

## **Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism**

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There are many misconceptions about autism and the experience of autistic people. In this presentation, myths surrounding 1) behaviors observed in autism, 2) the view of autism as a tragedy and 3) the belief that autism is only experienced by the individual with the ASD diagnosis will be challenged and a paradigm-shifting perspective will be offered. ASD is defined by a checklist of impairments, and this perspective leads to treatments that often focus on ridding a person of “autistic” symptoms. Instead of classifying behavior as deviant and pathological, we will examine such patterns as part of human development and human behavior— a range of strategies to communicate and to cope with a world that feels confusing, overwhelming and frightening. Informed by published research, four decades of experience working with autistic people and their families, and first person accounts, the experience of autistic people is addressed in a manner leading to more respectful and developmentally appropriate approaches. The notion of autism as a tragedy for the individual and family will also be challenged by parental accounts of raising and living with family members with autism. Finally, the notion that autism is best understood as a shared human experience rather than a condition within a person will also be considered. The presentation will conclude with a summary of evidence that leads to a compelling new way of understanding and living with autism, by honoring the uniqueness of each individual, by building on interests and strengths and by providing a range of appropriate supports. Specific educational/treatment implications will be presented that challenges approaches that focus on “fixing” people with autism and that measure progress primarily on the basis of eliminating symptoms.