

For decades, we've been told a simple story about autism and empathy.

As early as 1962, psychologists described autistic children as being “unable to achieve empathy.”

This story was given a name: **The Theory of Mind Deficit.**

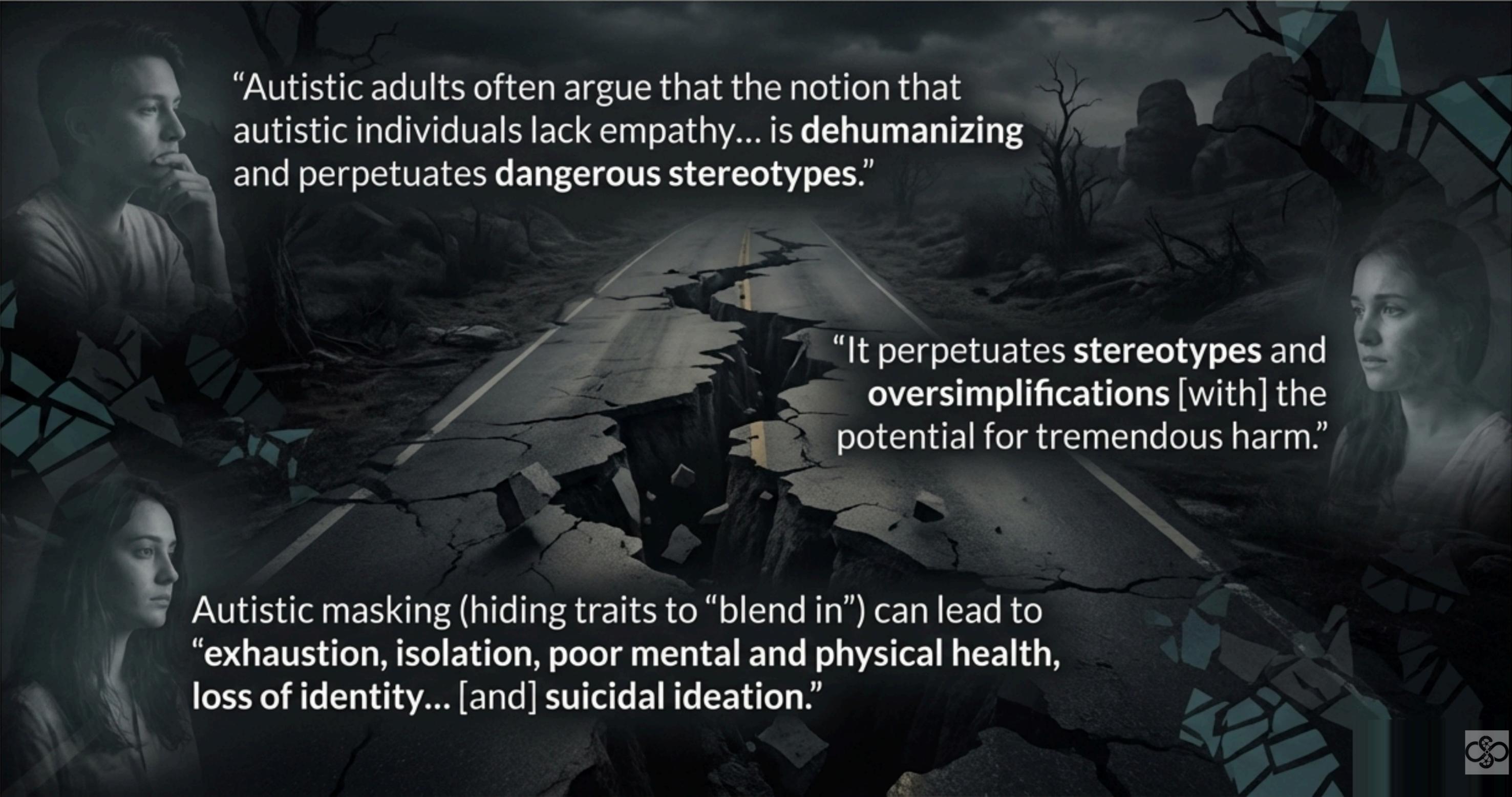
Concept: The theory claims that autistic people lack the ability to understand that others have thoughts, feelings, and perspectives different from their own.

Consequence: This was framed as “**mindblindness**,” a universal and specific deficit inherent to autism.

“Those with autism can be thought of as mindblind in that they cannot imagine what others might be thinking, or even that others are thinking.”

— *The Encyclopedia of Neuropsychological Disorders*

But this story has caused profound harm.



“Autistic adults often argue that the notion that autistic individuals lack empathy... is **dehumanizing** and perpetuates **dangerous stereotypes.**”

“It perpetuates **stereotypes** and **oversimplifications** [with] the potential for tremendous harm.”

Autistic masking (hiding traits to “blend in”) can lead to “**exhaustion, isolation, poor mental and physical health, loss of identity... [and] suicidal ideation.**”

The foundation of the theory began to crack. First, it wasn't specific to autism.

The Claim: Poor performance on “Theory of Mind” tasks was claimed to be an *autism-specific deficit*.

The Reality: A wide range of non-autistic people also “fail” these tasks, including individuals with:

- Specific language impairment
- Down syndrome
- Williams syndrome
- Cerebral palsy
- Epilepsy
- Deafness or blindness
- Even typically developing children with fewer siblings



Then, it wasn't universal. Many autistic people passed the tests.

The Claim

"Mindblindness... is universal in applying to all individuals on the autistic spectrum." - S. Baron-Cohen

The Reality

Numerous researchers have documented that many autistic children and adults pass theory-of-mind tasks.

The Confounder

Performance on these tasks is heavily dependent on language skills, not a supposed 'mind-reading' ability. Vocabulary alone can predict nearly 75% of the variance in performance.



“mindblindness
cannot be a
universal
characteristic
of autism.”

Finally, the seminal research failed to replicate.

Example 1: The Picture Book (1978)

Original Claim: Children performed significantly worse on 'real' stories.

Result: Follow-up studies have failed to replicate this finding.

Example 2: The False Belief Test (1985)

Original Claim: Children are prone to fail the false belief test.

Result: Numerous studies have failed to find significant differences in performance.

FAILED

FAILED

A new theory proposed the problem wasn't a one-way street, but a two-way bridge.



Dr. Damian Milton,
autistic sociologist

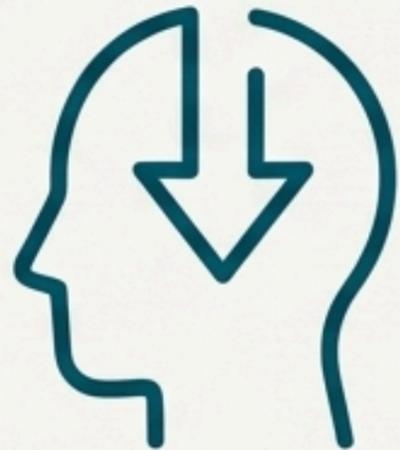


His central idea:
**The Double Empathy
Problem**

“A breakdown in mutual understanding... can happen between people with very different world views... re-framing the empathy issue as one of ‘reciprocity and mutuality.’”

The evidence shows the empathy gap runs both ways.

Finding 1: Lower Empathic Accuracy



Non-autistic people had **significantly lower** accuracy when tracking the emotions of autistic narrators, especially for happiness and sadness.

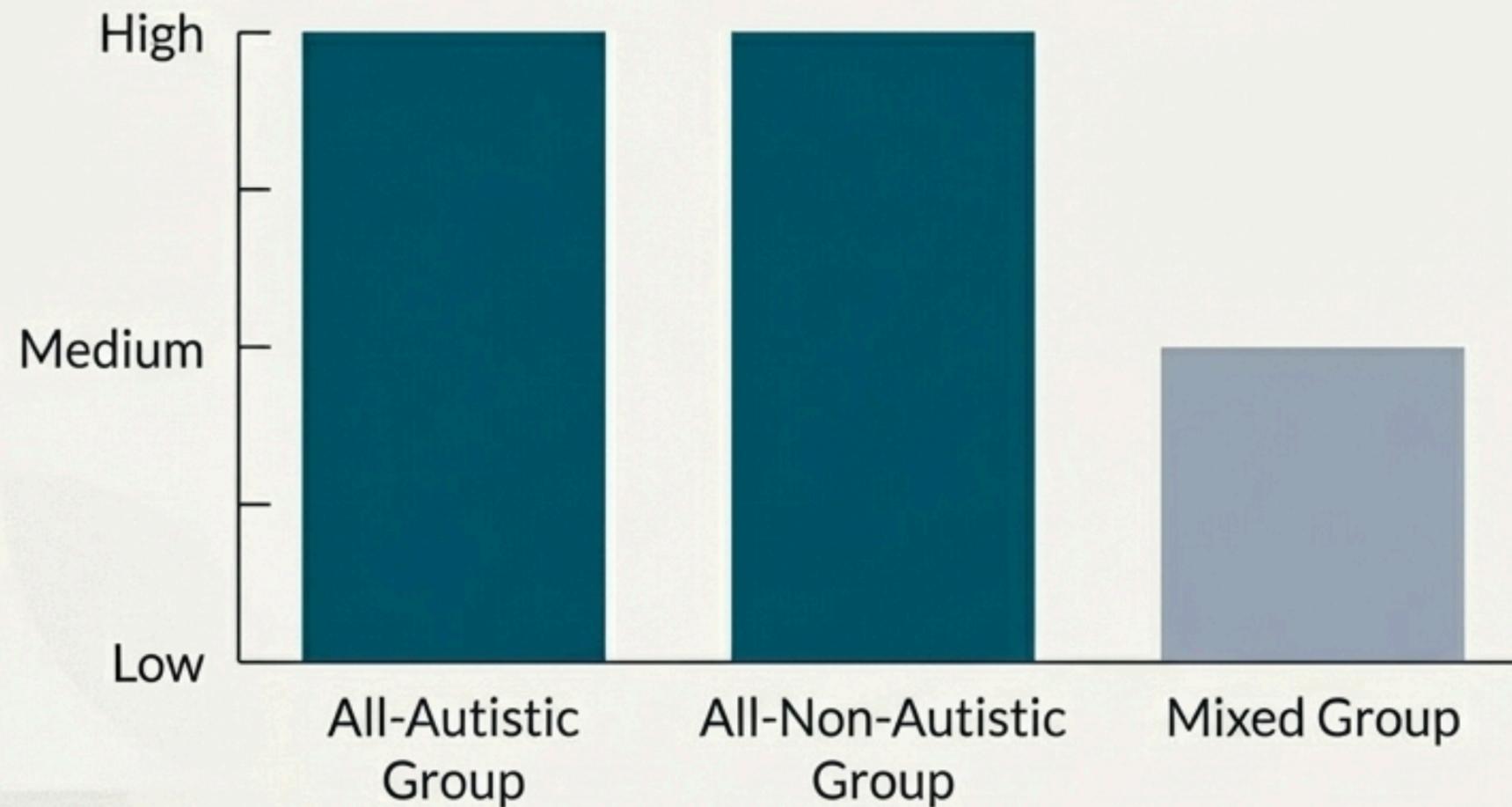
Finding 2: Higher Bodily Intensity



Conversely, they felt emotions **more intensely** in their own bodies when viewing autistic narrators expressing anger and fear.

Social connection is not a deficit. It's a matter of context.

Self-Reported Group Rapport



The Stunning Result

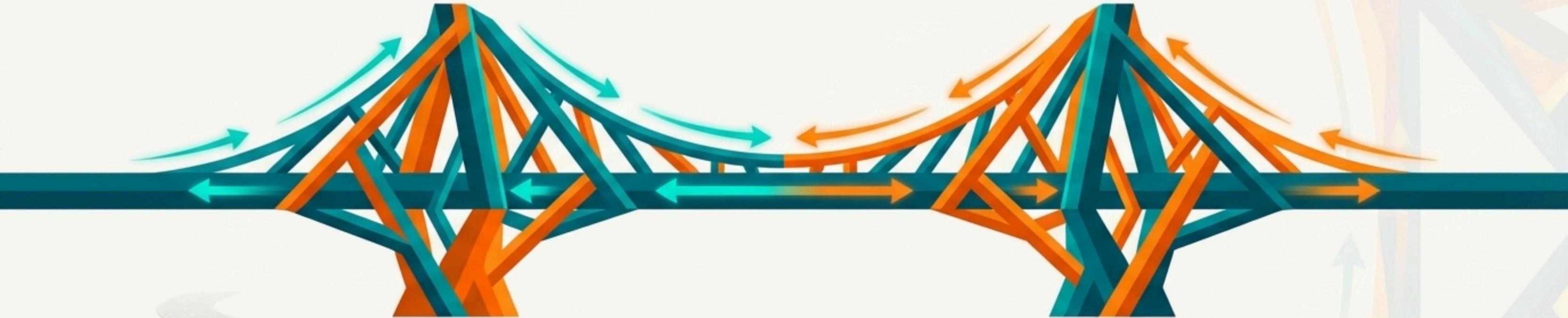
All-autistic groups reported just as much rapport as all-non-autistic groups.

The Key Insight

Both same-neurotype groups had **higher** rapport than the mixed-neurotype groups.

Source: Foster et al. (2025), *Autism*

This changes everything. The goal is not to “fix” people, but to build a bridge.



OLD MODEL (One-Way Street)

- Focuses on “deficits in social communication.”
- Trains autistic people to mimic neurotypical skills (masking).
- Places the burden of adaptation entirely on the autistic person.

NEW MODEL (Two-Way Bridge)

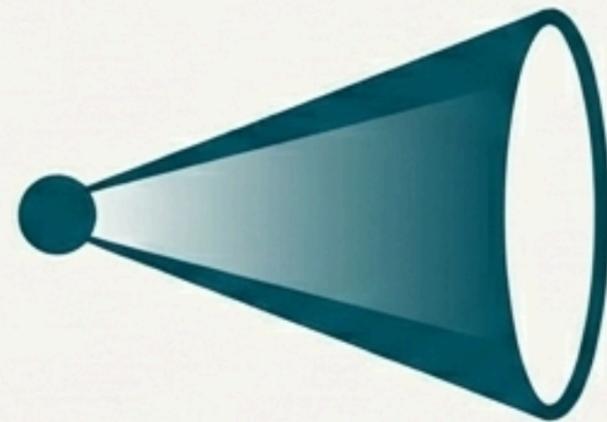
- Recognizes different communication styles.
- Focuses on mutual accommodation and shared responsibility.
- Asks *both* sides to learn and adapt.

Step 1: Understand Autistic Communication Styles.



Literal, Honest, and Specific

Prioritizes truth and accuracy. Metaphors or generalities can feel like a lie. Directness is not rudeness; it's clarity.



Infodumping

Sharing a wealth of information about a passionate interest. This is not a one-sided lecture; it's an act of trust and a desire to share joy.



Different Nonverbal Cues

'Flat affect' is not boredom or disinterest. Facial expressions may not match neurotypical expectations, but the internal feeling is still there.

Step 2: Adjust Your Communication.

Be Specific.

Ask explicitly instead of implying. “How was your day?” can be overwhelming. Try: “What was something good about your day?”

Get Clarification.

Don't assume. Check in. “Your tone sounds like you're mad at me. Am I reading that right?”

Give Processing Time.

Pauses in conversation are okay. Allow more time for a response, especially after a question.

Step 3: Avoid Common Assumptions.

Assumption

They aren't making eye contact, so they aren't paying attention.

They're disagreeing with me to be difficult.

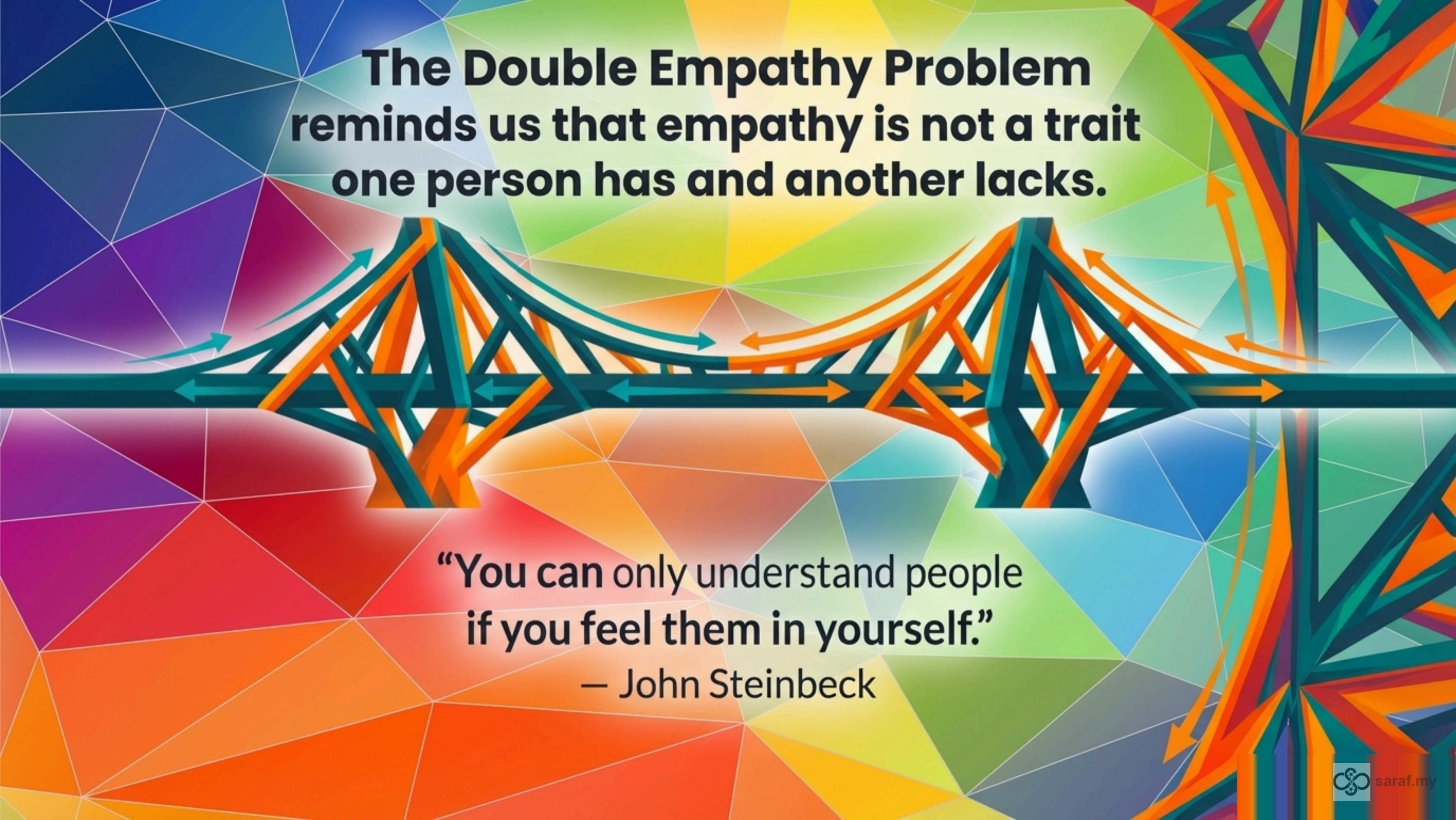
Their blunt criticism is rude or mean.

Reality

Eye contact can be uncomfortable or even painful. Looking away can actually help an autistic person *hear more* of what you're saying.

When an autistic person disagrees, it simply means they have a different opinion. They prioritize honesty over social peace-keeping.

Reading between the lines can be impossible. Directness ensures the message is understood without ambiguity.



**The Double Empathy Problem
reminds us that empathy is not a trait
one person has and another lacks.**

**“You can only understand people
if you feel them in yourself.”
– John Steinbeck**