

Actually Autistic Educator

Episode 1.5: The Harms of the Deficit Model of ASD June 2021

Overview

In this mini-episode, Jeanne explains how the prevailing narrative of autism viewed exclusively as a deficit causes immense harm to autistics by vilifying their behaviors and ways of thinking, which encourages abuse (both intentional and unintentional) by caretakers and support professionals, and causes depression, anxiety, and self-loathing in autistics who internalize this hatred of autism.

Key Points:

- The common argument that many non-autistics have with autistic advocates about how we should view autism has a fundamentally flawed premise - nothing said on the internet changes how many autistics will exist, the goal is to reduce the harm autistics face. When autistics state that there are positive autistic traits it's to counteract this prevailing narrative that explicitly dehumanizes us (think of the many books and articles calling us robots or lacking a personality and needing to build one for us). This negative perception is absorbed by autistics from their caretakers/educators/therapists, causing self-loathing and serious and harmful mental health conditions.
- The goal of neurodivergence and moving away from the deficit model isn't to ignore the challenges autistics face, but to avoid perpetuating a narrative that treats us as inherently broken, evil, or wrong. The words we use to describe autism impact how autistics see themselves, and how others see us too. Insisting on viewing autism as a tragedy only perpetuates the idea that autistics = bad, which won't help anyone. Nothing we say will make someone less autistic, just more ashamed about autistic traits and autistic self.
- Time: 11:37

Quotes:

"This lens of viewing autism exclusively as differences between what is considered 'normal' vs autistic, and considering any changes as being inherently negative does serious real harm to autistics, and their families and loved ones."

"When we as autistics are saying 'I like being autistic'"

or "autism is not a bad thing,' it's because we are trying to push back against an incredibly harmful narrative that talks about autistic individuals as being sub-human, drains on society, a cause of divorce in parents, and a group that many are hoping to eliminate through genetic testing and termination so that we won't ever be born. Autistics face regular violence and death from caretakers, as well as other professionals, yet when our murders are reported there is inevitably a call for compassion for our murderers because of this narrative of autism as inherently negative."

"Please imagine what it might be like to have spent your entire life being told that what you are was broken and wrong, that you don't care about other people (even though you desperately do), that the ways your brain works are bad, that you don't have a personality or soul, that people like you should be locked up so as to not hurt others, that the only way you will be loved and accepted is if you change inherent parts of yourself because no one would love you as you are. How would that influence how you thought about yourself? Those are all things I have personally been told over the years, many times in an educational environment from professionals who genuinely thought they were helping me or one of my siblings."

"For years I thought that I was evil, broken, and wrong because that's the message I was given about what autistic traits were."

"And this is the double-sided sword all autistics are stuck with. If we share our struggles to validate our perspective we are infantilized and told we are too autistic to understand the realities of autism, but if we mask and drive ourselves to exhaustion to try to look "normal" enough to be listened to, we get told we're not autistic enough to understand what autism is really like."

"The question isn't if you think autism is good or bad, it's do you want your autistic student, client, or child to feel that they are good or bad. You can't change our autism, but you can change how we all feel about being autistic, if we see ourselves as being bad or being good."