

The background of the slide is a watercolor-style illustration. It features a large, dark blue area on the left side, which transitions into a lighter blue and then a purple area on the right side. The colors are blended together in a soft, painterly manner, creating a textured effect. The purple area is more prominent in the top-left and bottom-right corners, while the blue area fills the rest of the slide.

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Autscape 2023

# **The Autism- Dissociation Association**

# Introduction

- **This talk will be exploring the overlaps and interactions between autism and dissociation**
- It will be covering:
  - What dissociation is
  - Habitual dissociative responses, aka Dissociative Disorders
  - What causes these to develop
  - Why so many people with dissociative disorders are on the autistic spectrum
  - and what we can learn from this

# Content notes

- This talk will **mention and allude to** adverse experiences including:
  - Extreme events, such as medical emergencies, bereavements, accidents, kidnapping, disasters and war
  - Children's homes, institutionalisation and foster care
  - Childhood abuse and neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences
- This talk will **go into more detail** about:
  - The reality of being an autistic child
  - School and bullying
  - The ways we may respond to upsetting events – I discuss the concept of **trauma**
- This may **remind you of bad experiences**, you may **re-live old feelings**

# Who am I?

- I'm an autistic adult with a complex dissociative disorder
  - plus ADHD, dyspraxia, hEDS and a number of other labels
- **I'm not a researcher, a psychologist or any kind of mental health or neurodevelopmental condition practitioner**
- My 'expertise' is 'by experience'
  - I have a diagnosed dissociative disorder and I'm receiving complex trauma therapy through the NHS
  - I do also train social care professionals about autism as a part-time job

# Part One: What is dissociation?

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- The conscious mind becomes *distanced* from the outside world
  - or from the *feelings and memories* that it provokes
- This can be as part of a psychological defence mechanism:
  - “*This isn’t real*”, “*This isn’t happening to me*”, “*Those memories happened to someone else*”, “*I don’t remember; nothing happened*”
- **This is a common, natural response to unbearable experiences, or intense situations that we must get through in the moment**

# Everyone dissociates

- **Dissociation isn't always a problem; it can be positive or neutral** – it can just be a reaction to boredom or a lack of mental stimulation
- If you've ever driven, walked or cycled somewhere and suddenly realised that you'd stopped paying attention and the last few minutes **happened on autopilot** – *that's* dissociation
- If you've ever **zoned out or daydreamed** during a class or a talk, then realised you had no idea what was being talked about – *that's* dissociation
- If you've ever got so into doing a task or reading a story that you **lost all awareness of the outside world** and forgot to eat – *that's dissociation!*



# Humans need emotional detachment

- If everyone became emotionally overwhelmed by all the injustice, suffering, war, hunger, poverty, greed, political corruption, etc etc in the world all the time, no one would be able to function
- **Sometimes we all need to be able to *temporarily* ignore or distance ourselves from overwhelming emotions and events**
- Rationalising things away, compartmentalising them so you're only worrying about that when at home, *not* when at work, even denying that something is happening, *can* all be helpful forms of dissociation

# The habitual dissociative response

- But if overwhelming experiences happen repeatedly over weeks or months then **dissociation can become a habit**
- Rather than responding to *only the most extreme situations* with detachment, daydreaming, distancing, denial, etc, **your brain slips into the dissociative response more and more easily**
- The defense mechanism starts to become the *default* reaction to stress – habitual dissociative responses, aka **Dissociative Disorders**



# Dissociative disorders

- So what do dissociative disorders look like?
- **Depersonalisation** – responding to stress by experiencing yourself or your emotions as less real or as happening to someone else
  - you might feel as if you're observing your emotions or even your body from outside; or that the person who's speaking your words isn't you
- **Derealisation** – respond to stress by altering your perception of reality, making everything seem unreal or dreamlike
  - feeling like the world is happening on a screen, in a game, through a window or in a dream; feeling like other people are robots, characters or avatars, etc

# Dissociative disorders continued

- **Maladaptive Daydreaming** aka Daydreaming Disorder
  - losing yourself completely in fantasies, inner worlds, imaginary conversations etc and neglecting the real world for minutes or hours at a time
- **Dissociative Amnesia** – forgetting upsetting events or who you are
  - or forgetting how to do something you've been able to do well before
  - can also come with **fugue** where you travel somewhere else to start a new life
- **Identity confusion** – trouble defining what kind of person you are
  - feeling like your opinions, preferences, ideas and beliefs shift around

# Dissociative disorders concluded

- **Identity alteration** – feeling that your identity changes and shifts depending on the situation you're in
  - or feeling that different parts of your personality are separate and independent from each other, each wanting their own things
  - feeling that your age shifts and changes; e.g., sometimes you're a child or a teen
  - having a different voice or voices in different situations
  - feeling that when you're overwhelmed 'someone else' takes over from you
- or having so much separation that you're a system of significantly different identities – **Dissociative Identity Disorder**, DID, aka '*multiple personalities*'

# Recap: What is dissociation?

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- Dissociation can be a psychological defense mechanism **or a response to chronic boredom and under-stimulation**
- The conscious mind becomes *distanced* from the outside world
  - or from the *feelings and memories* that it provokes
- **This is a common, natural response to unbearable experiences, or intense situations that we must get through in the moment**
  - “*This isn’t real*”, “*This isn’t happening to me*”, “*Those memories happened to someone else*”, “*I don’t remember; nothing happened*”
- It can develop into a **habitual dissociative response** where the **defense mechanism becomes the default response to stress**

# ***The autism-dissociation association***

- *By the way, before the word “autism” meant autism, it was used to describe:*
  - *“detachment from reality, together with the relative and absolute predominance of the inner life”* – Bleuler, 1911
- Schizophrenic people could be described as *“receding into autism”*
- So, up until the 1960s, when “autism” or “autistic thinking” appeared in psychology texts, it was:
  - *“characterized by infantile wishes to avoid unsatisfying realities and replace them with fantasies and hallucinations”* – *How autism became autism*, Evans, 2013
- **i.e., the original meaning of “autism” described a form of dissociation**

# Part two: What are the causes?

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- Short-term dissociative responses that look like limited episodes of a dissociative disorder are a **normal way of coping with extreme stress**
  - e.g., medical emergency, hostage situation, kidnapping, disaster or war
- Initially **responding to a bereavement with denial of reality** is a common form of dissociation
- When events with **that level of intensity of emotion, stress and threat are on-going**, these responses can *become habitual* and so develop into **long term dissociative disorders**

# Habitual dissociation in childhood

- **The most complex dissociative disorders usually begin in childhood**, in response to overwhelming on-going stress
- Research shows that having this stress recognised, acknowledged and **acted on by caregivers significantly reduces the harm** it does
- Overwhelming stress is most harmful when it is **unrecognised and unaddressed by caregivers**, this is when stress becomes *toxic*
- Dissociation is more likely during neglect when the child is chronically under-stimulated, or when **caregivers actively deny the reality of the stress, or are the source of stress themselves**



# Adverse Childhood Experiences

- **ACEs** are *“highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person’s safety, security, trust or bodily integrity.”*

– Young Minds, 2018

- Physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect, or exposure to domestic violence
- Living with someone who abused drugs or alcohol, went to prison or has a serious mental illness
- Losing a parent through divorce, death or abandonment
- Living in a children’s home or in foster care

# The 'T' word

- The word I haven't been using much so far is **Trauma**
  - Society has *particular* expectations of what is and isn't *traumatic*
- I prefer to frame this instead as **Chronic Unaddressed Toxic Stress**
- **Chronic** – the overwhelming stress occurs regularly over a long period, so the habitual response develops
- **Unaddressed** – the stress isn't fully acknowledged and soothed by caregivers, or is actively denied, so the child can't adapt or recover
- **Toxic** – the brain and other organs are regularly flooded with stress hormones, without adequate recovery time

# Not everyone dissociates toxic stress

- *But wait*, not everyone responds to bereavement with denial or to medical emergencies with derealisation; not every kidnapping victim depersonalises and sees themselves from above
- Why do only *some* people dissociate to survive traumatic events or ACEs?
- **Some experts think it depends on the way you respond to threat:**
- *If* rather than **Fight** or **Flight**, you **Freeze** or **Fawn** then you *may be* more likely to also *Fantasize, Float, Fade* or *Forget*

# Freezing and Fawning

- If you respond by **Freezing** then you stay where you are when under threat
  - so it's helpful to be able ignore what's overwhelming you, *to forget or bury your feelings*, so you don't react at all to the threat
- If you respond by **Fawning** then you try to please, win over or calm down the source of threat
  - so it's helpful to shift to be *who you need* to be or to *feel what you need to feel* to do that
- For both, you may learn to view yourself or your emotions from outside, or experience everything as unreal or happening to someone else

# A learned response?

- Other experts argue that freezing and fawning are only developed in situations when fight or flight become impossible, **they aren't innate but *learned*** as a survival mechanism
- Some studies have also shown that the **parents of dissociative disorder patients are significantly more likely to have dissociative experiences** themselves – Ozturk and Sar, 2008
- ***Perhaps it's easier to learn dissociative coping strategies if these are already being modelled by your caregivers***

# Part Three: So, why this talk?

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- One of the earliest ways I learned to recognise that other people were fellow undiagnosed autistics was a pattern where they would respond to a difficult, noisy social situation like a meetup group by **staying put and starting to become more and more spacey and incoherent**
- I'd then have to rescue them by helping them to get out of the situation and home to safety – as others had done to me in the past
- I later realised that this is a **maladaptive dissociative response, a broken coping mechanism** of freezing or flopping in place

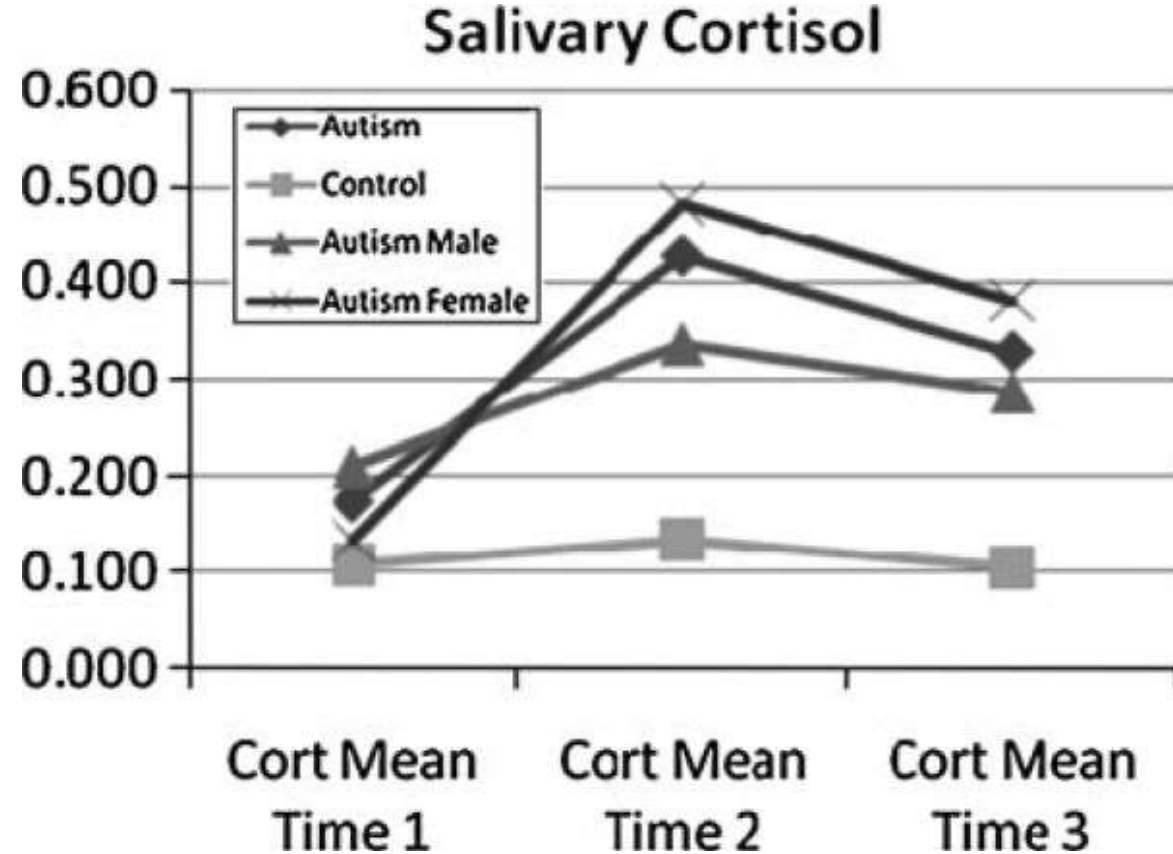
# Are autistic people more dissociative?

- When I joined online support spaces for dissociative disorders, I quickly noticed **that there are a lot of autistic people and traits on display**
- I've even seen people sincerely speculate that perhaps *everyone* with Dissociative Identity Disorder might *also* be autistic
  - This is definitely over-stated, but it's not *that* much of an exaggeration
- I also noticed how many of the things people with OSDD or DID, and those who treat them, talked about as realities of dissociative amnesia or complex dissociation reminded me of ideas from the autistic community
- ***I began to think about why autism might make habitual dissociation more likely...***



# Autistic stress response

- Numerous studies have found that **autistic children respond more strongly to stress** – Gao et al., 2022
- Most notably, their stress hormone levels **remained raised long after non-autistic children's** have returned to base levels – Spratt et al., 2012

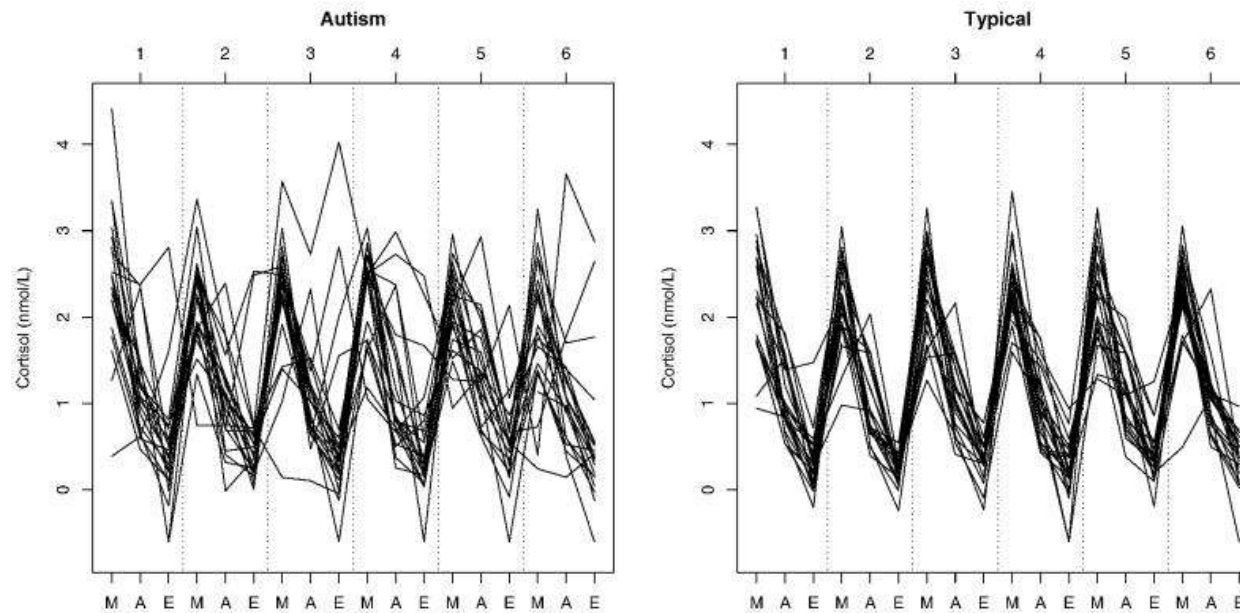


# Sensory stress

- **Research has found that increased stress hormone response is “associated with greater sensory sensitivity”** – Corbett et al., 2016
- Even without sensory sensitivities at play, **autistic people are less able to modulate sensory activation** – all the small background noises and sensations add up to cumulative sensory load
- Some researchers have made links between autistic sensory over-activation and trauma responses
  - See *Sensory Trauma – autism sensory difference and the daily experience of fear* – Fulton et al., 2020
- **Sensory adverse environments can be sources of chronic toxic stress**

# Chronic toxic stress

- “Children with autism have greater between-subject and within-subject variability in daily cortisol responses than neurotypical children and in addition have a **higher level of dysregulation**” – Corbett et al., 2009



- “[...] reduced cortisol values in concert with higher stress measures may be the result of chronic stress and particularly with social stress”

# A much lower 'barrier to entry'

- With more sources of stress, a significantly higher stress response and stress hormones remaining at high levels long after the stressful situation, **autistic children are much more likely to experience chronic toxic stress**
- The baseline for what becomes an 'Adverse Childhood Experience' resulting in unbearable stress and potential trauma responses is likely to be much lower
- ***Just attending school is likely to be extremely stressful, even if only the sensory environment is considered***

# Autistic stressors

- Studies have found significantly raised cortisol (stress hormone) levels for autistic children are observed after:
- *“Environmental changes or novel situations that might not be stressful to others”* – **unfamiliar situations and surroundings**
- *“Higher evening cortisol was associated with [stressful] **changes in routine or schedule**”* – Corbett et al., 2009
- Voluntary engagement in social play – just **playing with other children**, even when there wasn't any *“forced interaction[,] evaluative threat or peer rejection”* but only *“benign conditions”* – Corbett et al., 2010

# Unaddressed toxic stress?

- So, we've established a much higher likelihood of chronic toxic stress, now **is the extent of that toxic stress fully *addressed*?**
  - Is it recognised, understood, soothed, managed and reduced by caregivers? **Do they teach adequate coping strategies?**
- I'd say that undiagnosed autistic children are particularly unlikely to have their chronic toxic stress fully addressed
  - **Not having your autism recognised in childhood should probably be considered an Adverse Childhood Experience all on its own**

# A thousand CUTS

- Rather than talking about ‘trauma’ as the foundation of a habitual dissociative response, I prefer CUTS:

## – **Chronic Unaddressed Toxic Stress**

- This feels particularly appropriate as the chronic toxic stress associated with autism, *particularly undiagnosed autism*, tends to be a **cumulative load** of stressful things that **seem insignificant if you’re judged by neurotypical standards**
  - *but taken together it’s a case of ‘**death by a thousand cuts**’*



# Denied toxic stress

- **Society tends to assume that children are neurotypical** until they fail to cope and are proven to be autistic
- Up to that point, **family often try to minimise the child's struggles** and their signs of overwhelming stress, **encourage them to ignore** their sensory **sensitivities**; how **difficult and confusing** social situations are; how **upsetting** uncertainty and change can be
- Parents may fully **deny** their child's overwhelming stress and **encourage coping strategies that hide or ignore the discomfort**
- **Often parents actively reject signs of autism** – if we show them we're struggling, they may react negatively; **this can be a stressor**

# Addressed chronic toxic stress?

- So what does it look like to properly address the stress that autistic children face?
  - Recognising the stress is present and difficult
  - Not encouraging hiding or repressing of discomfort
  - Giving the child time and space to recover and adapt
  - Giving them the tools to protect from and manage reactions to stress
  - Modelling positive and constructive coping strategies
  - Helping to support autonomy, individuality and self-expression
  - Giving them a positive view of autism and role models for autistic success and coping with stress while autistic

# Being an autistic child is stressful

- But ultimately, autistic kids still have to engage with all the social and sensory stressors and uncertainty of the outside world
  - Just attending school alone can be hours of stress that takes hours more to recover from, and remember even voluntary social play without threat or rejection resulted in raised stress hormone levels
  - Conversely, actual lessons can be *chronically under-stimulating* for some children, resulting in habitual daydreaming and derealisation
- **So autistic kids will need to learn to develop their own coping strategies**, and their caregivers should accept and support this

# Part Four: Autistic dissociation

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- I'm pausing here to recognise that some of what I'm about to do in this part of the talk is an **unnuanced over-simplification** bordering on a thought exercise in taking my ideas too far
- I'll be veering into making yet another grand **Unifying Autistic Theory of Everything** where the part of autism that *I happen to be studying* explains all other autistic traits, e.g., *Intense World Theory*
- But it is *always* more complicated than that – in reality **there will be lots of other interacting factors all at play together**
- *With that aside, let's explore what autistic dissociation looks like...*

# Social withdrawal as dissociation

- *"Intense World Theory suggests that the autistics perceive their surroundings not only as overwhelmingly intense due to hyper-reactivity of primary sensory areas, but also as **aversive and highly stressful due** to an overly reactive amygdala, which also makes quick and powerful fear associations with usually neutral stimuli – fear of a color for example. **A natural coping strategy to deal with this kind of emotional overflow could be social avoidance and withdrawal.**"*

– *The Intense World Theory – a unifying theory of the neurobiology of autism,*  
Markram, 2010

# Behaviouralism as dissociation

- If autism is treated as a series of 'behaviours' that need to be 'reduced' rather than **reactions** to overwhelming emotional, sensory and stress responses, we are training people to **ignore** their distress
- If you're taught to respond to stress by burying your feelings and suppressing your reactions, **you are being trained to dissociate**
- Taking away the ability to recognise, self-soothe, minimise and escape stressful situations leaves few healthy coping mechanisms when ACEs do occur, **dissociative disorders become more likely**

# Trained to dissociate

- **Undiagnosed autistic people likely go through ‘informal training’**
- *Why did my young undiagnosed autistic friends react to being overwhelmed by loud social situations by staying put and becoming more and more spaced out and incoherent?*
  - **It felt like being at school** where you're taught by teachers and peers alike to stay in your seat, keep quiet, hide your difference and **not show any distress**
- **We learn to ignore being overwhelmed by sensory onslaughts** because everyone tells us it's not loud, it's not bright and we're making a fuss over nothing – **dissociation becomes the only option**



# ***Free range autistic coping strategies***

- But what sort of coping strategies do autistic kids use if they **are recognised as autistic, supported fully and allowed to be weird?**
- Often 'free range' coping strategies involve **playing games of pretend or call-and-response** that give the autistic child some **control** of the situation or add a **layer of distance** from unfiltered reality
  - e.g., speaking in a funny voice and always asking the same questions, requiring the same responses
  - insisting that you're really an alien, or a train, a cat or your favourite TV character and want everyone to play along for months at a time

# Rich inner worlds

- Coping strategies might also involve **creative imagination**
  - e.g., picturing everyone around you as a different type of animal, or fantasising that your teachers and classmates are secretly robots or spies
- It might involve imaginary friends or **projecting personalities or feelings** into everyday objects around you or your favourite toys
  - perhaps even talking or expressing your needs through them
- **Coping with stress by playing pretend, daydreaming or imagining that you're part of a story isn't necessarily problematic**
  - *but these are small steps from becoming the starts of maladaptive dissociative responses once the child is exposed to ACEs*

# Part Five: Identity fragmentation

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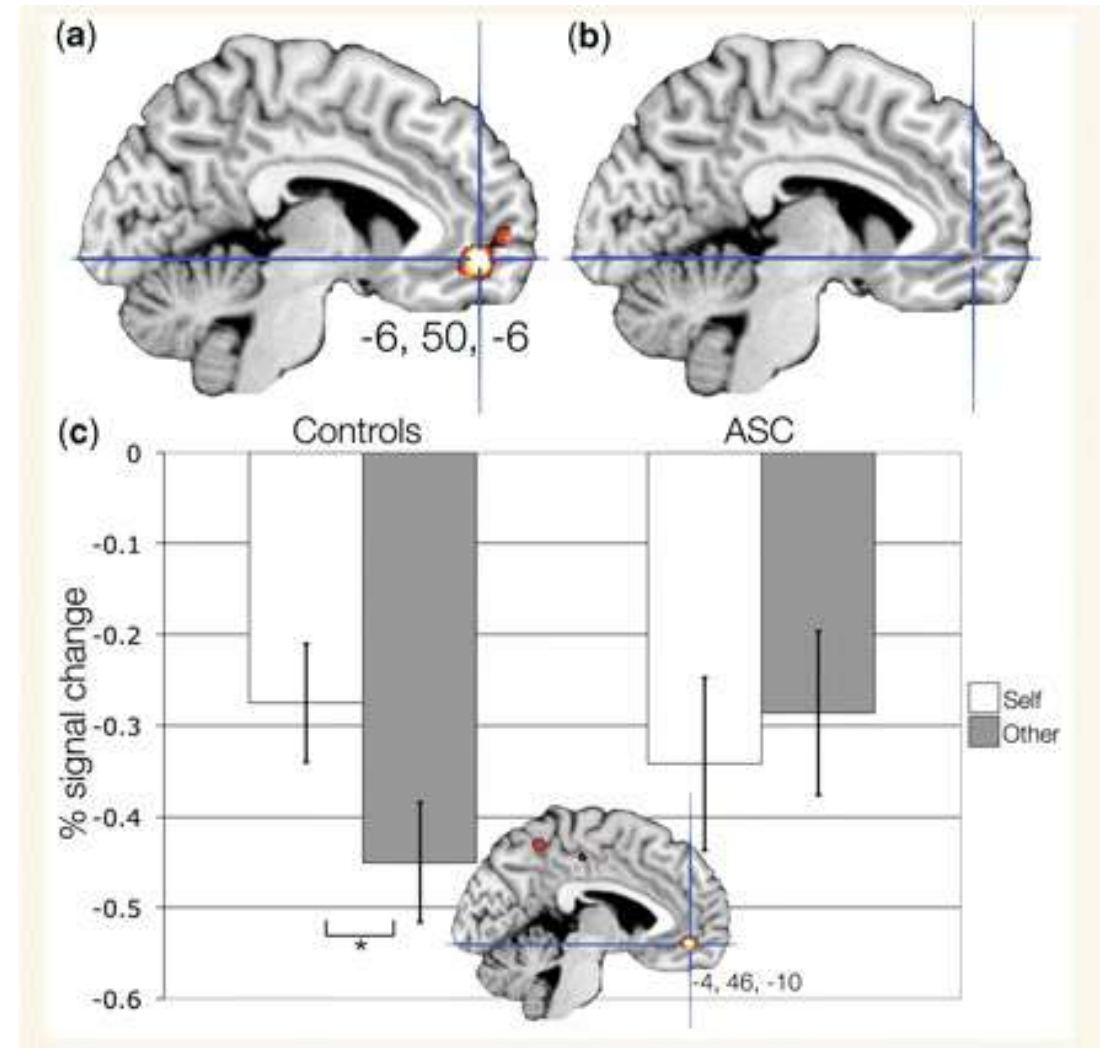
- The theory of Structural Dissociation posits that **all children begin with different parts to their personality** and don't develop a fully integrated self image until later in childhood
- Identity confusion and alteration (OSDD-1b), and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) are **considered to be the most severe forms of dissociation** that must require the most extreme childhood trauma and ACEs in order to interrupt the formation of the self
- **I would argue that, *once again*, autism 'lowers the bar of entry'**

# Everyone has personality parts

- **Internal Family Systems** theory suggests that everyone has parts to their personalities with different roles that act as a kind of inner family with inner children and inner parents, along with exiled unacceptable selves
  - “*A part of me thinks that-*” is considered to be literally true
- **Autistic people may react differently to non-autistic people when exposed to IFS style parts-based therapy**
  - over time, some of us can begin to *unpick* our singular sense of selves

# Autistic self-identity

- Research shows that autistic people have neurological impairments in self-referential cognitive processing
  - When asked to consider the British Queen's opinions vs ones own opinions, non-autistic controls had significantly different levels of brain activation, autistic people did not



– *Atypical neural self-representation in autism*, Lombardo et al., 2009

# Identity disruption?

- **Autistic people already tend to have a more detached and depersonalised view of their own identities**
  - We are more likely to know ourselves by considering **past observed behaviour**, the same way we would a family memory or celebrity
- While autistic people are *more likely to be consciously aware* of our masks, personas and scripting, **everybody has different personas in different situations**
  - neurotypical people behave and feel differently with their parents from their friends to their boss or their teachers
- Perhaps autistic people are **more able to see the realities** of human identity – *we all have different parts, masks and personas*

# Mimicry and mental rehearsal

- Another autistic coping strategy is to learn how to emulate acceptable social skills by **mimicking other people around us**, aka 'masking'
- To do this we may **fixate on a friend or classmate** and learn to model how they would behave and what they would do in any situation
- We may also **rehearse conversations with other people** by developing a mental model of what they're likely to say and how they're likely to react
- *Some autistic people may slip into feeling that this person is **taking over from them** or literally **telling them what to do** during adverse experiences*

# Repression of unacceptable selves

- Autistic children tend to have a more intense experience of the world and **more intense emotional expression** in reaction to this
- We may learn to entirely suppress awareness of our negative emotions as a coping strategy, or due to external 'training'
  - This can cause our negative emotions to only be expressed when they have reached extreme levels that can no longer be suppressed
- ***Children may conceive of these negative feelings as another unacceptable 'exiled' self***
  - *particularly if these thoughts are associated with a rehearsed or mimicked external person, or are experienced during depersonalisation*



# Repression of positive emotions

- Autistic children may learn to repress positive emotions too, or to **associate these emotions with upsetting situations** where they were shamed or felt unsafe, bullied or punished
- Unfiltered autistic joy is often intense and shown with hand flapping, jumping up and down and squealing
  - This can be very misunderstood, discouraged or treated as immature
- Autistic interests may be perceived as age-, gender- or socially inappropriate, annoying or harmful by others
- **Autistic depression *may* have a dissociative basis**
  - *‘Unmasking’ and supporting exiled selves may help heal this*

# Part Six: Conclusions

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- **Autistic people have a 'lower bar of entry'** to developing habitual dissociative responses to unbearable ongoing adverse experiences
- **I prefer to frame the reasons for this as CUTS rather than trauma**
- It's not very empowering to have to think of *just existing as autistic* being *traumatising* in the same way as the most upsetting ACEs
- **Considering Chronic Unaddressed Toxic Stress** and its interactions with Adverse Childhood Experiences as leading to habitual dissociative responses allows for more nuance
- Parents of autistic people are more likely to have both autistic traits **and** dissociative traits – ***dissociation can be learned by example***

# Other dissociative experiences

- A lot of other autistic community-described experiences *could* be partially described or explained in terms of dissociation
  - **Skills loss/burnout** overlaps with dissociative amnesia
  - **Hyperfocus and flow states** are usually placed on a dissociative spectrum
  - **Inertia and getting stuck** *could* be due to maladaptive dissociation – perhaps developing from habitual daydreaming and zoning out
  - **Alexithymia and sensory under-sensitivity** *could* be repression
  - **Detached assessments of your emotional state, or forgetting the emotional content of memories** *could* be forms of dissociative switching, depersonalisation or amnesia

# Final thought

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- Awareness of CUTS and habitual dissociative responses, and what these might look like for autistic people, is an essential addition to our 'autistic toolbox'
- **Without this perspective, our picture of autistic development is incomplete!**

# **Further discussion in Derwent at 2pm**

- If you have **any questions or thoughts to share**, the discussion the accompanies this talk will be in **Derwent immediately after lunch** at 2pm today
  - **ACEs = Adverse Childhood Experiences**
  - **CUTS = Chronic Unaddressed Toxic Stress**