

How my brain works

By Minni K. Ang, Ph.D. Autistic Self-Advocate

People talk about their thoughts being sort of like a filing cabinet where everything is put in proper boxes and they can locate what they're looking for at any time they try to remember something. Well my brain is not like that.

Instead if I were to try and describe what happens in my head to you it would be more like an empty room full of very bouncy India rubber balls all of different sizes bouncing around the room at different speeds. Some zoom by really fast, others bounce leisurely by and roll away into a corner. Each ball represents a packet of thoughts in my brain. The super fast bouncy balls are the ones that are newest; the ones that lie aside are the thoughts that I have had a chance to examine, think about and fully digest. I need time to examine each of these bouncy balls in order to understand them fully. Some of the bouncy balls are of great interest to me and I love to look at them and study them. Others are not of much interest but because they bounce around all over the place, they can interfere with my ability to focus on the bouncy balls that I am interested in.

Let me explain with an example:

I had just been in a meeting where I had met a whole bunch of new people. Aside from this, a whole bunch of other regular things also happened in my day. On top of that I was in the process of doing a course on machine learning and had just finished the topic of neural networks, which I find extremely fascinating. My brain really wanted to spend time going over the beauty of the equations from every possible angle. The problem was there were like 25 small very fast bouncy rubber balls, each representing one of those new people that I had met, bouncing all over the place, all clamoring for attention as well. In my mind's eye, I tried to examine my beautiful equations, but the bouncy ball, which was a large one, kept bouncing around because it was new to my brain. So I just had to sort of stand around and wait for it to bounce back into my vision to focus on it, while all these other bouncy balls each bounced across my field of vision forcing me to look at them too. The more familiar things that happened to me that day such as having dinner and my dog demanding attention were in my brain too, but they were each clustered on their own ball and just laying in a corner of the room.

So, this is how my brain works. It's terribly important for me to have absolute quiet and peace to mull over all these things going on in my brain, especially first thing in the morning. When I am able to do this, I find I can eventually bring all these bouncy balls under control and give them their own little spaces in this huge room that represents my brain. I can then find these balls anytime I want, and I can understand and remember everything that is contained within each one.

About the author

Let me introduce myself - my name is Minni, and I was diagnosed with Level One Autism only a few years ago, although I have of course been autistic all my life - autism is not something you catch or develop: it is rather a non-neurotypical wiring of the human brain that some of us are born with. Today I am employed full-time as a software developer by a great Canadian company, Kinaxis. I love my job - it is interesting, sufficiently challenging, and the company culture is amazing and inclusive; I was hired through their "autism at work" programme, intermediated by another great Canadian non-profit human resource agency that specializes in work placements for neurodiverse individuals, Specialisterne Canada.

My backstory is pretty complex. I emigrated to Canada in 2009, although I was here for several years as a young child when my dad did his doctoral and post-doc studies at the University of Waterloo. I have a Ph.D in Computer Applications, but also have degrees in Music and in Physics. I have worked in exceptionally diverse fields including academia, as a professional musician, in broadcasting, as a youth worker, ran my own music production start-up company, as a freelance iOS developer, as a consultant for academic and research development, and even spent a year driving a big yellow school bus!

I live in Ottawa with my spouse Sofia and our three dogs, and I have a teenage daughter who is presently studying abroad. To relax I love doing puzzles of any sort, playing one of my many musical instruments, reading or watching science fiction or fantasy, and woodworking. I have many special interests, but especially love learning how things work and creating new things for others to enjoy.



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