

* Introducing Autism-Informed Practice

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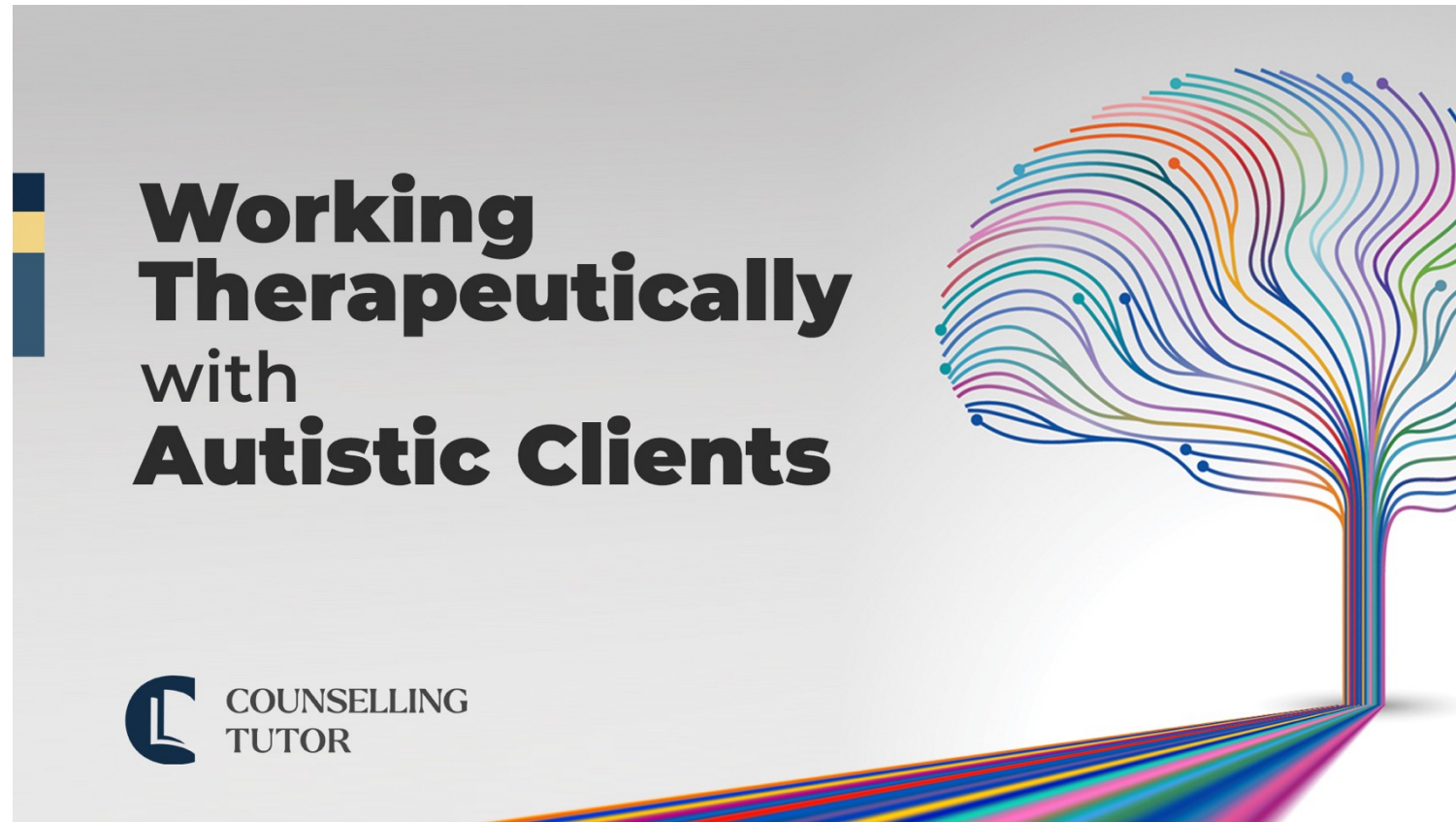


COUNSELLING
TUTOR



* Welcome!

The lecture is a sample from a series of lectures included in our 45-hour Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course.



* Aim and Objectives

Aim: To introduce the principles and framework of autism-informed practice

Objectives:

- ✓ To understand why being autism-informed is essential to your practice
- ✓ To challenge stereotypes
- ✓ To develop skills in adapting your practice
- ✓ To examine the law as it relates to autism



***‘If you've met one autistic person,
you've met one autistic person.’***

Dr Stephen Shore

* What Is Neurodivergence?

‘Neurodivergence’ refers to the natural variations in how brains function and think, and how they process information. It challenges the idea that there is a ‘normal’ or ‘correct’ way for a brain to work.

Examples of neurodivergence:

- ✓ Autism
- ✓ ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*)
- ✓ Dyslexia and dyscalculia
- ✓ Dyspraxia
- ✓ Tourette syndrome



Different operating systems

***Disclaimer: why we avoid ‘disorder’**

The term ‘disorder’ suggests deficit and stigma. We use inclusive language to honour neurodivergence as a natural difference, focusing on strengths and individuality.

* What Is Neurodivergence?

Viewing neurodivergence as a difference rather than a deficit allows counsellors to recognise both the challenges and the unique strengths that their clients bring.

- ✓ **Not a deficit** – Neurodivergence is not a disorder but a difference; it includes both challenges and unique strengths.
- ✓ **Neurotypical versus neurodivergent** – Neurotypical people process information in ways considered ‘typical’, whereas neurodivergent individuals may think and perceive the world differently.
- ✓ **Strengths-based view** – Many neurodivergent individuals excel in creativity, problem-solving and specialised skills.

* Key Examples of Neurominorities



Industrialist – Elon Musk



Artist/teacher – Iqra Babar



Climate activist – Greta Thunberg

It's crucial to understand that these individuals do not typify either the autistic community or the broader population.

* Why Recognise Neurominorities?

- ✓ **Significant population** – 15–20%* of the global population is neurodivergent.
- ✓ **Inclusive support** – Recognising neurodivergence enables tailored, effective counselling.
- ✓ **Validation** – Acknowledging neurodiversity promotes self-acceptance and empowerment.
- ✓ **Better outcomes** – Inclusive approaches improve therapeutic results.
- ✓ **Focus on strengths** – This leverages neurodivergent strengths, e.g. creativity and problem-solving.
- ✓ **Client support** – Clients get the right support when we provide a service that meets their needs.

* This percentage is a conservative estimate.



[Watch Cassy's story here](#)

* Challenging Myths about Autism

| Myth | Fact |
|---|--|
| Autism affects only boys. | Autism can be experienced by people from either gender or sex. |
| Autism is caused by bad parenting or by vaccines. | Autism is present at birth and not caused by external factors such as parenting or vaccines*. |
| Autism did not exist until a few years ago. | Autism has always existed, but we have more awareness now as more people are being diagnosed. |
| Autistic people do not feel empathy. | Autistic people do have empathy, though they may display it differently from neurotypical people |
| Autism can be cured. | Autism cannot be cured: it is part of a person's identity. |

* Brain damage resulting from a stroke, tumour or accident can cause a person to develop neurodivergent traits.



How Can We Adapt Our Practice and Skills to Support Clients Who Are Autistic?

* Relevant Legislation

Autism Act 2009 – This was the first disability-specific legislation in England and Wales. It requires the government to develop and review regularly an adult autism strategy, which aims to improve the services available to adults with autism.

Equality Act 2010 – This is a significant piece of legislation that protects people with disabilities – including those with autism – from discrimination in various areas, e.g. employment, education, and access to goods and services.



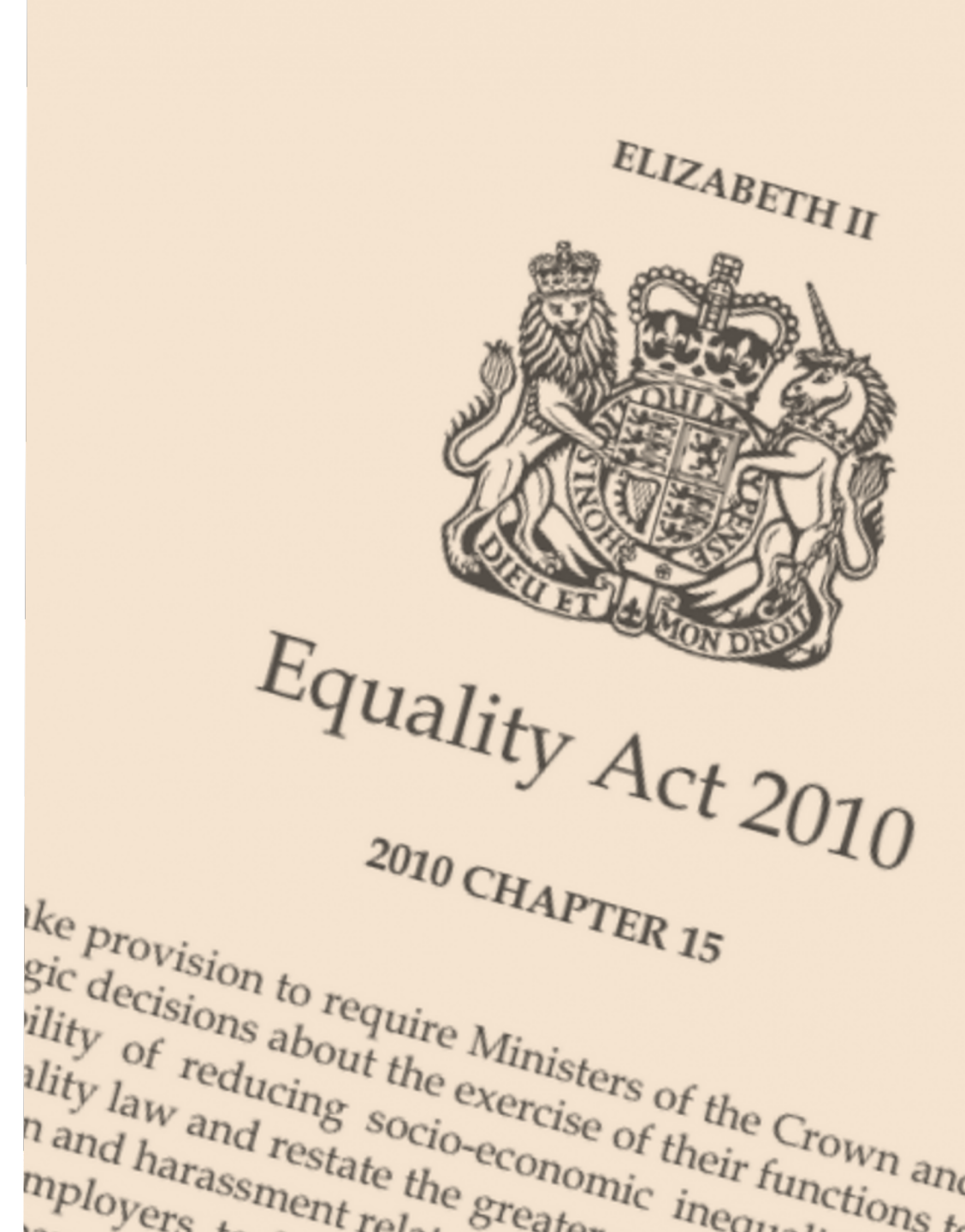
* Relevant Legislation

Children and Families Act 2014 – This legislation includes provisions to support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including those with autism. It introduced education, health and care (EHC) plans, which are integrated support plans designed to meet the needs of children and young people up to the age of 25 for education, health care and social care.



* Equality Act 2010

- ✓ Age
- ✓ Disability
- ✓ Gender reassignment
- ✓ Marriage and civil partnership
- ✓ Pregnancy and maternity
- ✓ Race
- ✓ Religion and belief
- ✓ Sex
- ✓ Sexual orientation



* Anticipatory Duty – Reasonable Adjustments

Like other organisations and businesses, private-practice counsellors and psychotherapists are required to consider and plan for the challenges that autistic clients may encounter.

This entails forward-thinking and planning to ensure that their services are accessible to autistic people, which includes identifying and making reasonable adjustments.

The reality is that there is often a long wait for a diagnosis.





Making Reasonable Adjustments to Accommodate Client Preferences

* Sounds

Autistic individuals may have varying sensitivities to noise and sounds, both inside and outside the therapy room.

This sensitivity can fluctuate, based on their current level of relaxation, stress or fatigue. For those who are more sensitive, even the sound of a ticking clock can be extremely distracting or overwhelmingly loud.



* Smells

It is crucial to maintain a neutral scent environment within the counselling area. This means avoiding the use of strong fragrances, including colognes, during sessions.

Additionally, it is wise to ask the client if there are any particular odours they find unpleasant or disruptive.



* Lighting

Many autistic individuals are sensitive to bright lights, and they might come to their counselling sessions squinting – or wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap or a hoodie – to shield their eyes from the glare.

This behaviour can serve as an initial indication that the client may prefer to have the blinds closed during the session.





Adapting Our Communication: Receive and Transmit -.-

* Rethinking Communication – Don't Take Anything for Granted

Examine the graphic to your right – what message is conveyed through the Morse code?

Unsure or unable to decipher it?

Wondering why?

Despite Morse code being a communication method used by millions globally, not everyone is familiar with it.

If this task leaves you feeling confused or slightly anxious, it offers a glimpse into the experiences of autistic individuals when faced with unclear language.



* The Double Empathy Problem

In the context of autism, the communication gap between autistic and non-autistic individuals is bidirectional.

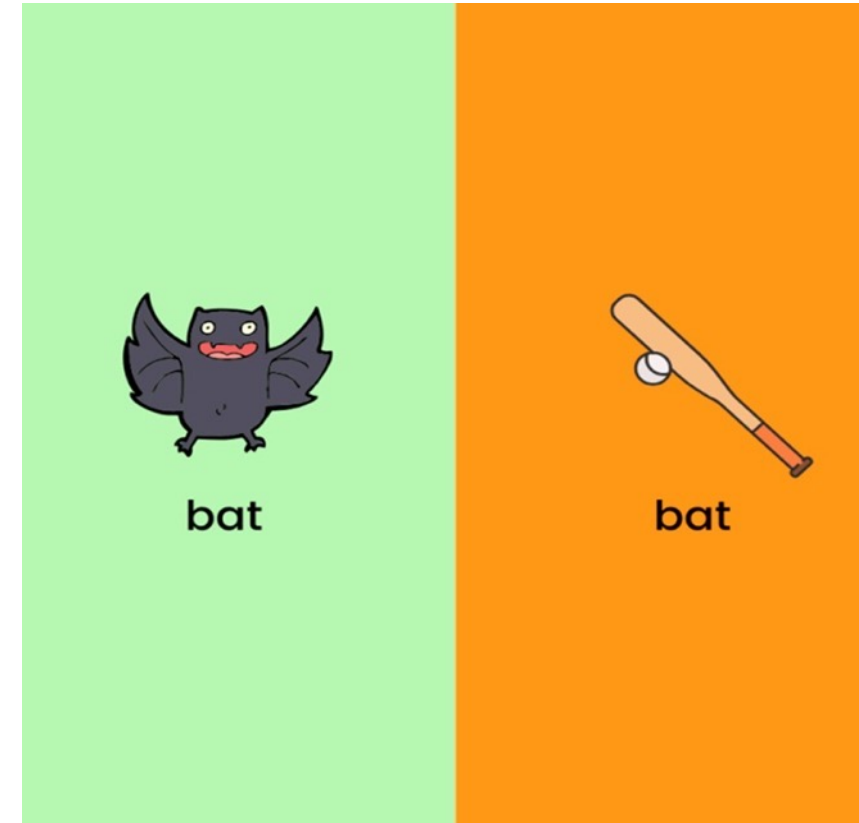
It's not solely that autistic individuals might struggle to comprehend non-autistic perspectives; non-autistic individuals frequently encounter challenges in understanding autistic viewpoints as well.



* Dual Frames of Reference

Autistic frame of reference – Autistic individuals perceive, process and respond to the world in ways that are intrinsic to their neurology. Their communication, social interactions and understanding of others are filtered through this lens, which may differ significantly from non-autistic norms.

Non-autistic frame of reference – Non-autistic individuals, or those who align with the majority neurotype, also have their unique way of experiencing and interpreting the world. Their expectations for communication and social interaction are shaped by societal norms that may not accommodate the autistic perspective.



‘I had a bat in the back of my car.’

* Adapting Your Language

Autistic individuals may struggle with interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues, such as body language and tone of voice.

- ✓ Misunderstandings in social interactions are common, due to these communication differences.
- ✓ Expressing thoughts and feelings in conventional ways can be challenging.
- ✓ Difficulty initiating or responding in conversations might occur.
- ✓ Adapting communication approaches is crucial for effective interaction with autistic individuals.

International Morse Code

| | | | |
|---|---------|---|-----------|
| A | • — | U | • • — |
| B | — • • • | V | • • • — |
| C | — • — • | W | • — — |
| D | — • • | X | — • • — |
| E | • | Y | — • — — |
| F | • • — • | Z | — — • • |
| G | — — • | | |
| H | • • • • | | |
| I | • • | | |
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* A Guide to Clear Communication

Autistic individuals often have a distinct way of communicating compared to those who are not on the spectrum; this can lead to misunderstandings. To make your website autism-friendly, it's crucial to adapt your content accordingly:

- ✓ Offer visual alternatives alongside text. For instance, if you're providing explanations in text, also include a diagrammatic representation.
- ✓ Steer clear of vague language, including metaphors, similes, and any form of exaggeration.
- ✓ Exercise caution with sarcasm or humour, as these can easily be misinterpreted by someone with autism.



* A Guide to Clear Communication

- ✓ Make sure to clarify any specialised terms used or, at the very least, provide a definition for each term.
- ✓ Always spell out abbreviations in full after their initial use. For example, if you mention 'GDPR', ensure that you also include its full form – 'GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)' – the first time it appears.
- ✓ Remember that any aspect of your communication that an autistic person does not understand can cause them distress.





Autism and Minority Experience

* Language Is Important

‘**Ethnically diverse**’ and ‘**ethnic minority**’ are now accepted terms to describe the ethnicity of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds/identities.

You may also come across the outdated term ‘**BAME**’ (Black, Asian and minority ethnic).

* Intersectionality

‘Intersectionality’ – a term coined by American critical legal race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 – focuses on recognising all the factors of a person’s identity that can lead to their marginalisation.

An example would be being both Black and autistic in a society or culture that does not recognise or accept neurodiversity.



Dr Kimberlé Crenshaw

* The Double Minority Effect

'Research has discovered the double minority effect. This is "the psychological state created when two devalued identities interact to influence the individual in a way that is greater than the sum of the independent effects of those identities". In fact, double minority status had been linked to higher mental distress and poorer well-being ... Also, research shows that minorities experience chronic stress from prejudice. They also experience discrimination and are at a greater risk of physical health problems.'

Oswald, 2021, 'Double Minority Status' section, para. 3

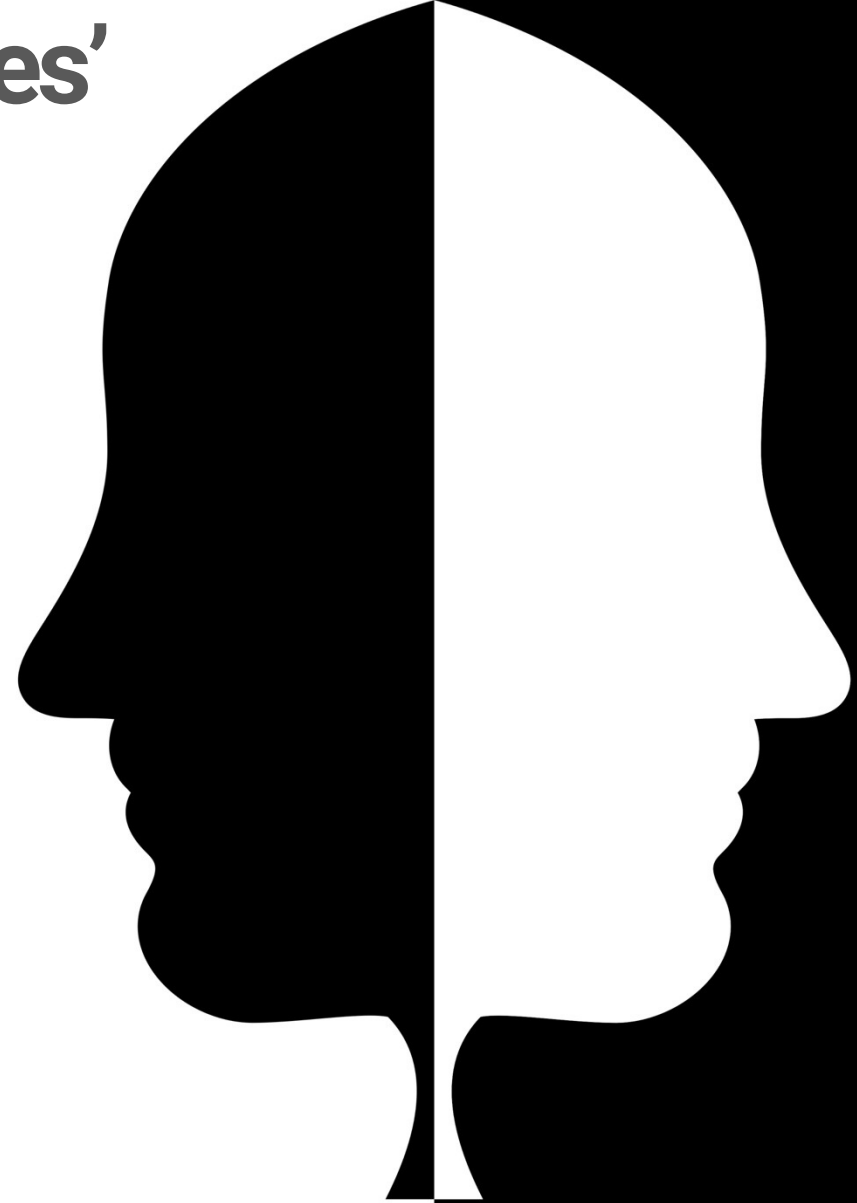


Dr. Tasha Oswald , Ph.D.

* 'I Feel Like I Have Two Identities'

'Often, the company will have very inclusive rhetoric and an active network when it comes to their LGBTQ+ staff. However, the rhetoric around autism and other disabilities is often lacking, or perhaps less mature. You feel accepted for one side of your identity, but the autistic part of your identity is perhaps less recognised or understood.'

Moran, n.d., para. 5





Autism and Working Online

* Anything but the Phone

‘This dislike of phone calls was often linked to the difficulties the medium caused: “my auditory processing is poor, and trying to say what I want/need verbally is difficult” and “phone calls ... tend to be paced quite quickly, which can overload me”.’

Howard and Sedgewick, 2021, p. 2271

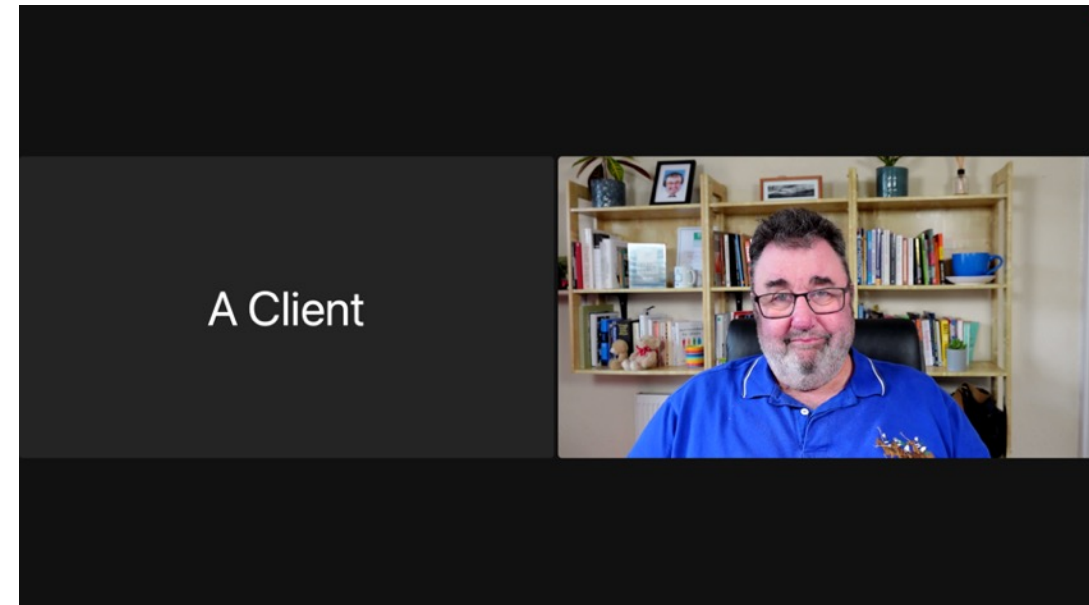


* Working Online

As a counsellor, you may need to adapt your methods for video platforms. Elaine Nicholson, in her article for the *Healthcare Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal* (2016, 'Open access' section, para. 4), notes:

'It is not uncommon for me to "Skype" a client with only him/her seeing my face, but with me not seeing their face on the screen.'

*This article was written in 2016, before the GDPR came into force. We strongly advise that you ensure that the video platform you choose is GDPR-compliant.



How an autistic client may prefer to work online

* Final Thoughts

Historically, psychiatric diagnosis has often been an active process of labelling that, unfortunately, can disadvantage neurodivergent individuals – particularly women.

Many have been misdiagnosed with personality disorders, mood disorders, sociopathy, psychopathy or depressive disorders when their experiences are actually rooted in autism.

* Final Thoughts

As therapists, developing a clear understanding of autism and adapting our practice accordingly enables us to provide better support for these clients.

By shifting our approach, we can move beyond harmful misdiagnoses and foster meaningful, positive change in their lives.



Cassy speaks about how her life has changed – [watch here](#)

* Want to Become an Autism-Informed Practitioner?

>> Go to counsellingtutor.com/autism-course/

Autism-Informed Course for Counsellors

This course, **Working Therapeutically with Autistic Clients**, is designed for therapists who want to better serve their clients on the autism spectrum by developing a nuanced understanding of neurodivergence. It offers practical skills and knowledge to enhance your practice.

Course launching soon!

Interested in getting this training? Just click the button below to get added to the update list and receive a copy of the course handbook.



JOIN THE WAITING LIST

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