

# **Autism and Employment: Special Issues, Special Strategies**

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# About Zosia Zaks



- Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC)
- Manager of Programs & Education:  
Hussman Center for Adults with Autism, Towson University
- Visiting Instructor  
College of Health Professions, Towson University
- autistic adults 10 years
- adults with disabilities 15+ years
- Maryland State Rehabilitation Council; Maryland Commission on Autism; Itineris, Inc.
- Self-advocate; parent

# Quick language disclaimer

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➤ Person-first language is the official way to refer to those with disabilities:  
**Person with autism**

➤ Many advocates dislike person-first language for political reasons. They use:  
**Autistic person**  
**Disabled people**

➤ This speaker does not use person-first language for political reasons. No offense is intended to those who do prefer person-first language.

➤ Curious? More to explore: <http://autismmythbusters.com/general-public/autistic-vs-people-with-autism/jim-sinclair-why-i-dislike-person-first-language/>

# Overview

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Section 1: Autism Overview

Section 2: Autism challenges and strengths explored

Section 3: Specific tools for autism challenges

Section 4: Barriers for autistic adults in traditional VR

Section 5: Specific strategies and novel insights for VR

# Section 1: Autism Overview

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◆ DEFINITION ◆ TRAITS ◆ NEURODIVERISTY

# Warm Up Exercise #1

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- Warm up exercise: What does that person feel?
- The presenter will ask for three volunteers
- Everyone else take out a sheet of paper & a pen or get ready to type

# Debrief Exercise #1

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- How did you know volunteer #1 was angry?
- How did you know volunteer #2 was bored with volunteer #3?

# Warm Up Exercise #2

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- Warm up exercise: Answer or Fail
- The presenter will ask for a group of volunteers
- An assistant will get the volunteers ready in the hall
- Everyone else will follow the speaker's instructions

# Debrief Exercise #2

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- How did it make you feel if you were the test taker?
- How did it make you feel if you were a distractor?

# Warm Up Exercise #3

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- Warm up exercise: Sensory violation game
- Break into small groups
- Survivors, want to know what you are playing for?





# Image Description

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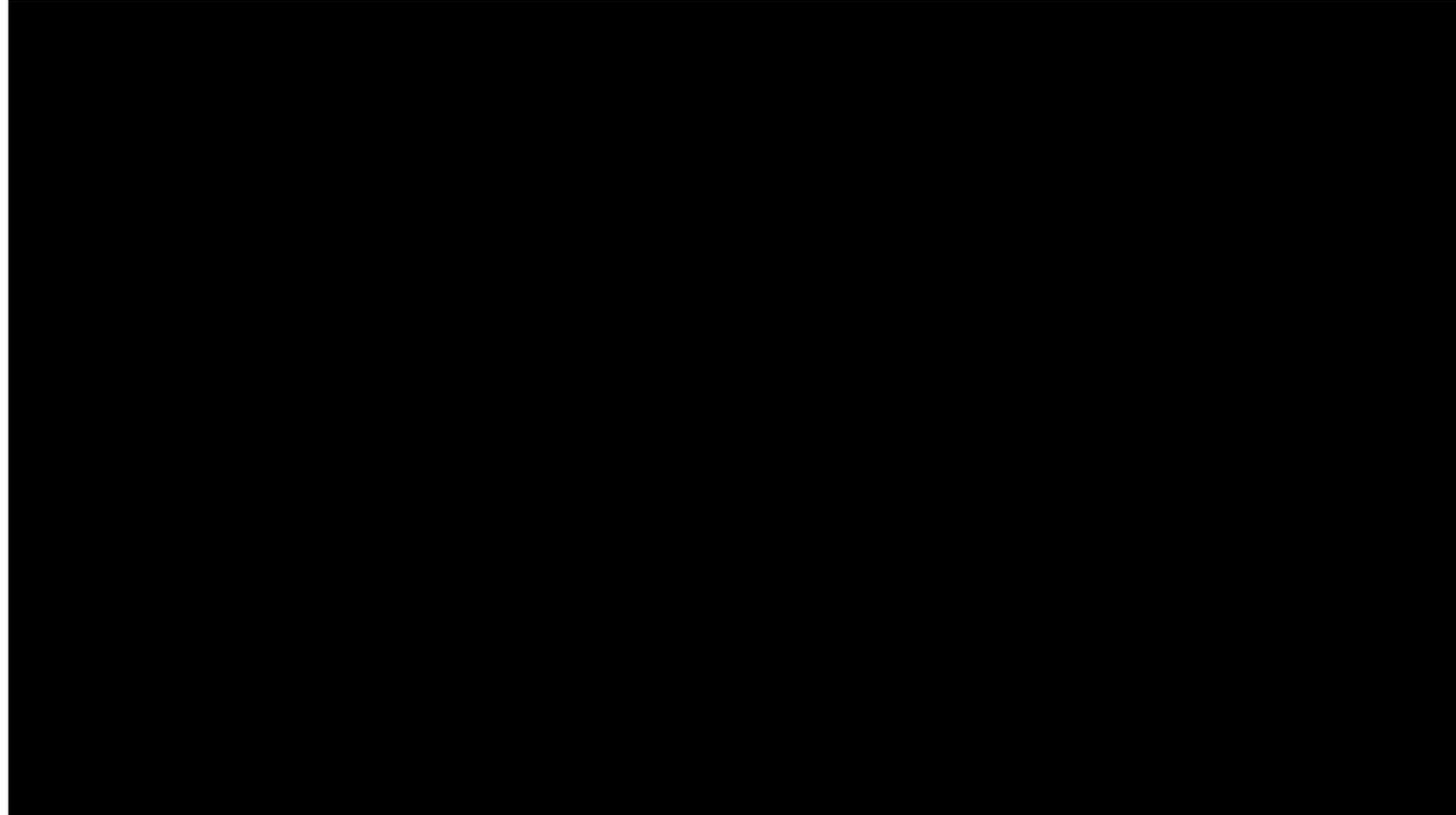
The previous slide shows a stock picture of contestants on the CBS Show Survivor getting ready for a contest that appears to involve walking on thin wooden planks.

The picture is simply there for engagement of the audience.

# Carly's Cafe Video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmDGvquzn2k>

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# Carly's Cafe Video

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The previous slide has a video about an autistic woman, Carly Fleishman. Carly demonstrates in the video what it is like to struggle to communicate, and what it feels like to have sensory issues, by showing her experiences in a café.

The embedded video does not have closed captioning or a written transcript.

The video can be found online with closed captioning here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmDGvquzn2k>

# Craig's Walking Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIPNhooUUuc>

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# Craig's Walking Video

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The previous slide has a video about walking down the street as an autistic person. Craig Thomson demonstrates what an average street looks and sounds like to an autistic person. The embedded video does not have closed captioning or a written transcript.

The video can be found online, but the online video also does not have closed captioning or a written transcript.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmDGvquzn2k>

To try to make the content accessible, the speaker will read text that appears on the screen during the video and will narrate as the scene unfolds as well.

# What Is Autism?

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- DSM-5 2013: challenges in social communication; repetitive behaviors including sensory issues
- Impacts development throughout the person's life
- appears in very early childhood and does not go away
- spectrum – significant to mild functional limitations
- probably genetic

# Autism Traits that Impact Employment

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- Sensory issues
- Social communication differences: non-verbal processing; abstractions; social rules
- Late stage developmental delays
- Routines and rituals
- Special interests or “fixations” - hyperfocus

# Autism: A Non-Judgmental View

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- Sensory issues: art, music, science, colors
- Social communication: culturally mediated anyway!
- Late stage delays: does not have to be an issue
- Special interests = special experts

# Neurodiversity

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# Image Description

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The previous slide shows a poster captioned, “Celebrate Neurodiversity” in rainbow letters. Below the caption are rows of multicolored brains. The image depicts the idea of neurodiversity: that each person’s brain is unique.

# Neurodiversity: Dr. Grandin

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**I am different,  
not less.**



# Image Description

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The previous slide shows a black and white picture of Dr. Temple Grandin seated on the ground, surrounded by cows. One cow has bent down slightly to nudge Dr. Grandin with a cow kiss on her hand and another cow is nudging her hair gently in an affectionate manner.

# Summary

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- Autism is a disability – the person isn't making these problems up
- Autism also comes with unique strengths and unique opportunities
- Society can't afford to miss a single brain!

# **Section 2:** **Autism challenges and strengths explored**

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# Challenges

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- self-regulation
- self-advocacy
- social communication
- group skills
- literal thinking
- routines and rituals
- life skills
- lack of experience

# Discussion Questions

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- What did you do the last time you were really upset?
- When did you last advocate for something you needed?

# Self-regulation

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- Crucial to every aspect of adult life
- Nearly impossible to work if you can't self-regulate
- Brain-based differences due to autism make self-regulation difficult

# Self-advocacy

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- Crucial to every aspect of adult life
- Nearly impossible to work if you can't advocate for yourself
- Americans with Disabilities Act is a self-advocacy law
- Adult service system is a self-advocacy system
- Autism-related challenges in communication and self-awareness make self-advocacy very difficult

# Social Communication: Cornerstone of Work Success

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- What interpersonal interactions arise at work?

# In-Vivo Demonstration: Social Skills at Work

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- The speaker will ask for a few volunteers
- Volunteers will participate in a live demonstration
- Discussion follows

# Michelle Garcia Winner: Social Thinking Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qYz1SRy15M>

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- Research demonstrates that teaching social thinking is more important than teaching specific social skills.



# Garcia Winner: Social Thinking Video

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The previous slide has a link to a video of Michelle Garcia Winner demonstrating social thinking concepts using a volunteer from the audience at a conference.

The video can be found online at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qYz1SRy15M>

The online video includes closed captioning and a written transcript.

# Sample Social Thinking Challenges at a Job

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- Difficulty generalizing rules to specific situations.
- Difficulty modulating to different levels of authority.
- Difficulty interpreting and sending out social cues.
- Difficulty making decisions about open-ended social problems.

# Group Skills Can Be Very Challenging

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- May be overwhelmed by sheer amount of interacting at workplace
- May not understand rules of engagement
- May want quiet, individual work – uncommon in today's workforce
- May not know how to cope with less-preferred people
- May lose opportunities to join groups

# Adults with ASD have literal minds

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- Your salary is your reward.
- You need to be responsible.
- Don't overdo it.
- Act your age.
- A bird told me.
- Are you having a bad hair day?
- You won't believe this one.
- Can I tell you something?

# Routines and Rituals

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- The 9:00 A.M. email story
- The detour story
- The pants story
- The parking lot truth

# Life skills

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- Doesn't accurately dress for varying conditions
- Can't plan meals for work shifts
- Transportation barriers
- Lack of money skills
- Does not understand what to do when not doing job tasks
- Can't "fudge"

# Lack of Experience

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- Fewer chances as teens to try jobs, volunteer, or earn money
- Social isolation results in lower career maturity
- Lack of self-awareness
- Can't identify jobs they want to try or to do
- Can't identify tasks of the jobs they are interested in
- Can't accurately describe workplace expectations

# Summary: Challenges

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## AUTISM-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

- self-regulation
- self-advocacy
- social communication differences
- literal thinking
- late stage developmental delays
- life skills

## SOCIETAL ISSUES

- isolation from peers
- lack of experience
- ableism

# Strengths

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- focus
- special interests
- loyalty
- adherence to routines

# Autism: Let's Change the Conversation

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- Has rituals and routines
  - Sensory issues
  - Blunt, direct comments
  - Doesn't chat or hang with us
  - Same thing, same time – always
  - Won't stop talking about toasters, rubber bands, shoes in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, tinfoil, cows
- ❖ Follows procedures; adheres to rules
  - ❖ Useful sensitivities
  - ❖ Honest, straightforward
  - ❖ Gets right to work
  - ❖ Loyal
  - ❖ Expert

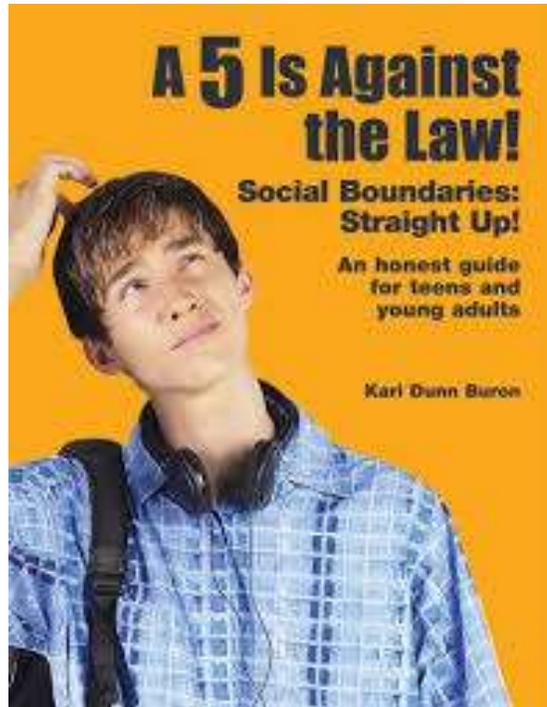
# Section 3: Specific Tools

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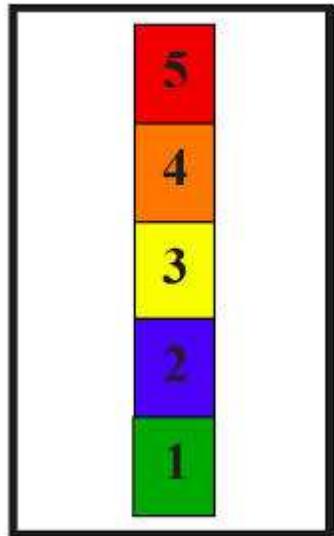
- ◆ 5-POINT SCALES ◆ SOCIAL TARGETS ◆ SOCIAL NARRATIVES
- ◆ SCAFFOLDING

# Self-Regulation: 5-Point Scales

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# 5-Point Scales – Various Designs



Name: David My SCARED (Anxiety) Rating Scale

Rating	Looks/Sounds like	Feels like	Safe people can help! I can try to!
5	Scared, like running, or really crying.	I am going to explode if I don't do something.	I will need an adult to help me leave here!
4	Frazzled, others or I am upset.	People are talking about me, I feel irritated, mad.	Close my mouth and feet, breathe in slowly, Leave the room for a while.
3	I've lost my train of thought, can't concentrate.	I sleep more.	Write an diary about it, Close my eyes.
2	I still feel nervous.	My stomach gets a little queasy.	Slow my breathing, Tell someone I can't do it.
1	Scared = too calm, no looking at me.	Calm, relaxed.	Just do it.

Reprinted with permission from Duroe, K. & Curtis, M. (2005). The Incredible 5-Point Scale: Assisting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in understanding social expectations and controlling their emotional responses (pp. 1-3, 42-43). Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company. [www.asperger.net](http://www.asperger.net)

# Social Targets – Keep Yourself In Range

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- Targets allow for gradation
- Promote behavioral flexibility
- Promote staying within accepted norms

# Social Narratives

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- Explain social thinking visually
- Dissect what happened (looking back) or predict (going forward)
- Encourage and reinforce adaptive skills

# Scaffolding

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- Slowly expand flexibility and cooperation by gradual increases
- Don't expect 100% improvement in flexibility right away
- Example: Dr. Grandin's cows

# **Section 4: Barriers in traditional VR**

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# Challenges with assessments

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- Traditional career testing may not measure/notice special interests
- Job matches frequently made without considering sensory issues
- “Work samples” may result in false negatives; don’t detect interpersonal skills
- Traditional “work samples” may not detect interpersonal skills
- Key point: Autistic adults may not be able to demonstrate what they know

# Spock Video: How Do You Feel?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5CHjiuFehU>

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- How do you feel?
- Assessments are NOT designed for neurodiverse brains!



# Spock: How do you Feel? Video

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The previous slide has a link to a video of Spock being tested by a computer. Spock answers incredibly complex math and science problems, but when the computer asks Spock, *How do you feel?* Spock is stymied.

The video can be found online at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5CHjiuFehU>

The online video does not have closed captioning or a transcript, but the computer's questions are indistinct anyway until this question is asked.

# Challenges with Obtaining a job

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- Can't interview well
- No experience to put on resume
- Can't do all parts of a job that already exists
- Skills highly specialized or narrow
- Speed and social finesse highly prized by society but not common on the spectrum

# **Section 5: Strategies for VR**

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# Work Adjustment Opportunities

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- Autistic adults need more time to:
  - ✓ adjust to being a worker
  - ✓ adjust to being at a worksite
  - ✓ adjust to social expectations at work
- Work Adjustment helps with lack of experience, lack of self-awareness
- Work Adjustment also helps with late-stage delays and peer isolation

# Work Adjustment Video: Peers Matter

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# Work Adjustment Video

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The previous slide has an embedded short video showing a peer-model based work adjustment program at the Hussman Center.

An autistic adult stands next to a peer. They are preparing a tray of bread and cheese sandwiches for the cooks.

The online video does not have closed captioning or a transcript. There is no dialogue.

# Work Adjustment Suggestions

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- Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer
- Baby steps: A few hours might just be enough right now
- Try “nice” worksites first: churches, universities, nursing homes
- Informal networks: Who do you know? Who do they know?
- Peer mentor model v. job coach model

# Disability Education

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- fosters self-awareness and self-advocacy
- teaches about diagnosis
- confers ability to communicate diagnosis and individual needs
- imparts and increases awareness of personal strengths and challenges
- confers the ability to advocate for accommodations

# Disability Education: Risks for Autistic Adults

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- Right to know your diagnosis
- Ability to communicate your diagnosis
- Awareness of personal strengths and challenges
- Ability to advocate for accommodations
- Don't know what they have
- Can't tell others they are autistic
- Don't know what they can and can't do
- Can't ask for accommodations
- Don't understand what accommodations could be provided

**Reminder: The Americans with Disabilities Act is a self-advocacy law!**

# Customized Employment: New Policy

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- Customized Employment creates a unique job for the person or modifies existing jobs to meet the specific needs of the individual and the employer

More to explore:

- Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Services website

<http://www.dol.gov/dol/media/webcast/20110610-odep-ce/20110610-odep-ce-3.htm>

- Customized Employment helps build on autistic strengths

# Customized Employment

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- Can utilize special interests
- Can accommodate sensory issues, communication needs
- Allows individuals to contribute their specific potential

# Special Interests: The “How” of Neurodiversity

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- Story time! → Greg and the action figures
- Case time!

# Special Interests Case 1: The Wanderer

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- Hector, 23, ASD and cognitive issues
- Always pacing
- Part of a roaming crew model
- “He is a liability!”
- “He is unemployable!”
- Taken off several jobs because of wandering

# Special Interests Case 2: Movie Repeater

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- Vickie, 18, special education student, ASD
- Repeats Disney movies verbatim
- On a behavior plan: don't repeat movies; do generate peer-appropriate conversations
- Was asked to leave several work trials because of repeating movies

# Sensory Scans

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- Low tech – actually no tech
- Allows you and the autistic adult to plan for sensory profile
- Example: the food service story

# Sensory Scan Practice

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- Do a Sensory Scan for this room
- Or do a Sensory Scan for your workspace

# Summary: Dealing with VR Barriers

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- Peer-typical experiences early in adolescence on up
- Work adjustment opportunities to practice behaviors & expectations
- Practice working: try jobs through volunteering, service, internships
- Use alternative assessments
- Complete Sensory Scans for job sites
- Include life skills training every step of the way
- Use Customized Employment model to build on special interests

# Conclusion

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- Autistic adults need special opportunities to adjust to the world of work
- Autistic adults need to strengthen social thinking skills
- Autistic adults need support for autism-specific challenges
- Autistic adults can contribute, even when significantly impacted by autism

***It's all about using what you got!***

***Neurodiversity – the spice of life!***

*Thank you!*

Zosia Zaks

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References available upon request

# Videos and Movies to Explore

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Dr. Grandin – The World Needs All Kinds of Minds

[http://www.ted.com/talks/temple\\_grandin\\_the\\_world\\_needs\\_all\\_kinds\\_of\\_minds/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/temple_grandin_the_world_needs_all_kinds_of_minds/transcript?language=en)

➤ Temple Grandin – The Movie

<http://www.hbo.com/movies/temple-grandin>

➤ Wretches and Jabberers

<http://www.wretchesandjabberers.org/>

# Books to Explore

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- Alex Packar: How Rude

<http://www.alexjpacker.com/how-rude/>

- Kari Dunn Buron: A Five Is Against the Law

<http://www.amazon.com/Against-Law-Social-Boundaries-Straight/dp/1931282358>

- Michelle Garcia Winner: Social Thinking at Work – Why Should I Care?

<http://www.amazon.com/Social-Thinking-At-Work-Should/dp/0884272036>