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Interviewing Skills with Neurodivergent Individuals

Presenters

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This presentation may address topics related to behavioral intervention, violence prevention, discrimination, harassment, sexual misconduct, or other forms of interpersonal harm. Examples, case studies, and discussion may include descriptions of traumatic events, threatening behavior, or other sensitive subject matter.

We recognize that participants bring a wide range of professional and personal experiences to this work. Please engage in the way that best supports your learning and well-being. You are welcome to step out, take a break, or rejoin the session at any time if needed.

Our goal is to examine these topics thoughtfully and respectfully to strengthen prevention, response, and support practices across our educational communities.

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What Does “Neurodivergent” Really Mean?

- Neurodivergence refers broadly to natural variations in how the brain functions
- The term may include autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, sensory processing differences, and other neurological or developmental differences.
- It is not a diagnosis and does not describe one uniform set of needs
- For investigators/assessors: the relevant question is not “What label/diagnosis does this person have?” but rather “What communication or process supports will help to obtain accurate information?”

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Interview Relevant Features

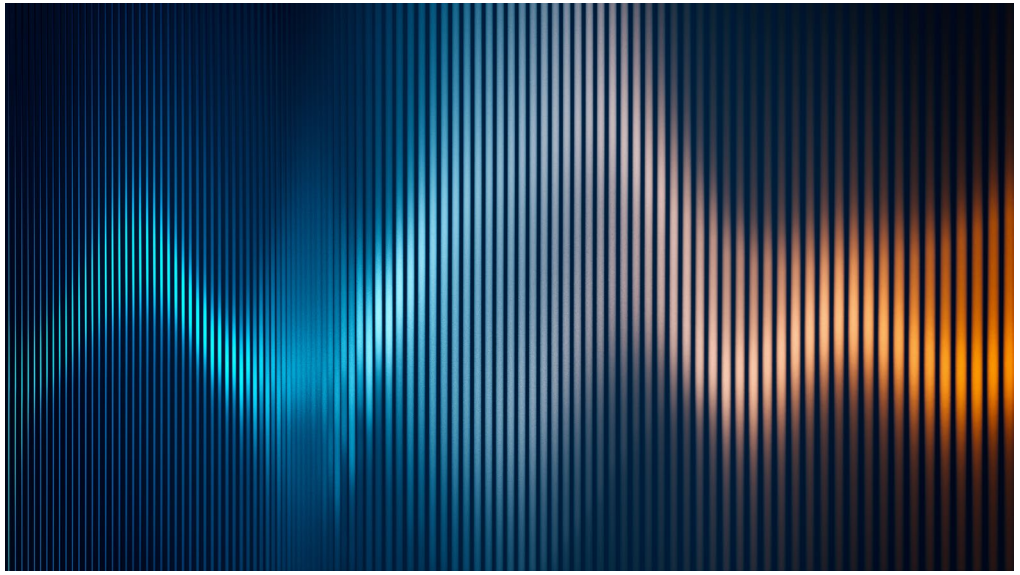
- Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition with substantial individual variation
- Differences may involve social communication, interpreting implied meaning, sensory processing, routines, focused interests, and repetitive behavior. Some autistic people use spoken language fluently; others may communicate differently or need more support
- A diagnosis alone does not tell you how a person will behave, remember, communicate, or respond under stress
- Many individuals with autism and autism advocates prefer to use the language of “autistic”, “autistic person”, or “autistic individual” rather than “individual with autism”

https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/

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The Spectrum is Not Linear

- Avoid “high-functioning/low-functioning” assumptions. Skills can vary by context, demand, stress, sensory load, and familiarity
- A person who is highly verbal may still need extra processing time, concrete questions, written prompts, or breaks
- Stress can temporarily reduce access to communication and self-regulation skills
- Build the interview around the individual’s demonstrated needs, not around stereotypes about autism



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Why This Matters in Interviews

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Before the Interview: Prepare for the Person

- Review known, appropriately available information about communication needs and approved accommodations
- Ask the participant what helps them communicate and process information effectively
- Clarify whether they prefer questions verbally, in writing, or both
- Plan for breaks, a low-distraction setting, and additional time
- Coordinate with disability/accessibility staff when appropriate without asking them to interpret facts or credibility

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Presentation May be Misinterpreted

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What May Be Observed	Possible Misinterpretations
▪ Limited or atypical eye contact ▪ Flat, intense, or unexpected affect ▪ Long pauses before answering ▪ Literal responses ▪ Repetitive movement or fidgeting ▪ Detailed focus on one part of an event	▪ Dishonesty or evasiveness ▪ Lack of concern or remorse ▪ Noncompliance ▪ Sarcasm or defiance ▪ Agitation or dangerousness ▪ Avoiding the “real” issue

Credibility Traps to Avoid

- Do not use eye contact as a proxy for truthfulness.
- Do not equate atypical affect with absence of impact, fear, empathy, or remorse
- Do not assume a delayed response means fabrication; the person may be processing the question
- Do not treat a highly detailed answer as intentionally evasive simply because it does not begin with the “main point”
- Separate what was said and done from your interpretation of how the person “should” have presented



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Create a More Accessible Interview Process

- Use a quiet, predictable environment with minimal visual and auditory distractions
- Explain who will be present, where people will sit, whether the meeting will be recorded, and how long it is expected to last
- Avoid unnecessary interruptions, side conversations, alarms, bright lights, or unexpected touch
- Offer breaks proactively and explain that taking a break is acceptable and does not reflect poorly on the participant

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Be Clear and Transparent About the Process

- Describe the purpose of the interview and your role in plain language
- Explain the structure: “I’ll start broadly, then I’ll ask more specific questions.”
- Emphasize that “I don’t know,” “I don’t remember,” and “I don’t understand the question” are acceptable responses
- Tell the person they can ask you to repeat, rephrase, or write down a question if needed
- Explain what will happen after the interview and what, if anything, they will have an opportunity to review

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Build Rapport Thoughtfully

- Be warm, calm, and predictable, but do not require small talk or reciprocal social behavior
- Do not insist on eye contact, a handshake, or a particular posture or position
- Allow self-regulation behaviors such as fidgeting or repetitive movement unless they create a safety issue
  - Consider offering fidget toys or other items to help the individual manage stress/emotion
- Use neutral encouragement (“Take your time,” “That’s helpful”) rather than praise that could signal a preferred answer

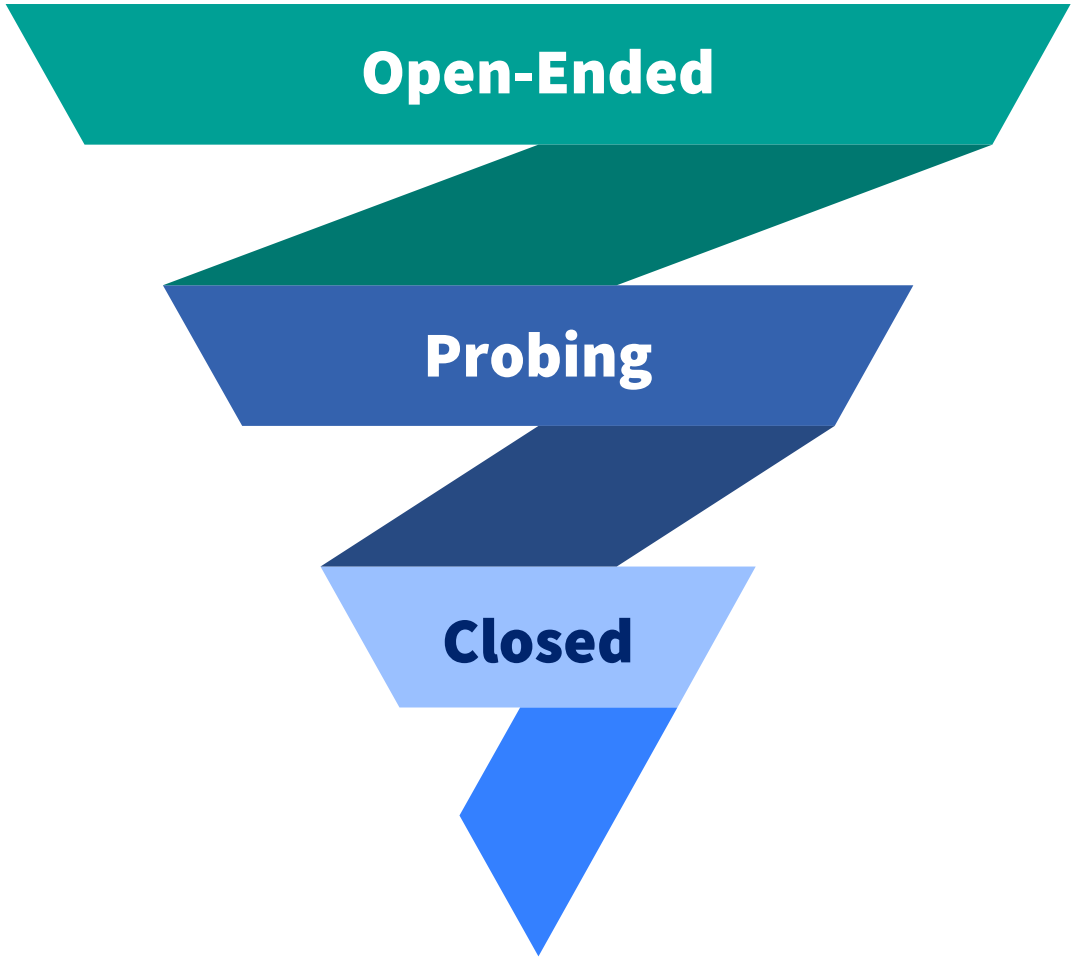


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Effective Questioning Strategies

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- Ask questions using a funnel technique:
  Open-ended > Probing > Closed
  - **Open-ended:** Invite the individual's story and broader context
    "Tell me what's been going on for you."
  - **Probing:** Clarify meaning, frequency, intensity, and context
    "You said things are getting worse—tell me more about that."
  - **Closed:** Use when specific information is needed such as risk indicators
    "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
- For some autistic interviewees, very broad prompts may need more scaffolding than they do for other participants



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Use Clear, Concrete Language

- Be careful not to rush – ask one question at a time
- Use clear, specific language over idioms, euphemisms, sarcasm, or implied meaning
- Avoid vague references such as “that,” “things got weird,” or “you know what I mean”
- Define process terms that may be unfamiliar in this context: consent, retaliation, threat, intent, impact, relationship, or “hooking up.”
- If a term matters to the finding, ask what the participant means by it rather than assuming shared meaning

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Use and Allow Silence

- Ask the question, then allow ample time for a response
- Allow more processing time before repeating or rephrasing; rapid rephrasing can create a new task before the first question is processed
- If the individual is still processing, avoid filling the silence with additional questions
- If rephrasing is needed, make the change explicit: “I’m going to ask that in a different way.”
- Avoid complex or multi-part questions or offer for some responses to be completed in writing



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Autism and Recall: Accuracy ≠ Level of Detail

- Research suggests autistic individuals may provide less information in broad free recall while still providing accurate information
- Structured, supportive prompts can help elicit specific episodic details
- Do not interpret an initially sparse narrative as evidence that an event did not occur or that the person is withholding or being deceptive
- Avoid assuming all autistic individuals have the same memory profile; individual differences remain substantial

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McWilliams, K., et al. (2019). “Effects of Delay, Question Type, and Socioemotional Support on Episodic Memory Retrieval by Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.” Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 49, 1111–1130.

Question to Support Recall

Following an open-ended prompt, question by category without leading:

- **WHEN:** “What do you remember about when this happened?”
- **WHO:** “Who was present?”
- **WHERE:** “What do you remember about the setting?”
- **ACTIONS:** “What happened next?”
- **OBJECTS / COMMUNICATIONS:** “Were there messages, objects, or other details you remember?”
- Then ask the participant whether there is anything important you did not ask about



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Clarify Inconsistencies Without Damaging Rapport

- Identify the discrepancy neutrally and specifically
- Give the participant both pieces of information: “Earlier you said X; now I heard you say Y.”
- Collaborative problem-solving: “Can you help me understand the difference?”
- Allow time to reconstruct sequence or meaning
- As always, distinguish a genuine contradiction from differences in wording, level of detail, literal interpretation, or the scope of the question

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Non-verbal Behavior

- Eye contact, facial expression, tone, posture, and social reciprocity vary widely across people and cultures, and may vary further with autism and other forms of neurodivergence
- Document observable behavior when relevant but avoid converting presentation into unsupported credibility conclusions or other assumptions
- “Looked away and paused for 20 seconds” is an observation
- “Appeared deceptive” is an interpretation or judgment
- Anchor findings in evidence, consistency, corroboration, plausibility, and policy and not in a neurotypical model of demeanor or expectations

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Sensory Overload

- Repetitive movement, rocking, pacing, hand movements, or use of a sensory object may support regulation
- A louder voice, shutdown, reduced speech, or need to leave may reflect overload rather than aggression or refusal to participate
- Try to reduce demands and sensory input before interpreting behavior as defiance
- For BIT/threat assessment, continue to assess objective behavior and risk factors; neurodivergence neither creates nor eliminates risk



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BIT/Threat/Violence Risk Assessment Interviews

- Keep the risk assessment consistent; do not lower or raise risk because of a diagnosis/disability
- Ask directly about concerning behavior, intent, target, planning, access to means, stressors, and protective factors using concrete language
- Differentiate unusual or socially atypical behavior from behavior that objectively indicates threats, intent, planning, or escalation
- Use collateral information to understand baseline behavior and recent change, not to “diagnose” the person
- Tailor interventions to both the assessed risk and the individual’s communication/support needs

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Title IX Investigations/Interviews

- Build accessibility into the process without changing the substantive standard applied to the facts
- Explain abstract concepts and procedural terms clearly; do not assume shared social meaning
- Avoid demeanor-based assumptions about how a complainant, respondent, or witness “should” react to sexual conduct, trauma, accusation, or questioning
- Use precise follow-up questions to clarify consent-related communications, sequence, context, and the participant’s understanding at the time
- Coordinate approved accommodations consistently across interviews and hearing participation

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Practice: Risk Assessment

A student referred for repeated emails about a faculty member arrives wearing headphones, avoids eye contact, gives very literal answers, and becomes increasingly frustrated when asked, “Why are you so obsessed with this professor?”

- What observations are relevant to risk and what may simply reflect communication or regulation?
- How might you rephrase the question?
- What environmental or process changes might improve the interview?

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Practice: TIX Interview

A witness provides a short initial account, pauses for long periods, and corrects the investigator's wording several times. When asked, "So could you tell she was uncomfortable?" the witness answers, "I can't tell what people are feeling unless they say it."

- What credibility assumptions might an investigator be tempted to make?
- What is a better way to phrase the question?
- What concrete observations could the witness be asked to describe?
- How could structured prompts help elicit more complete recall without suggesting an answer?

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Before the Interview Concludes

- Have I asked what communication approach works best for this person?
- Did I explain the process and expectations explicitly?
- Did I use concrete, one-idea-at-a-time questions?
- Did I allow adequate processing time?
- Did I scaffold broad recall without supplying answers?
- Did I avoid treating eye contact, affect, stimming, or social style as credibility evidence?
- Did I clarify apparent inconsistencies neutrally?
- Do my notes distinguish observations from interpretations?

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Takeaways/Reminders

- Neurodivergence should change how thoughtfully we gather information – not the fairness or rigor of the process
- Autism can affect communication, recall style, sensory regulation, and social presentation in ways that are easy to misinterpret
- Ask, don’t assume – individualize the interview while preserving neutral, evidence-based fact-finding
- Concrete language + processing time + structured recall support can improve the quality of information obtained
- For both BIT and Title IX: focus on objective behavior, relevant evidence, and context – not on whether someone presents in a neurotypical way

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Questions?

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