

### Episode 5: Autistic Communication Part 3: The Double Empathy Problem

#### Overview

A classic diagnostic trait of autism is “deficits in social communication.” However, as past episodes have highlighted, many new studies are showing that this is more a case of autistics and non-autistics struggling to communicate with each other, with both sides failing to interpret differences. By viewing autistic communication through the lens of this double empathy problem rather than as an autistic deficit, and through examining new research highlighting ways in which autistics communicate effectively with each other, non-autistic teachers, therapists, and caregivers can help meet autistics halfway and create more supportive and effective relationships. Jeanne (she/her) speaks with fellow autistics Katie (they/them) and previous guest Amanda (she/her) about their experiences about this disconnect between autistic and non-autistic perspectives.

#### Key Points:

- The double empathy problem views social communication as a two-way street, rather than making one side solely responsible for matching differences in communication styles. Historically the assumption by non-autistics was that autistics must learn to communicate using non-autistic methods, but new research supports this bi-directional approach as having multiple benefits.
- Autistics often have many distinctive mannerisms, traits, and communication preferences that read as welcoming to fellow autistics, many of which can be explained through monotropism - deeply engaging with a subject area. By teaching non-autistics about these preferences and encouraging the use of them when communicating with autistics, we can improve autistic mental

health and interactions through sharing this communication load.

- Time: 28:42

#### Quotes:

“The ‘double empathy problem’ reexamines difficulties in communication between autistics and non-autistics as being due to differences of what [Dr Damian Milton] calls ‘reciprocity and mutuality’ - that autistics tend to view and interact with the world in certain ways, and non-autistics often view it differently, causing problems on both sides regarding communication.” - Jeanne

“I think if we consider autistic as another language or at least dialect it becomes a lot easier to understand the ways we communicate as being different, but not wrong.” - Jeanne

“I found it so interesting growing up that people would say that he was nonverbal because I thought, he’s communicating deep, emotional concepts to us in what is frankly, a very simple way to get across that concept.” - Katie

“It’s not that social skills training as a concept is inherently bad. The problem is the vast majority of time what they mean is we’re going to teach autistics how to pretend to communicate like non-autistics, which as we’ve talked about before, can cause all sorts of serious mental health concerns and reduce your mental capacity for understanding other things.” - Jeanne

“I feel like it’s such a mistake to treat everything of autistic culture and the neurotype as like, this is a deficit and there’s nothing of value here because it’s

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different.” - Amanda

“It makes me sad when I hear other people say, ‘I connected with the only other autistic child in my class and they deliberately separated us because they were like, nope, must be able to socialize with others.’” - Amanda

“This is something that non-autistics can learn to do, it just requires them to be willing to put in the work partially too, and accepting autistic traits, mannerisms, and preferences as genuinely being equally valid, rather than demanding autistics take on 100% of the communication burden.” - Jeanne

### Articles referenced:

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Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The ‘double empathy problem’. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008>

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