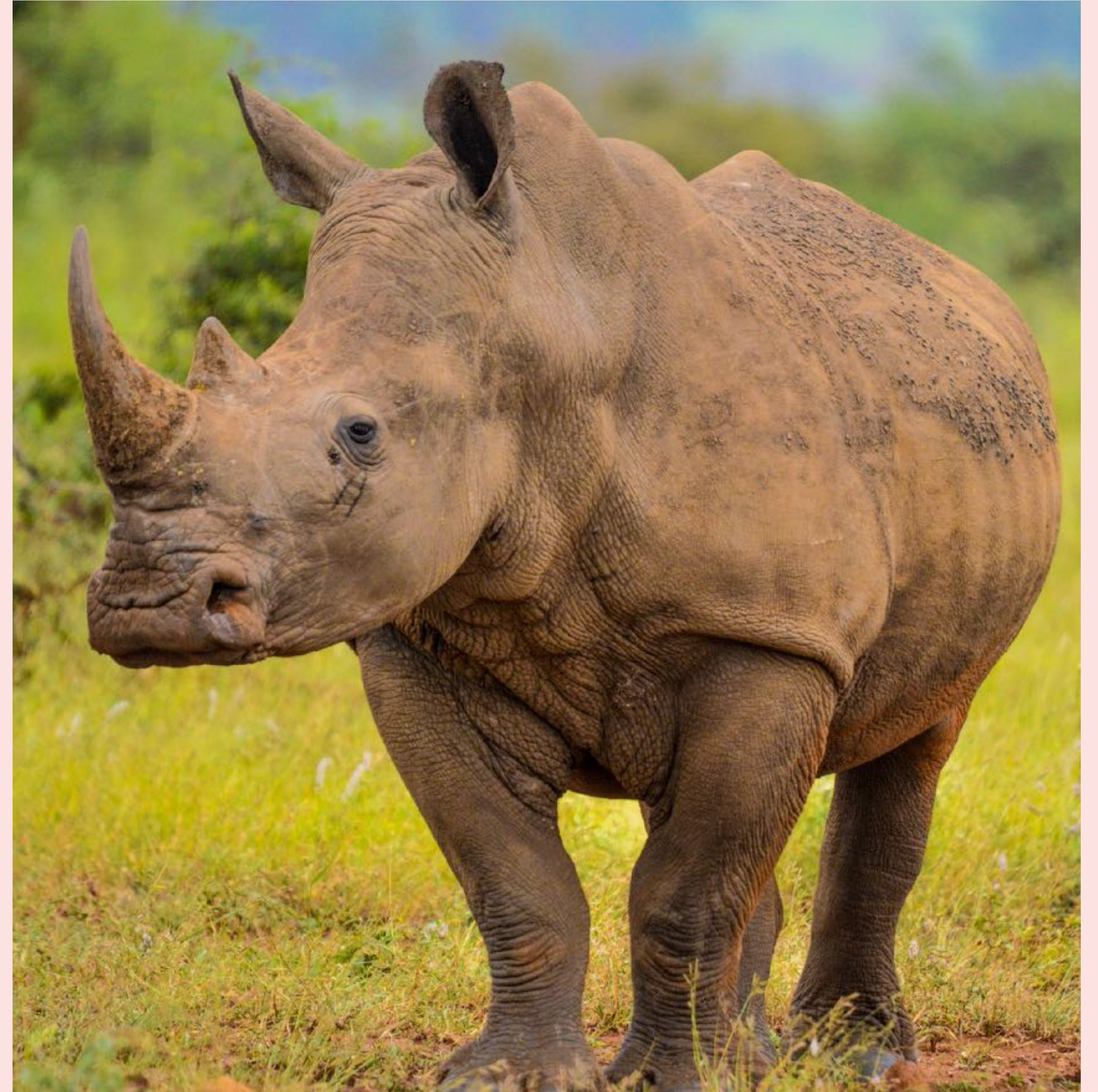
- Good at drafts, initiative, ideas
- Poor follow-through
- Will get a lot done in a short time
- Error prone, but often don't mind correction
- Needs:
  - Reminders
  - Small tasks
  - Proofreading





# Rhinos

- Similar to cats, but with more drive
- Often expert and competent
- Most productive
- Will trample all over everyone else
- Also likely to end up in leadership roles, but work best alone
- Needs:
  - Reminding of others' needs
  - Recognition of competence
  - Clear expectations





# Productivity

**Getting the most from autistic team members**





# Skill distribution

## Rare skills

- sending post
- making phone calls
- writing letters



## Common skills

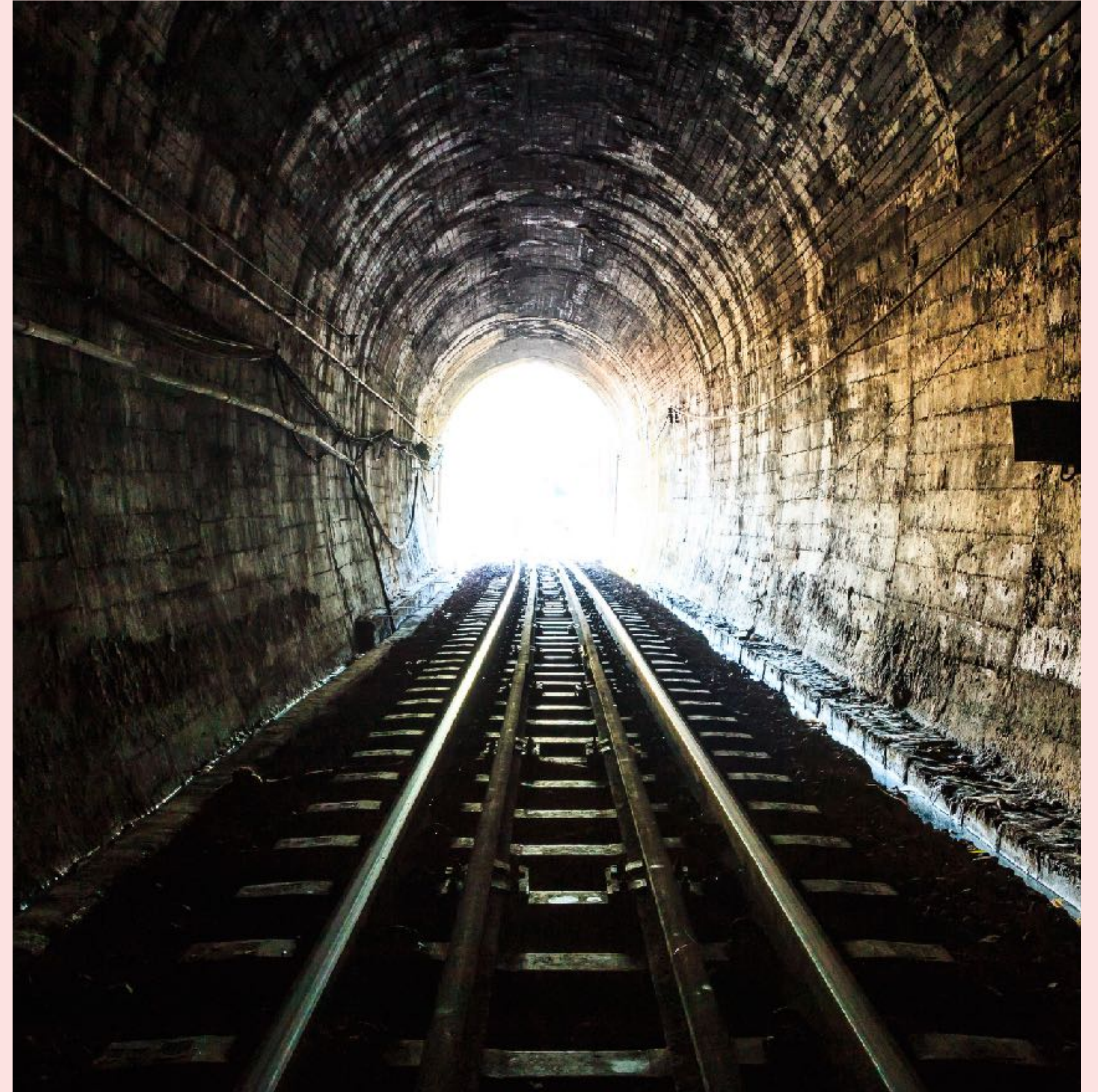
- computer skills
- error checking
- research



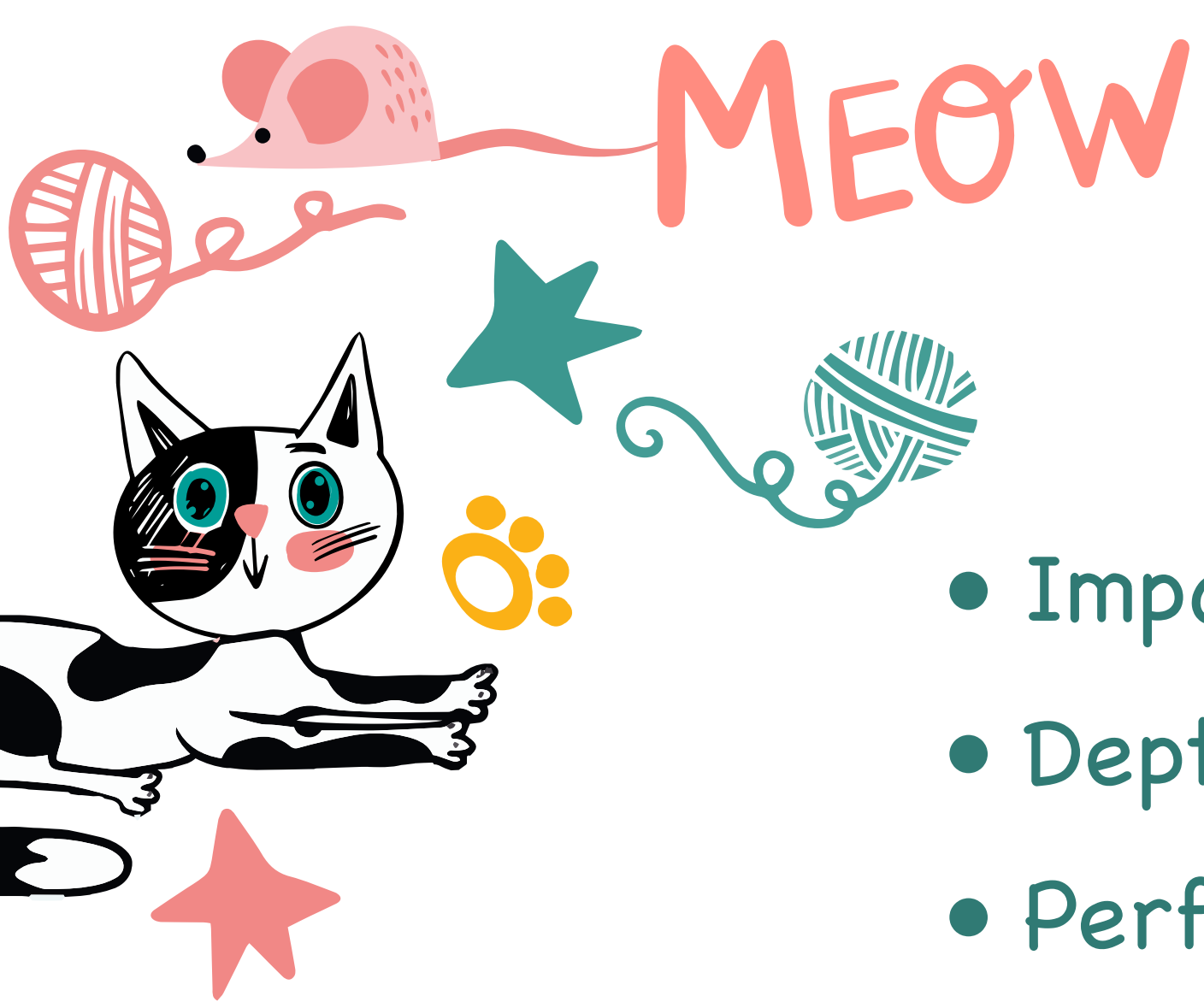


# Single track attention

- Focus very strongly and have difficulty shifting
- When you've done something twice, that's it
- Loyalty
- Often enjoy repetition and symmetry
- Give time to adjust to changes
- Consider that others may have a point







# Forests and trees

*... and the third leg of the fly on the underside of the leaf on the bottom branch of the second tree to the left*

- Importance of detail
- Depth and focus
- Perfectionism
- Micromanagement and control
- Appreciation for quality





# Organisation

- Different approaches
  - Some will not know where to start
  - Others will organise to the tiniest detail
- Often not good at documentation
- Help with sequencing
- Help with administrative tasks
- Send reminders





# Getting stuck

- Help with sequencing
- Do the first step
- Reduce transitions (including context switches)
- Make an appointment
- Low stress
- Deadlines





# Working with autistic people

Put things in writing.

Provide deadlines and be clear about whether it's strict or has wiggle room.

Give time to process, especially for changes.

Reduce the number of transitions, e.g. by (re-)including all the information when a decision or action is needed.

Consult about good times for prompts and reminders





# Working with autistic people

Paradoxical abilities and unexpected deficits

- More supervision, help with administrative tasks
- Lowering thresholds for communication and initiative

Don't deny weaknesses, work around them.

- Re-invent ways of working rather than just following traditional (NT) ways
- Find those with complementary skills and rare skills.

If you can't do something, tell someone!

Be organised. Make lists. Communicate.







# Conclusion

Take-home messages



# Why is it worth the trouble?

## Normal is context dependent

- Allows autistic people to be the 'normal' ones for a change.
- Often easier to meet mutual needs.

## Feeling accepted

- Feeling understood, not different or defective.
- More likely to have compatible communication.
- Finding others who work similarly and have similar experiences.





[autisticinertia.com](https://autisticinertia.com)

