Attention Tunneling w/ Fergus Murray

Fergus: The way that people talk about executive dysfunction, and like, steering attention, it's kind of like the problem is with the steering, but actually, it's that there's so much attention to steer, if that makes sense.

So like, it takes a lot of investment to get from one course to another, but that's not because you lack the ability to shift attention, really, it's that there's so much attention, so many processing resources invested in what you were paying attention to, and you need to pull those all the way out and then kind of pile them over here instead, in order to change track.

Jesse: You're listening to Sluggish, a newsletter with audio/visual tendencies by me, Jesse Meadows.

I recently got to chat with the writer, science educator and autistic community organizer Fergus Murray about monotropism, a theory of autism that's actually changed how I understand myself in some very helpful ways.

It's an idea that's very personal for Fergus, whose late mother, Dinah Murray, was one of the first researchers, along with Wenn Lawson, to theorize and publish on it.

In their 2005 paper with Mike Lesser, *Attention, Monotropism, and the Diagnostic Criteria for Autism*, they talked about styles of attention in terms of light.

Imagine you're in a room and you turn on that big light in your ceiling fan that we all hate. It lights up the entire room and everything in it, but it's a flat, even wash of light. They called this polytropic attention.

You can have a lot of interests all over the room, but none of them are particularly intense.

Now turn that light off and whip out a flashlight. You have a very focused, very intense beam that can only light up a few things at once, maybe a side table or the corner of a bookshelf. Everything that falls outside the flashlight's beam is engulfed in darkness. That's monotropic attention.

Murray et al thought of the diffuse big light and the focused flashlight as two ends of a spectrum of attention, and they hypothesized that the diagnostic criteria for autism was actually selecting for people on the flashlight end.

Here's Fergus:

Fergus: The idea is that monotropic people, our attention is pulled in relatively strongly to relatively few things at a time. So it's less distributed than it is for polytropic people. And this seems to explain all of the diagnostic features of autism and quite a lot of other things about autistic experience, and it does this without making them into deficits.

The diagnostic criteria for autism have always been defined from the outside behaviorally. They're based on what autistic people look like to clinicians, basically, and, that could have different causes. There might be completely polytropic people who happen to have social communication difficulties, particularly with nonverbal communication, and restricted range of interests, and repetitive behaviors.

You know, maybe there are other completely non-monotropic reasons why that comes about. We don't really know! But I think it's safe to say that most autistic people are quite a lot more monotropic than most non-autistic people.

It's also the case that ADHDers seem to be more monotropic than average, and that goes for both autistic ADHDers and non-autistic ones. So the most monotropic people on average are those who are autistic and ADHD, at least going by the results of the Monotropism Questionnaire.

Jesse: That's an assessment for monotropism that Fergus and a team of researchers have been working on since 2021. A student at the University of Edinburgh, Valeria Garau, invited people to take the questionnaire as part of her Master's project.

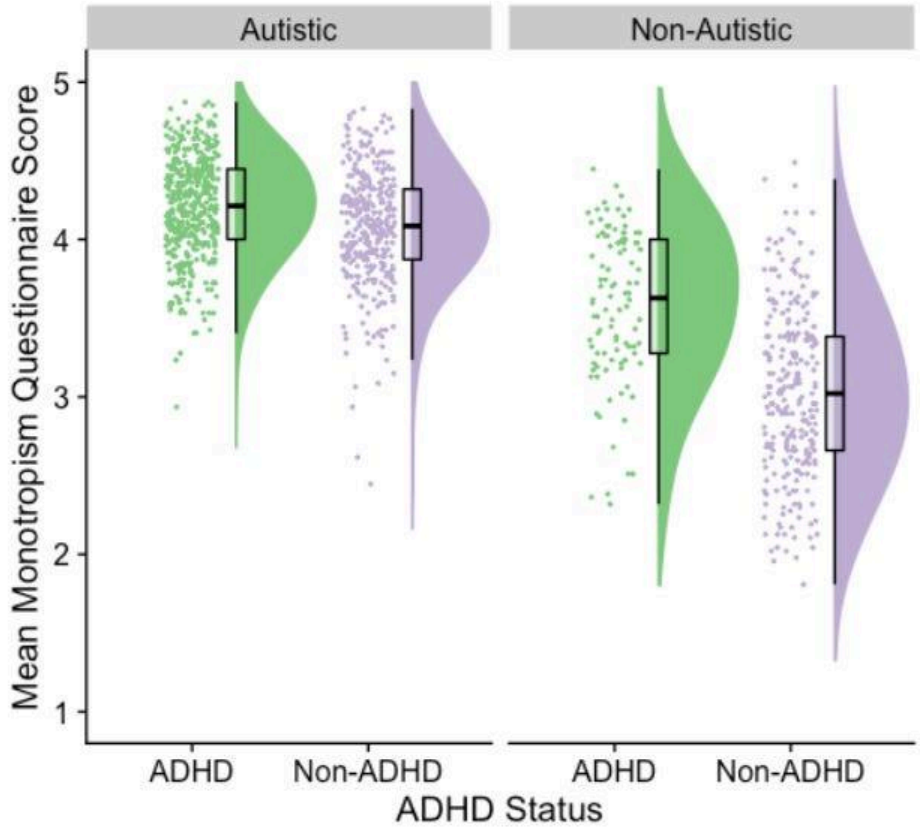
Fergus: We got about a thousand respondents in the space of roughly a week, which is not usual for a Master's project. It's kind of a symptom of how many people were already interested in monotropism. But it has to be said that interest has exploded since the questionnaire has been out there, which has been interesting to watch.

And, as someone who cares about doing good science, well, a little bit concerning!

Jesse: That's because the paper hadn't actually made it through peer review before going viral on TikTok, where creators mistakenly described it as a new test for autism, which it's not. It's a test for monotropism.

Fergus: It's to check whether we're right that, in fact, autistic people are nearly always monotropic, and non-autistic people are hardly ever monotropic.

And yeah, I mean the results came back and yes, basically, if you look at the graph, it's two normal distributions and the normal distribution for non-autistic people is much wider, like long tails on both sides — this is, of course, for people who *think* they're not autistic. It's possibly worth making that distinction.



And yeah, the average is kind of about, I don't know, three out of five or something. And then for the autistic population, there's a much, much steeper hill with the mean way above the average for the non-autistic population.

So it's not, you know, it's not like the population divides neatly into a polytropic population and a monotropic population, and the monotropic population is just autistic, but it is true that, you know, if you do the test, you'll see that you can be less monotropic than most autistic people and still be more monotropic than something like 90 percent of the non-autistic population.

It’s a very satisfying graph from my perspective as a part-time researcher.

Jesse: You've said before that you are a serial monotropist, which I think is an interesting term. What does that mean to you?

Fergus: Yeah, so, I grew up thinking about autism. My mum started talking about monotropism in public in the early 90’s. She got her friend Jeanette Bursky to coin the term in 1991, I think? Her first conference presentation on it was in 1992 when I was 13, 14. So, she was talking about her ideas, you know, and obviously, we talked about it a lot.

Jesse: Like, you're at the dinner table..

Fergus: Oh, yeah, that kind of thing. And I didn't think I was all that monotropic. Like, I knew that I was relatively monotropic, but I thought I probably wasn't autistic because I was prone to jumping from thing to thing to thing. Eventually I came to accept that it wasn't that I was multitasking, which is what I like to tell myself, but that I was just repeatedly forgetting what it was that I was doing just now.

I've got the kind of, drive for novelty, which I think is a major part of ADHD.

Jesse: Yeah, I really relate to that actually, because I also jump from thing to thing. They're all like, pretty related to each other, they're in the same kind of like, category. But, yeah. I was diagnosed ADHD in high school. My little brother's autistic. And so I had my come-to-autism moment, toward the end of my twenties, because I was like, there are just a lot of things that weren't explained, or being interpreted in other ways. Like, I got diagnosed bipolar, because I told them that I had these moods that would go up and down.

Fergus: I think it's safe to say that a lot of autistic people are misdiagnosed with bipolar, because largely, it's explainable through monotropism, right? Like you get really, really into something and then you're passionately excited about it for a while and then you crash at some point and yeah, that looks like the kind of cycle of, you know, hypomania or whatever, associated with bipolar, but it probably, probably comes from a different place.

Jesse: Yeah. I mean, definitely for me, it makes a lot more sense through the lens of monotropism. How did you figure out that you're autistic?

Fergus: So, I was married for a while, and a lot of the friction between my ex wife and me, was around things which I slowly came to accept were autistic things, basically. Not tuning in to her. A lot of communication breakdowns. It was partly her kind of wanting to make more sense of why our relationship had gone so badly wrong.

Jesse: Mm-hm.

Fergus: But you know, it was a useful kind of self discovery for me as well. But at the time it sort of didn't make that much difference to me because I already knew that I was relatively monotropic.

You know, I knew myself reasonably well, I think, but it did make some difference having external confirmation that, you know, I wasn't just moderately monotropic, but actually I was diagnosably autistic.

But yeah, it was kind of funny for me because I didn't do very much with that information. Like I had a few support sessions to kind of help with employment related stuff. I'd known autistic people for years. Like I said, [with] my mum, I grew up talking about this stuff.

She became a support worker to work with autistic people to kind of check if her ideas seemed to check out, and befriended a bunch of autistic adults.

So I sort of already had that in my life, but I never really connected with it that much until getting together with my current partner, who realized they're autistic within a year of us getting together, I guess. It was a bit sooner than that for me, but I wanted them to get there on their own.

Jesse: Yeah. Yeah. You can't tell someone they're autistic. You have to let them figure it out.

Fergus: You've certainly got to be careful about it. Yeah.

There have been one or two times in my life, I think, where I've kind of said to someone, so, have you looked into getting an autism assessment? In one case, the person I said that to said, Yes, I finally got one last week. That removed any awkwardness, I thought.

Jesse: Yeah, I also kind of looked around when I realized I was autistic and I was like, Oh, kind of, most of my friends are, also. You just kind of like, just naturally, uh, what's the word? There's a science word for it, you know, birds of a feather..

Fergus: Yeah, it's like.. it's assortative mating, when you actually get together. I don't know, assortative friendship?

Jesse: It's like… man, now it's going to bother me. It'll come to me in like 30 minutes.

Editor Jesse: It did not come to me in 30 minutes, listener, but the word is homophily. Wikipedia says it's "the tendency of individuals to bond with similar others."

Which brought me to my next question. If ADHD is supposed to be chaos, and autism is supposed to be order, why do we tend to find that we all have so much in common?

Could it be a shared experience of monotropism? And how does that explain ADHD?

Fergus: Like me, for years, a lot of ADHDers don't immediately identify with monotropism, because it tends to be a feature of monotropism that it is difficult to change attention tunnels, to like, shift your attention from one thing to another. And I think actually that is true for a lot of ADHDers, but only when you've kind of got a certain depth into the attention tunnel.

So when you're just kind of skimming along the surface, you're likely to be hopping from one thing to another to another to another, often compulsively, possibly to avoid getting into things too deeply, because it's scary getting deeply into something. You might hyper focus and forget to eat or people might be angry with you. Certainly, that's been my experience.

So, one of the things about ADHD is inattention, right? They call it inattention. And the thing about monotropism is attention, but it's attention on one thing at a time, or a small number of things at a time. So if someone is trying to make you pay attention to something which doesn't grab your interest, then it's a massive challenge to steer your attention towards it.

And I think that's a challenge shared by most autistic and most ADHD people actually. But it's kind of funny, because the diagnostic criteria for the two things are almost totally like at cross purpose. They're just describing completely different parts of the elephant, right?

Like yeah, ADHDers have a trunk and big ears. Autistic people have great big legs and like, a little thin tail!

I don't want to go overboard with saying that they are just the same thing, but I do think that most of the time they probably come from the same place. But I wonder if — we talked earlier about the possibility that maybe there are autistic people who are autistic for completely non-monotropic reasons.

And I think that's quite likely with ADHD, like, there are probably other ways for your attention to be difficult to steer and for you to be impulsive and hyperactive and whatever else.

So, what were we saying… the tendency to forget what you're just doing when you've hopped from one thing to another. I think that's a very, very common ADHD thing.

And in monotropism terms, that's like, yeah, it just makes perfect sense. Obviously you're just going to shift all of your attention resources from one thing to another when you do that. Also distractibility, right? And that's an interesting one because hyperfocus is something which is now a part of the public discourse about ADHD, but wasn't really until, I think, fairly recently.

Jesse: I think it was in like, the early pop psych books like Ed Hallowell in Driven to Distraction, I think he talked about [it]. I don't know if he called it hyperfocus, but definitely it was like, this is a paradox, because ADHDers can pay attention to stuff that they're very interested in.

Fergus: Yeah. Yeah. It's an interesting one, distraction cause I think when you're in hyperfocus, you're probably not that distractible.

Jesse: I'm not!

Fergus: No, I know that I'm not. I might find distractions very irritating when they penetrate my attention tunnel at all, but I'm not likely to be pulled out of it.

Whereas when my attention is not that deeply invested in something, I am very distractible. You know, something will grab my attention, and again, I just kind of forget about what I was doing.

Jesse: I have days where I just I am like, constantly skimming the surface. And I actually really hate days like that. I can't get into flow or like, get deeply into anything, and it just makes me feel very disoriented and like, I'm drifting around.

Fergus: I hear that from a lot of autistic people.

Jesse: Which is often called executive dysfunction! Although, you said in a talk, which I'll link in the show notes, that you think that it's a 'vague and woolly concept', which — woolly is not really a word that we use in the US, but I like it.

Fergus: You get the image.

Jesse: Yeah. So I'm wondering what you think is missing from the concept of executive function and how monotropism can maybe fill in some of the gaps?

Fergus: I think executive function is kind of too big a concept. It covers too much, and in doing so, it fails to make anything really very clear.

So, you know, I do talk about executive function, because if you're talking about difficulty focusing on things and planning and stuff, it's the term that people are most likely to, at least, half understand.

It's misleading to think of it in terms of generalized executive dysfunction, which is how it tends to be talked about in terms of ADHD and autism. And apart from anything, if you're saying that autistic people and ADHDers lack executive function, then what exactly is the difference meant to be? Which, you know, there are answers to it in the same way that there are answers if you're trying to put them both down to monotropism, um, but I always found that a little bit unsatisfactory.

What I would say is that the way that executive functioning is different in autistic people is that it's more monotropic. Basically, that's it. So, one thing is that the way that people talk about executive dysfunction, and like steering attention, it's kind of like the problem is with the steering, but actually, it's that there's so much attention to steer, if that makes sense.

So like, it takes a lot of investment to get from one course to another, but that's not because you lack the ability to shift attention, really. It's that there's so much attention, so many processing resources invested in what you were paying attention to, and you need to pull those all the way out and then kind of pile them over here instead, in order to change track.

And then, you know, a lot of stuff with executive function is about planning and things, and understanding that at least a big reason why that stuff goes wrong is because it involves holding too many things in your head at the same time, just gives you more to work with than just saying, yeah, you have executive functioning difficulties. That means that planning is really hard.

If you kind of get your head around the idea that planning stuff is hard because it's like — sorry, I was about to use a roundabout metaphor and then I remembered how much of our audience is likely to be American. So let's leave that out..

Jesse: Oh, well, we have roundabouts..

Fergus: Kinda.

Jesse: A few! [laughs]

Fergus: Anyway, the point is. When you shove one thing into your head, quite often something else drops out. I mean, there's limited space, unless you can tie everything together closely and it starts to feel like one thing.

And I think that's a really important idea for understanding some of the behaviour and kind of, thought patterns, which might not look monotropic at first glance.

It's like you were saying, when we bounce around from thing to thing to thing, it's often not really between things. It's within one larger thing. And we know the connections, the connections are perfectly clear to us. It might be obscure to other people.

Jesse: Do you want to talk about this paper that you co-authored last year?

Fergus: Towards Autistic Flow Theory!

Jesse: Yeah. I love it. It's open access. I will also link it in the show notes. How does an autistic flow theory differ from these like, more mainstream positive psychology accounts of flow?

Fergus: I was listening to your podcast the other day about Csikszentmihalyi's book Flow, which I have not read as thoroughly as you, so just a caveat with that.

Jesse: I don't remember when I wrote that, but I wish that I had read this paper before I wrote that. I don't know if it had come out or I don't remember, but I was like, Oh, this is what I needed for that essay!

Fergus: Yeah, so you were talking about how, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi…quite a sort of, capitalist-friendly, individualistic account of flow.

Jesse: Yeah. Well, a lot of the stories in his book were about how workers can just like, harness flow to love their job in the factory and stuff.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And like we were saying, it is a feature of monotropic cognition that actually, no, we can't just choose where our flow goes. We just really can't. If something grabs our

attention, it grabs our attention, like we might be able to tune it out, but it'll take work. If something does not grab our attention, it's incredibly difficult to focus on it in a meaningful, sustained way.

It takes constant effort, which I think actually is probably true to everyone, to a point. William James was writing about this in the 19th century. But I think it's much, much truer for monotropic people. But it's also true that we probably typically enter flow states more easily than most and they're a larger part of our existence.

So, as far as I know, it's Damien Milton, the autistic scholar, who first made the connections between flow states as described by Csikszentmihalyi and monotropism, cause they look really very similar.

Would you like to enumerate the features of flow? Are they fresh in your head?

Jesse: He was talking about, like, when your skills are just good enough to be doing something, but not like *too* good..

Fergus: Yeah, so it's a challenge, but it's not too much of a challenge. Yeah, so that's his like main criteria, isn't it, for entering flow. And he says that when you are in flow, you lose track of everything else. You tend to lose track of time. There's, what does he say? A merging of action and intention, I think, which is quite a poetic turn of phrase.

Jesse: Goal-directed. Like, you have a goal.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And there's usually ongoing feedback on how well you're doing with getting to that goal.

So, you know, if you're a musician in flow, you know that you're in tune, you know that it sounds great. Sports people in the zone… Csikszentmihalyi first published, I think, in a sports psychology journal, although that wasn't really his main interest. He had trouble getting published at first.

So yeah, most of that stuff is going to be very familiar to anybody who has experience of hyperfocus, right? The losing track of everything else outside of it, losing track of time, really kind of losing yourself in the activity is what it's all about.

And I think a monotropic person in an environment which suits them is likely to spend quite a lot of their time in flow. And I mean, there are interesting questions about, like, what is and isn't flow as well. Like, when I am totally absorbed in watching the light play on the surface of flowing water, is that a flow state?

It's definitely got some of the characteristics, but not necessarily all of it.

Jesse: Well, you don't have a goal.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And there are lots of things like that, going back decades since Csikszentmihaly first started talking about this stuff, people saying, well, but is this flow? Because it's got this, this, and this characteristic but it doesn't really have that.

So, you know, if you get absorbed in reading a book, that doesn't necessarily meet all of the criteria of flow, but it's clearly a similar kind of thing, I would argue.

When I'm trying to get people to understand what's going on for autistic people, often I refer them to experiences of flow that they might have had. So, you know, if they have ever been playing a computer game and they had to stop immediately to go and eat supper.

Jesse: Mm-hm.

Fergus: Then they, they'll have some kind of insight into what a wrench that is, being pulled out of an attention tunnel, is actually quite a familiar feeling, I think, for most people. It's an extremely familiar feeling for most autistic people, and especially at school probably, like most high schools, most secondary schools, involve, just every half hour to an hour, sometimes more often, [they'll] be wrenched out of whatever they're doing and like made to do something else entirely.

Jesse: When I took Adderall in school, one of the reasons that I didn't like it is that it made my attention tunneling so intense that I got really mean. Like, I was just mean to all my friends because they were trying to talk to me, and I was like, *I'm doing this!* And if I'm not on Adderall, I still am bothered to be pulled out of something, but I can like, not snap at people, you know?

I'm like, I need a buffer, buffer time.

Fergus: Yes!

Jesse: ..if you want me to do something like, okay, give me 10 minutes to get out of this.

Fergus: Buffer time! And so much of the tension between a lot of parents as well, but certainly teachers, you know — I was a teacher for 10 years for context — so much of the friction between teachers and parents and neurodivergent kids is about just not understanding how much of a wrench it is to be pulled out of an attention tunnel and how important it is to give people a little bit of, kind of, decompression time between things.

Jesse: Yeah, and school is very like, okay, you have 20 minutes to do this assignment and then we're going to move to the next thing. And it's like, that's not really how it works. Like, I don't really feel like I have control over if I'm getting into flow or like, if I get sucked into an attention tunnel or if I can get out of it, like sometimes it feels very, I don't know, mystical in a way, like I can't plan around it. It just like, it happens when it happens. Sometimes I can kind of trigger myself to get into it though.

Fergus: Hmm.

Jesse: Drum and bass and a dark room.

Fergus: Yeah, interesting. Jamie Knight, as in Jamie and Lion, talks about organizing his life around tunnels, not tasks.

So he knew my mum for years and I think it took quite a long time for monotropism to really, really click for him. Um, when it finally did, it was like, Oh, wait, right. Okay. So if I forget about sitting down to do this thing, and instead, put myself in the optimum environment to do *things*. Enter an attention tunnel.

So he goes to a cafe that he goes to all the time, everyone knows him. He gets the same thing. He doesn't have to think about anything much else. He knows that the level of background noise is going to be enough to satisfy that need without being distracting.

And he just gets down to things. Yeah, like you, I have often struggled with trying to do a particular task. And I think, um, this approach of like, right, I'm going to be productive now, and I'm going to put myself into the kind of environment and headspace that I know I can be productive in, without necessarily saying.

Right, I'm going to do X in particular for the next half hour.

Jesse: For me with planning what I'm going to write in the newsletter, I'll be like, okay, I'm going to write this essay. And then I sit down and I'm like, I'm not interested in this today. So then I write something completely different, that happens all the time. And so I can't really have, like, a strict editorial plan, because I don't know. It's just, based on what my brain wants.

Fergus: Yeah. yeah. yeah. And sometimes my brain just bounces off things which I think I'm interested in.

I don't really have a good explanation for that, but it's certainly a known phenomenon.

Jesse: Do you have any like, tricks that you use to put yourself in flow?

Fergus: Sometimes I put on white noise, that can help. Making sure that I'm not going to be distracted by things like hunger and thirst for a while.

Jesse: Oh yeah.

Fergus: I don't know, I wish I was better at it, honestly, after all these years.

Jesse: Uh, my partner has, they listen to coffee shop sounds. So like, their Spotify wrapped one year, the number one track was coffee shop sounds.

Fergus: I can relate to that, I spend a lot of time in cafes.

Jesse: Yeah, there's something about the background kind of hum and just having people around who are doing stuff, which, it's co-working, is what it's usually called, but the paper talked about intersubjective flow, where like a bunch of people are getting into flow together. And I wonder if that's an example of it?

Fergus: Yeah, it's definitely a related phenomenon. I think when we're talking about intersubjective flow, it's more about kind of being in the same flow together.

Jesse: Like a sports team?

Fergus: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I kind of think that working with other people towards a common goal is one of the most intrinsically satisfying things around. I've rarely been in a workplace that has felt like that was what was happening, even though in theory, every workplace kind of should be that, right.

But it's always like, everyone's doing just completely different things and not necessarily feeding into each other's stuff. And anyway, most people aren't in anything resembling a flow state most of the time in most workplaces.

Jesse: Yeah. and the paper mentioned that intersubjective flow could help autistic people build relationships together, I thought that was an interesting point.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. A lot of the time when autistic people do build friendships, that is how, right? And relationships more broadly. So, people working with autistic kids, adults, whoever, really, who understand how powerful it can be to start where the autistic person is, and enter into their attention tunnel, and, you know, get into their flow, rather than disrupting their flow, tend to have a much better time of it.

Jesse: Another thing I thought about reading the paper is that flow has like a duality, it has a light and a dark side. It helps us regulate. It's like, really good for our wellbeing, but it also could contribute to rumination and things like anxiety and OCD.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah. And that's not a link which has historically been made in flow research, as far as I'm aware. But again, it's these things which clearly share a lot of the same characteristics as flow. I mean, in this case, obviously we're talking about monotropism. Monotropism is not just a positive, shiny thing.

It does mean that autistic people, monotropic people, are prone to rumination. It can be very difficult to stop thinking about things.

There was a very interesting paper out, I think just last week, about trauma, finding that autistic people who'd been in car accidents were something like four times as likely to have PTSD, diagnosably, months later.

And this is something that I've been wondering about for a long time, because it's known that, different people respond to trauma very differently, and I think, you know, some of that is quite well understood, and it's not just about the person, it's about things like, personal connection.

So if you have someone there to talk to about your trauma, as soon as it happens, who understands what's going on, you're much less likely to have long term PTSD resulting from it.

Obviously autistic people are less likely to have that kind of affective connection, unless we're around the right people, but I have wondered for a long time if a big part of the reason why autism as we know it looks so much like trauma. Like, so much of the diagnostic criteria for autism, they just look the same as descriptions of trauma.

And yeah, I mean, I have to wonder if that's because so many autistic people are traumatized, for various reasons, you know, probably by a lot of things, which other people wouldn't necessarily find traumatic, like sensory experiences, which are just incredibly unpleasant, distressing, and people around us tend not to believe that.

So that combined with the rumination and the lack of social connection, I think, probably goes quite a long way.

Jesse: I definitely relate to that. Like, bad things get stuck in my head, and then I can't stop, they just kind of loop.. the loops of concern, is one of my favorite terms that I've learned.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah. So that's my partner Sonny Hallett's phrase. Yeah, they're now a counselor, although I'm pretty sure that they drew and wrote loops of concern before they ever started counseling training, but probably when they had been doing counseling for a while and like learning about trauma.

So, yeah, they wrote about those loops of concern that autistic people are very prone to getting in where we have, you know, something just getting at us like a bit of grit or something in our heads, and we just can't really let it go, and yeah, they provide some strategies for hopefully finding ways to let things go.

Jesse: Yeah. That definitely explains a lot of my childhood. [laughs]

I was thinking about rumination after top surgery because I had a lot of pain, and I was reading about the relationship between anxiety and pain, and like, rumination is the link there.

Like, if you have a lot of anxiety that kind of predicts you're going to have a lot of post operative pain, and also just like, chronic pain in general. And I was like, Oh, that's interesting. There's something there I think, because a lot of autistic or just otherwise neurodivergent people have chronic pain.

Fergus: There's a whole complex of things which we don't know why they're related, but it's now very clear that they are. And it's quite fascinating actually, looking at the different explanations that people have come up with for like, why EDS leads to anxiety, for example. Like, yeah, it's probably because, uh, kids with EDS can't do sports at school, and everyone knows how sports help with anxiety. So yeah, it's probably that.

Um, but, you know, there are lots of potentially plausible explanations going in all sorts of different directions between autism, ADHD, anxiety, POTS, MCAS, mast cell activation syndrome..

Jesse: Which I've been learning about myself lately..

Fergus: right, yeah. Hypermobility, EDS, um, what else am I forgetting? Dysautonomia more broadly than POTS..

Jesse: Yeah.

Fergus: And, yeah, it's quite possible that what's happening is a physiological difference we don't understand yet, which causes all of these things.

Jesse: I was reading about MCAS, and I found this paper that was talking about the relationship between stress and histamine release, and like, histamine causes all kinds of shit. Like, it crosses the blood brain barrier and causes systemic stuff that looks kind of unrelated, but that's like, the link between it.

And I was like, Oh, maybe there's something there about, you know, if you're like chronically stressed as a kid, because you're autistic and the world is not built for you, that can cause stuff to happen in your body and then yeah, it leads to these chronic illnesses.

Fergus: It's very plausible, and certainly, yeah, chronic fatigue slash ME is, yes, another thing which I think I left off the list just now, which is very, very strongly associated. And yeah, yeah, maybe it's just distress. Or like maybe, maybe it's more complicated, maybe there's a difference in the blood vessels in our brains because of the connective tissue difference, which makes us autistic, and the same collagen difference makes us hypermobile. I don't know.

There's just a whole lot of like, possible things that could be happening. Or maybe it's just a bunch of genes that happen to appear in the same block, you know? It's hard to rule out. But it looks meaningful.

Jesse: There's something going on!

What research about monotropism are you really excited about right now?

Fergus: I'm looking forward to more research on the MQ, the Monotropism Questionnaire.

There's a lot of research ongoing on links between ADHD, autism, and monotropism and, you know, hyperfocus and related experiences. And I think that's fantastic and really overdue, you know, I feel like we are years and years behind where we should be with understanding the relationship between autism and ADHD, because up until 2013, you couldn't be diagnosed with both at the same time in the DSM.

And because they've been approached from such fundamentally different angles, as if autism has nothing to do with attention, and ADHD has nothing to do with sensory experiences or sociality.

So yeah, everything that's happening along those lines, I'm pretty excited about. Um, the OCD connection, you touched on it just there, and there's been one paper to my knowledge, which has talked about OCD and monotropism.

Jesse: Is it the one about the lion?

Fergus: Yeah, Autism is the Arena, OCD is the Lion, I think.

Jesse: Yeah, I read the abstract, but I haven't gotten the full paper.

Fergus: And that's, you know, that's tantalizing, because there's so much about OCD which looks so much like autistic rumination, really. I've kind of thought that I was just about borderline diagnosable with OCD a long time before I concluded that I was actually autistic.

There's an episode of The Great North, fantastic cartoon series, I don't know if you know it, but there's an episode where [Moon] meets, I think a teacher who has OCD, and has like, obvious OCD tendencies, only actually it's all monotropism.

Like it's just, he's obviously monotropic, and not all of the stuff that is happening is like, actually OCD relevant really, but it's all monotropic.

And Moon is obviously highly monotropic as well, and that's just not, it just doesn't happen to be the angle that they came at it from. Because they were thinking about OCD.

Jesse: Yeah. It's different lenses on the same thing, I guess.

Fergus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's just so much of that. Part of it is that psychiatry has gone down this route of named conditions, which are seen as categories. And I think an increasing number of

psychiatrists and psychology researchers and so on are starting to think that that entire approach is probably a mistake, and basically everything is continuums and spectra and tendencies, and an awful lot of things are connected.

And there are many, many different ways of slicing up the ways that tendencies manifest. So, you know, we've currently got something called Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and another thing called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which are just a kind of assumed by default to be completely separate things because that's how they're defined.

Jesse: Mm-hm.

Fergus: There've been papers looking at, just other ways of measuring things, like they kind of set AI on it to try to categorize people afresh based on, you know, various measurements, and they come up with just completely different categories from what humans did.

Editor Jesse: Personally, I think the human brain is infinitely weirder than we could ever hope to accurately categorize. And our MO here at Sluggish is embracing the weird, so I was very pleased to discover that Fergus organizes an annual Weird Pride Day on March 4th every year.

Fergus: My mum made herself a weird pride badge sometime, probably in the 1990s, and had a succession of different handmade weird pride badges throughout the rest of her life.

And in 2021, when she was dying of cancer, I thought it would be nice to have a day for Weird Pride to specifically celebrate our weirdness, the things that mark us out as different from most people, which is for everyone, really, because frankly, humans are a massive bunch of weirdos.

Some of are in denial about it, and I think that's unhealthy!

So, it’s partly about that. It's partly about like, the things that make everybody weird in their own different ways. Obviously I'm autistic. My mum was also autistic and many of the ways that we are weird are autistic related, also queer.

I accepted early in my life that I was weird because people kept telling me, I didn't have that much choice. But I was fortunate to be in the kind of family and social milieu where weirdness is kind of celebrated, you know. I realized that all of the most interesting people are quite weird.

Jesse: True.

Fergus: But, you know, autistic people in particular just are weird. Like, we are, you know, we process things different from most people, the average person tends to find the average autistic person weird. And because of that, autistic pride is impossible without weird pride. You know, if you're in denial about being weird, or you're trying to hide your weirdness, then you're not really, you can't really be at peace with being autistic. It just doesn't work. But that's true for all kinds of things.

Like, you know, every identifiable minority is seen as kind of weird, and yet we kind of venerate normality in this culture in a really mixed up way where, we also celebrate people being themselves and being authentic and standing out and you know, we love geniuses, and we fully expect them to be weird.

We know that the average scientist is a weirdo, the average artist is a weirdo, right? But then it's kind of like, you need to justify your weirdness with a sufficient level of genius or something, which is just gross. It's grossly unjust and unnecessary.

And I want everyone to accept the things about them that make them kind of weird and celebrate them.

Jesse: Yeah, you're right. Like every movie for kids is about this weird outsider who doesn't fit in, and then they like, save the world. And we don't actually like the weird outsiders in real life.

Fergus: Yeah, Yeah, it's such a weird thing, right? [laughs] We go to school, you know, and from an early age, we're exposed to all of these stories about weirdos who are clearly weirdos, right?

They're like unambiguously identified as being strange in the stories, and they're the heroes of the story. At the same time, anyone who is seen as weird in the classroom is bullied for it, is chastised for it, and often by teachers as well as their peers.

That's why we need Weird Pride, and that's why Weird Pride Day is the 4th of March, or March 4th if you prefer.

Jesse: Thank you so much, Fergus, this has been great. Where can people find you on the internet?

Fergus: Yeah, so my personal website is oolong.co.uk. That's oolong like the tea. If you want to learn more about monotropism, I made monotropism.org as a central resource, and weirdpride.day is the website for Weird Pride Day.

Jesse: And thank you for listening, you big, beautiful slug. Be sure to check the show notes for links to all the papers and things we mentioned in this episode, and subscribe to get my dispatches into the void at sluggish.xyz