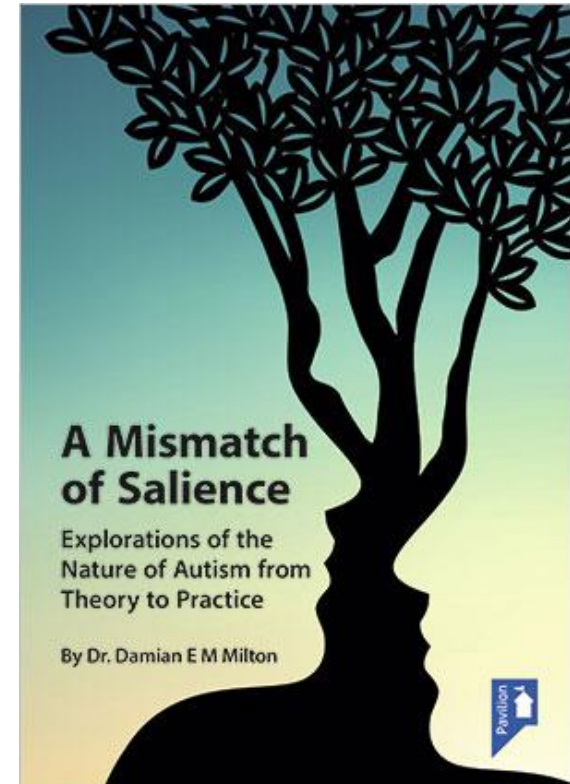


Supporting the wellbeing of autistic learners through activities that encourage flow states

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Introduction

- The concept of flow states will be explored, where a person is so immersed in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.
- The benefits for wellbeing (and also potential downsides) of flow states will be examined in relation to educational pedagogy.

Core Domains of Quality of Life	Indicators
Self-Determination	Autonomy, Choices, Decisions, Personal Control, Self-Direction, Personal Goals/Values
Social Inclusion	Acceptance, Status, Supports, Work Environment, Community Activities, Roles, Volunteer Activities, Residential Environment
Material Well-Being	Ownership, Financial, Security, Food, Employment, Possessions, Socio-economic Status, Shelter
Personal Development	Education, Skills, Fulfillment, Personal Competence, Purposeful Activity, Advancement
Emotional Well-Being	Spirituality, Happiness, Safety, Freedom from Stress, Self-concept, Contentment
Interpersonal Relations	Intimacy, Affection, Family, Interactions, Friendships, Support
Rights	Privacy, Voting, Access, Due Process, Ownership, Civic Responsibilities
Physical Well-Being	Health, Nutrition, Recreation, Mobility, Health Care, Health Insurance, Leisure, Activities of Daily Living

The sensory onslaught

- Sensory integration and fragmentation.
- Hypo and hyper sensitivity.
- Context and motivation.
- Synaesthesia.
- Stress, arousal and sensory overload – ‘meltdown’ and ‘shutdown’.
- Stress build up: coming back from Denmark.

Chronic stress and mental ill-health

- Living with almost constant stress and social disjuncture, can be even more highly damaging when unrecognised.
- Alienation and isolation, withdrawal from society.
- Mental ill-health – from social anxiety issues to depression and catatonia.
- The AMASE report: Too complicated to treat?

What did they know?

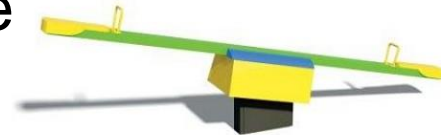
- “Appalling, I fear I am at a loss to know where to begin and what to try next. Fortunately, he enjoys his table-tennis.” (French teacher, Autumn term, 1985).



- “Have you ever decided to spend half an hour on an activity, such as reading e-mails, doing some gardening, or even shopping, only to find out that you have been doing the activity for a number of hours? Then you may well have experienced what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as a ‘flow state’.” (McDonnell and Milton, 2014).

Flow states and challenging experiences

- A flow state can be achieved when the skills and resources available to an individual are fully engaged in managing an activity.
- If an activity is not challenging enough it can lead to boredom, yet flow can return if the level of challenge increases.
- Equally, if an activity is too difficult it can quickly lead to frustration, and returning to flow would require a reduction in the difficulty of the challenge presented.



Flow and the relieving of stress

- By engaging with passion in their interests, all people can become absorbed in an activity that gives them a sense of achievement.
- In addition, certain repetitive tasks can help people achieve a flow-like state of mind. These tasks can become absorbing and can become areas of meaning.

Interests and wellbeing

- When looking at the accounts of autistic people, 'special interests' are rarely framed as troublesome obsessions (although this is on occasion remarked upon).
- More often than not, such interests are regarded as essential to the wellbeing and sense of fulfilment that autistic people experience.

The downside

- The opposite of flow-like states: such as when flows become blocked and entangled (Milton, 2013b).
- Blockages may account for high levels of stress and resultant 'challenging behaviours' (McDonnell, 2010).
- Gambling on horse races or card games have all the necessary parameters with regard to producing a flow state in those who participate in them.
- More morally neutral activities such as playing non-gambling games can also become addictive.

Study of Asperger United Magazine

- Four broad main themes (encompassing various sub-themes) were identified:
- Meeting personal needs.
- Living with the consequences of an 'othered' identity.
- Connection and recognition.
- Relationships and advocacy.

Meeting personal needs

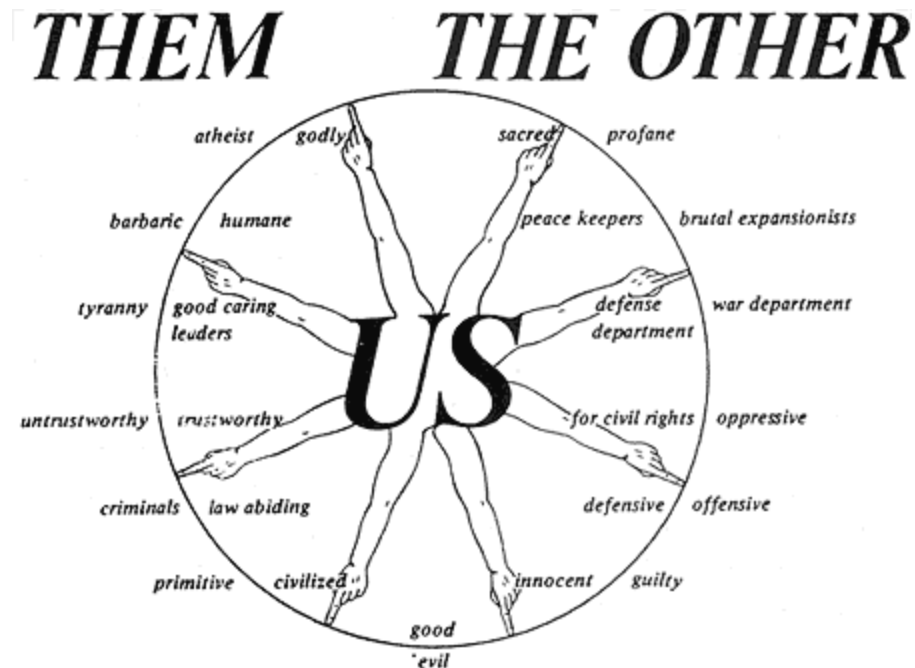
- Paramount within this theme was the minimisation of stress and sensory overload, and personal fulfilment through the pursuit of interests.
- *'It makes me a very visible case of 'sensory issues', when a spectrumite's body is discomfited by certain clothes and fabrics.'* (Maurice, 'Sensitivity and Clothing', issue 66, 4).
- *'I have always been happiest when absorbed in very detailed problem solving.'* (Tom, 'Work Detail', issue 66, 10).

Societal othering

- Societal othering encompassed issues including being excluded from social activities, attempts of others to 'normalise behaviour', problems with authority figures (expectations of obedience and conformity), stigma and bullying.
- *'Growing up in this way, it can lead to feeling as though we are 'wrong' or 'defective', and for me that led to low self-esteem and depression, as well as an intense need to find a way to improve myself and make myself acceptable to others.'* (Sian, 'Asperger's and Anorexia', issue 68, 15).

Social stigma

- The denigration of difference (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).
- 'In' and 'out' groups, stigma and discrimination.



Masking

- *‘Throughout my life I have developed an ‘act’ to be ‘normal’, which has allowed me to interact with people, but this negates the possibility of friendship due to the fact it’s not the real me.’ (Robert, ‘Relationships’, issue 77, 16).*

Social navigation

- *'Far from being loners, most of us are lonely.'* (Ruth, 'Relationships', issue 77, 14).
- *'I started attending a social group for people with autism. It has helped a great deal with my confidence.'* (Paul, 'Family on the Spectrum', issue 67, 20).
- *'I was wondering how other people in the same position have 'embraced' their Asperger's personality and shed the masks that have to be worn every day – I feel that mine will have to be surgically removed, as they've grown to be a big but uncomfortable and ill-fitting part of me.'* (Karen, letter to the editor, issue 76, 20).

Connection and recognition

- *‘I cannot talk about my real experience of life to most people, because they wouldn’t understand or be interested. That makes me feel, as the saying goes, ‘lonely in a room full of people’ and I’m fed up with it. I would like to talk to caring, intelligent, honest people who understand Asperger’s well and with whom I can talk openly. My hobbies include cycling, walking in the countryside, and rational thinking.’ (Daniel, Pen Pal 95, issue 68, 7).*

Acceptance and autistic-led spaces

- *‘When I am in an environment I feel comfortable in, with people who are kind and tolerant, and doing things I enjoy, then I am as happy as the next person. It is when people tell me I should think, speak or behave differently that I start to feel different, upset, isolated and worthless. So surely the problem is a lack of fit with the environment rather than something inside my brain that needs to be fixed?’*
(Victoria, ‘Are You Taking Something for It?’, issue 76, 12).

Relationships and advocacy

- *‘Now, close personal relationships and I have what you might call a nodding acquaintance. I usually manage one every ten years or so, on average.’* (Mark, ‘Don’t Really Go in for Titles, Best Just Read On’, issue 76, 11).
- *‘We’re all positive and that positivity has helped us cope with everything in life. We’re a strong unit: we help others and each other.’* (Paul, ‘Family on the Spectrum’, issue 67, 20).
- Advocacy and self-advocacy – and in relation to research.

Key points in reducing stress

- Acceptance of the autistic way of being, work with the autistic person and not against their autism.
- Watch out for ‘triggers’ in the environment. If the environment is causing distress, change it.
- Explore interests and fascinations together.
- Having strong rapport and building mutually fulfilling and trusting relationships.
- Encourage autistic companionship.
- Encourage understanding of non-autistic people and culture, rather than teaching how to poorly mimic what one is not.
- ‘Low arousal’ is not ‘no arousal’ – many sensory experiences are fun!

Heasman et al. (2024)

- Drawing on autistic autobiographical accounts, we outline four principles: (1) autistic people are uniquely placed to discover and manage flow; (2) autistic flow may qualitatively diverge from traditional models of flow; (3) difficulties maintaining and exiting flow for autistic people highlight a need to examine transitions into and out of flow; and, (4) internal and external constraints to flow highlight there is unrealised autistic potential yet to be discovered.
- The implications of an autistic flow theory for:
 - (a) our conceptual understanding of autism.
 - (b) how we build enabling environments for autistic people that allow flow to flourish across educational practice, wellbeing and research contexts.

Heasman et al. (2024)

- “Flow states allow us to discover and extend our abilities and might therefore create optimal conditions for learning (analogous to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development; Vygotsky, 1978). Strengths-based and self-directed approaches to education would harness the autistic propensity to enter flow states, by allowing learners to pursue their own specialist interests and remove barriers to flow.” (Heasman et al. 2024).

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