



xMinds BIPOC Committee:
People of the Global Majority
Discussion about
Stress on the Autism Spectrum

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Today's Discussion Topics

- How to identify causes of stress in children and teens on the autism spectrum
- How might stress look differently in autistic children compared to neurotypical children
- The impact of stress on young people's physical and mental health
- How to work with your child to overcome feelings of stress in their everyday life



“Happy Wife,
Happy Life”

Happy = No Stress?

Stress = Unhappy?

“It’s NOT...Happy Wife, Happy Life.
It’s Happy Spouse, Happy House.”

Is stress bad?

Can stress be protective—
a means to survive?

Can stress be contagious?

Can we avoid stress altogether?

Does stress
look
different in
autism?



Physical aggression toward others

Yelling/crying
Physical withdrawal (e.g., running away)

People-pleasing
Mental stagnation (e.g.,

staring wall)

Relational aggression (e.g.,

difficulty saying "no"

Avoiding conflict (e.g., abandoning)

Physical immobility (literally)

Over-accommodating behavior

Assertiveness

Insubordination

Seeking approval

Competitiveness

Social withdrawal

Conflict avoidance

Verbal attacks

Hyperactive behaviors

(e.g. deflecting)

Self-sacrifice

Emotional numbness

Breaking things

Minimizing risks

Camouflaging

Resistance to change

Passivity

Elopement

Masking

Shutdown

Bolting

Melting down

Stress Responses

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are primal (Acute) stress responses that protect us from danger. This primal response dates back to our ancestors, who would have faced more immediate risks than we face today. Though these are common human experiences, these responses have been given different labels when they happen to Autistic People.

General Terms

Autism Terms

Fight

Meltdown

Flight

Elopement/Bolting

Freeze

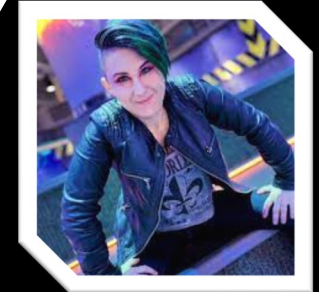
Shutdown

Fawn

Camouflaging / Masking



LYRIC RIVERA
NEURODIVERGENT REBEL



Link to their website:
<https://neurodivergentrebel.com/>

Can stress and coping look similar?

Is it that different in autistic people compared to neurotypical people?

Can there be concurrent stress responses?



Breaking
down
different
stress
responses:
Fight

Verbal confrontation

Physical aggression

Assertiveness

Control-seeking behavior

Competitiveness

Resistance to change

Breaking down
different stress
responses: Flight

Physical withdrawal

Avoiding conflict

Procrastination

Social withdrawal

Distracting behaviors

Minimizing risks



Breaking down
different stress
responses:
Freeze

Mental stagnation

Physical immobility

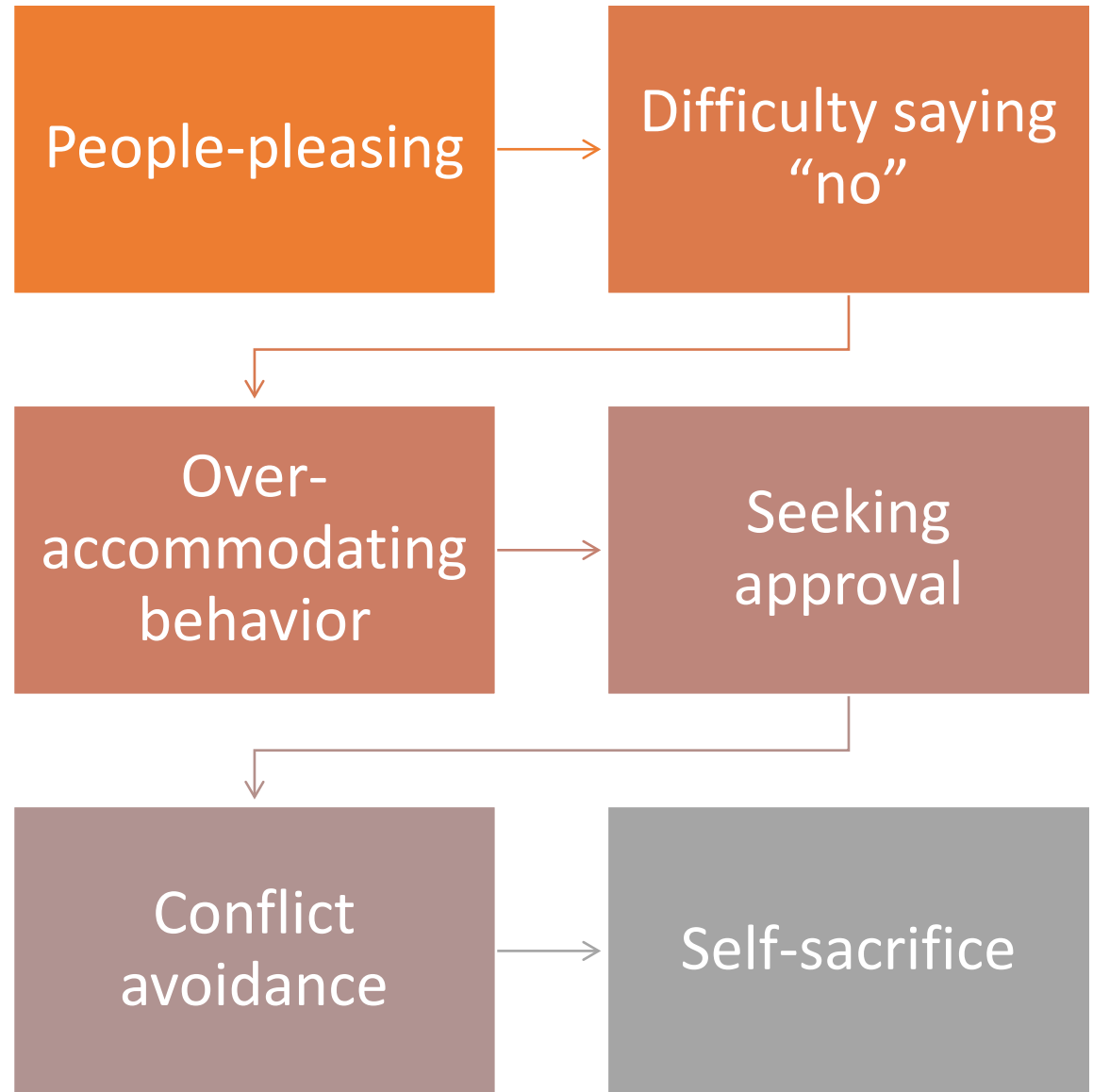
Dissociation

Hypervigilance

Emotional numbness

Passivity

Breaking down
different stress
responses: Fawn





Types of stress

Acute stress

Chronic stress

Episodic acute stress

Eustress

Distress

Life stress history

Post-traumatic stress



Minority stress

Intersectionality

Transgenerational

Trauma

Life events

Racial discrimination

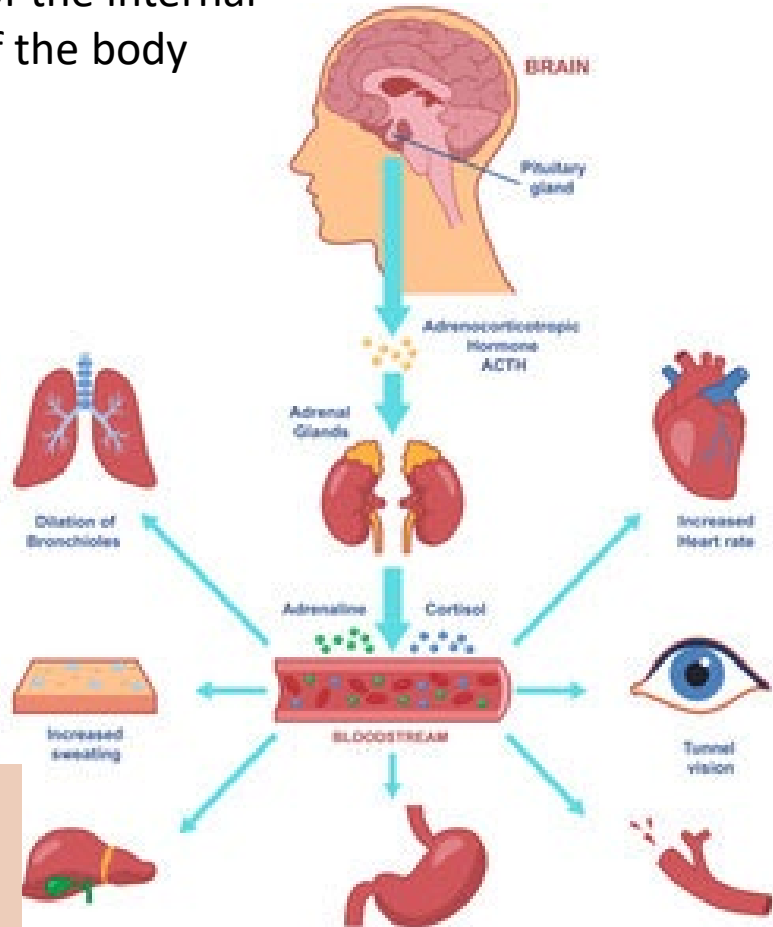
Racial discrimination + ableism

Racial discrimination + ableism + sexism

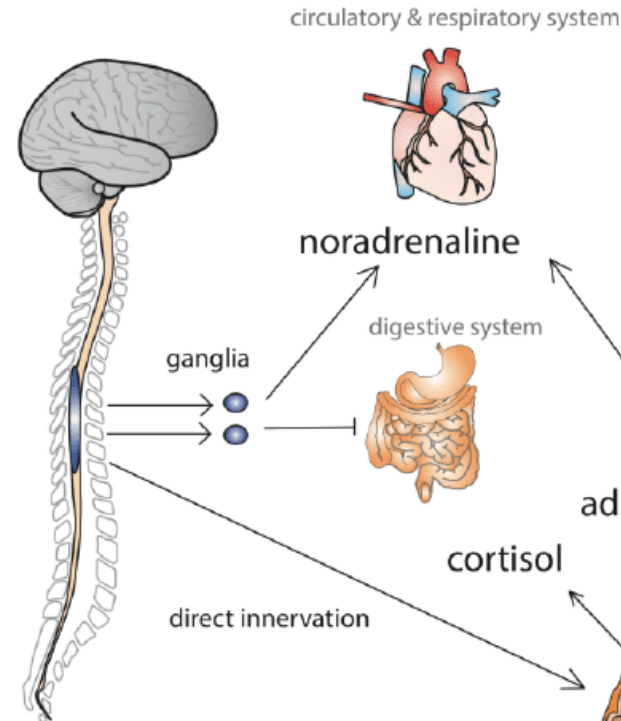
Racial discrimination + ableism + sexism + poverty

The neurobiology of stress responses in autistic people

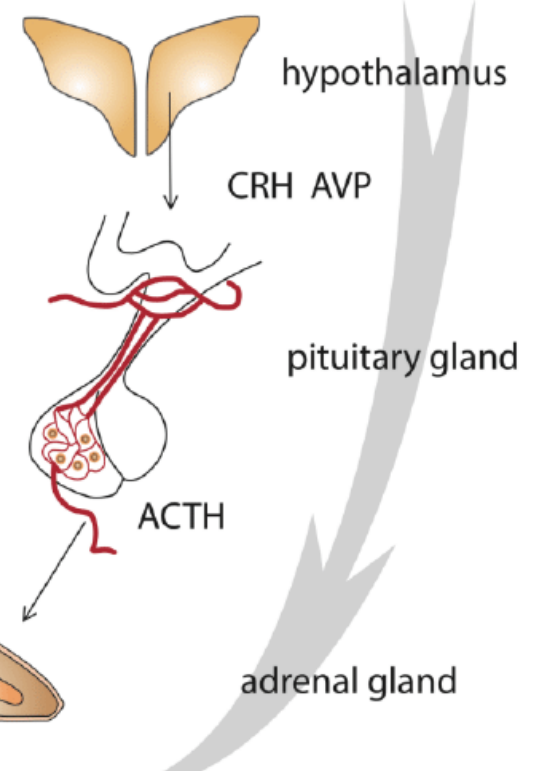
Interoception — the sense of the internal state of the body

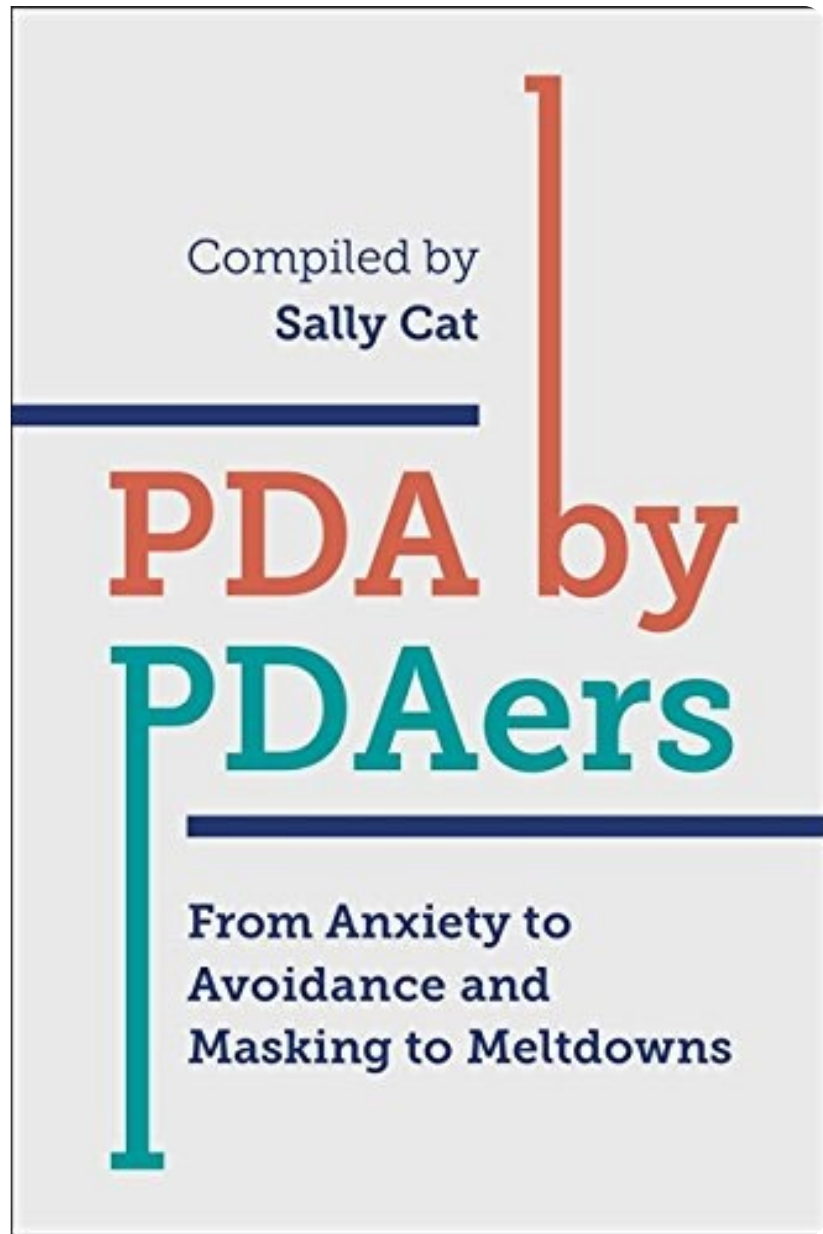


sympathetic nervous system



endocrine HPA axis





PDA

Pathological
Demand
Avoidance



What is PDA?

- PDA is a behavior profile within the autism spectrum characterized by an ***extreme avoidance of everyday demands and expectations*** due to high anxiety.
- An ***obsessive resistance to ordinary demands*** and expectations, use of social strategies as part of avoidance, surface sociability but with a lack of depth in understanding, excessive mood swings and impulsivity, and a comfortable feeling in role play and pretense.
- Individuals with PDA may feel an ***intense need to control their environment*** and may experience overwhelming anxiety when they feel they are not in control.
- While individuals with PDA can appear socially adept, they often misunderstand social communication and ***struggle with deeper social understanding***.

What strategies benefit those with PDA?



Neurobiological Perception of Safety

Strict boundaries that may comfort neurotypical children can ***cause fear and panic in PDA children*** due to their different neurobiology, leading to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses.



Responsive Boundaries

Flexible boundaries that adapt to the child's levels of regulation can be ***more attuned to the nervous system*** of PDA children.



Autonomy over Routine

For PDA children, the ***need for autonomy and control overrides the benefits of a routine***; strict routines can become demands that trigger avoidance behaviors.



Stress in Autistic People

Stress impact on physical health

Sensory Over-responsiveness

Autism people may experience heightened stress due to sensory sensitivities, affecting cardiovascular and muscular systems.

Gastrointestinal Distress

A higher prevalence of gastrointestinal issues in autism may be exacerbated by stress, leading to discomfort and health complications.

Immune System Dysregulation

Stress can impact the already vulnerable immune responses in autism, increasing health complications.

Sleep Disruption

Individuals with autism often face challenges with sleep, which stress can further aggravate, impacting overall physical health.

Endocrine and Metabolic Concerns

The stress response can affect appetite and weight regulation, areas that are often already a concern for those on the autism spectrum.

Stress impact on mental health

Anxiety disorders are common in autism and can be intensified by stress, often requiring tailored support.

Chronic stress can contribute to the higher rates of **depression** seen in the autistic population.

Stress can exacerbate **challenges with executive function**, making tasks that require planning and flexibility even more difficult.

Disrupted sleep due to stress can lead to increased behavioral issues and affect daytime functioning and learning.

Stress can **amplify social challenges**, potentially leading to greater isolation and impacting mental well-being.



How can systems of care
and support help?

Strategies for Mitigating Stress

Community Support Networks: Leveraging community resources and support groups that understand cultural nuances and provide a shared space for problem-solving and emotional support.

Culturally Responsive Therapies: Incorporating cultural beliefs and values into therapy to enhance its relevance and effectiveness, such as integrating community healing practices with conventional interventions.

Navigating Systems of Care: Empowering parents with knowledge and strategies to effectively navigate health care and educational systems that may have implicit biases or systemic barriers.

Advocacy and Representation: Encouraging and supporting advocacy for policy changes that address the unique needs of autistic individuals from communities of color, including access to services and educational equity.

Stress Management Education: Providing education on stress and its effects specifically tailored to the experiences of communities of color, including the impact of racism and discrimination on stress levels.

Stress Management Education for Diverse Autism Communities

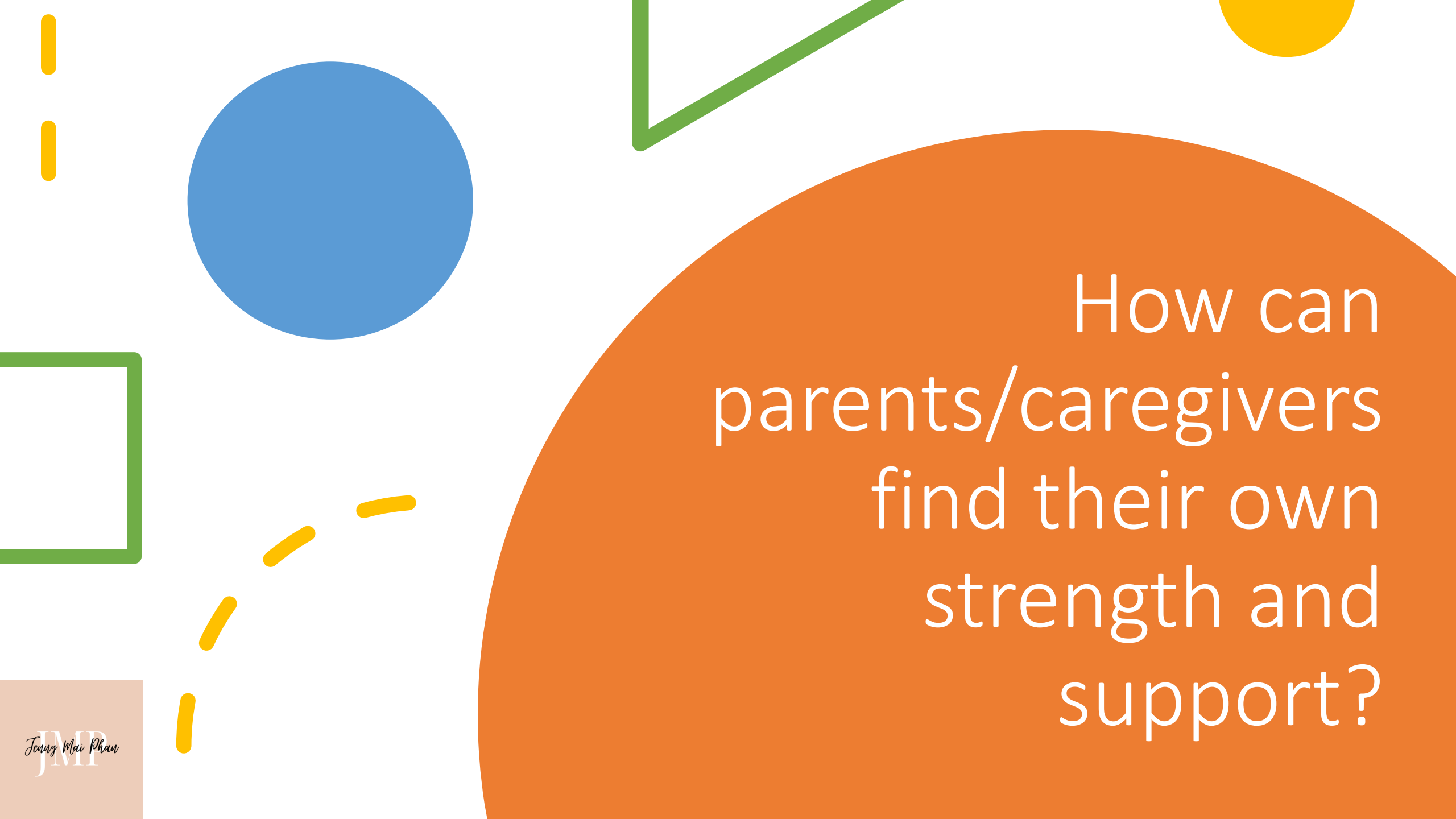
Understanding Stress in Context: Education about the physiological and psychological aspects of stress, with a focus on how cultural, societal, and familial factors intersect.

Cultural Coping Mechanisms: Emphasizing the importance of cultural practices and community rituals in managing stress, and how these can be integrated into daily routines.

Navigating Stress in Social Systems: Strategies for dealing with stress related to navigating health, educational, and social services, including dealing with systemic barriers and advocating for their child's needs.

Parent Self-Care and Resilience: Highlighting the importance of parental self-care as a vital component of stress management, offering culturally relevant self-care practices.

Community Building and Support: Encouraging the formation of support networks within the community, and how shared experiences can be a source of strength and resilience.



How can
parents/caregivers
find their own
strength and
support?



Cultural Coping Mechanisms

- Importance of cultural traditions and practices in stress relief.
- Examples of cultural rituals or activities that can be therapeutic.
- Integrating these practices into daily routines for both parents and children.

Navigating Stress in Social Systems



Strategies for dealing with the stress of navigating health and educational systems.

Tips on advocating for a child's needs against systemic barriers.

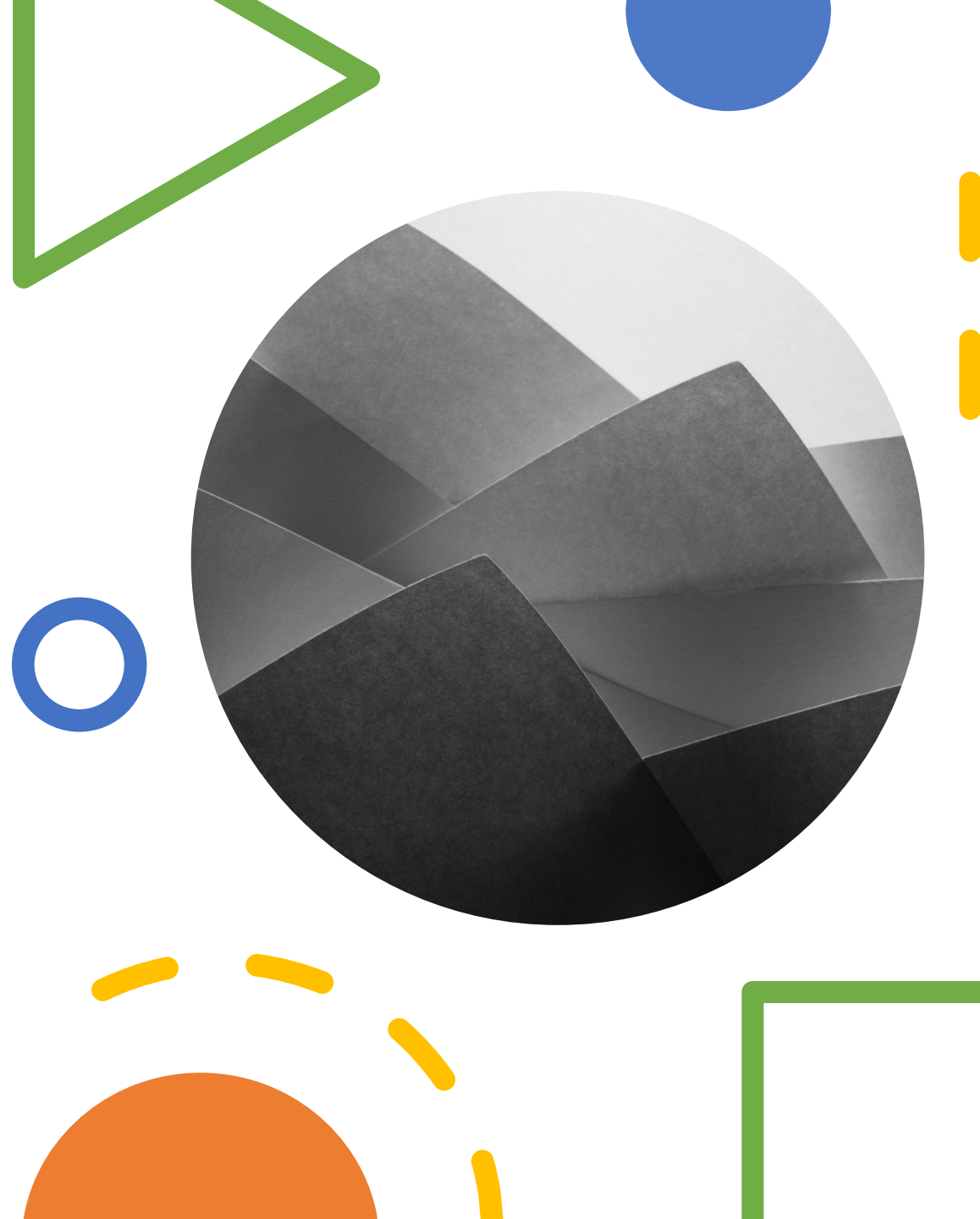
Seek out resources for parents in diverse communities.

Parent Self-Care and Resilience

Strategies for self-care to replenish physical and emotional energy.

Culturally relevant practices that resonate with individual identities.

Balancing caregiving responsibilities with self-care.





Community Building and Support

The role of support networks in shared problem-solving and emotional support.

Creating and engaging in community groups or events.

The strength of shared experiences and mutual understanding.





Children's National.

Puberty and Sexual Health Education for Autistic Teens and Parents/Caregivers

Would you be interested in participating in research on an online puberty and sexual health education program?

You and Your Child May Qualify If Your Child

- Has a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder or self-identify as autistic
- Is in 9th to 12th grade or between 14 and 19 years old
- Has English proficiency in reading and writing

Participation Involves

- Completing the online puberty and sexual health educational toolkit
- Answering questions about the toolkit's contents and your experience with it

Families will be compensated \$100 for their time.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Please contact Jenny Phan at 240-397-8208 or email jmphan@childrensnational.org.

Interested to learn more? Scan the QR code to be contacted by a member of the research team.



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[https://redcap.link/PUSHED Study Interest](https://redcap.link/PUSHED_Study_Interest)



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