

Monotropism and Attention Styles

Welcome to Thriving Autistics Discovery Programme, and welcome to this short introduction to monotropism and attention styles.

In this video, we're going to explore a theory that many Autistic people have found resonates with how their own minds and body work—how we focus and how and why we might become overwhelmed, and why our interests, our energy, and attentional pulls can feel so intense and so central to who we are.

Monotropism is a theory developed by Autistic people for Autistic people. It was pioneered by Dinah Murray in the 1990s and later developed with Wen Lawson and Mike Lesser, first published in 2005.

The theory suggests that many of the features commonly associated with being Autistic can be understood through the way our attention is organised.

It describes being Autistic as having an interest-based nervous system, in other words, meaning that our attention tends to focus deeply on a small number of things at a time, rather than being spread more evenly across many things.

Sometimes it's contrasted with polytropic attention, where attention is more broadly distributed and can switch more easily between multiple channels at once. This is more common for people who aren't Autistic or ADHD.

So for many Autistic people, and also for many people who are ADHD or AuDHD, attention can be organised in a monotropic way.

When something captures our interest, our attention can become highly focused, immersive, and absorbing, feeling like a flow.

This interest could be anything from a fleeting sensory moment to a deep focus on work or something that brings us great joy.

Equally, we may find ourselves focused and locked into something that is less positive and more like anxiety-driven, ruminating, looping thoughts.

When we're locked into something positive, it's what people often describe as entering an attention tunnel or a flow state. Time fades, the outside world recedes, and we're fully engaged with what we're doing or thinking about.

This deep focus can be a profound strength for some people, but it can also be very dysregulating if you're looped into something that's less comfortable and anxiety-inducing.

When we're feeling regulated, being monotropic allows for rich learning, creativity, problem-solving, and can support the development of deep expertise. For example, it's often where joy, meaning, and a sense of aliveness are found.

Many of us recognise the feeling of being completely immersed and emerged in an interest where it feels nourishing, regulating, and deeply satisfying. We feel alive.

At the same time, it can bring challenges, especially in environments that demand frequent context or task switching. Moving out of an attention tunnel can feel physically and emotionally difficult.

Being interrupted, redirected, or pulled away before we're ready can feel jarring and dysregulating. It might trigger frustration, distress, shutdown, or meltdown. It's cognitively very costly for us.

It also explains why starting tasks, stopping tasks, and switching between tasks can take so much effort. It's not about laziness or lack of motivation. It's about how our attention and our focus is allocated, and how much energy it takes to disengage from one and engage with another.

Because it's so closely linked with our nervous system, being unable to access our deep interests and flow states for long periods can contribute to exhaustion and burnout.

Deep engagement in things that are meaningful to us is not a luxury for us—it is a core regulatory need.

Monotropism also shapes social experience. In social situations, our attention may already be working very hard to process sensory input, language, facial expressions, body language, emotional cues, and the ongoing effort of being understood and understanding others.

Trying to manage multiple channels of information at once can be overwhelming, and our natural preference may be to focus deeply on one thread of conversation or one topic of interest, rather than constantly shifting focus.

This can sometimes be misunderstood by others as disinterest, intensity, or talking too much about one topic, but from a monotropic perspective, it reflects a nervous system that's organised around depth rather than breadth, and around meaning rather than surface-level exchange.

It can also explain why worries and thought loops can feel so difficult to break out of. The same deep focus that supports creativity and learning can also lock onto those concerns, fears, or unanswered questions we all have, making them feel so intense and difficult to break away from.

So it's the same attentional system doing what it does best—staying with what feels important and safe at the time.

It's important to say as well that not every Autistic person will relate to every aspect of this theory in the same way, because we are all different.

As you learn more about being Autistic, you'll notice what feels familiar, what helps things make sense, and what doesn't quite fit for you.

If aspects of monotropism resonate, it may offer a compassionate way to understand yourself.

In our live sessions, we'll explore how this shows up in everyday life—in your work, relationships, self-care, and recovery—and how understanding your own attention style can then help you advocate better for your own needs.

Bye for now.