

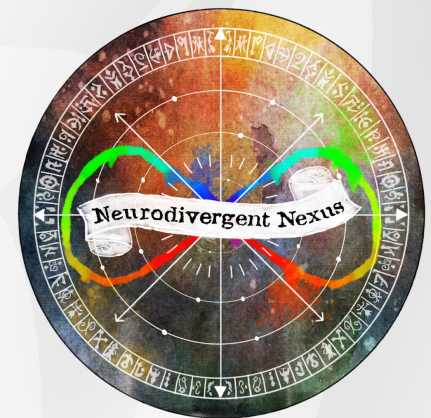


AOA

INSPIRE
2024 Annual Conference & Expo

A Neurodiversity-Affirming Toolkit for OTPs Supporting Neurodivergent Children & Youth: An Introduction

Bryden Carlson-Giving, OTD, OTR/L
03/23/2024



Dedication

To the brave disabled advocates who fought and created a platform for disability studies and disability justice to infiltrate occupational therapy and occupational science — this work is for you.

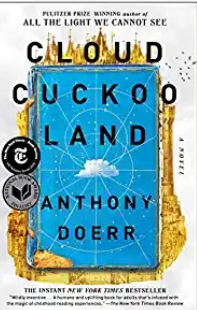
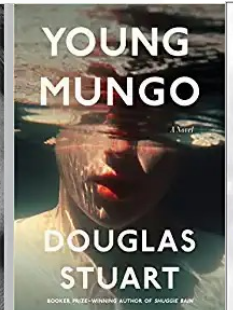
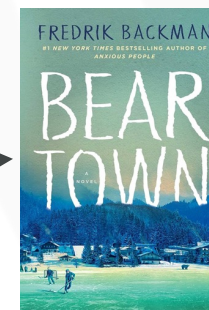
Within an endless spring of gratitude, thank you. The future is disabled, and my goodness, it is beautiful.



Land Acknowledgement

- This research and program's creation was conducted on the ancestral lands of the Wahpekute and Očhéthi Šakówin, currently occupied by the municipality of Buffalo, Minnesota.
- Consider examining the Indigenous land you reside on by visiting <https://native-land.ca/> and reflect on how you can advocate beyond land acknowledgements at <https://nativegov.org/news/beyond-land-acknowledgment-guide/>

About Me



www.barnesandnoble.com

Learning Objectives




#1

Apply neurodiversity-affirming principles throughout the entire OT process to maximize neurodivergent well-being.



#2

Reflect on current practices and modify approaches to ensure they align with best practices as identified by neurodivergent individuals.



A Note on Language & Privilege

Always remember:
Language is powerful and
through language we reflect
power structures, take a
particular stance, and
acknowledge (or invalidate)
identities (Bottema-Beutel, et al., 2021).



A Note on Language & Privilege

- Preference for identity-first language (Brown, 2020; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016; Taboas et al., 2022)
- Recognition of privilege (Serman et al., 2022)

What is Neurodiversity?

- The neurodiversity movement is a social justice initiative led by neurodivergent individuals embracing psychological, neurological, and executive functioning differences as valid forms of human diversity (ASAN, n.d.; Dallman et al., 2022)
- Examples of neurodivergent neurotypes:

Autism	Dyslexia	Depression	VAST*
TBI	SPD**	Schizophrenia	Anxiety
BPD	Down Syndrome	PTSD	Tic Disorders

* Variable Attention Stimulus Trait -> a more affirming designation for ADHD

** Sensory processing differences (not disorder)



The Problem -> Occupational Injustice

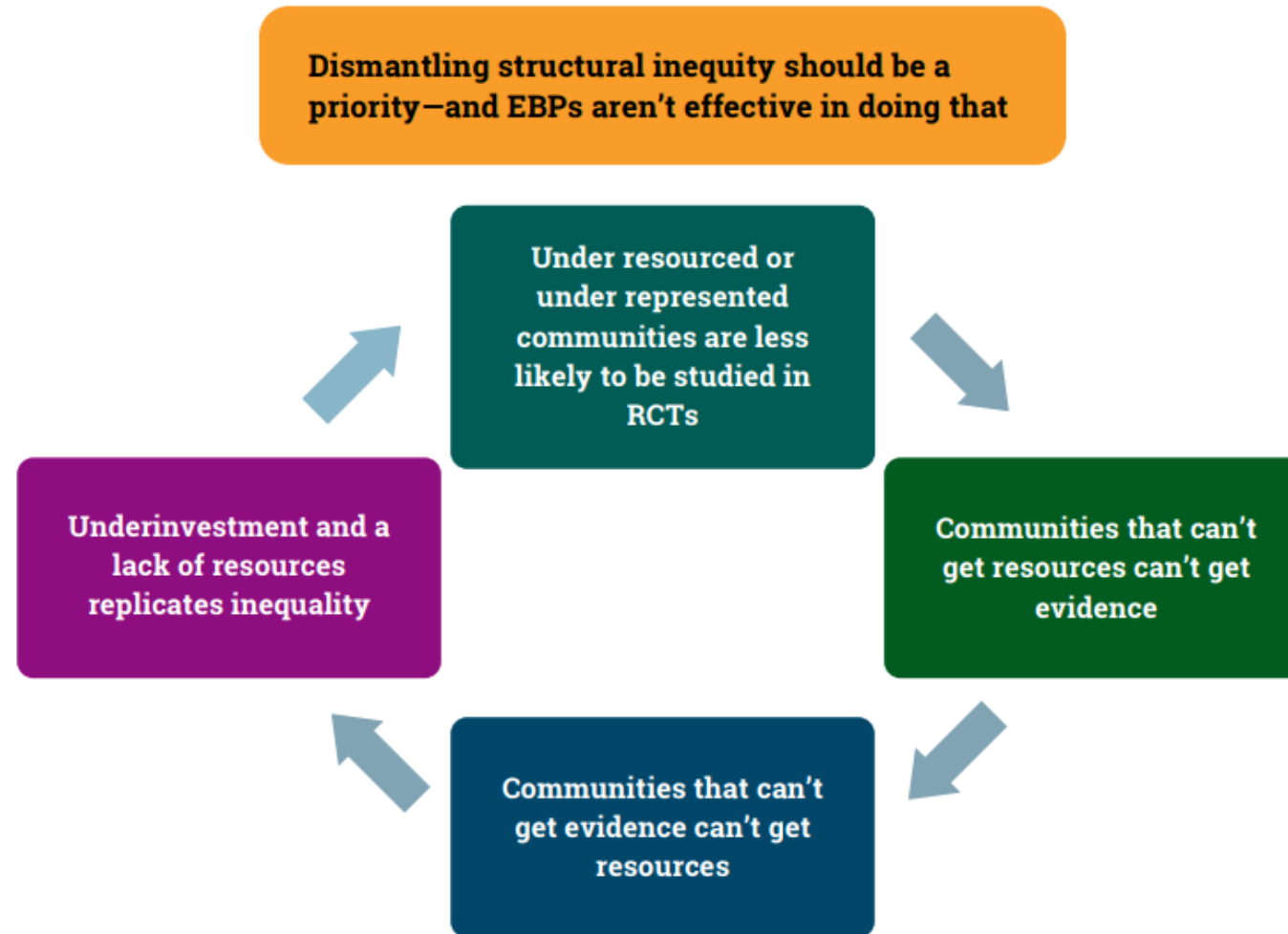
- Autistic and neurodivergent individuals are rarely incorporated into healthcare service creation (ASAN, 2020; Monahan et al., 2021)
- The medical model of disability is the dominant lens through which society views and provides services with neurodivergent individuals (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020; Holler et al., 2021; Shore et al., 2020)



The Problem -> Occupational Injustice

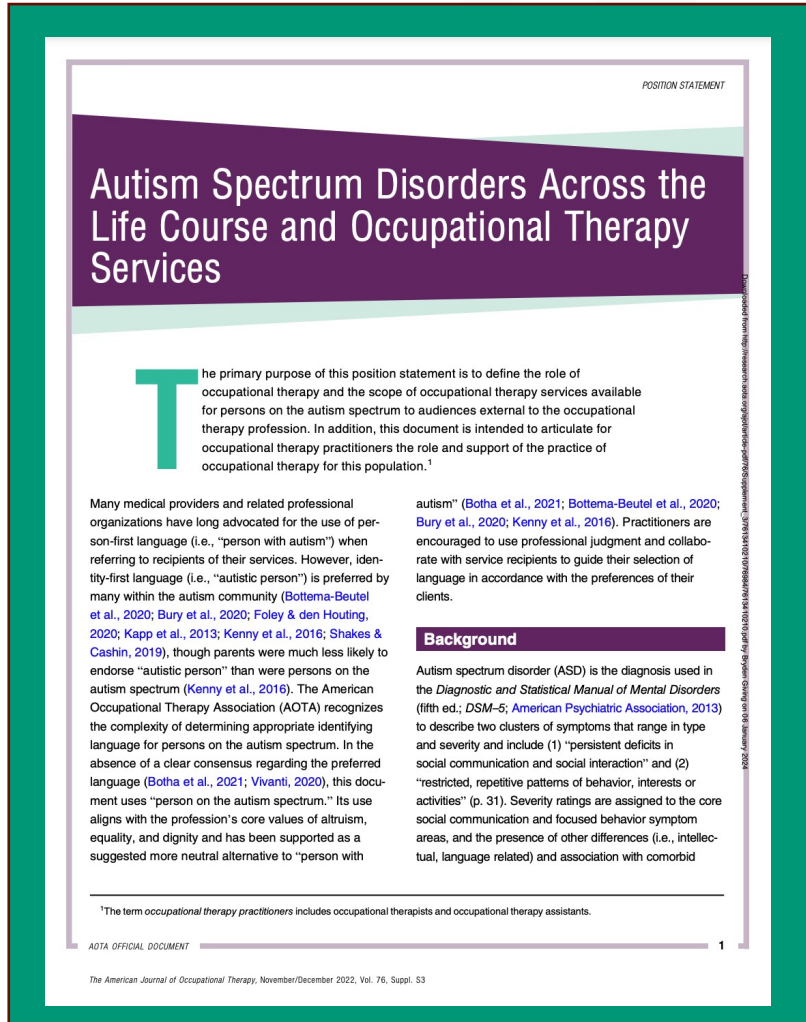
- The occupational therapy profession frequently prioritizes neurotypicality, often creating occupational marginalization and can reduce health outcomes for neurodivergent clients (Carlson-Giving, 2023; Dallman et al., 2022; Taylor, 2022)
- Dominance of aiming for neurotypicality within OT leads the profession to encourage ableism (Taylor, 2022)

The Problem -> Relying Solely on EBP Contributes to Health Inequities



Note. Taken from Tawa, 2020, p. 3

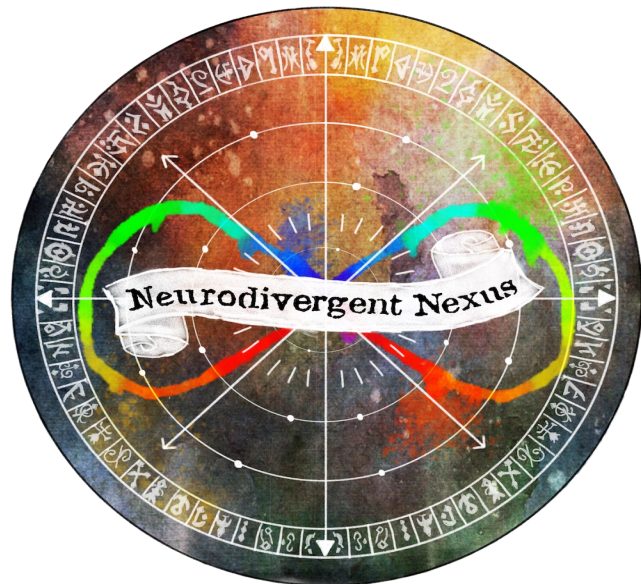
Example From Recent Literature (AOTA, 2022)



- There is no mention of neurodiversity, challenging the medical model of disability, or ableism within the article
- There is no mention of autistic OTPs or shareholders advising the article
- The article includes techniques identified as being evidence-based that have been advocated against by the autistic community
- The article provides ableist examples of how OTPs support occupations
- The case studies emphasize neurotypical norms or neurotypical occupations

Frameworks Guiding the Neurodiversity-Affirming Toolkit

Neurodiversity-Affirming Toolkit



Disability
Justice (Sins
Invalid, 2019)

Community-Defined
Evidence Practice
(CDEP) (National et al.,
2009)

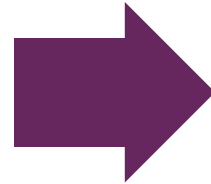
Lived Experience-
Informed Practice
(LEIP; Wise, 2023)

The *Neurodivergent Nexus* Program

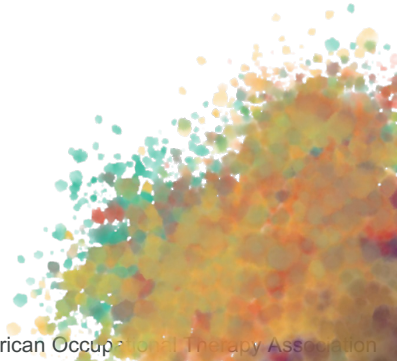
- Aims to be an example of community-based participatory research (CBPR)
- A collaboration with international disabled OTPs, advocates, and scholars
- A knowledge translation tool and advocacy program



Website &
online toolkit



Online workshops
& modules





Neurodivergent ways of participation are valid occupations (Carlson-Giving, 2023)

Components of *Neurodivergent Nexus*

Neurodiversity-
Affirming OT
Model

Grading of OT
Supports,
Services, and
Affirming
Characteristics

Health & Well-
being Priorities
Identified by the
Autistic
Community

Neurodiversity -
Affirming
Evaluations

Resources for
Applying Affirming
OT Supports

Neurodiversity -
Affirming
Practitioner and
Service
Characteristics

Conversation on
Models of
Disablement

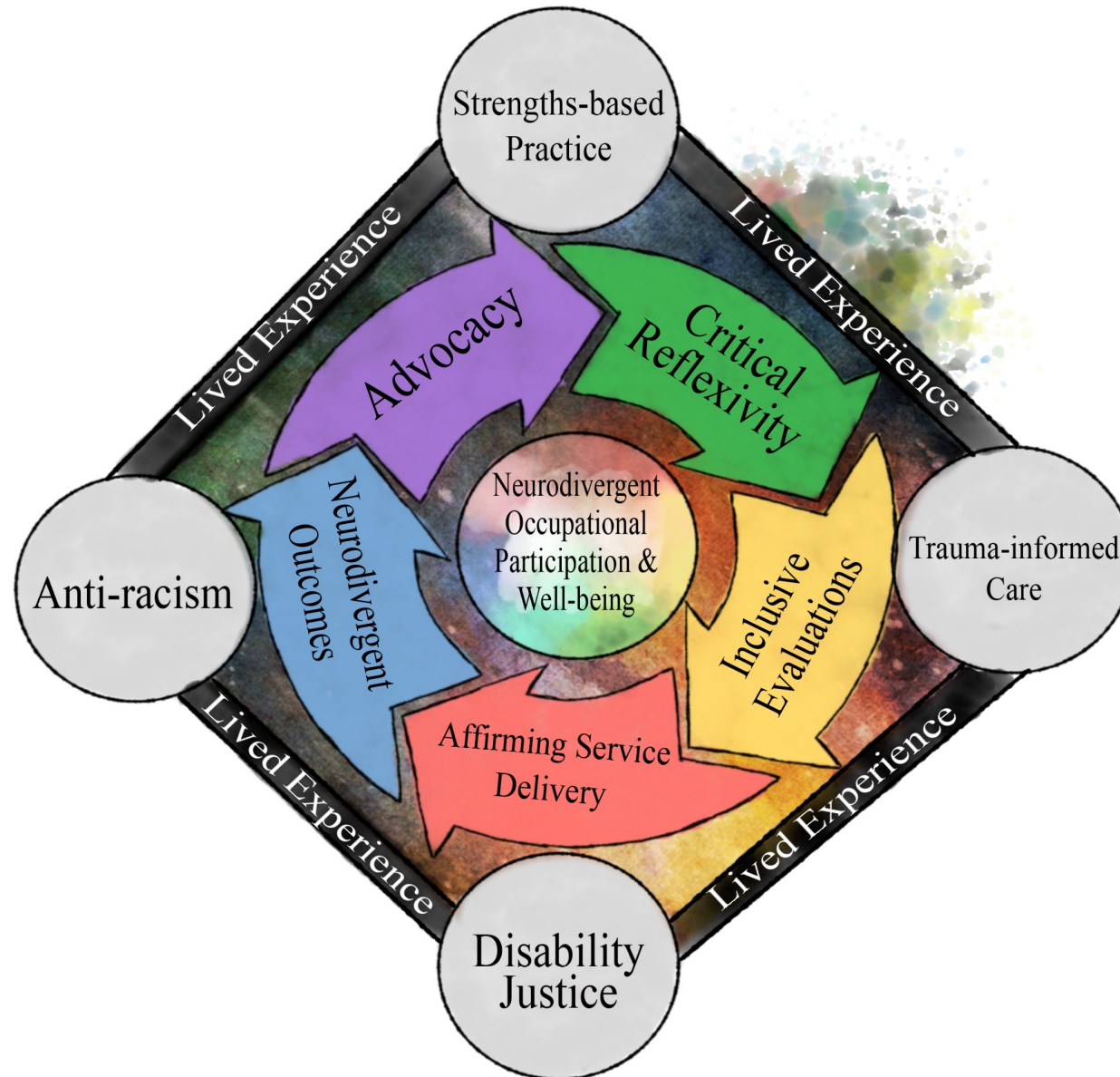
Call to Action for
OT Profession
and Researchers



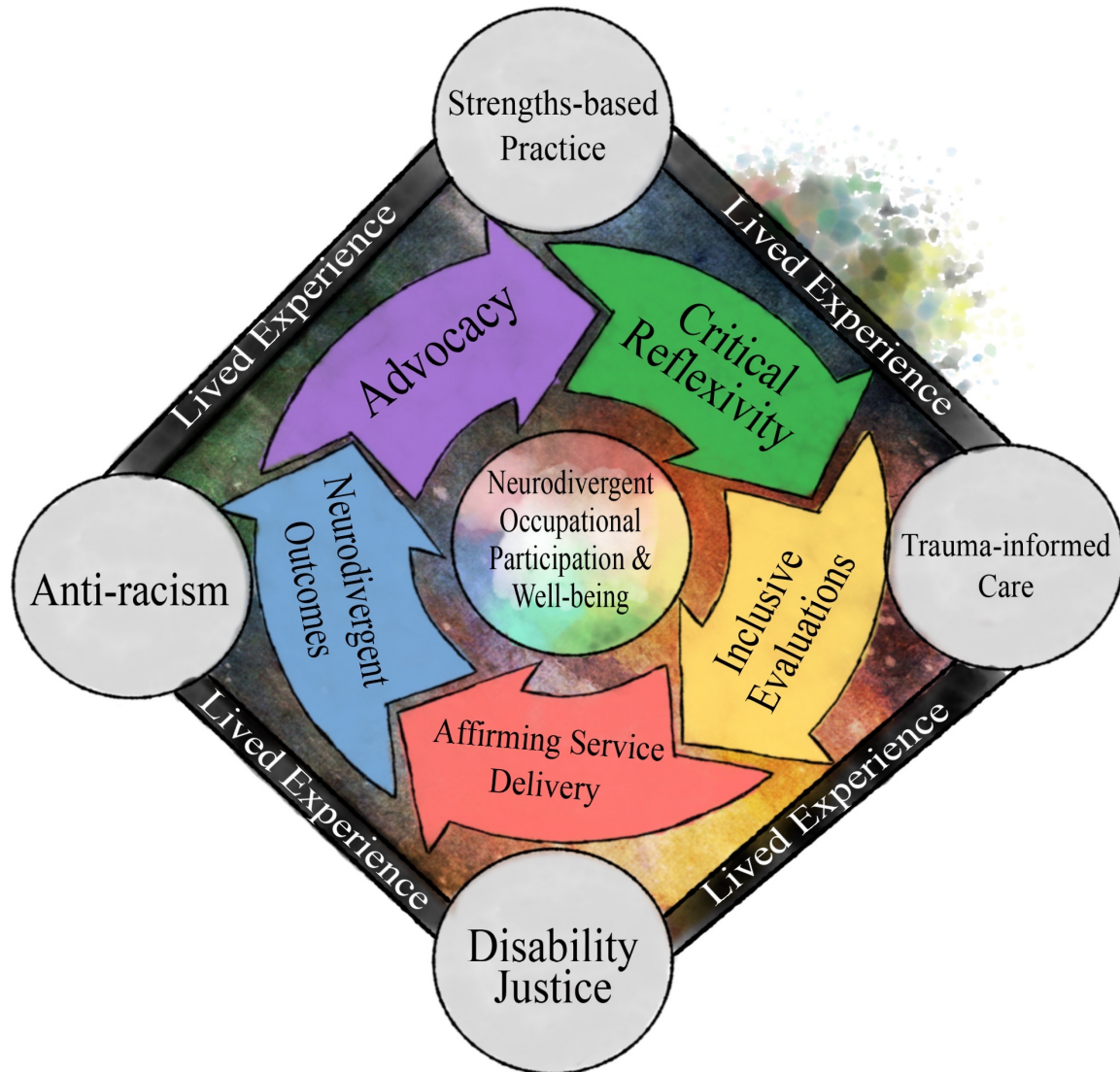
Component

The EMPOWER Model

The Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model



The Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model

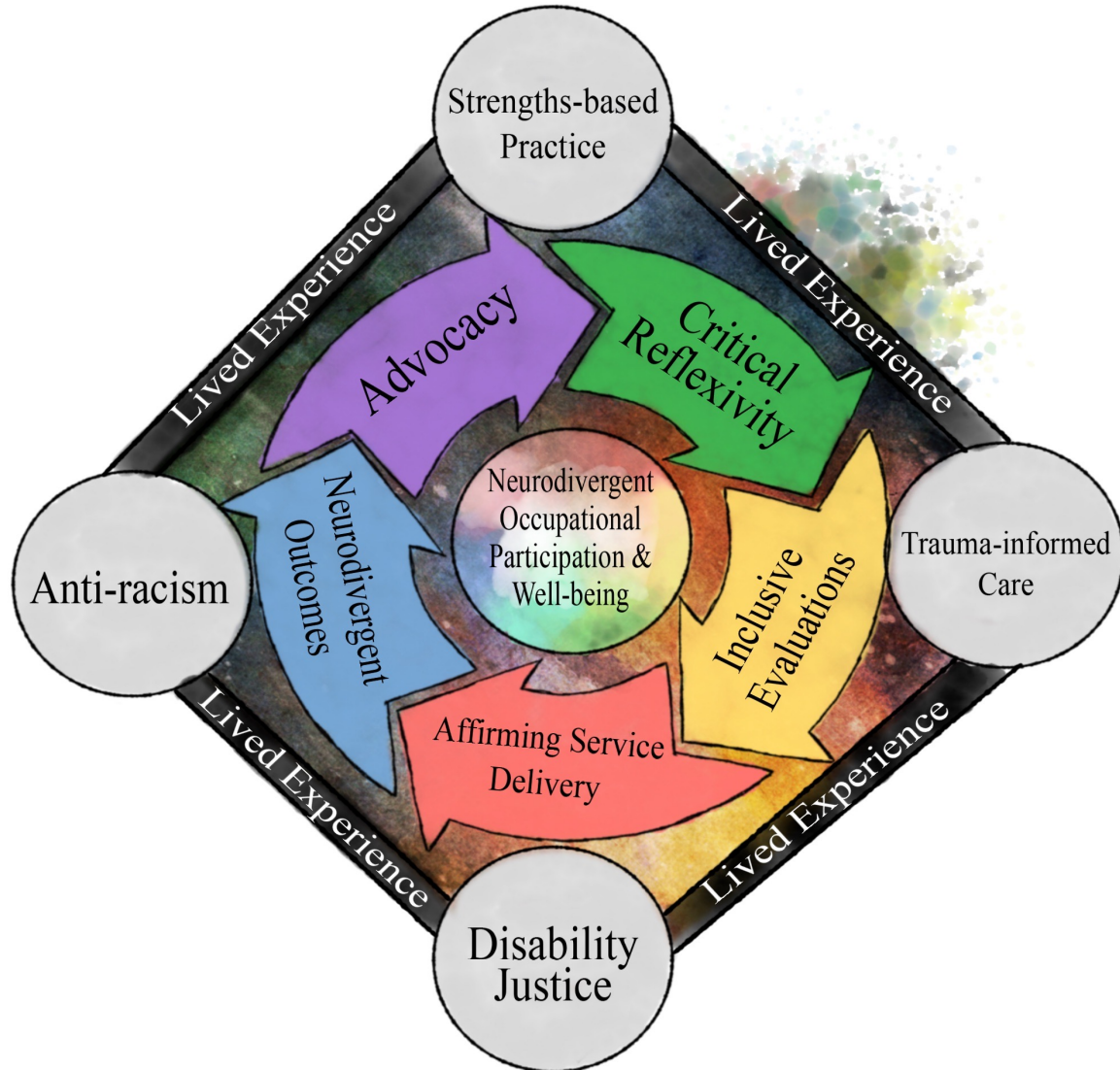


Strengths-based Practice (Murthi et al., 2023)

- Presume competence of neurodivergent individuals
- Include neurodivergent individuals as collaborators in research and practice
- Create supportive environment

Note: Being strengths-based does not ignore the challenges experienced by disabled individuals. It means we frame the individual's disability in a way that honors who they are, and we focus on the supports we need (Strengths-based Collective & Rosas, 2024)

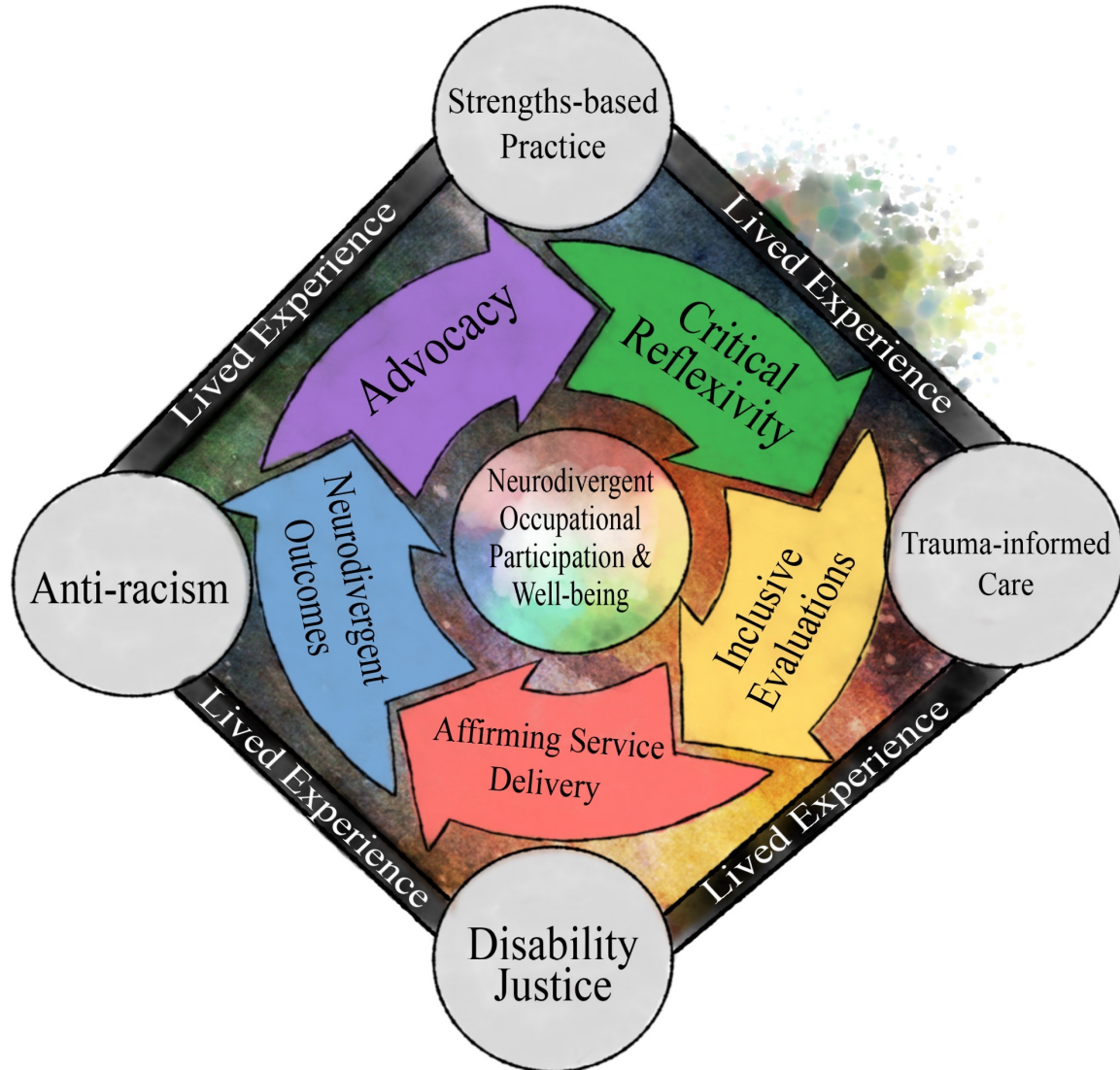
The Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model



Trauma-informed Care

- Neurodivergent individuals are more likely to be exposed to traumatic events, much of which is due to experiencing ableism every day.

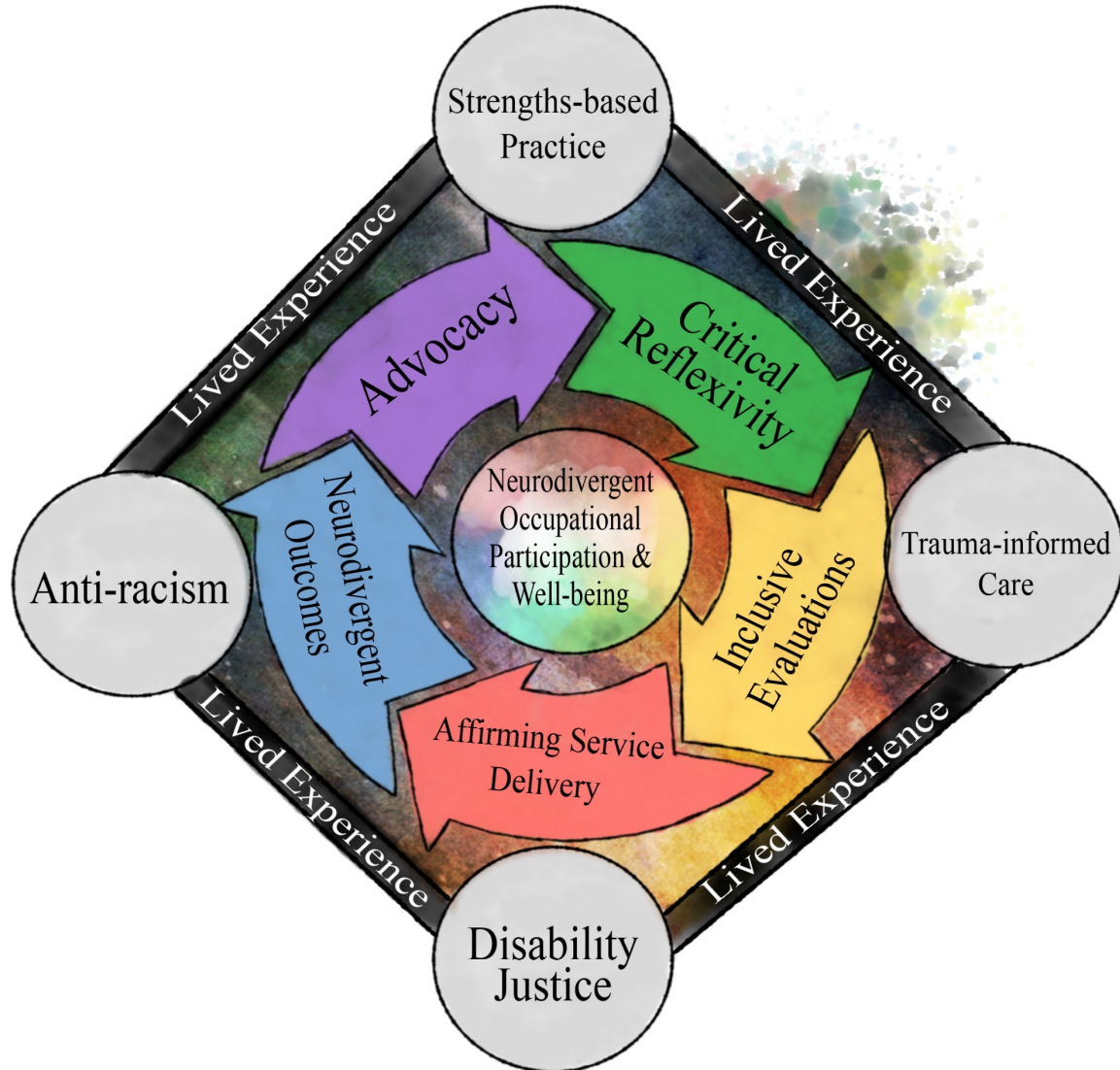
The Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model



Anti-racism

- You cannot be neurodiversity-affirming and not be anti-racist; racial justice is an essential component of disability justice and neurodiversity-affirming care, and we need to center intersectionality within our health equity conversations.
- Occupational science and OT must recognize how occupations manifest racism, and occupations contribute to promoting and reproducing injustice (LaValley & Johnson, 2023)

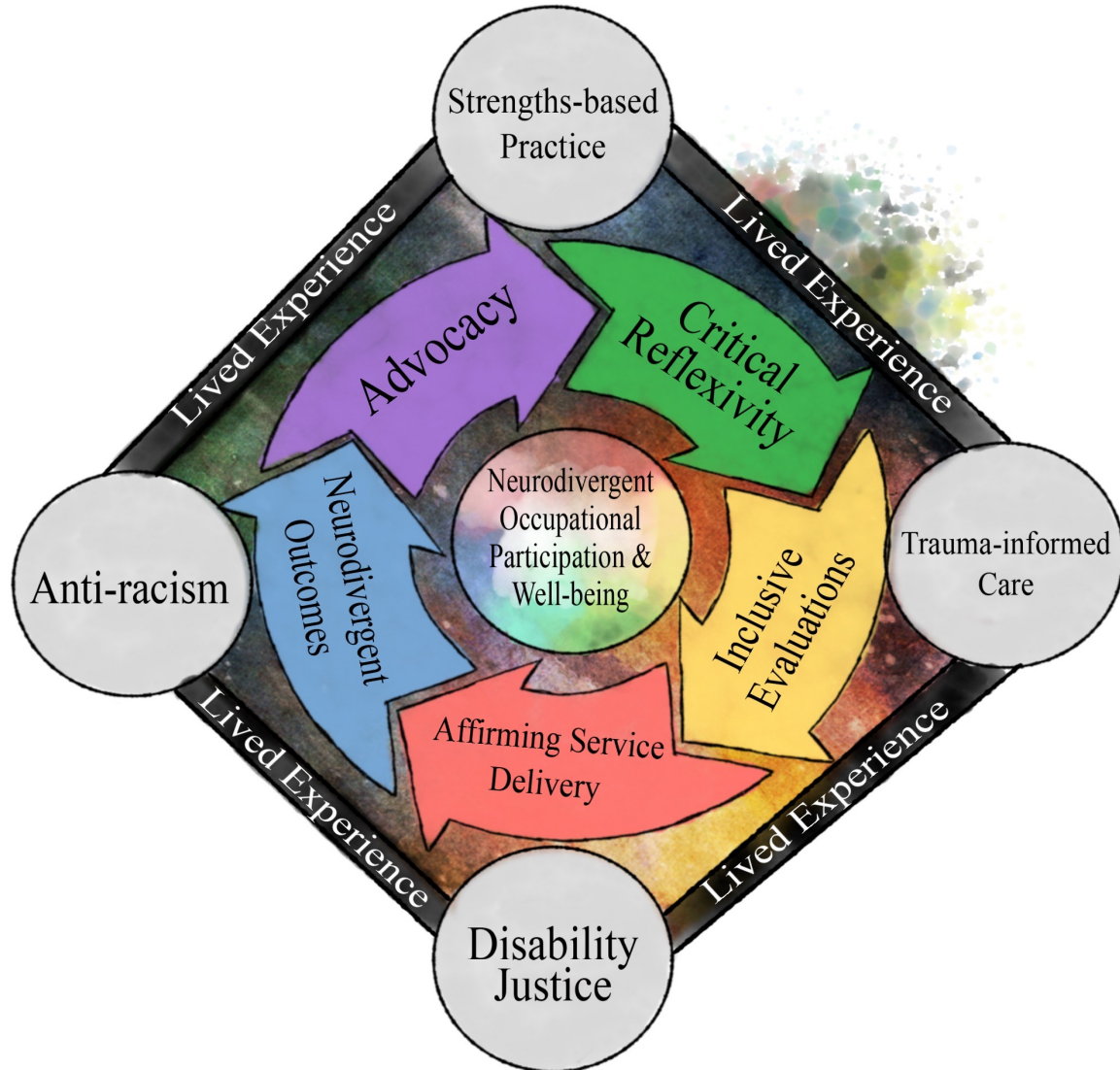
The Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model



Disability Justice

- Disability justice centers the voices of disabled individuals and emphasizes disability as its own culture
- Destigmatizes dependency
- Acknowledges crip time

The Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model



The process:

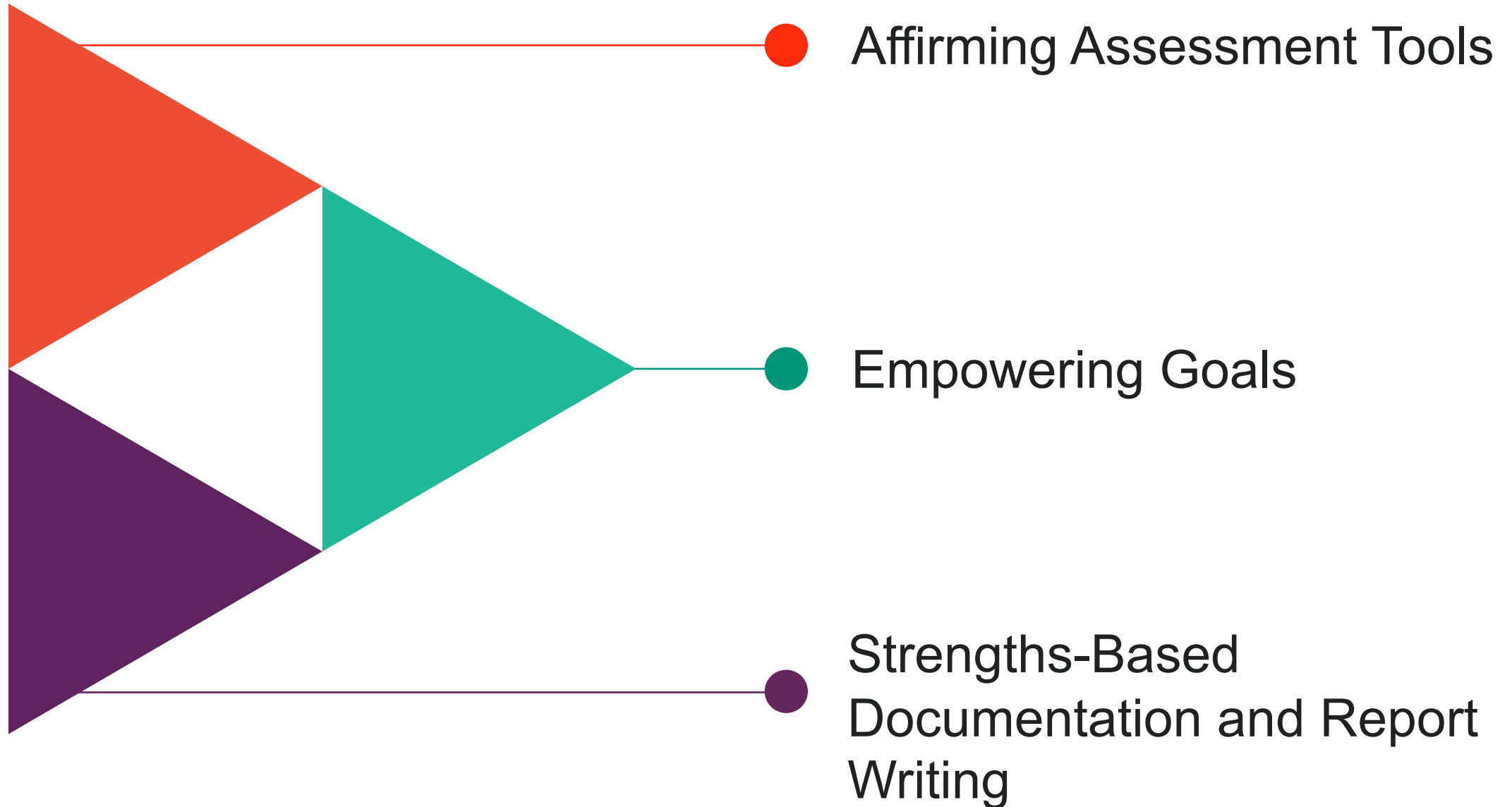
1. Critical Reflexivity
2. Inclusive Evaluations
3. Affirming Service Delivery
4. Neurodivergent Outcomes
5. Advocacy



Component

**Neurodiversity-
Affirming Evaluations**

Neurodiversity-Affirming Evaluations



Neurodiversity – Affirming Evaluations: Assessment Tools Emphasizing Lived Experience

Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM)	Pediatric Interest Profiles (PIP)
Sensory Profile-2 (SP-2)	Child Occupational Self-Assessment (COSA)
Young Child's Participation and Environment Measure (YC-PEM) & Participation and Environment Measure - Children and Youth (PEM-CY)	Self-Perception Profile for Children and Adolescents
Visual Activity Sort	Heart Drawing Tool
Perceived Efficacy of Goal Setting System (PEGS)	Pictured Child's Quality of Life Self-Questionnaire (AUQUEI)
Dynamic Assessment of Social Emotional Learning (DASEL)	

Implications for Occupational Therapy

Short-Term Outcomes

- ↑ acceptance and application of neurodivergent lived experiences within OT practice
- ↑ knowledge of affirming service delivery
- ↑ reflection on current OT practices

Long-Term Outcomes

- ↑ utilization of NA practices by OTPs
- ↑ neurodivergent quality of life and well-being
- ↓ ableism within occupational therapy and occupational science

Dissemination Tool - Introductory Manual (Free)



What are the components of the toolkit?

Initiative Component	Theoretical Grounding & Evidence Base
Neurodiversity-Affirming Occupational Therapy Process (EMPOWER Model)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengths-based approaches (de Schipper et al., 2016; Dunn, 2017; Hantley et al., 2019; Marnell, 2023; Marthi et al., 2023; Patten, 2022) Trauma-informed care (Rumball, 2022; TNC, 2022b) Anti-racism (Ayward et al., 2021; Doyle, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Lavalley et al., 2020; Pooley, 2020; Sterman et al., 2021) Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) principles (Gibson, 2020; Khan, 2021; Ryan et al., 2020; Sterman et al., 2021; Taff et al., 2017; UNC School of Medicine, 2023; Zafra et al., 2022) Disability justice (Sim Inwald, 2019; Widdschmidt, 2018; Twardowski, 2022; University of Washington, 2023; Yao et al., 2022)
Grade of Occupational Therapy Services and Resources and Affirming Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occupational therapy interventions and resources regarding the level of "always acceptable" and "never acceptable" treatment characteristics as described neurodivergent individuals (ASAN, 2022; TNC, 2022) Grading of how the intervention and its creators not only honor neurodivergent identity but empower neurodivergent occupations (ASAN, 2022; TNC, 2022) How ableist are the targeted outcomes by the intervention's research? Self-advocacy and shareholders need to be the designers of any research relating to International Classification of Functioning and Disability - Children and Youth Version (ICF-CY) (WHO, 2007)

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EMPOWER Model Cycle Phase and Underlying Framework Supporting Literature and Application (See Appendix I for More Thorough Report)

Phase	Key Points
Affirming Service Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No inclusion of behavioral feeding methods, Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), or traditional behavioral techniques (e.g., reinforcement, discrete trial training, pivotal response training) The service targets improving the autistic individual's quality of life by increasing access and opportunities to self-determination, communication, self-advocacy or other goals identified as priorities by the neurodivergent individual (ASAN, n.d.) As defined by the OTF-4, prioritize approaches to intervention emphasizing maintain, modify (compensation and adaptation), create or promote (health promotion), and prevention (Shore et al., 2020) Sensory processing differences are validated without expectations for tolerance, extinction, or expecting to modify how they process sensory information (TNC, 2022b). Environmental and task accommodations are provided in line with the individual's sensory processing differences (ASAN, n.d.; TNC, 2022b) Create a maximally enabling environment for the individual's natural contexts Reducing stigma by educating others about neurodiversity
Neurodivergent Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengths-based goal writing and strengths-based evaluation reports (ASAN, n.d.; Marnell, 2023; TNC, 2022b) Consider incorporating autistic health and well-being priorities, including perception and acceptance of self, positive mental health, self-esteem, academic well-being, social participation and relationships, meaningful everyday tasks instead of discrete skills, changes made to the natural environments, quality of life, self-advocacy skills, the individual's ability to utilize accommodations and adaptations, and reduction of societal barriers (AARC, 2019; Benavides et al., 2020; Coussens et al., 2020; Dewinter et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2017; Roche et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2019) Outcomes are not measured by changes in standardized scores (much of which promote neurotypical skills) but the learner's satisfaction with their performance in skills identified as meaningful by them Neurotypicality or achieving a norm-based skill are never targeted objectives (Marnell, 2023)
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occupational therapy and occupational science need to embrace nontraditional research methodologies that center lived experiences and voices, collaborate and highlight marginalized populations within the profession, amplify disability studies as a critical aspect of education, and authentically partner with the disability community in research, practice, and education (Patten, 2022) Self-advocacy and shareholders need to be the designers of any research relating to their community, and we reframe our mindset within the profession when supporting clients of overcoming disability to overcoming ableism (Patten, 2022)

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Affirming Assessment Tools

Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM)	Pediatric Interest Profiles (PIP)
Sensory Profile-2 (SP-2)	Child Occupational Self-Assessment (COSA)
Young Child's Participation and Environment Measure (Y-CPEM) & Participation and Environment Measure - Children and Youth (PEM-CY)	Self-Perception Profile for Children and Adolescents
Visual Activity Sort	Heart Drawing Tool
Perceived Efficacy of Goal Setting System (PEGS)	Pictured Child's Quality of Life Self-Questionnaire (AQUIL)

Dynamic Assessment of Social Emotional Learning (DASEL)

Grading of Occupational Therapy Treatment Interventions

- The next component of *Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations* will be illustrating occupational therapy techniques and resources regarding the level of "always acceptable" and "never acceptable" treatment characteristics as described by neurodivergent individuals (see Appendix G).
- Additional considerations for grade designation include how the creators of the program defined the technique, which outcomes the authors/creators are targeting within their research (e.g., autistic characteristics, neurotypical joint attention), emphasizing the targeting of neurotypical norms as outcomes, how the program incorporates neurodiversity-affirming treatment characteristics autistic/neurodivergent shareholder involvement, addressing the need to target environmental barriers, emphasizing self-determination and skill building on the client's terms, and frequency of ableist language within their promoted research and website.
- In the completed *Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations* website, explanations for grades for all techniques will be provided. See the discussion below for the grade given to Ayers' Sensory Integration (ASI) following the visualization of graded techniques

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Frameworks Guiding Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations

Community-Defined Evidence Practice (CDEP) Merged with the Lived Experience Informed Practice (LEIP) Model as an Alternative to Evidence-Based Practice

CDEP is defined as a set of practices that have yielded a positive consensus within a community over time and/or successful application of practices developed with significant community input (CDEP Integration Advisory Group, 2021; Martinez et al., 2010; National Latino Behavioral Health Association & National Network to Eliminate Disparities, 2009). Due to EBP often procuring research with racist and ableist tendencies, CDEP was designed to support and highlight the voices of marginalized communities (CDEP Integration Advisory Group, 2021). LEIP emphasizes lived experience as the foundation for practice, with clinical decisions prioritizing individuals and the impacted communities over research evidence and clinical experience (Wise, 2023a)

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Introduction to Selected Components

For the next few pages, you will be introduced to a few components of *Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations*. Please note that the information you see within this introductory manual is only a Marnell, and the information you see within the complete website may change from what is within the manual.

Empowering Neurodivergent Occupational Participation and Well-being (EMPOWER) Model

The EMPOWER model was initially conceptualized by this author with feedback from international disabled OTs and academics. The model was inspired by common themes found within disability advocate and neurodiversity-affirming literature (which are detailed in Appendix I). The cycle incorporates the following steps:

- Reflection on ableism (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Mahipaul, 2022; Marnell, 2023; Patten, 2023; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022)
- Meaningful evaluations (Dorsey et al., 2022; Harvey, n.d.; Law et al., 2017; Marnell, 2023; Proctor et al., 2020; Roberts, 2023)
- Affirming service delivery (AARC, 2022; Harvey, n.d.; Holler et al., 2021; Marnell, 2023; Shore et al., 2020; TNC, 2022b)
- Neurodivergent outcomes (AARC, 2019; ASAN, 2022; Benavides et al., 2020; Coussens et al., 2020; Dewinter et al., 2020; Marnell, 2023; Patten, 2022; Pfeiffer et al., 2017; Roche et al., 2020; TNC, 2022b; Warner et al., 2019)
- Advocacy (Le et al., 2021; Marthi et al., 2023; Patten, 2022)

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Autistic Health and Well-being Priorities

Physical Health	Mental Health	Activities & Participation	Environmental & Contextual Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pain (including modifying how we currently measure pain to better serve autistic individuals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety and depression Autism-friendly healthcare and healthcare access Prevention and acceptance of self Positive mental health Stress reduction and management Self-esteem Trauma-informed care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic well-being Autism-friendly healthcare and healthcare access Autistic inclusion in research and knowledge translation Financial vocational skills Connection and recognition Focus on everyday/meaningful activities instead of discrete skills Flourishing autistic occupation (e.g., autistic play, promoting engagement in special interests) Positive quality of life Relationship and social participation Self-advocacy skills Sexuality and sexual participation Sleep Spirituality Strengths-based assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessibility to environmental supports in home, learning, and work environments Community acceptance and empowerment Reduction of societal barriers and discrimination Respect for sensory processing differences (tolerance or attempting to change how the body processes stimuli)

Note. Adapted from AARC, 2019; Benavides et al., 2020; Coussens et al., 2020; Dewinter et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2017; Roche et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2019

Assessment of Individual Ableism - Created by Bridges Learning System

Neurodiversity Attitudes Scale - Created by Rachel VanDaalen

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Visualization of Graded OT Techniques

Note: Please note the grade is not a final determination and may be changed. Current grades were made with available resources (literature, creator's websites, how neurodivergent individuals discussed their trainings).

Reasoning for Ayres' Sensory Integration (ASI) Grade

ASI targets an individual's ability to process and internally integrate sensory information, often aiming to "remediate" sensory "dysfunction." Autistic and neurodivergent individuals frequently advocate sensory processing differences are not a flaw of our central nervous system that needs to be "normalized." Sensory processing differences are not a pathology that needs fixing, and are a valid form of human diversity. Recent published articles of ASI with problematic methodologies:

- Kuhaneck et al.'s (2023) article elaborates how autistic children have "difficulties" in play (neurotypical) and measures the impact of ASI in promoting neurotypical play skills of autistic participants
- Omarri et al.'s (2022) article aimed to measure decreased sensory sensitivity and increased neurotypical social participation
- An outcome of Schaaf et al.'s (2018) article included "improving" autistic behaviors
- Kashfehmer et al.'s (2018) article included the Sensory Profile as a pre and post-measure for changes in sensory processing and decreasing sensory sensitivity, which the author of the tool, Dr. Winne Dunn, has advocated to not be used as an outcome measure (Dunn, 2014).

It is important to note most articles published on ASI do not include autistic individuals within the articles' methodology or creation.

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Dissemination Tool – Website (Currently)

Home Neurodivergent Occupations Manual March Contact

Dedication

To the brave disabled advocates who fought and created a platform for disability justice to infiltrate occupational therapy and health sciences — this work is for you.

Within an endless spring of gratitude, thank you. The future is disabled, and my goodness, it is beautiful.

Let us take this home.

Origin and Future of Neurodivergent Nexus

Nexus – Latin for 'a connection' or 'union of connections', also a term used within many of my favorite video games, one of my favorite occupations.

Neurodivergent Nexus is a concept born from my doctoral project, a knowledge translation tool to support neurodiversity-affirming practices by occupational therapists (OTs).

Neurodivergent Nexus will be a connecting hub for fantastic resources. If you would like a (very) rough idea of what these resources will be, please explore my doctoral project manuscript. Some guidelines from the Neurodivergent Nexus are that we limited to:

1. Begin to explore aspects of my doctoral project into online components (e.g., visualization of treatment strategies, the EMPOWER model, etc.).
2. Evolve Neurodivergent Nexus into a non-profit and collaborate with a board of directors to expand the program, and turn this project into community-based resource development (if you would be interested in being on the board, please [let me know!](#)).
3. Expand the program into other disciplines, such as physical therapy, speech therapy, psychology and education.

If you would like to receive updates on components added to the website, please subscribe at the bottom of this page!

The Project That Started It All: Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations Manuscript

This manuscript is the culmination of my post-professional occupational therapy doctoral research, and entwines my love for disability justice, neurodiversity-affirming literature, and advocacy. This manuscript was a partnership with neurodivergent practitioners, advocates, and scholars from around the world, and I am thrilled to share it with you. Some key highlights:

1. Outlines how alterians is deeply entrenched within the occupational therapy profession, with an introduction to the first neurodiversity-affirming occupational therapy model (EMPOWER).
2. Discusses how relying solely on evidence-based practice can contribute to health inequities with an alternative framework.
3. Provides an overview neurodiversity-affirming assessment tools, evaluation components, affirming goals, and occupational therapy services.
4. Concludes on models of healthcare with a depiction of my favorite model (e.g., here it is:

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Occupational Therapy 2022

not the social model of disability)

5. Describe the health and well-being priorities identified by autistic individuals within occupation-based frameworks
6. A grading of occupational therapy services by level of neurodiversity-affirming characteristics
7. Resources for applying neurodiversity-affirming programs and services

Download

Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations Fact Sheet | Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations Doctoral Presentation with Notes | Introductory Manual for Embracing Neurodivergent Occupations

Download Fact Sheet | Download Doctoral Presentation PDF | View Introductory Manual

Who is Neurodivergent Nexus (so far)?

Byden Carlson-Giving is a neurodivergent pediatric occupational therapy practitioner with experience in pediatric outpatient and inpatient rehabilitation settings. He is passionate about community-defined evidence practice, mental health promotion, trauma-informed care, and incorporating strength-based approaches to promote a positive self-identity for his pediatric patients. Byden's work includes encouraging a shift away from an impairment-based perspective and returning to strength-based, occupation-centered practices, with his doctoral work including partnering with neurodivergent practitioners around the globe to create the first neurodiversity-affirming occupational therapy model. He seeks to promote neurodiversity-affirming practices, amplify the voices of the Disability community, and challenge obstacles within healthcare and research. From helping individuals discover and embrace their sensory processing differences to collaborating with their family and education team to improve their ability to be neurodiversity-affirming, Byden aims to maximize his client's quality of life and well-being to support authentic, neurodivergent development.

Subscribe

Want to sign up to receive updates about when new completed components of the neurodiversity-affirming model are added to the website? Sign up below!

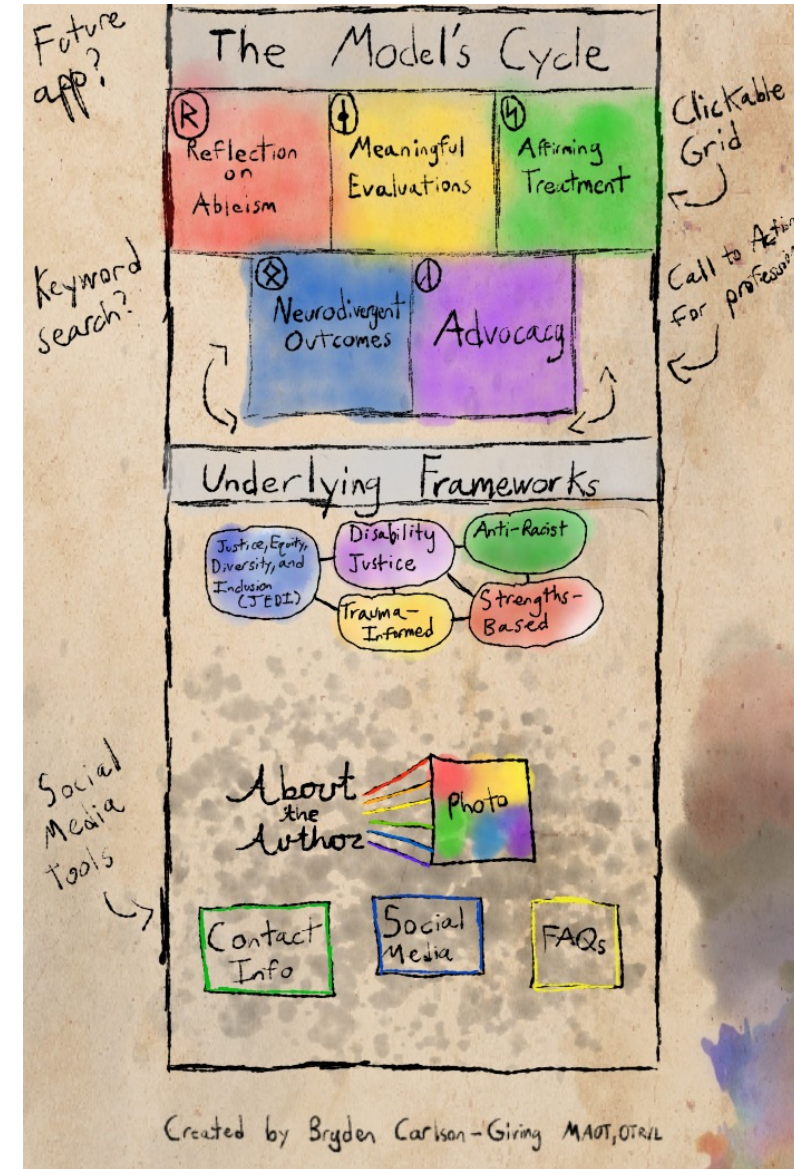
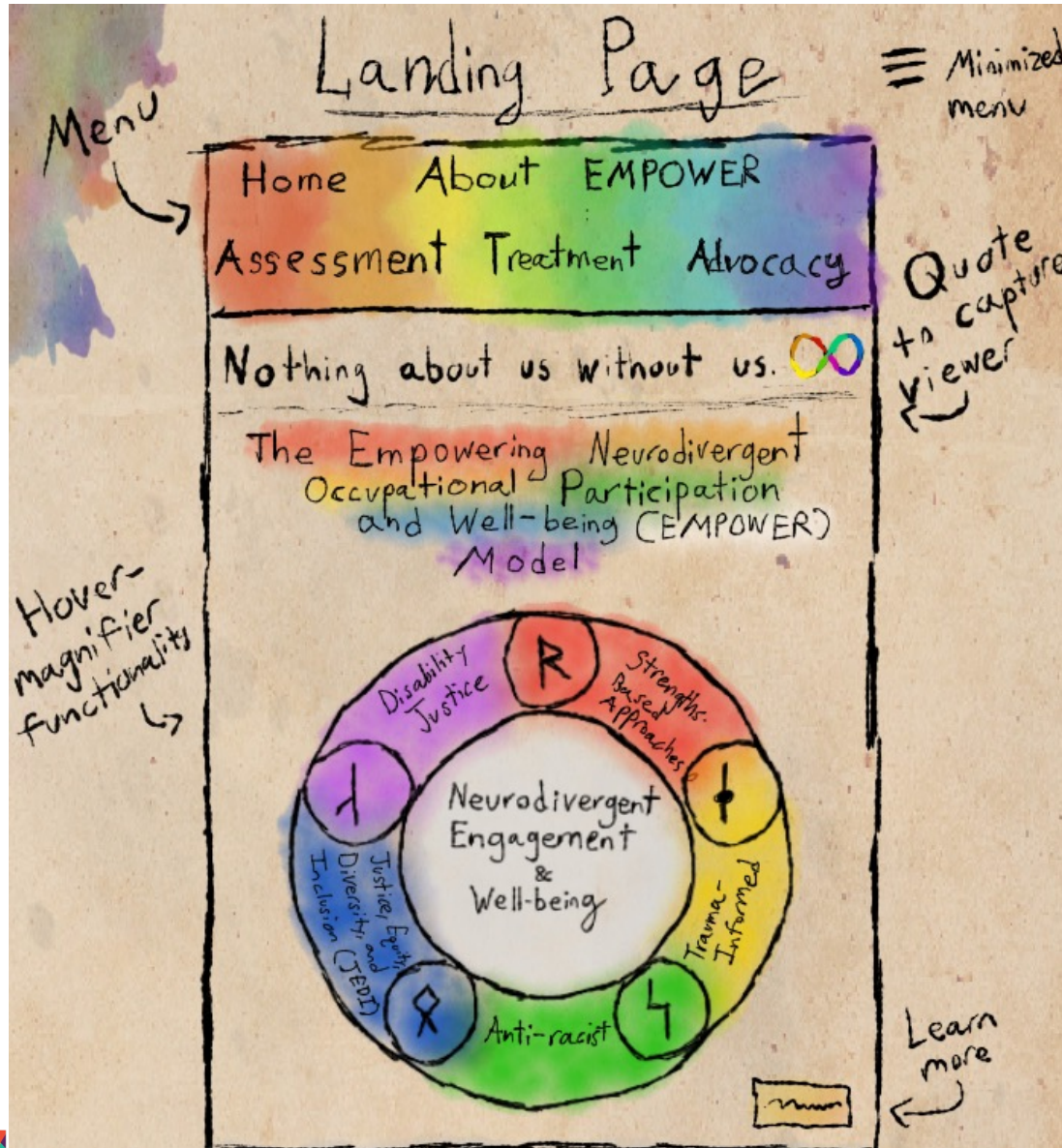
First Name: Last Name:

Email Address:

Sign Up

As someone who can't get overexcited with things, I promise you will receive critical emails. The updates will be about website addresses and resources and the email addresses will occur at most once every five weeks!

Dissemination Tool – Website (Long-Term Dream)



Conclusion

Disability advocates, clients, and shareholders are pleading for occupational therapy to do better (Dallman et al., 2022; Taylor, 2022)

Increase provision of neurodiversity-affirming services = decreased occupational marginalization and, the medical model has no place within occupational therapy

Providing neurodiversity-affirming care is an ethical mandate for OTPs and the profession must answer this call to action

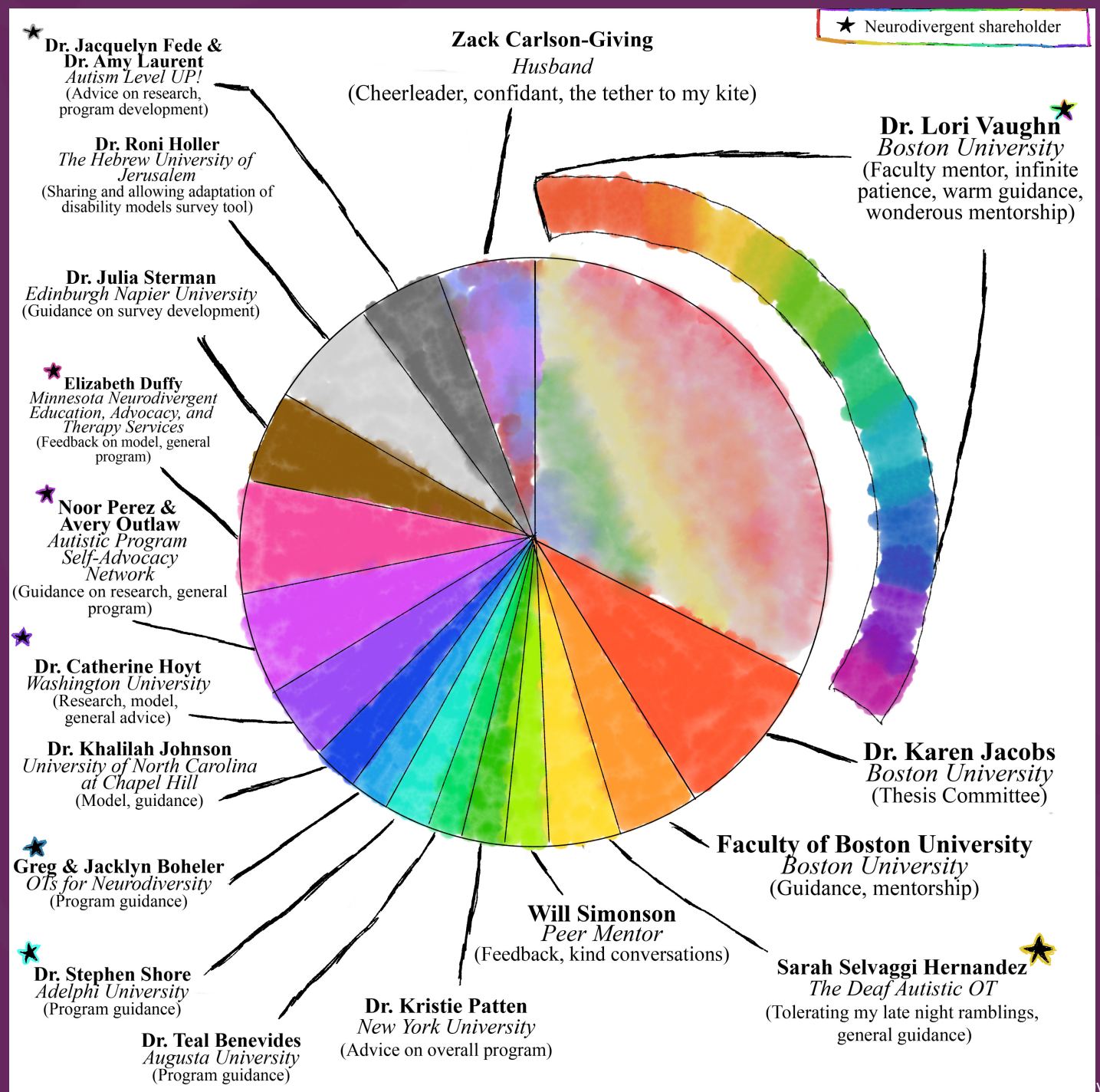
Neurodivergent Nexus aims to skip the lengthy knowledge translation gap, and support OTPs in providing neurodiversity-affirming services



A Fabulous Quote from a Mentor

"Our practices are often grounded in a deficit approach, where we are the experts who provide services to remediate weaknesses. No one builds their lives on remediated weaknesses. No one. Who does a deficit-based approach benefit?" - Kristie Patten (2022)

Acknowledgements



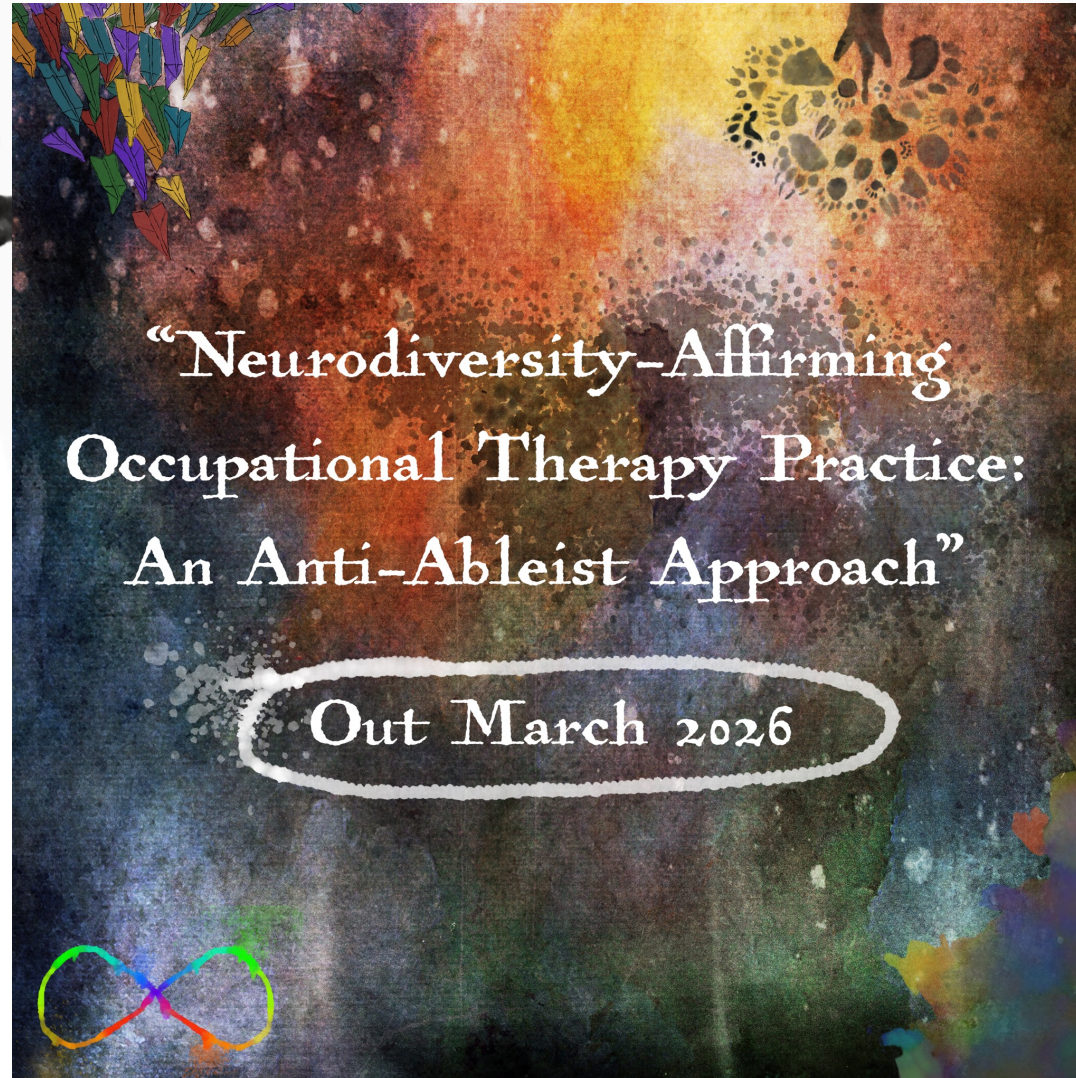
Links to Project Materials (Free)

- **Website:** www.neurodivergentnexus.com
- **Doctoral Thesis:** <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/46622>
- **Introductory Manual:** www.neurodivergentnexus.com/intro-manual

Note. The doctoral thesis provides between 5– 25 pages of information for each component, with the manual being a quick introduction to the components!



Book Out March 2026!



*“Neurodiversity-Affirming
Occupational Therapy Practice:
An Anti-Ableist Approach”*

Out March 2026

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