

Lena Benak

CANVAS OF THOUGHTS[®]



Evi's World: A small guide about
Neurodiversity, Autism and ADHD for
parents, families and the children
they love.

Lena Benak



A Warm, Affirming Guide
to Neurodiversity, Autism and ADHD
for Parents, Families
and the Kids They Love

Original Concept "Canvas of Thoughts" by Ronja Röbner

Contents

Welcome.....	5
How to read this book.....	6
What is Neurodiversity?.....	9
Neurodiversity.....	11
Monotropism.....	17
Double Empathy.....	23
Different Social Needs.....	29
Late Diagnosis.....	35
The Inner World	41
Interoception.....	43
Alexithymia.....	49
Sensory Processing.....	53
Emotional Intensity.....	59
Rejection Sensitivity.....	65
Daily Life	71
Executive Function.....	73
Energy Management.....	79
Routine and Predictability.....	85
Demand Avoidance.....	91
Social Communication.....	95
Being Visible	101

Stimming	103
Echolalia	107
Special Interests	111
Masking.....	115
Unmasking	121

Hard Days and Healing 125

Sensory Overload	127
Meltdowns and Shutdowns	133
Autistic Burnout	139
Accommodation.....	145
Recovery and Recharging	151

WELCOME

This book is for anyone who has ever been told, however gently, that the way their mind works is the wrong way.

It is also for the people who love them. A mother trying to understand why the supermarket undoes her son. A grandfather, lost for what to do when his granddaughter cried at her own birthday party. The teacher who has noticed that one kid in the third row hears what no one else seems to hear.

Most of all, it is for the people whose brains those belong to: the kids and the grown-ups and the people in between, who have spent a lot of their lives translating themselves into a language that doesn't quite fit, and who would like, finally, to be read in the original.

Neurodiversity is a word for a simple idea. Human brains come in many shapes, and that variety is how we are made. The world has, for a long time, been designed around one shape of mind and called the others broken. That is the part this book is trying to undo.

You can read this book however you like. From the beginning, if that's how you read books. Or from the chapter that sounds like you. Or the chapter that sounds like someone you love. The book ends in the same invitation it begins with:

What if there is nothing to fix in you, and the question worth asking is what you need to thrive?

We are glad you are here.



HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Each chapter is built the same way. Once you know the shape, you can pick up any chapter and know where you are.

The two layers. The first part of every chapter is written for a child to read. Short sentences and real examples. The kind of explaining you might do over breakfast. After that comes a section called *For grown-ups*, which goes deeper. Adult readers can read the whole chapter; younger readers can read the first part and stop, or come back to the grown-up part later, or skip ahead to whichever chapter sounds like them next. None of these options is rude.

The recurring pieces. A short opening from the life of someone the topic touches. The explanation. One or two small drawings. A quote from someone living the topic, in their own words. (Those names are first-name-only, and the quotes are composites, written to capture what people with these experiences tend to say, without pinning the words to any one real person.) Where the experiences naturally connect, a quoted name may return across a few chapters, so that a single grown-up voice can be followed through a sequence of related topics. Then *What helps* and *What doesn't*, in case you came for that. Then a small *Try this together* prompt: a question or a small experiment to do with someone in your life.



A girl called Evi. The opening scenes mostly belong to one child. Her name is Evi, she is eleven, and she likes the colour purple. You will meet her counting cracks in the pavement, disappearing into a pile of tin cans, lying on her bedroom floor after a party that asked too much of her. Evi gives the book a face to come back to. But she is a made-up one, a stand-in stitched together from many real people, and she is only ever *one* face. Autism wears as many faces as there are autistic people. When you have come to understand one of them, that is exactly what you understand: one person, closely and truly, and not everyone who shares the word. Evi is a door into the book. She is not a description of anyone you know.

At the back of the book. Two short reference pages. The first is a *Glossary* of every term used in the book, in plain language. The second is a page called *Words we don't use here*, which says what some commonly-used phrases get wrong, and what we reach for instead. The book's values made visible.

Read in any order. Cover to cover, if that's your thing. Or jump to the chapter that sounds like you. Or jump to the chapter that sounds like someone you love. The book is not a course; nothing in it is locked.

About the drawings. The pictures are meant to be a little funny, in a kind way. They are part of the book the way doodles in the margins of a school notebook are part of the notebook: small, often metaphorical, occasionally arguing with the text. If a drawing is your favourite part of a chapter, that is allowed.





PART 1

What is Neurodiversity?

The next five chapters explain the words we will need for the rest of the book.

CHAPTER 1: NEURODIVERSITY

On the walk home, Evi counted cracks in the pavement (forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine) while her best friend Mira told a long story about the dragon she was inventing. Both of them were paying attention to something real. Both of them came home happy.

There is no one right way for a brain to work.

Some people notice every sound in a room. Some people forget what they came into the kitchen for. Some people can read three pages and tell you exactly what was on each one. Some people read the same sentence four times before it sticks.

These differences are not mistakes.

The word *neurodiversity* means that human brains come in many different shapes, the same way human bodies do. Some brains run on a clock that ticks faster than other clocks. Some brains light up around music, or numbers, or animals, the way other people's brains light up around small talk.

Autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are some of the names we use for these differences. They are ways of being wired.



Plant one kind of tree in rows and you get a tree farm. Plant many kinds together and let the birds and the moss and the mushrooms settle in underneath, and you get a forest. Brains work the same way. A world with only one kind of mind would be very small, and not very interesting.

In their own words

For years I thought my brain was a faulty version of everyone else's. Turns out it was just my brain.

Mira, 28

For grown-ups

Neurodiversity is two things at once. It is a fact, which is that the human nervous system varies widely from person to person in how it processes and responds to the world. And it is a paradigm, a way of thinking about that fact, which asks us to treat neurological variation the way we treat any other kind of human difference: as variation, not as defect.



The word itself emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s, from inside the autistic self-advocacy community. The Australian sociologist Judy Singer was developing the term in her honours thesis at the time, and around the same period the journalist Harvey Blume put the case in print: that neurodiversity might be “every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general.” His 1998 *Atlantic* piece is where the biodiversity image first found its public audience, and it is the image that runs through this chapter. The framing has since been developed by autistic writers, notably Nick Walker, into what is now called the *neurodiversity paradigm*.



That second part, the paradigm, is the move that makes the word feel new. For most of the 20th century, the dominant framework for thinking about these differences was medical. A brain that worked differently from the statistical average was called disordered, and the goal was to bring it closer to typical, usually through therapy aimed at the visible behaviors. The neurodiversity paradigm doesn't deny that some experiences are genuinely difficult. It asks where the difficulty actually lives. A child who melts down at the supermarket is not malfunctioning. The supermarket, with its fluorescent lights and its hundred shouting labels, is a sensory event most adults couldn't comfortably parse either. The child is just less practiced at hiding it.

What changes, when you adopt this lens, is the question you ask. Instead of *what is wrong with you, and how do we make you more like the others*, you start asking *what do you need to thrive, and what conditions are getting in the way?* Sometimes the answer is a quiet corner. Or headphones at the playground. Or a schedule made of pictures, or being allowed to talk about trains for as long as the talking lasts. Sometimes the answer is simply being believed.

None of this is soft. The neurodiversity paradigm asks more of the people around the neurodivergent child than the older paradigm did, not less, because it shifts effort from changing the child to changing the conditions. But it asks more of the right people, in the right direction. And it gives the child back the experience of being themselves on purpose, which is the experience every child needs.

What helps

- Letting the child show you how they experience things, before deciding how they should.
- Changing the environment first (lights, noise, schedule), and the child second, if at all.
- Using accurate words, including *autistic*, in the same plain tone you'd use for *left-handed*.
- Believing the child when they say something is too much.

What doesn't

- “But everyone gets overwhelmed sometimes.” (True. The size and frequency are the point.)
- Praising the child for not “seeming neurodivergent” today.
- Bargaining with a meltdown.
- Treating a diagnosis as bad news.



Try this together

Walk into a room together. Stop. Each of you, out loud, name one thing you can see, hear, or feel that nobody else has mentioned yet. Keep going around until someone runs out. Notice what each person noticed first. Notice what each person noticed last. That is what we mean by different brains.



CHAPTER 2: MONOTROPISM

Evi was building a castle out of tin cans and didn't hear her name the first five times. On the sixth she looked up as if surfacing from somewhere deep underwater, blinked once, and turned back to the cans.

Imagine you have a torch.

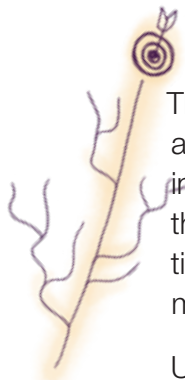
Most people carry that torch wide, sending a soft light in many directions at once: a little on what their teacher is saying, a little on who's whispering two seats over, a little on the sandwich in their bag, a little on the football match later.

A monotropic mind runs differently. The torch is narrow and very bright. Instead of spreading out, all the light goes into one place. When it shines on something, it really shines on it. The colours look different. The details open up. Things that other people would miss become completely clear.

This is called *monotropism*. It is a way of paying attention. And when it's working, it feels like flying.

The same torch that makes Evi completely disappear into tin cans will make her the person who notices every tiny error in a set of plans, or who spends six hours on a single drawing until it is exactly right, or who becomes so expert in something she loves that adults start asking her questions.





The tricky part comes when the torch has to move. Pulling attention out of a deep focus is real work. It doesn't happen instantly just because someone called your name, any more than you can stop a river by waving at it. The river needs time. It needs warning. A "five minutes" and then a "two minutes" is not nagging. It is a kindness.

Unexpected changes are hard for the same reason. When attention is already flowing somewhere, pointing it suddenly in a new direction takes effort that other people can't see from the outside.

In their own words

When I'm in it, I'm really in it. The rest of the world just stops. It's only when I come back out that I notice I missed dinner.

Theo, 14

For grown-ups

Monotropism is a theory of autism built by autistic people, and it has become, over the past decade, probably the framework most widely used in autistic adult communities to describe how attention works from the inside.



The theory was developed by the linguist Dinah Murray together with Wenn Lawson and Mike Lesser. Murray had been thinking about the relationship between attention and interest since her PhD in psycholinguistics in the 1980s, and the word *monotropism* appears in her writing as early as 1992. The full theory was published academically in 2005. Dinah Murray died in 2021, and the community she helped build continues the work at monotropism.org.

The core claim is both simple and powerful: a monotropic mind does not spread attention broadly across many things at once. It channels attention deeply into a narrow set of interests at any given moment. The phrase Murray used is the *attention tunnel*, and it earns its name. Inside the tunnel, experience is intense, focused, detailed. Outside it, things are dimmer, harder to prioritise, easier to miss.

This frame explains a great deal at once. Special interests are not a quirk to be managed; they are what happens when the attentional spotlight lands on something and stays. Transitions between tasks are difficult not because the person is stubborn, but because pulling out of an attention tunnel takes real cognitive effort. Unexpected changes disrupt not just plans but the mental arrangement of attention itself, and the nervous system's protest at that disruption is not disproportionate. It is appropriate to what is actually happening.

It also explains why warnings and structure help. "We're leaving in ten minutes" is not arbitrary courtesy. It is giving the attention tunnel time to close down safely, rather than being cut off suddenly with nothing.



What the monotropism frame changes is where grown-ups look when things go wrong. Instead of asking why the child is ignoring or overreacting, you can ask: what is the attention doing right now, and what does it need to move?

What helps

- Warning before transitions, not just instruction (“five more minutes” as a real heads-up, then “two minutes”).
- Letting the tunnel close before introducing something new.
- Treating deep focus as a strength to be worked with, not a problem to be interrupted.
- Asking “what were you thinking about?” rather than “why didn’t you hear me?”

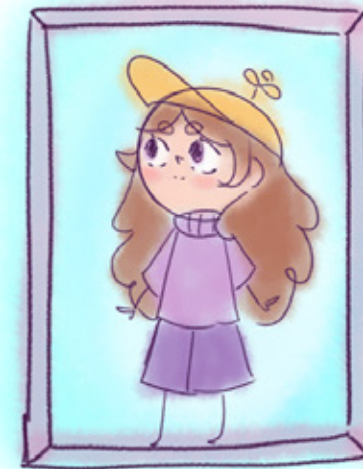
What doesn’t

- “You need to be more flexible.” (The difficulty isn’t stubbornness; it’s the real work of redirecting attention.)
- Pulling someone out of a flow state as a consequence or punishment.
- Treating the deep interest as the problem rather than the sudden change.
- Measuring a monotropic child’s transitions against the average, without accounting for what those transitions actually cost.



Try this together

Pick a time when the child is deep in something they love and let them stay in it five minutes longer than you usually would. Then give two real countdowns: “five more minutes,” then “two more minutes.” Afterwards, ask them what it felt like to come out with warning. Ask what it usually feels like without. Compare notes.



CHAPTER 3:

DOUBLE EMPATHY

At lunch, Jules told a long and very specific story about a documentary on deep-sea fish. The boy sitting opposite, whose name was Callum, kept glancing at the door. Later that day, Callum told his mum that Jules was weird. Jules told hers that Callum was rude. Neither of them was wrong. Neither of them was right. What they had, mostly, was a gap neither could quite see.

For a long time, people said that autistic people had trouble understanding others. And there is something true in that sentence. But it is only half the sentence.

Here is the other half: non-autistic people also have trouble understanding autistic people.

The gap runs both ways.

When two people from very different places try to talk to each other, it is not one of them who fails. They both struggle. They carry different habits, different signals, different ways of showing they are listening or interested or pleased. Neither set of habits is the right one. They are just different, and the difference belongs to both of them.

This is what researchers call the *double empathy problem*. Not a problem with one person. A problem that belongs to both people in the room.



Here is something interesting. Put two autistic people together, and often the gap shrinks. They find each other easier to read. They understand why the other person needs to explain the fish in detail, or why the pause before answering isn't rudeness but thinking. They share something that is harder to put into words than it is to experience.

This is the double empathy problem working in reverse: the closer two people are in how their minds work, the less translation the conversation needs.



In their own words

I used to think I was the one who was bad at people. Then I started spending time with other autistic kids and realised I was fine at people. I was just bad at one particular kind of people, and they were equally bad at me.

Jules, 15

For grown-ups

The concept was named in 2012 by Damian Milton, an autistic researcher and sociologist, in a paper whose title politely buries the point: "On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'." The argument was that much of what gets described as autistic social difficulty is not a property of autistic people alone. It is a property of the interaction between two people whose ways of moving through the world are different enough that each finds the other hard to read.

The word *double* is doing real work. Autism had historically been framed around the single empathy failure: autistic people struggle to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. The research Milton drew on, and the research that has built up since, adds the other side. Non-autistic people also misread autistic communication. They rate autistic adults as less likeable in first impressions, even when the content of what's being said is identical. They miss the warmth and interest in an autistic person's face or voice because they are reading a different set of signals. The failure, such as it is, is mutual and symmetric.

The most striking evidence for this failure is what happens when you take neurotypical people out of the room. Studies comparing autistic-to-autistic interactions against autistic-to-non-autistic ones consistently find that autistic adults communicate more successfully with each other: higher rapport, more effective information transfer, more accurate reading of intentions. The difficulty is not in autistic communication per se. It is in cross-neurotype communication, which is a different thing entirely.

Why does this matter? Because if the difficulty is one-directional, the remedy is to change the person with the difficulty. And for decades, that is exactly what many educational and therapeutic approaches aimed at: teaching autistic children to make better eye contact, hold conversations in the expected format, pass as more neurotypical. The approaches were sometimes well-meaning. The effect, accumulated over years, was usually corrosive.

If the difficulty is bidirectional, the remedy looks different. It becomes a question of building shared understanding rather than one-sided compliance. It asks non-autistic people to do some of the learning too: to notice when they are misreading, to check what a silence or a blunt sentence

actually means, to stop evaluating a person whose social style differs from theirs as somehow deficient.

This is harder than it sounds when the default assumption has been, for decades, that one side of the gap is where the problem lives. But the research is consistent, and the people who have lived on the misread side of the gap have been saying this for longer than the research has existed.

What helps

- Asking what a person means, rather than assuming you know from how they said it.
- Recognising that flat tone, no eye contact, and blunt sentences are often neutral rather than negative signals.
- Learning some of the communication patterns that autistic people use with each other, rather than expecting translation to always run one way.
- Explaining your own signals when you can (“when I go quiet it means I’m thinking, not angry”).

What doesn't

- Treating every misunderstanding as the autistic person's error to fix.
- Teaching autistic children that their natural way of communicating is wrong.
- Measuring connection only in eye contact and small talk.
- Assuming that because a communication style is unusual, there is no warmth or interest behind it.



Try this together

Sit down together and each person picks one thing they do in conversation that they think the other person sometimes misreads. Maybe you go quiet when you're thinking and it looks like sulking. Maybe you change the subject when you're interested, not when you're bored. Swap notes. See what you've both been reading wrong.

