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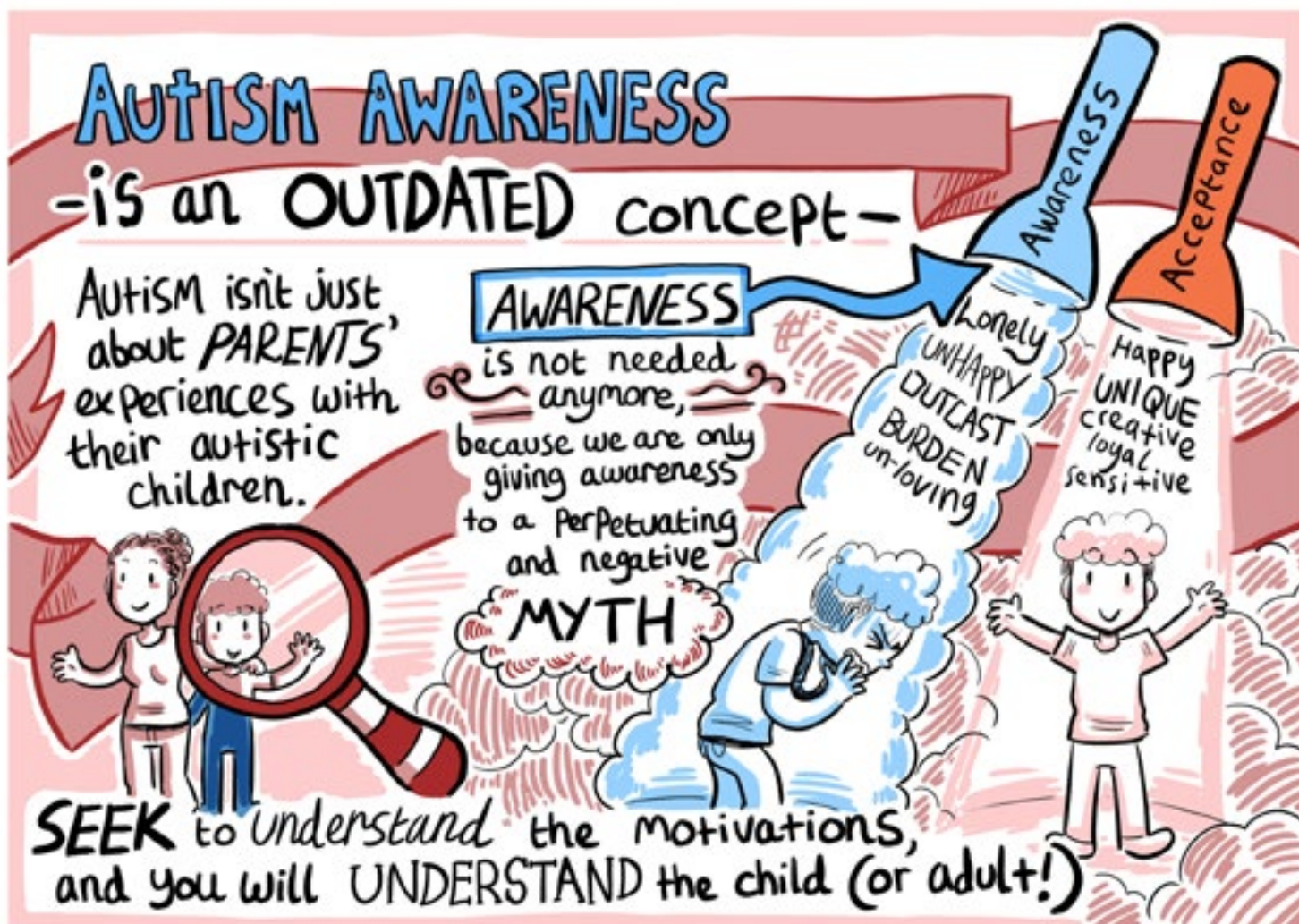
*Comic by Rebecca Burgess*

*Produced by Geek Club Books*

**By this point, everyone's aware of autism. It exists! We get it!**

Parents of autistic kids everywhere want the world to know that autism exists, but we got the message long ago and it's time to move on. It's time to embrace autism acceptance. And it's time to start listening to us, autistic people, who have our own voices and know what we need.

To that end, here are 10 reasons to end autism awareness efforts and focus instead on acceptance. They've all been said before, but we've had to keep saying it again (and again and again) because some folks didn't seem to hear us. But as more of us get diagnosed, there are more of us to talk about it. And now it's my turn to advocate for our community.



## 1. Autism awareness is an outdated concept.

Back when no one had heard of autism, raising awareness of its existence was understandable. Parents sought answers for how to approach parenting and educating their kids. They wanted to form communities with other parents whose families were experiencing similar things. But we've learned enough since then to realize that autism isn't just about parents' experience with their autistic children. It's not just about behavior either; it's about the motivations behind behavior. Seek to understand the motivations, and you will understand the child (or the adult).

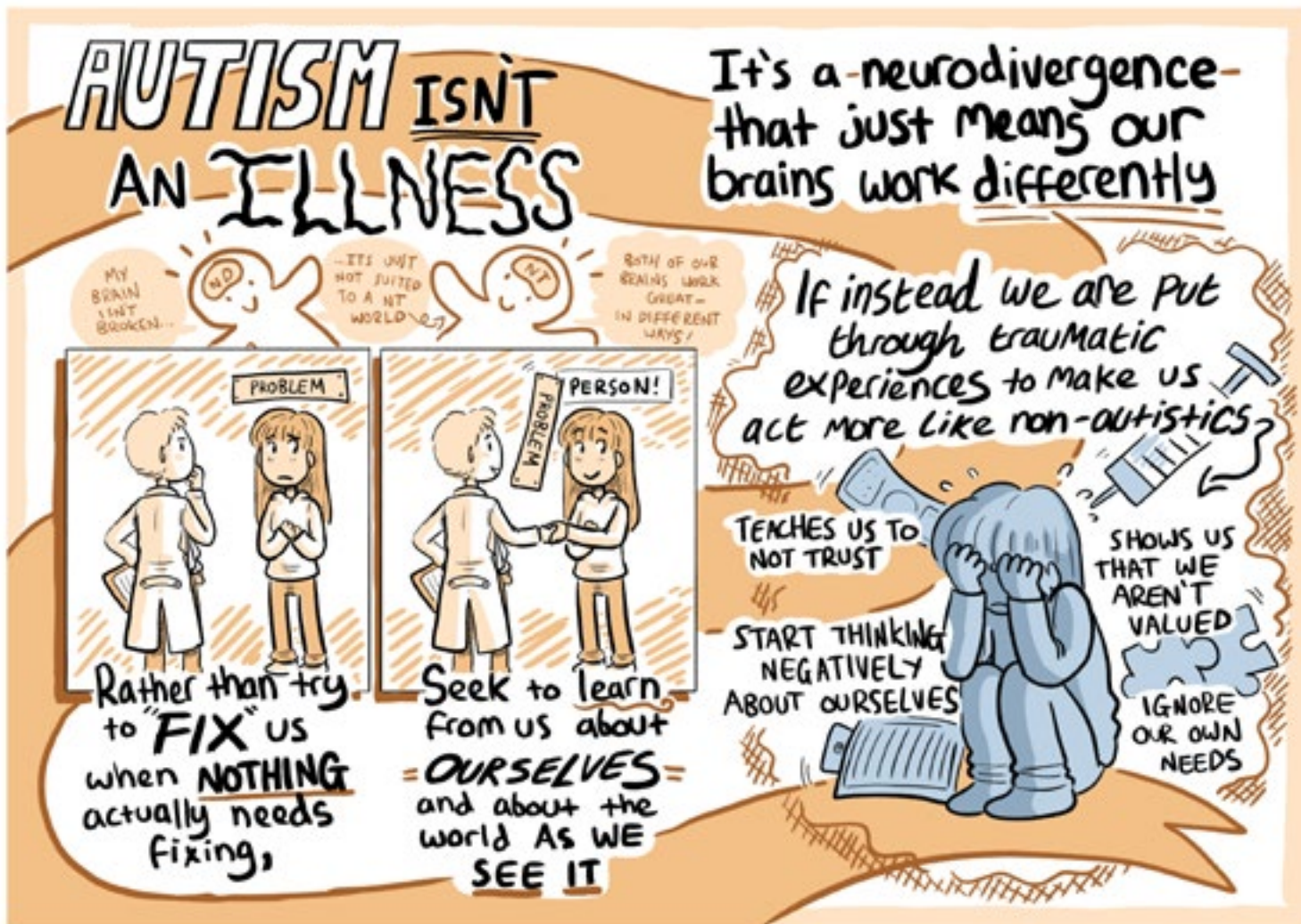
Illustrator Bex Burgess puts it well: " 'Awareness' is not needed anymore, because we're only giving 'awareness' to a perpetuating and negative myth on what autism is, and on what motherhood and childhood should look like. The way I hear about autism in some contexts is almost like some kind of scary dreaded urban myth!"

She continues, encouraging people to use the concept of autistic acceptance to understand their own children and to be more accepting of people in general:

"Acceptance" is a great word to replace "awareness" with. To accept autism from an adult point of view, is to stop fighting how someone simply is and enjoy every person's differences, and become flexible and cooperative in how we live differently in the same space. From a parenting point of view, acceptance helps encourage parents to give up on unhealthy expectations, that perpetuate these ideas that every child has to be perfect, or be who you want them to be.

Acceptance not only spreads REAL awareness of autism as a whole rather than one side of autism, but it also helps people shift their whole perspective on how we should treat everyone. All people have their good and bad moments, their strengths and weaknesses. We should all be allowed to accept that, and be flexible and compassionate with one another. I don't understand why, when an autistic person has a weakness or a bad moment, it's really focused on and seen as being the only thing they are, and something that needs to be erased, instead of a passing moment that will come and go like everyone else's weaknesses or bad moments. I think acceptance encompasses this as well."





## 2. Autism isn't an illness.

Autism isn't a disease or illness that needs to be cured. It's a neurodivergence that just means our brains work differently and we approach the world differently. Rather than try to "fix" us when nothing actually needs fixing, seek to learn from us about ourselves and about the world as we see it. Imagine that we see and hold a bit of truth that others don't have. If someone aims to understand this truth, without judgment, it shows us that they respect us.

But if instead we are put through traumatic experiences to make us act more like non-autistics, it teaches us to not trust or feel safe with our caregivers. It shows us that we aren't valued as we are. Frequently, we even internalize this and start thinking negatively about ourselves, too. We don't magically lose our autism when we are forced to abandon our coping mechanisms and ignore our own needs. We are still autistic but without the tools we need to deal with a world that is sometimes overwhelming for us.





### 3. Acceptance allows us to be our best selves and take care of our physical and mental health.

By accepting autism, people are accepting us, just as we are. By not trying to change us or force us into a narrow definition of what is acceptable, it allows everyone to get to know us as people. They might just find that they actually like us. They might find our personalities refreshing.

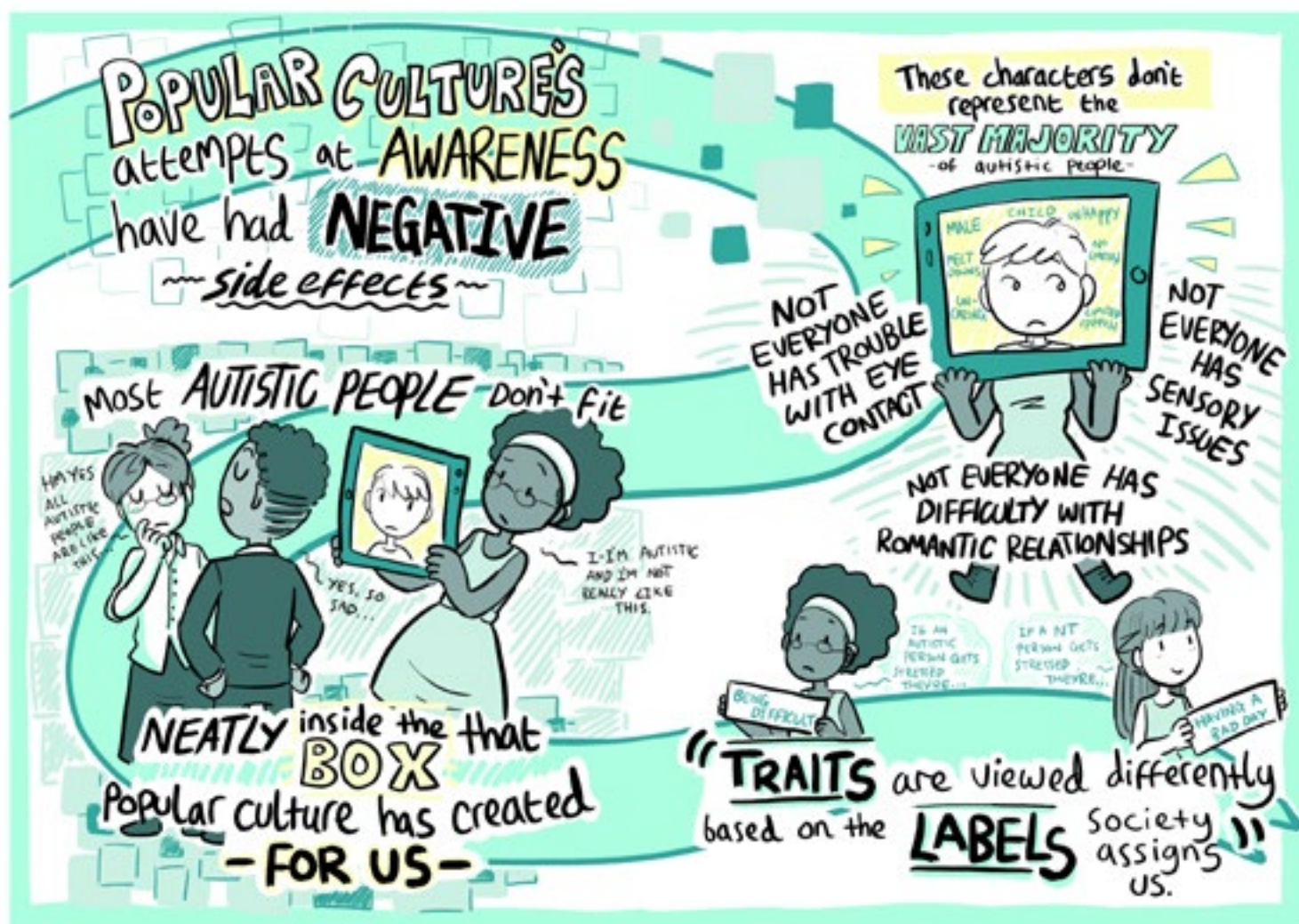
Sure, sometimes autistic people can act or react in ways that are different from what people may expect. For some autistic people, this may include stimming behaviors; sensitivity to light, sound, touch, smell, texture, or taste; bluntness and direct statements; and out-of-the-box thinking. But rather than using therapies that squelch our natural behavior and coping mechanisms just so those around us can feel more comfortable, realize that these therapies are unhealthy for us. By forcing us to deny or hide who we are, some of us develop anxiety disorders, digestive difficulties, emotional regulation issues, and all kinds of other physical and mental health issues. When there is no autism acceptance, we may struggle to get proper physical or mental health care, or even have access to it. We have a higher suicide rate. We have higher unemployment and underemployment rates. Our ability to thrive often relies on acceptance.

We want to be ourselves just like everyone else does. By accepting us as we are and taking our stated needs seriously, we are able to practice the kind of self-care that maintains good mental and physical health. That allows us to be our best selves.

As it currently stands, society often forces us to conform, and, for our own safety, opportunity, and access, we often go along with it. But spending decades masking who we really are can cause us to forget how to be our real selves, which we must then work to rediscover later.

Writer K. Tilden Frost likens it to speaking a second language that you're almost-but-not-quite fluent in. "You can understand a lot, and you can get more through context if you work at it, but it's [...] exhausting." When K. began a relationship with another autistic person, she said, "I had to relearn how to speak my native language."





#### 4. Popular culture's attempts at awareness have had negative side effects.

A number of books, movies, and television shows, among other media, have made an attempt at autism awareness. But they have usually created autistic characters that are mere stereotypes exhibiting one collection of behaviors which have now become synonymous with autism in the public eye. But these characters don't represent the vast majority of autistic people. Not everyone has trouble with eye contact. Not everyone has sensory issues. Not everyone has difficulty with romantic relationships.

Autistic people have been portrayed in popular culture within a narrow band of skills, behavior, and sensitivities. Sure, there are autistic people who exhibit these types of behaviors. But that's only scratching the surface. Most autistic people don't fit neatly inside the box that popular culture has created for us. You can liken it to the old square peg, round hole analogy. But here's what many people don't get: round holes aren't the only kind of holes. And we're not all square pegs. Some of us are triangles. Some are even tesseractes. Sure, you can sometimes find commonalities among the autistic population, but each one of us has our own set of autistic attributes, both "from the list," as it were,

and from outside the list. Plus, everyone expresses their attributes differently.

Among our differences may also be some generally valuable skills that are not as common in the non-autistic population, but we don't all have the same set. Each autistic person has their own set of strengths and will have something unique to bring to the table. But, be careful here. A trait that may be seen as valuable in a non-autistic person might be seen as "problematic" in an autistic one. As Jules Sherred explains, "Traits are viewed differently based on the labels society assigns to us."

If you want to learn more about autistic people, look to the fiction and non-fiction that we write. We don't all write about autistic people or characters, but by reading these books, you'll experience our various autistic worldviews. And, any autistic characters that are included will be more accurate and well-rounded, and not caricatures. K. Tilden Frost recommends a few YA/middle grade novels written by autistic authors that "get autistic characters right": *Queens of Geek* by Jen Wilde, *The State of Grace* by Rachel Lucas, and *The Someday Birds* by Sally J. Pla. Also, K. and I both recommend Abed from *Community* as a well-done autistic character.





## 5. It's time to treat autistic people as authorities on themselves.

Most of the people designated as “authorities” on autism and autistic people aren’t actually autistic. They may have a bunch of letters after their name and have worked with countless autistic people and families, but anyone who isn’t autistic can’t completely understand what we experience. People can’t get to know us and our struggles by merely observing. There is too much going on inside our heads for any outside observer to know what we experience. We are the best experts on ourselves.

It is time to listen to #ActuallyAutistic people. Twitter is a great place for this and treat us as authorities on ourselves—whether we’re children or adults—rather than discounting what we have to say.

If people truly want to help us, seek to understand, not to control. Accept our identity-first language when we use it. Pay attention to what we are saying with our words or with our actions or behaviors. Some people might have to look closer to find patterns of how we’re trying to communicate, but, I promise, the communication is there.

Autistic people should be the first ones to talk to when parents are looking for guidance after a child’s autism diagnosis. Autistic adults can talk from the perspective of an autistic child who grew up. People who are often considered experts, despite their PhDs, often steer parents in the wrong directions. Some have developed therapies and advice based on forced compliance. Some have made recommendations solely based on observation, which can tell very little about some autistic people. Those around us can only know what is going on inside our heads by hearing what we have to say or by paying attention to the subtle things we do over time. If we’re quiet and unresponsive, for example, we may actually be experiencing emotions so intensely that we are overwhelmed by them and have to mentally distance or separate ourselves from the stimulus. Forcing us to communicate at such times may harm us more than help us. Being quiet can sometimes be a form of self-preservation. Once people respect the different ways in which we respond to the world, they will finally begin to understand.





## 6. Acceptance makes it easier for us to help ourselves.

Turning awareness into acceptance can minimize stigma that might prevent some adults from seeking their own diagnosis, and some parents from seeking one for their children. With a correct diagnosis can come better understanding and context for behavior, which makes all the difference in family dynamics, educational settings, and job supports.

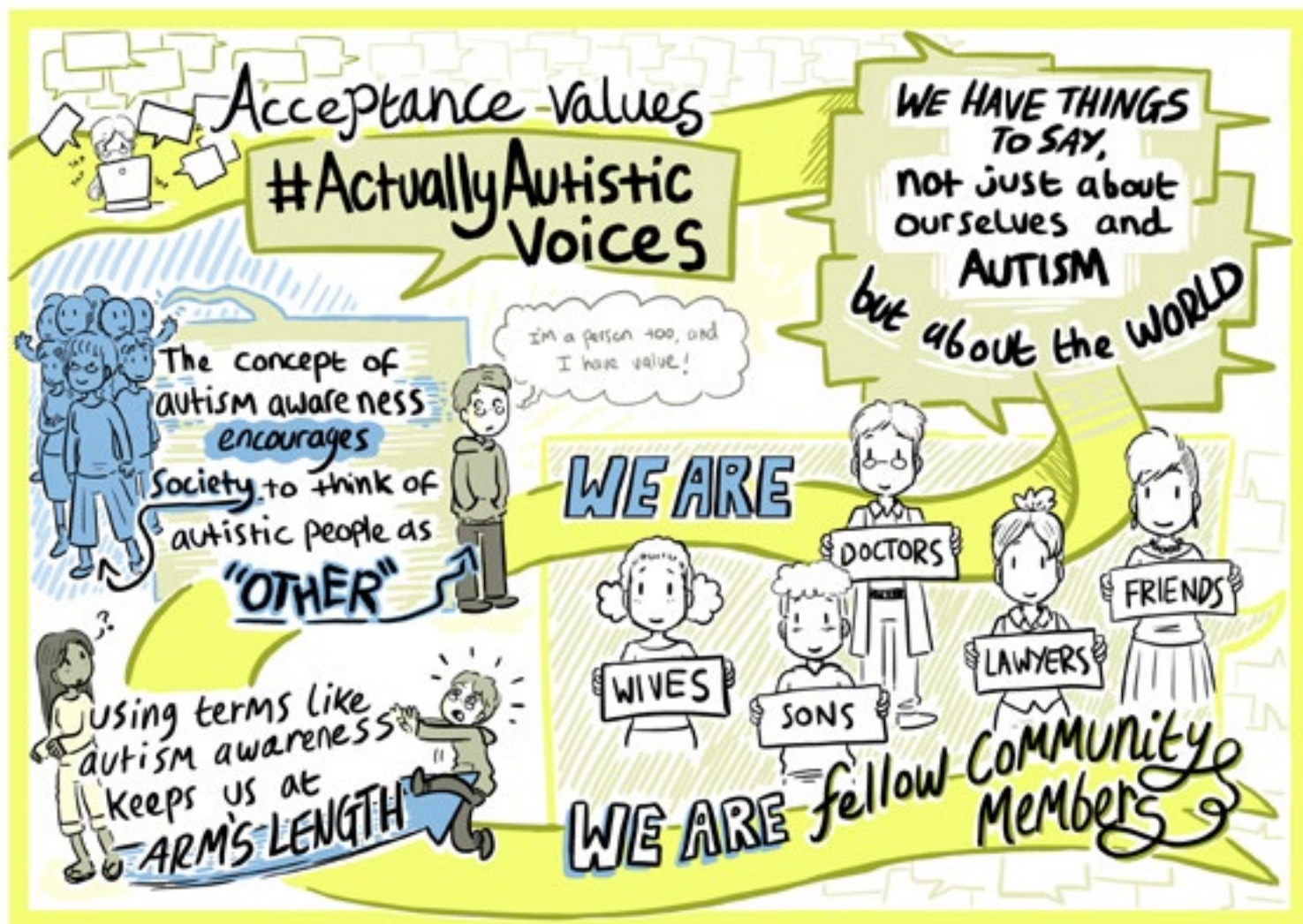
Already, more adults are getting diagnosed, with parents, especially, realizing they might be autistic after their child is diagnosed. A diagnosis helps us understand ourselves better, including our strengths and our challenges. Self-understanding provides us additional tools to navigate this tricky world. For me, it was an eye-opening experience being diagnosed last spring at age 45. It really was life changing. It was like putting on a pair of glasses and seeing my life clearly for the first time. I've reexamined my entire life through this autistic lens ever since and regularly have new epiphanies.

Many women in particular have been misdiagnosed as having a mental health or other condition before being properly

diagnosed as autistic. Or they may have a comorbid issue, such as anxiety, and professionals dismiss autistic traits as part of that issue. Autistic females often present differently from males, so their autism can be missed or ignored, thus missing out on the opportunity for self-understanding until they eventually recognize it in themselves. A prime example is K.'s diagnosis story:

*"So when my youngest was in the process of being diagnosed, I had a whole bunch of paperwork to fill out. It was full of if/then instructions, which are the bane of my existence. So I filled out an entire two page document the wrong way, realized what I'd done, created a key on the side to indicate what answers really meant what, and brought it back. I said to the doctor (who at this point had been talking about family history and observations of the youngest for two days) that I was sorry I'd messed it up, and if he had another, I could really quickly fill it out the right way to make it easier for him. He stared at me for a minute, and said in this fairly small, flat voice, "So, you get really obsessed with details sometimes, huh?" I nodded. He threw his pen down on his desk, put his head in his hands and did that thing where he kind of scrubbed at his face for a second. "You realize that there are tests for adults too, right?"*





## 7. Acceptance values #ActuallyAutistic voices.

The concept of autism awareness encourages society to think of autistic people as “other,” as a group separate from themselves, as a problem to be solved or something erroneous to be fixed. In this age of the internet echo chamber, non-autistic people may exist inside their own bubble. If these people begin accepting autistic people and listening to what we have to say about ourselves and our experiences, they could gain new perspective. Many of us approach problems in novel ways. Many of us prioritize different parts of our existence. Many of us recognize solutions that remain hidden from others. We have things to say, not just about ourselves and autism, but about the world, relationships, innovation, culture... The list could go on forever.

Autistic people enrich the lives of others, as a part of families, circles of friends, companies, and communities. Acceptance helps folks embrace us as part of the mosaic that makes up society—we are husbands, wives, daughters, sons, friends, parents, employers, coworkers, doctors, lawyers, customer service reps, etc. We are fellow community members. Most people interact with us every day and don’t even realize it. Using terms like “awareness” keeps us at arm’s length. It’s time to accept autism and, with it, autistic people.



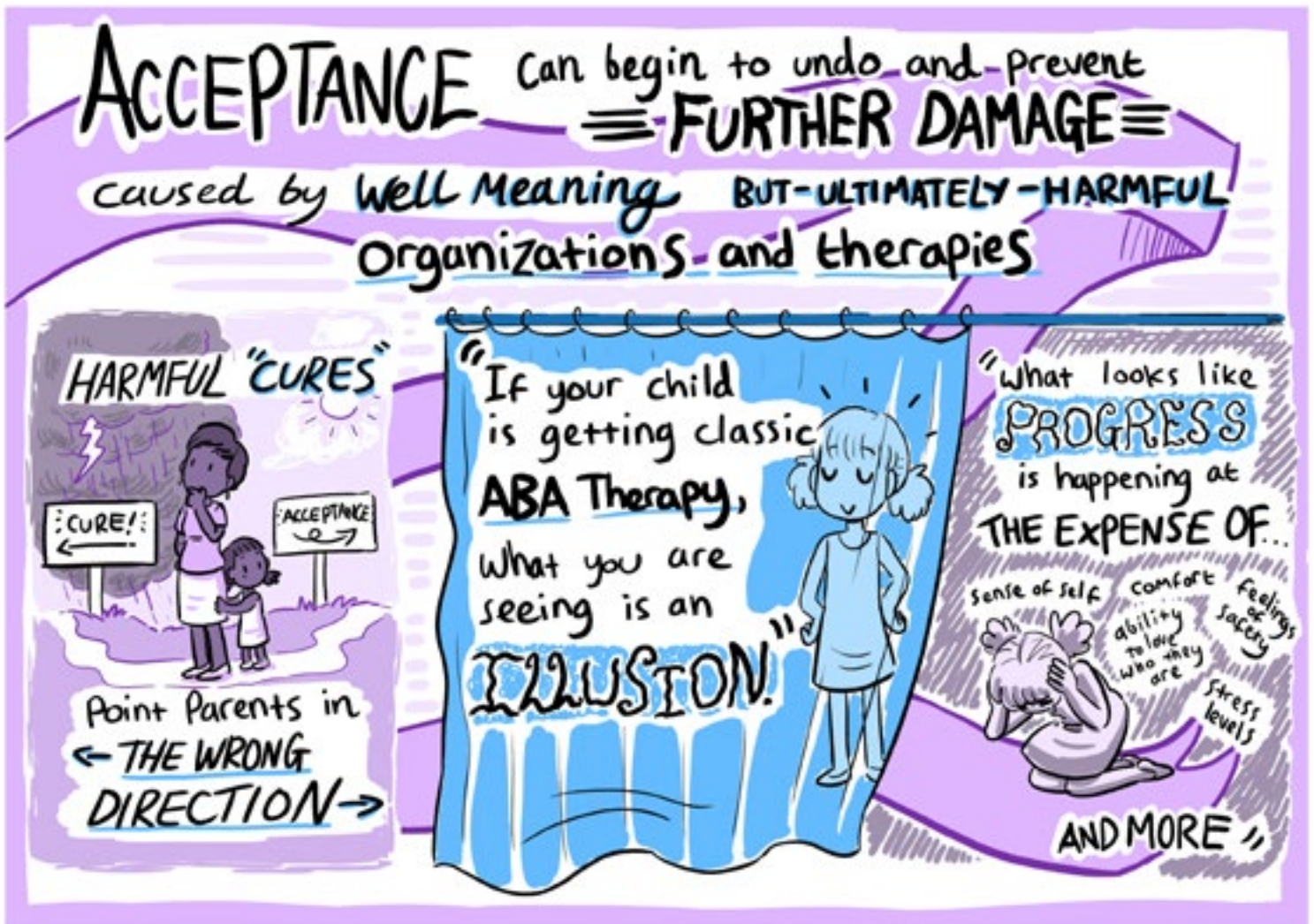


## 8. Acceptance leads to integrated supports.

By accepting autism as something that is a natural part of who we are, it will be easier to implement integrated supports for autistic people in schools, public spaces, company hiring practices, and elsewhere. Autistic kids aren't the only ones who need supports, though. We also need autism supports for adults, since we don't stop being autistic when we reach adulthood.

Acceptance leads to action and understanding. Until efforts are shifted away from therapies that strive to change us and instead toward strategies that help people understand us, society may not see these supports as necessary. As long as groups are promoting therapies that claim to "fix" us, people may think that "fixing" us will eliminate the need for supports. But even if we become good at masking our autistic traits to fit in better with the rest of the population, we're still the same people. Our brains work the same way. Only we can't keep the mask up for long, and some people struggle with keeping it up at all. We still need those supports. They help us operate without the need for masks.





## 9. Acceptance can begin to undo and prevent further damage caused by well-meaning-but-ultimate-harmful organizations and therapies.

Acceptance can begin to undo the damage caused by Autism Speaks and other harmful organizations that promote the idea of an autism cure, promote ABA, and discourage leadership by autistic people. Harmful "cures" point parents in the wrong direction and seek to erase who we are, and ABA-based therapies remove our mind and body autonomy.

As Max Sparrow from the Unstrange Mind blog says, "if your child is getting classic ABA therapy, what you are seeing is an illusion. And what looks like progress is happening at the expense of the child's sense of self, comfort, feelings of safety, ability to love who they are, stress levels, and more. The outward appearance is of improvement, but with classic ABA therapy, that outward improvement is married to a dramatic increase in internal anxiety and suffering."

Another harmful practice is the use of functioning labels. The "high-functioning" and "low-functioning" labels that

autistic people are sometimes burdened with don't always reflect what their internal experience is or what kind of supports they need now or in the future. Someone who may be seen as high-functioning may only appear that way to others, and may instead be suffering because of lack of supports, which may not exist for them because they seem too functional to need any help.







## 10. Acceptance gives our kids the best start in life and helps them grow up to be the best adults they can be.

It's our role as parents to empower our children, to help them develop into the best versions of themselves. Not to control them or train them, but to educate them, help them understand themselves, and help identify what motivates them, calms them, and challenges them. Autistic kids will be adults one day, and most will live independently. Their parents won't be with them all the time. So it's important for them to develop the skills and gain the experience to make their own good choices.

By working with how their brain works rather than against it, parents not only validate their kids, they also help them find their own unique solutions to problems and find their niche in the world. While they're still young, teach your kids in a way that maintains their agency; beginning to make their own free choices and act independently when they're still young will serve them well when they are adults. And they will thank you for it.





## THE WORLD IS ALREADY WELL AWARE OF AUTISM

Autism awareness campaigns are no longer needed. If these ten points aren't convincing enough and people want to keep focusing on the concept of autism awareness, well, perhaps focus on the awareness of the long- and short-term harm of ABA-based therapies, the awareness of the lack of autistic supports, the awareness of the comorbidity of autism and other diagnoses, and the awareness of the existence of autistic-led support groups and online communities. The autism community would benefit from these types of awareness.

#ENDAWARENESS

#LIVINGOUTSIDETHEBOX

#ACTUALLYAUTISTIC