

The 3rd Annual Shifting the Autism Narrative: The Impact of Stigma on Health

Webinar presented by Mel Houser, M.D., Executive Director, All Brains Belong VT (4/16/2024)

Plain Language Summary

Part 1: The Problem with Healthcare for Autistic Adults

Autistic adults face many problems getting healthcare. Almost 80% have trouble getting basic medical care, and many have untreated health issues. They face barriers like:

- **Environment:** Healthcare facilities can be overwhelming.
- **Provider Knowledge and Attitudes:** Many doctors don't know how to support autistic patients.
- **Systemic Issues:** The healthcare system often doesn't meet the needs of autistic people.

These problems mean autistic adults often don't live as long. Many die earlier than non-autistic adults. The reason for dying early is mainly from heart disease and suicide.

Part 2: How the Healthcare System Adds to Stigma

Doctors often think and talk about autism in negative ways because of what they learned in medical school about autism. Doctors are taught to focus on what autistic people can't do.

The words doctors use can make patients and families not trust them. For example, a doctor might talk about a child's autism in a negative way, making the family feel hopeless. This kind of talk reinforces the idea that being autistic is bad. This harms autistic people's self-esteem and mental health.

Part 3: Changing the Story

To improve healthcare for autistic people, we need to change how we think about autism:

- **Neurodiversity:** Everyone's brain is different, and that's okay. Different brains process information, think, behave, and communicate in unique ways.
- **Neurodiversity Paradigm:** There's no one "correct" way for a brain to work.
- **Universal Design:** Offering things in different ways to suit everyone's needs is the best approach.

Part 4: All Brains Belong VT

All Brains Belong VT is a nonprofit organization creating healthcare that supports people whose brains work in all kinds of ways. The All Brains Belong model includes:

- **Healthcare is more than Medical Care:** We focus on social connections, job support, and community education.
- **Customizing Care:** One size doesn't fit all. We design healthcare to meet different needs.
- **Community Input:** We ask the community what they need. We make changes based on that feedback.
- **Building Connections:** We believe that feeling connected to others is important for good health.

By listening to autistic people and making changes to the healthcare system, All Brains Belong VT is working to create a better, more inclusive world for everyone.