

# The Impact of Stigma on Health

Mel Houser, M.D., Executive Director, All Brains Belong VT



## 1 The status quo of healthcare is failing Autistic patients...

### Autistic adults struggle to access healthcare.

- **Almost 80%** have difficulty accessing primary medical care.
- **Around 65%** have untreated health conditions.

### Types of barriers to healthcare:

- **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.

### Autistic patients are dying.

- Life expectancy is between **36-54 years**.
- Leading causes are **premature cardiovascular disease and suicide**.

## 2 The healthcare system's role in driving the stigma of autism...

The way doctors are trained to think and talk about autism leads to a deficit-based paradigm. Doctors are taught to focus on what autistic people can't do.

The words professionals use often lead to patients and families mistrusting the professional. Language often reflects the paradigm the professional is working from.



### Why does this matter?

- Autistic people grow up stigmatized and "othered."
- Autistic people receive the message that their way of thinking, acting, communicating, etc. is broken.
- If healthcare providers view patients through this deficit-based lens, they won't feel comfortable.

## 3 Shifting the narrative...

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.



## 4 All Brains Belong is pioneering a new model for neurodiversity-affirming healthcare.

<b>Healthcare is more than medical care:</b> social connection, employment support, community education.	<b>Customizing Care:</b> 'One size fits all' does not work for all. We design healthcare to meet different needs.
<b>Community Input:</b> Ask the community what they need, and change the system from the ground up.	<b>Building Connections:</b> Feeling connected to others is important for good health.