

KATE COLDRICK

Autism, uncertainty and anxiety

A VISUAL GUIDE FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Understand one possible link between uncertainty and anxiety, and explore what might help when you feel stuck.



Seven complete illustrations with a plain-English companion to each one

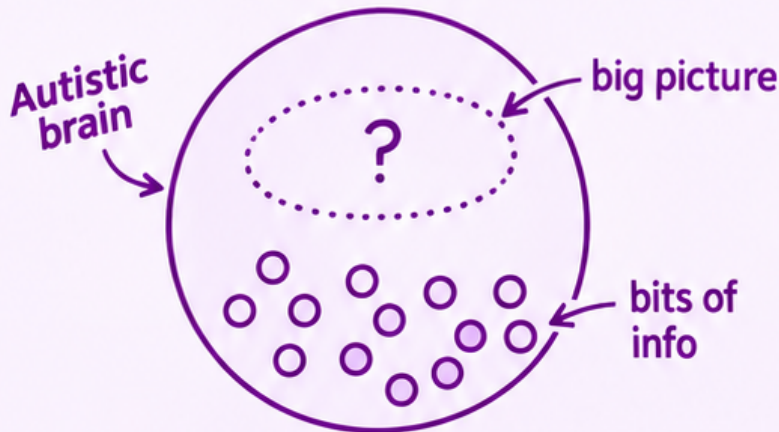
Based on a theoretical paper by Stark and colleagues (2021)

Graphics and guide: Kate Coldrick

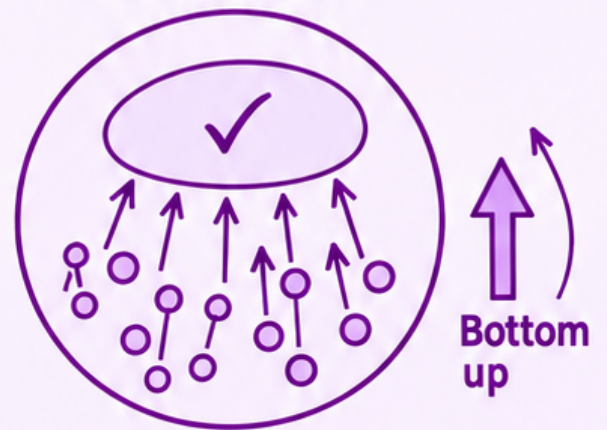
Autistic brains and Neurotypical brains process information in different ways.

1

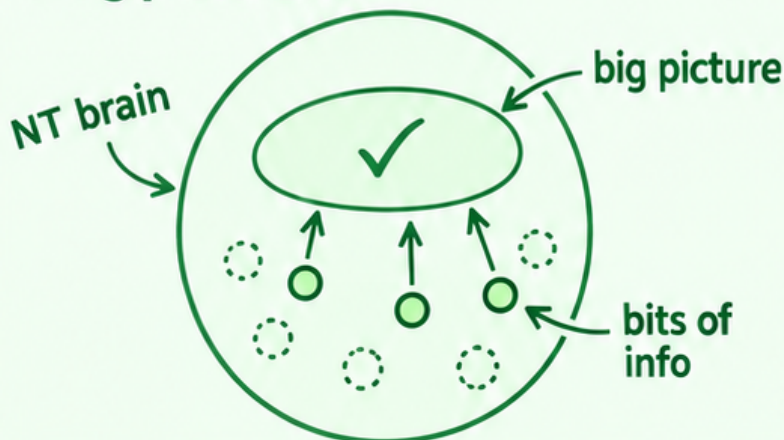
Autistic brains start by taking in lots of bits of information...



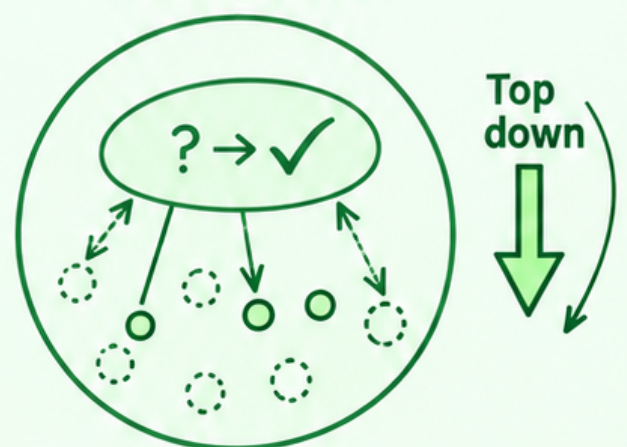
... and then analyse these bits until the big picture becomes clear.



Neurotypical brains use a few bits of information to generate a big picture...



... and then check out the big picture with more bits of information.



Both ways of processing information have strengths...



Autistic brains take in lots of info so their big pictures are usually very accurate and often also imaginative or 'outside the box' in a creative, novel way.



Neurotypical brains can generate big pictures very quickly, which means they work well in fast-moving situations like conversations and social interactions.



How a “big picture” forms

The first image compares two ways of combining details with expectations. Both ways are used by everyone.

Information and expectations

As we take in sights, sounds and words, our brains combine what is arriving now with what previous experience leads us to expect. The illustration calls these **bottom-up details** and **top-down predictions**. A “big picture” is our working sense of what is happening.

A possible difference in balance

Some research suggests that autistic people may sometimes give relatively more weight to incoming information, or use previous expectations differently. This varies by task and person. The paper found evidence in some auditory and complex social tasks, while other kinds of prediction appeared unaffected.

Strengths belong in the picture

Close attention to what is actually present can help someone notice changes or details that others miss. Fast expectations can make familiar situations easier, but they can also lead anyone to overlook information. Neither side of the drawing describes a better brain.

A QUESTION TO TRY

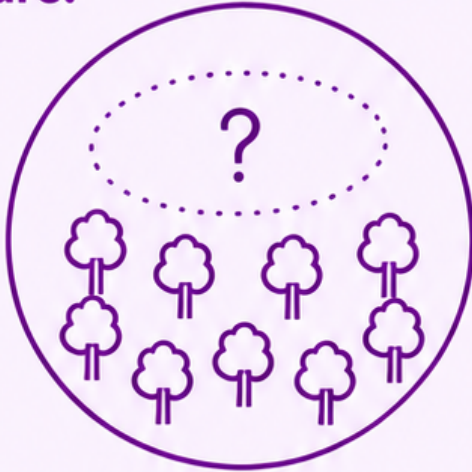
When do details help you see something clearly? When does it take time to decide what the details mean?

In the paper: Predictive processing; strengths of autistic cognition.

... and both ways of processing also have weaknesses.

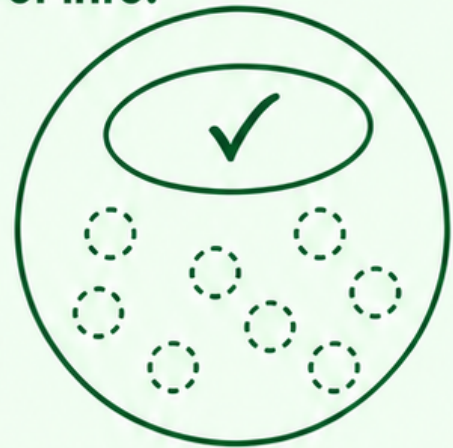
2

Autistic brains may be focused so much on the small bits of info that they forget to see a bigger picture.



= 'they can't see the wood for the trees'

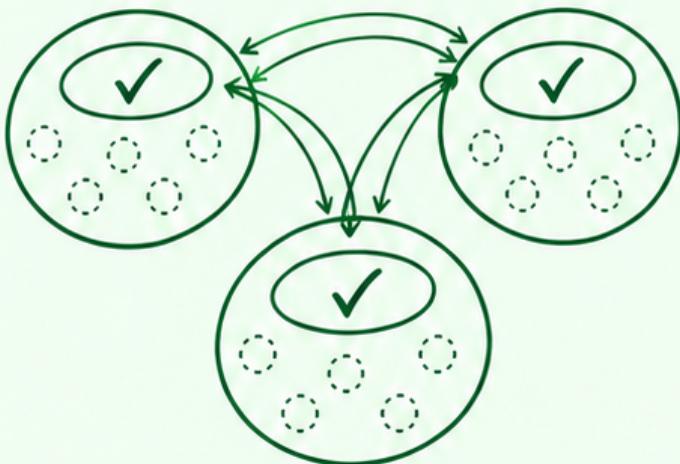
NT brains may jump to a big picture so quickly that they forget to check out if it's accurate or not with the small bits of info.



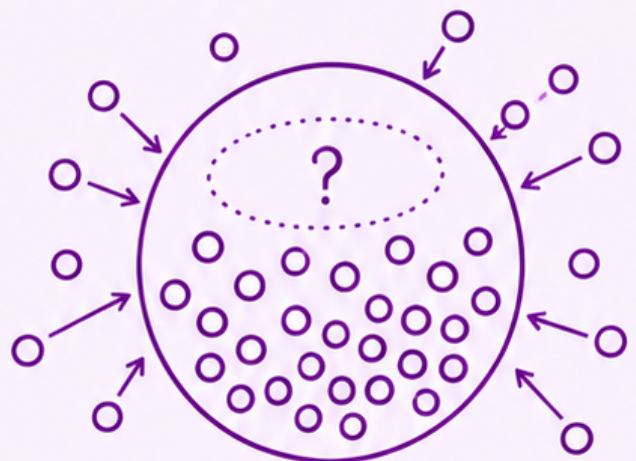
= 'they jump to conclusions'

Both Autistic and NT brains experience problems in social situations when their different ways of processing information mix with each other.

NT brains can generate patterns very quickly from fast-moving bits of information (like non-verbal cues, body language, voice tone) that are all occurring at the same time....



... while Autistic brains are left out, still trying to form a big picture.... from overwhelming amounts of information.





When people interact

The second image shows how different ways of forming a quick interpretation may meet in a conversation.

Conversation contains many signals

Words, tone, pauses, gestures and the surrounding setting change quickly. People use experience to guess what another person means and when they might speak next. Those guesses can be useful, but they can also be wrong.

Why it may take more work

The paper reviews studies in which some autistic participants needed more time to use prior information in complex social tasks. It also reviews tasks where prediction did **not** differ. A conversation can therefore feel demanding without there being one universal “autistic processing style”.

Misunderstanding can go both ways

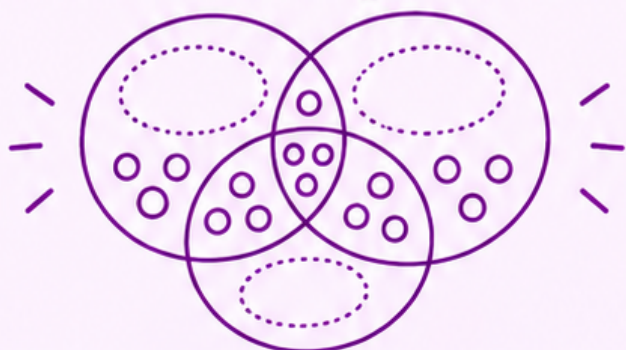
The illustration places both people in the interaction. A non-autistic person may settle on an interpretation too soon; an autistic person may still be taking in the details. Clear language, time to process and checking what each person meant can help both people.

A QUESTION TO TRY

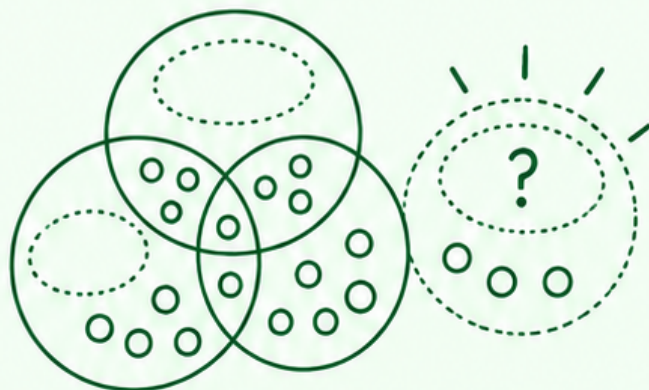
Would it help if someone gave you more processing time or stated what they mean directly?

In the paper: Examples from the review of social prediction and its limits.

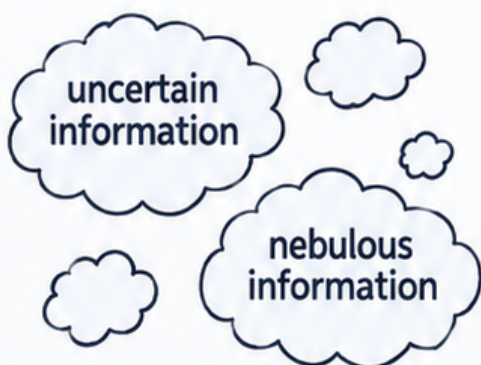
Autistic brains enjoy sharing their bits of information and are happy leaving the big picture to emerge....



.... while NT brains are left out, wondering why their big picture isn't part of the conversation.



However, the Autistic brain's way of processing information makes it very difficult for it to generate big pictures when the bits of information it is receiving are uncertain or nebulous.

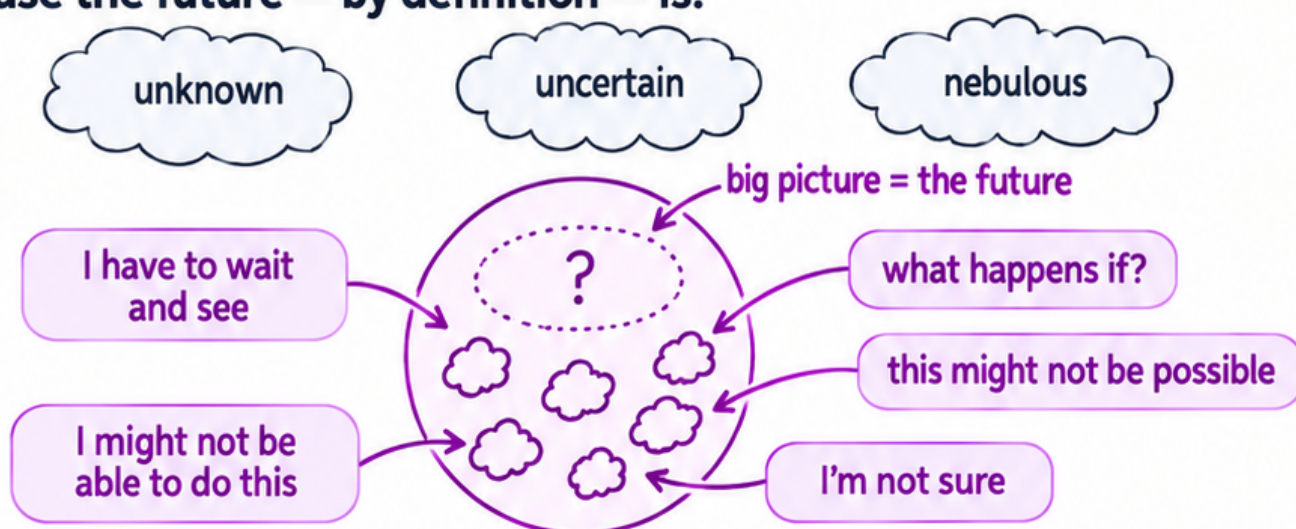


It is very difficult for an Autistic brain to generate a big picture when the bits of information keep changing, or might not happen, or are just unknown....

This is

**ANXIETY +++++
and VERY STRESSFUL!!
for the Autistic brain.**

Thinking about the future is therefore one example of a situation that is very stressful (VERY STRESSFUL!) for an Autistic brain, because the future — by definition — is:





When the answer is unclear

In image three, the clouds stand for information that is unknown, changing or impossible to settle yet.

Uncertainty is part of ordinary life

“Will the plan change?” “How will this person respond?” “What if I cannot do it?” These questions do not have definite answers in advance. The future, especially, cannot be filled in completely with the information available now.

Why uncertainty may feel so difficult

Research reviewed by Stark and colleagues finds that difficulty tolerating uncertainty is common among autistic people, though not universal. The paper describes both a strong wish to gain predictability and the experience of feeling mentally or behaviourally **stuck** when an answer is unavailable.

The cloud is a metaphor

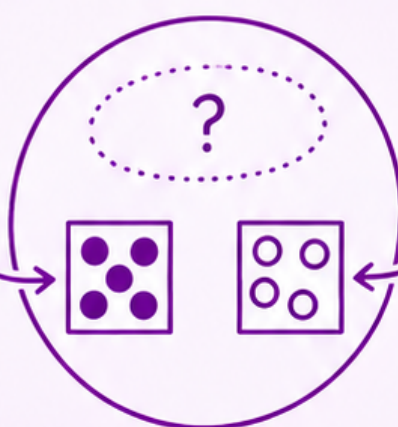
A cloud is not a bad thought to eliminate. It marks a real gap in what can currently be known. Sensory overload, sudden changes and unclear communication may add more uncertainty, so the surrounding environment matters too.

A QUESTION TO TRY

Which part of a situation is known now, and which part really has to wait?

In the paper: Intolerance of uncertainty; desire for predictability and uncertainty paralysis.

When this happens, the Autistic brain has an ingenious way of solving the problem.



one option
(= black)

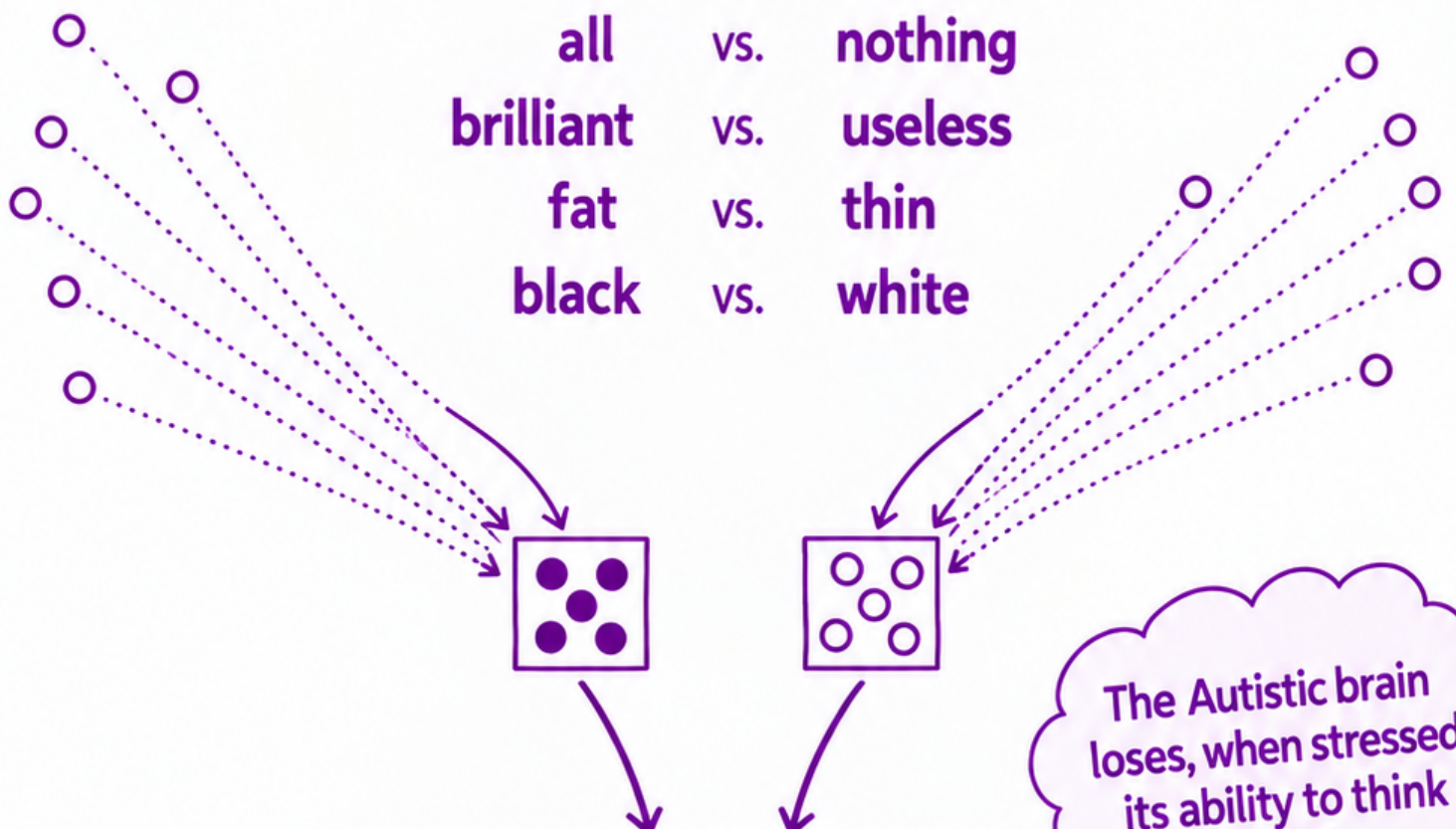
one option
(= white)

The Autistic brain locks the uncertainties away into two options = 'black-and-white' thinking.

This is a brilliant solution to the anxiety created by nebulous bits of information!

Now, the Autistic brain doesn't have to get stressed about all the clouds. It can focus instead on one of two options.

	good	vs.	bad	
	this	vs.	that	
	all	vs.	nothing	
	brilliant	vs.	useless	
	fat	vs.	thin	
	black	vs.	white	



The problem is, the world has now become very small and reduced for the Autistic brain.

The Autistic brain loses, when stressed, its ability to think flexibly.



Why certainty can feel safer

Image four turns many uncertain “clouds” into two definite “certainty boxes”.

A quick answer can bring relief

“It will work” or “it will fail” gives a sharper answer than “I do not know yet”. The authors propose that, for some autistic people in some anxious situations, thinking in two absolute options might briefly reduce the discomfort of uncertainty.

A proposed response, not a rule

This link between uncertainty, anxiety and black-and-white thinking is a **hypothesis**. The authors say there is very little direct research on black-and-white thinking in autism. The image offers one way to picture their proposal; it cannot tell us how any particular person thinks.

When categories help and when they narrow

Firm judgements can be useful, including in ethical decisions. A problem may arise when anxiety makes two extremes feel like the only possible outcomes, even though the situation contains more information and more possible next steps.

A QUESTION TO TRY

Are there two facts you know for sure and one part that remains open?

In the paper: Black-and-white thinking; the authors’ proposed link to short-term relief.

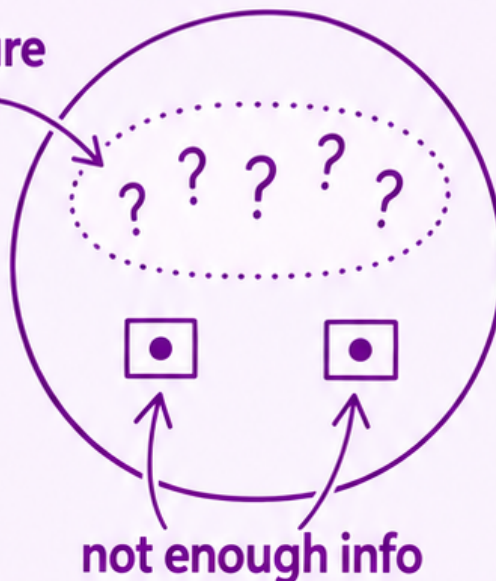
When the Autistic brain is doing its protective 'black-and-white' thinking thing, how does this make the Autistic person feel?



At first, they feel relieved because it is so much less **-STRESSFUL-** to have **certain** bits of info in your brain than **clouds.**

After a while, however, the Autistic brain realises that it still can't generate a big picture from either of these two extreme bits of info.....
the amount of info is just too little.....

the big picture
= one big ?



This makes the
Autistic person feel

- stuck
- stuck
- stuck
- stuck
- stuck
- stuck

When the Autistic brain is stuck like this, the Autistic person can't remember what they enjoy doing, can't choose to do something different, feels unmotivated to try anything new, and clings harder than ever onto one of the two options that the Autistic brain has presented. To give that up would be to release the clouds.....and that would be too **STRESSFUL!**



When relief becomes stuckness

The fifth image follows the possibility that a simpler answer feels good at first but leaves too little to work with.

The short-term effect

Reducing a complicated situation to two options can make it feel manageable. This is why the authors compare absolute thinking with a possible **safety behaviour**: it might lower anxiety for a while.

The longer-term difficulty

If the two options are both extreme, neither may fit the situation well. The person may still be unsure what to do. The authors suggest that repeatedly relying on a definite answer could make it harder to learn that uncertainty can sometimes be borne without catastrophe.

Stuckness has many causes

The drawing shows one possible route to feeling stuck. Overload, exhaustion, depression, a genuinely unsafe situation or lack of practical support can also make choices difficult. The image should not be used to assume that a person only needs to “think more flexibly”.

A QUESTION TO TRY

What would make this decision safer or smaller: more information, more time, a clear plan, or help from someone?

In the paper: The model’s safety-behaviour proposal and discussion of uncertainty paralysis.

Putting it all together, this is what it can look like when an Autistic brain thinks, 'What's going to happen?'

1 Anxiety...



... caused by too many uncertain bits of info. (clouds)

2 Relief...



... when the brain reduces the options by locking away the clouds into certainty-boxes. (black vs white thinking)

3 Stuck...



... because the brain can't use the certainty-boxes to generate a true & meaningful big picture.

Being stuck, the Autistic person feels sad and unmotivated. Their brain now enters into a doom loop The more unsure and uncertain they feel, the more their brain tries to reduce their anxiety by creating certainty-boxes. Their brain is filling up with certainty-boxes, but it can't use these to form a big picture ... and that makes the Autistic person feel even more sad, and even more unmotivated the more unsure and uncertain they feel, the more their brain tries to reduce their anxiety by creating certainty-boxes ... and so on ... and so on ... !!

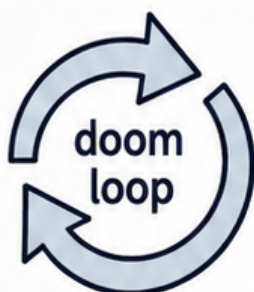
Certainty-boxes often start with:

"I must"

"I am"

"I can't"

"I have to"



Clouds often start with:

"What if?"

"How?"

"I might"

"I don't know"



The possible anxiety loop

Image six brings the sequence together: anxiety, temporary relief and feeling stuck again.

The loop in everyday words

Something is unclear. Anxiety rises. A definite, either-or answer brings relief. Later, that answer proves too narrow to guide the next step, so uncertainty and anxiety return. A stronger search for certainty may follow.

What is established, and what is proposed

Research links autism with intolerance of uncertainty and links intolerance of uncertainty with anxiety. Some predictive-processing findings vary by domain. The exact chain shown in the drawing, including whether binary thinking causes or maintains the loop, remains to be tested.

Look outside the person too

When plans, instructions or sensory conditions are unpredictable, the demand is real. More notice, clearer choices and a reliably communicated plan may reduce the load. The paper explicitly asks clinicians to consider the environment and social injustice.

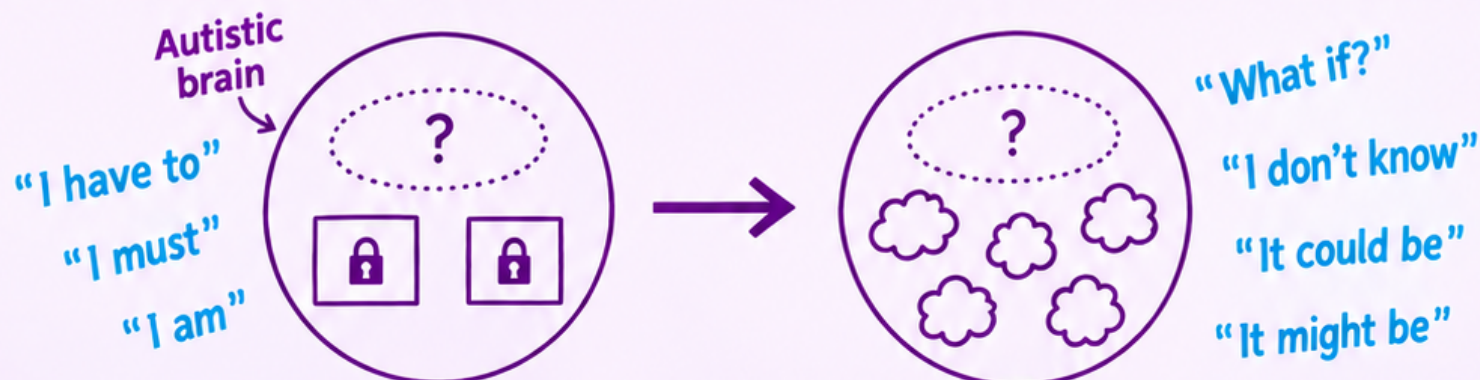
A QUESTION TO TRY

Where could the loop be interrupted by a clearer environment, rather than by extra effort from you?

In the paper: The theoretical model, testable hypotheses and concluding remarks.

How can a stuck Autistic brain become unstuck?

The answer = by releasing the clouds from the certainty-boxes.



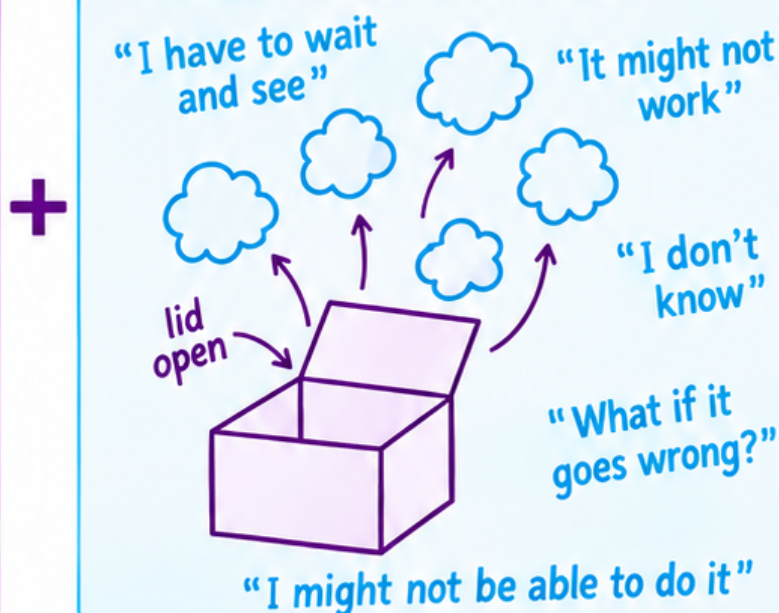
We already know that releasing the clouds will cause anxiety, so now we can be prepared for that. The main thing we need to do is to stop the Autistic brain trying to lock all the clouds away again into certainty-boxes.

PREPARE FOR ANXIETY

- go for a walk outside
- have a warm bath
- cuddle a pet
- light a candle
- whatever works for you



HOLD THE CLOUDS



When an Autistic brain begins to be able to hold the clouds without locking them away into certainty-boxes, it begins to realise that the options on the certainty-box labels might not be the only options, or even the best options for the Autistic person. This allows the Autistic brain to start processing different bits of information again, and, slowly, a true and meaningful big picture begins to emerge.



Making room for “not yet”

The final image calls uncertain thoughts “clouds” and suggests holding them without immediately putting them in boxes.

A gentle way to use the metaphor

You might name one thought as a cloud: “I do not know yet.” Then identify what is known, when more information may arrive and what will help you feel supported in the meantime. There is no need to tackle a large or frightening uncertainty at once.

Support before flexibility

Predictable routines, a written plan, a trusted person, a sensory break or another familiar source of comfort can make waiting easier. If uncertainty is caused by vague instructions or last-minute changes, asking others to make the situation clearer is reasonable.

What the paper actually claims

“Clouds and certainty boxes” is Kate Coldrick’s visual interpretation. The authors propose that support for anxiety may need to address intolerance of uncertainty, but **this particular exercise has not been tested in the paper**. Use the image as an invitation to reflect, not as a requirement to endure distress.

A QUESTION TO TRY

What is one small uncertainty you could leave open with enough support, and what would make that safe?

In the paper: Clinical implications and the call for interventions that address uncertainty.

Keep what is useful



This is one possible explanation for anxiety. Your own experiences and the situations around you matter.

If uncertainty is caused by the situation

Ask for clear information: what is happening, when you will know more, what can change and who will tell you. Written steps, advance notice, a quieter space or a backup plan can reduce needless uncertainty.

If an answer cannot be known yet

You could separate **what is known now** from **what is still open**. Choose a small next step and a way to feel supported while you wait. If an uncertainty feels overwhelming, it is reasonable to ask for help rather than practise sitting with it alone.

Read the drawings as a model

The image captions use broad shorthand such as “the autistic brain”. Autistic people differ greatly. The paper draws together evidence and proposes a testable explanation; it does not prove that every link in the illustrated cycle occurs for every person. The clouds and boxes are Kate Coldrick’s interpretation.

RESEARCH BEHIND THE GUIDE

Stark, E., Stacey, J., Mandy, W., Kringelbach, M. L., & Happé, F. (2021). Autistic cognition: Charting routes to anxiety. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 25(7), 571–581. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2021.03.014

This leaflet accompanies seven original graphics by Kate Coldrick. The graphics are reproduced in full on pages 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 and 14; the facing pages explain them in everyday language.

About Kate Coldrick

Kate Coldrick is an autistic educator, literacy tutor and writer who creates inclusive resources for neurodivergent learners. Find more of her writing and resources at katecoldrick.com.



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