

# hendrickx associates

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## Anxiety: How Autism Explains Everything

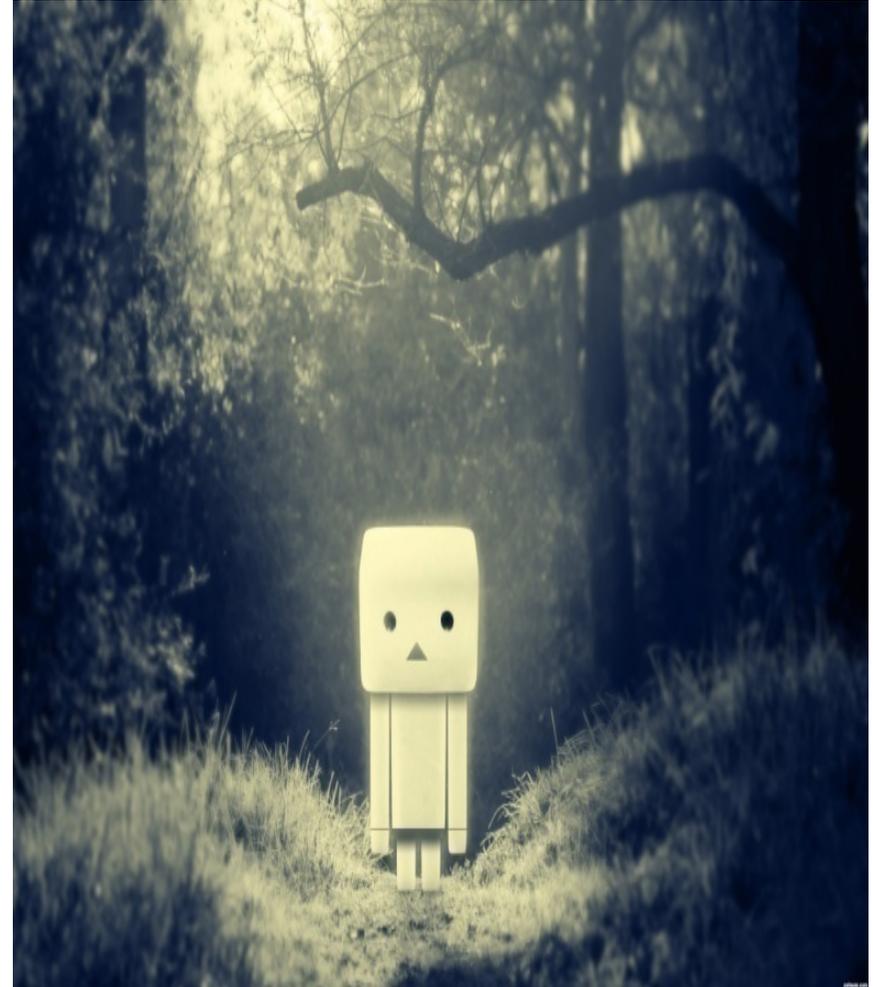
Sarah Hendrickx

**It is entirely to be expected  
that autistic people will be  
anxious**

- understanding and accepting this is the first step in providing the right sort of help

# Mental Health in Autistic Individuals

- High levels (40%-50%):
  - Stress
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
- Feel 'different' or 'odd'
- 'It's all too much'
- Struggling with 'basics'
- Sense of failure – negative experiences & messages
- Socially excluded/isolated
- No hope for future change



Why aren't you anxious  
now?

# Why You Aren't Anxious Now:

- Understanding what is going on and filling in gaps
- Generalising from past similar events
- Picking up signals – seeing that other people are OK
- Identifying your own feelings
- Putting things into perspective/bigger picture – cost/benefit
- Filtering out sensory data
- Being able to ACCURATELY ‘guess’/predict what is likely to happen next?
- Knowing that whatever happens, you can think of an EFFECTIVE strategy to resolve

THESE ARE ALL IN THE DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR AUTISM

What makes you anxious?

**Processing / Thinking – making sense of:**

**Social Language & Communication:**  
people

**Self, feelings and the Sensory World:**  
internal & external

**Non-Social World:**  
imagination, context,  
abstracts

**Behaviour:**

Communication difficulties  
Relationship difficulties  
May avoid people  
Solitude

Routines, sameness  
Struggles with change  
Unexpected events  
Decision-making  
Self-care

**Consequences:**

Isolation  
No social support

Daily hassles  
Struggles with independence

**Potential Outcome:**

Anxiety  
Depression

Adapted from Gaus, V.L.

# Global Stability (Beardon)



# Autism & Anxiety – Invisible Conditions

- Autism may:
  - be invisible
  - be hidden/masked
  - manifest as an anxiety response
- Anxiety response may:
  - be invisible
  - be hidden/masked
  - manifest as a physical health condition
- Do not presume extent of impact by behaviour or presentation

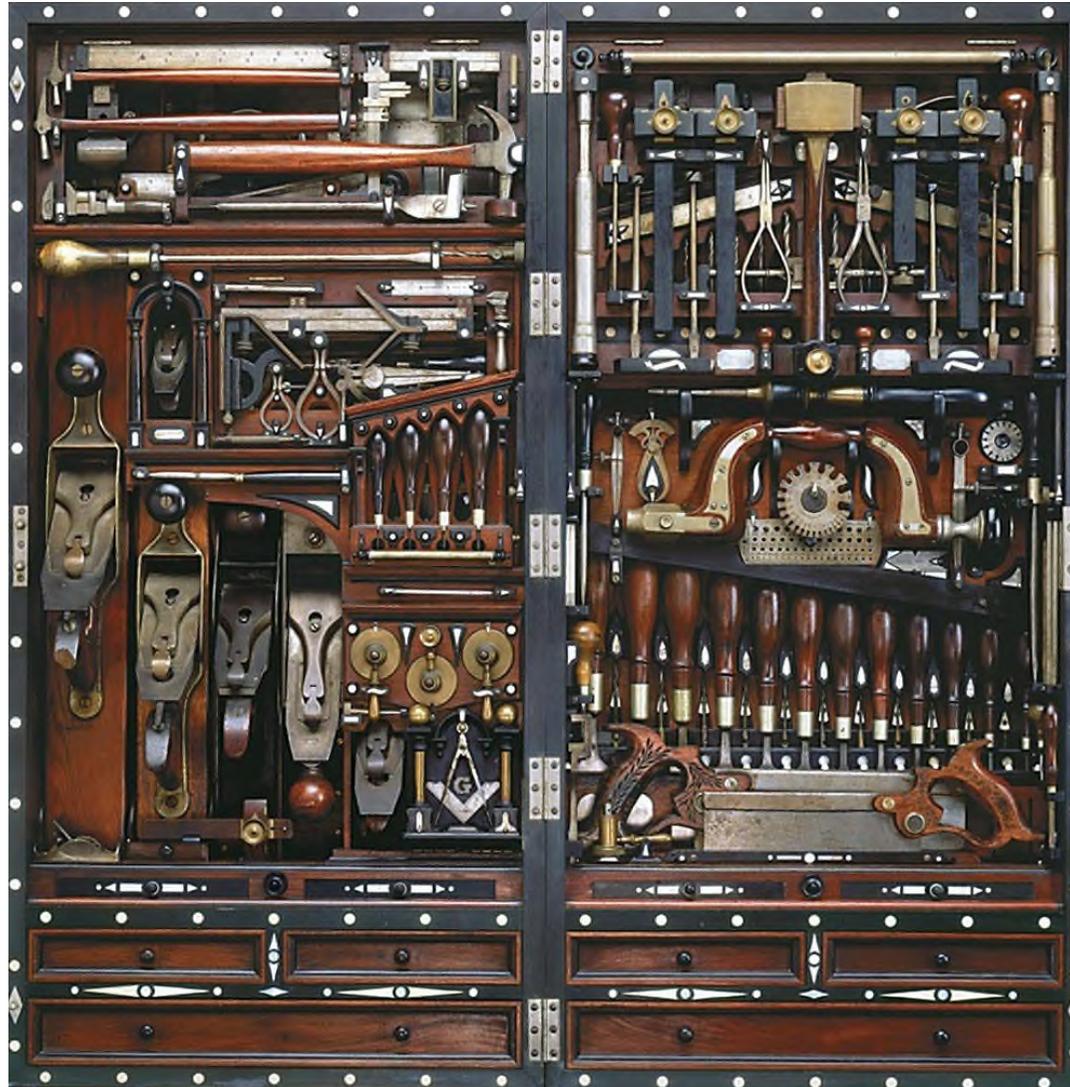


# 'Challenging Behaviour'??

- Autism and/or anxiety response may manifest as perceived 'challenging behaviour'
- It's not 'challenging behaviour'; it's 'the only tool in my toolbox right now'
- **ASK: What else could they have done with what they had to work with?**

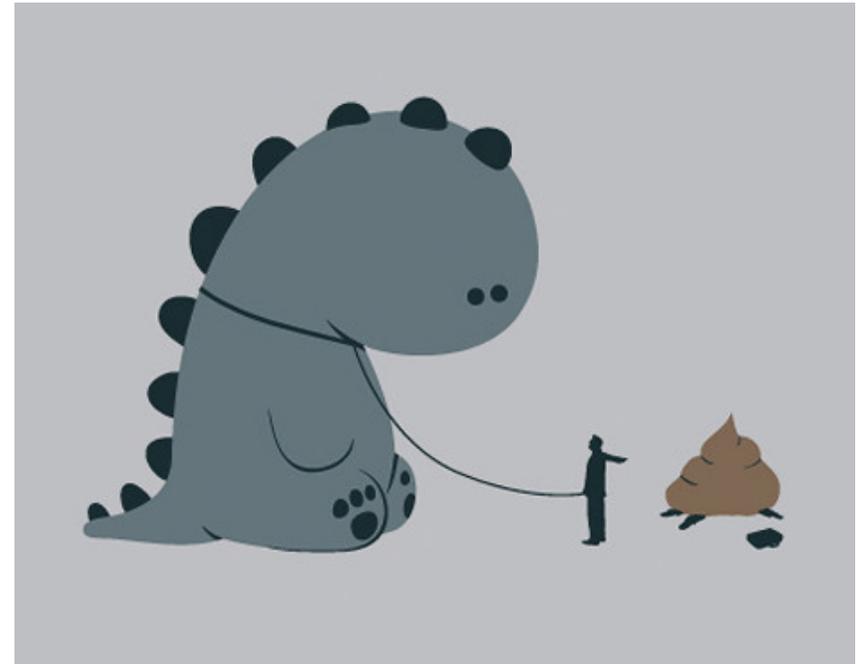


# Other People Have a Bigger Choice of Tools



# Anxiety Management

- Avoiding anxiety teaches the brain that it is correct to be afraid
- Anxiety is normal and useful
- Zero anxiety is unrealistic
- Thoughts & feelings are not fact/truths - 'Smoke alarm and toast'
- Teach to recognise signs, manage, minimise & live with



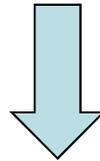
# Teach Social Context

- Autistic people tend to apply same solution to all problems
- Explicitly teach social understanding
- Teach to generalise – supports prediction
- Teach to problem solve
- Teach to develop multiple responses – what could I do instead?
- Visual flowcharts easier than words

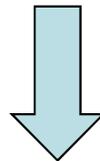


# Break the Cycle

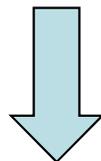
Increase support and understanding of effects of autism



Better able to cope with anxiety & increased self-efficacy



Decrease in anxiety response



Decrease in stress-related health issues / behaviour