



Untangling the Wires

A New Framework for Understanding Autism, Alexithymia, and Empathy





The Dominant Stereotype: 'Autistic People Lack Empathy.'

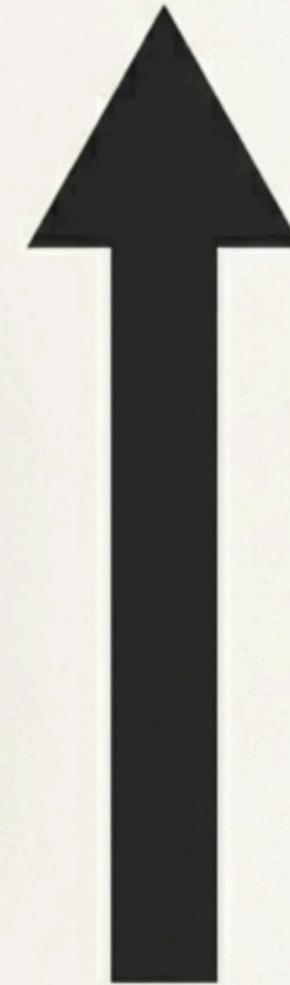
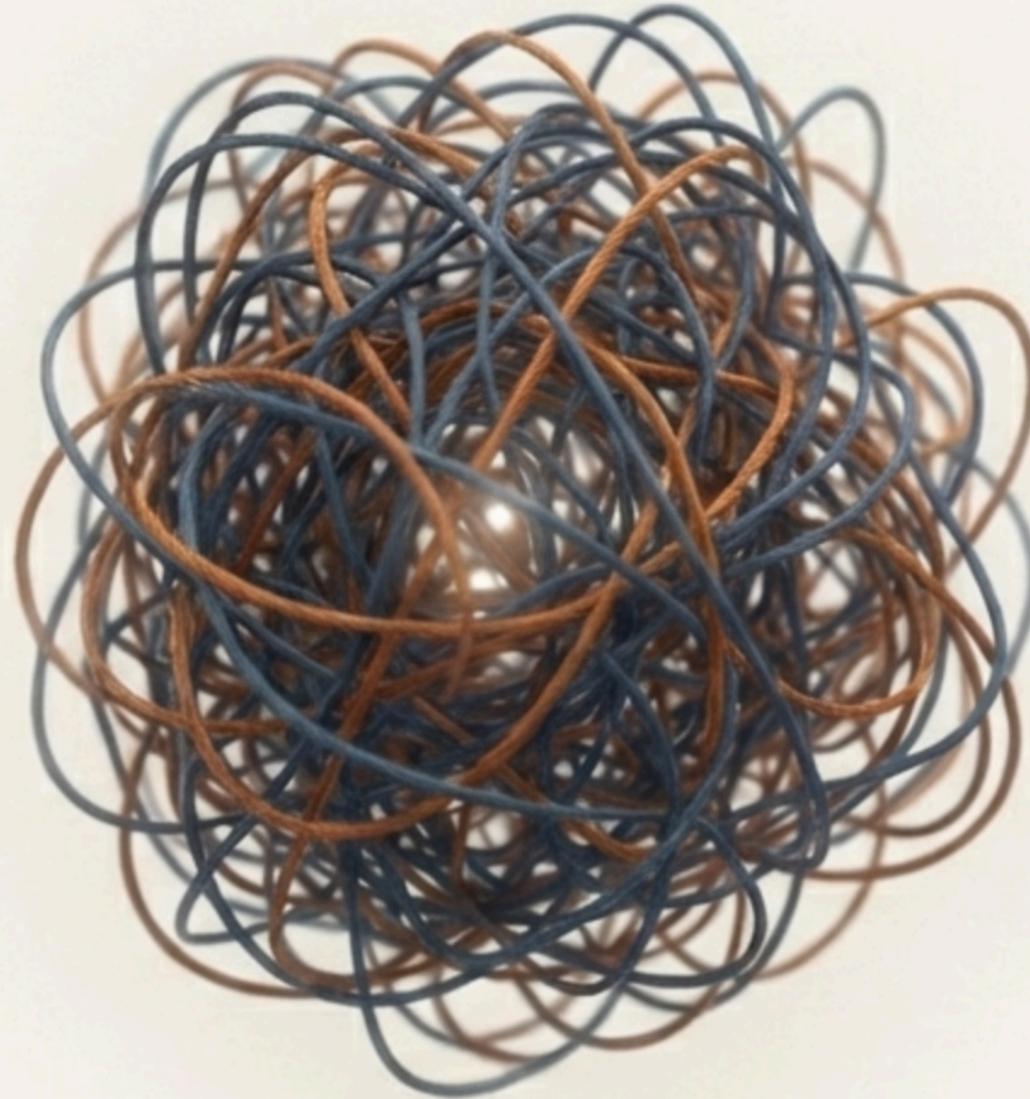
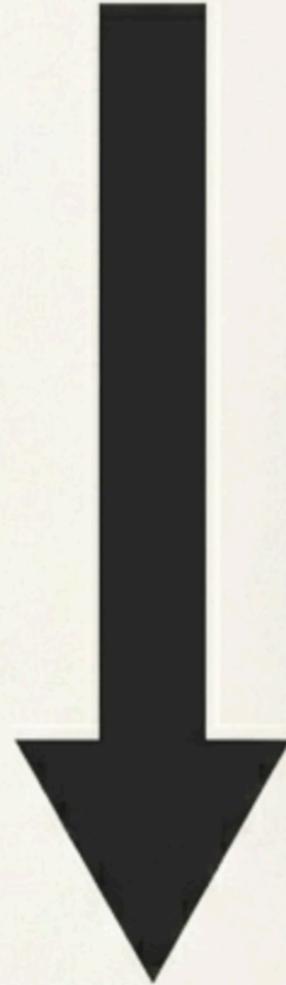
This assumption has long shaped public perception and even clinical diagnostics, despite conflicting evidence and lived experience.

“It has long been assumed that autism is associated with difficulties in empathy.”

- (Charman et al., 1997; Hobson, 1986)

The Data is Contradictory.

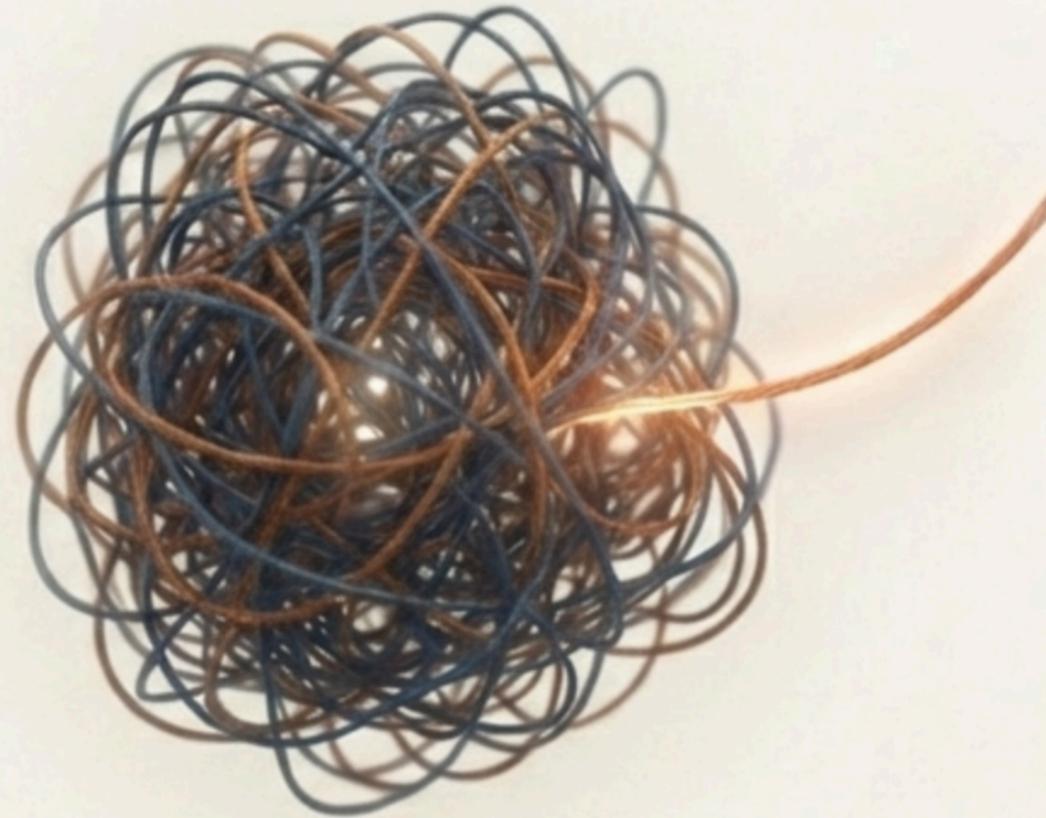
Studies report significant differences in empathic abilities.



Other studies observe similar empathic responses between and neurotypical individuals.

Research has produced highly mixed findings, suggesting that socioemotional impairments are far from universal in autism. This inconsistency points to a missing variable in the equation.

The Alexithymia Hypothesis



What if the empathy differences traditionally attributed to AUTISM are actually caused by a distinct, co-occurring trait called ALEXITHYMIA?

(Bird & Cook, 2013)

What is Alexithymia?



(from Greek: a = 'no', lexis = 'word', thymos = 'emotion')

- Marked difficulty *identifying* one's own feelings.
- Difficulty *describing* feelings to others.
- An externally-oriented thinking style.

Crucial Clarification: Alexithymia is a subclinical trait, not a formal diagnosis. It is not the absence of feeling, but the difficulty in recognizing and articulating it.

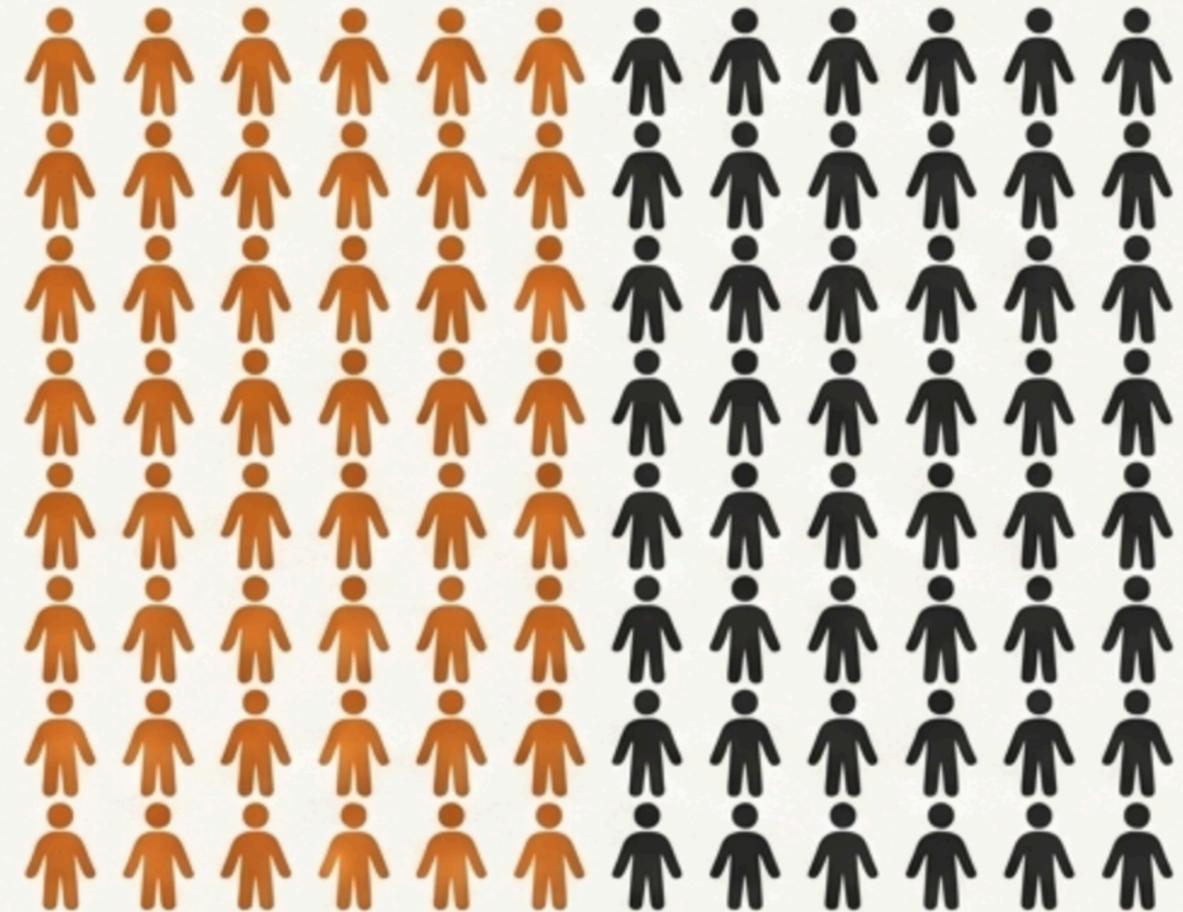
The Overlap is Common, Not Universal

General Population



~5-10% prevalence of alexithymia

Autistic Population



~50% prevalence of alexithymia

Alexithymia is approximately 5 to 10 times more common in the autistic population. This high rate of co-occurrence is the primary source of the diagnostic **confusion**.

The Connection is Interoception

Internal Body Signals



Interoception
(8th Sensory System)



Poor Interoception

Perception & Interpretation
of Emotion

Interoception is our ability to perceive internal body signals. Emotions are experienced as physiological changes in the body.

Poor interoceptive awareness, common in autism, can lead directly to alexithymia—the difficulty in identifying those emotional signals.

“Alexithymia can be thought of as a byproduct of poor interoception awareness.” - Neurodivergent Insights

When We Control for Alexithymia, Brain Differences in Empathy Disappear

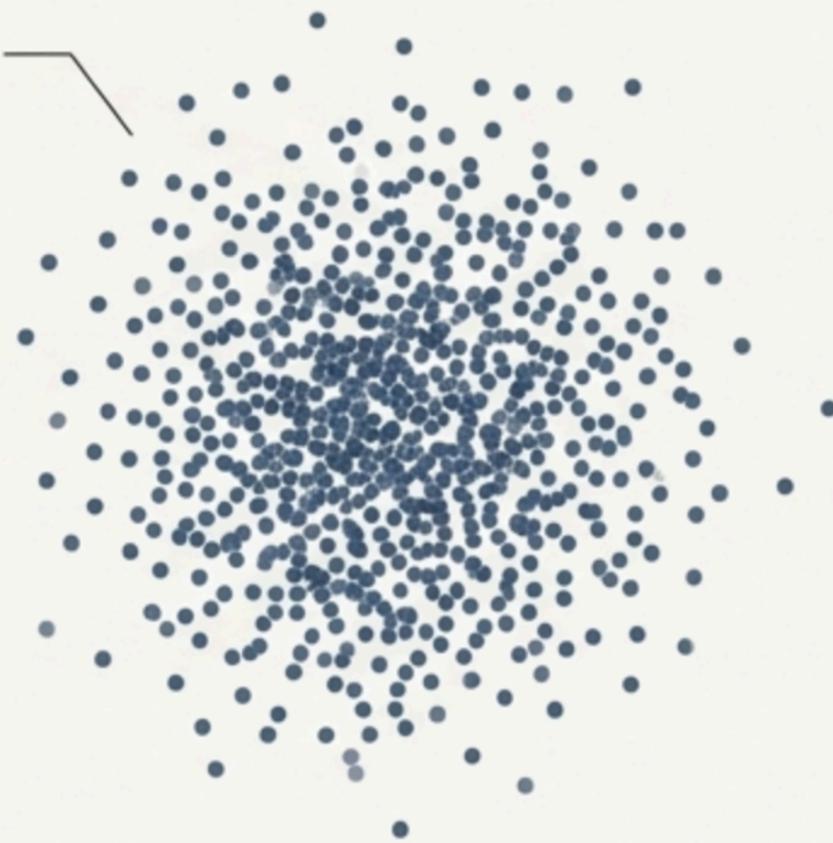


Study: fMRI study measured brain responses when participants saw a loved one in pain. (Bird et al., 2010)

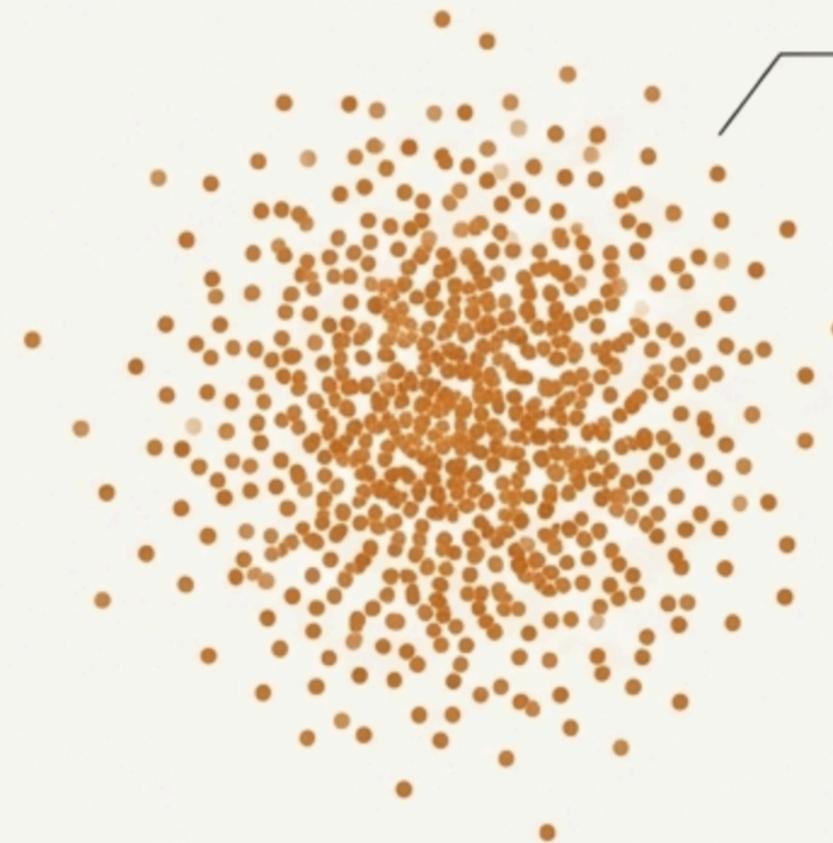
Finding: Empathic brain responses in the insula were modulated by levels of alexithymia, *not* autism.

Autistic and Alexithymic Traits are Statistically Distinct

Autistic Traits
(AQ-50 Items)



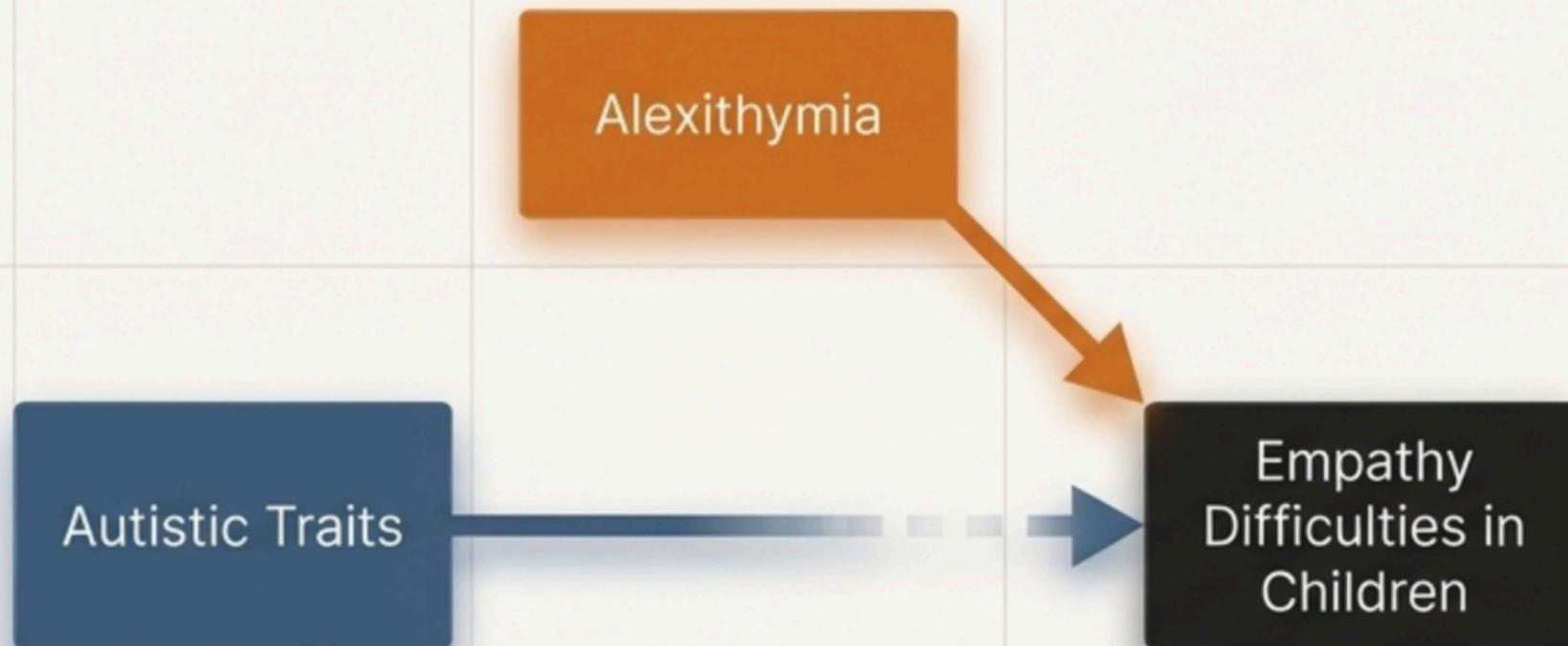
Alexithymic Traits
(TAS-20 Items)



Study: A joint factor analysis and network analysis of the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ-50) and Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20). (Cuve et al., 2022)

Results supported strong independence. Models where autism and alexithymia were a single construct fit the data poorly. The two traits form separate, reliable clusters.

The Pattern Holds True in Children



Study: The first study to examine these relationships concurrently in preadolescent children.
(Speyer et al., 2021)

Key Finding: Alexithymia was found to **predict empathy significantly better than autistic traits**. When adjusting for alexithymia, the association between **autistic traits** and behavioral **empathy** became **non-significant**.

A New Model: Two Separate Paths to Social Difficulty

Alexithymia

Associated with difficulties in the “affective representation system.”

Leads to challenges with *recognizing and representing* your own and others’ emotional states.

Primarily an *interoceptive* and *emotional awareness* challenge.

Autism

Associated with difficulties in the “situation understanding system.”

Can lead to challenges with *inferring* emotional states from context or choosing a socially-expected response.

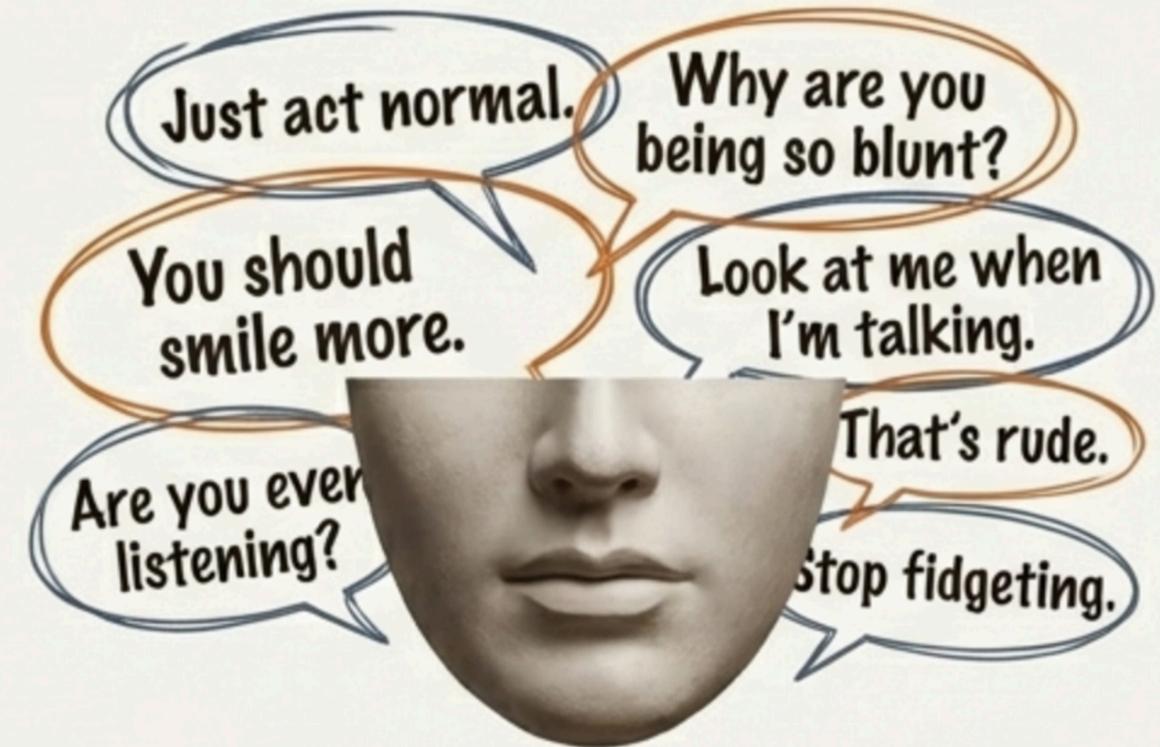
Primarily a *Theory of Mind* or *social processing* challenge.

The Consequences of Conflation



Point 1: The Cultural Archetype

The stereotypical depiction of an “unempathetic” autistic person is often a depiction of an autistic person with *severe alexithymia*. This has perpetuated a harmful and inaccurate public image. (Neurodivergent Insights)



Point 2: The Camouflaging Burden

The pressure to conform to neurotypical emotional expression leads to social camouflaging—the conscious masking of autistic traits. This is an exhausting cognitive process linked to burnout, anxiety, and depression. (Sofi, 2025)

A More Precise Path to Support



Assess for Alexithymia

Separately assess for alexithymia in autistic individuals to create a full picture of strengths and needs.



Improve Interoception & Emotional Awareness

Utilize mindfulness, body awareness exercises, and sensory integration to improve interoception.



Build Emotional Vocabulary

Use tools like visual supports (emotion cards), social stories, and ABA therapy focused on labeling emotions to connect physical sensations to feelings.

The Clarity: Autism is not an empathy disorder. Alexithymia is an emotional awareness deficit.



- Empathy difficulties in autism are largely explained by co-occurring alexithymia.
- Autism and alexithymia are statistically and neurologically distinct constructs.
- Recognizing this distinction dismantles harmful stereotypes and allows for precise self-advocacy.
- This clarity provides a logical foundation for targeted interventions that improve emotional well-being.

Understanding the system is the first step to optimizing it. Precision in language leads to precision in thought, and precision in thought is the foundation of self-advocacy.

The question isn't "Do I feel empathy?" The question is "How do I understand and process my emotions?"