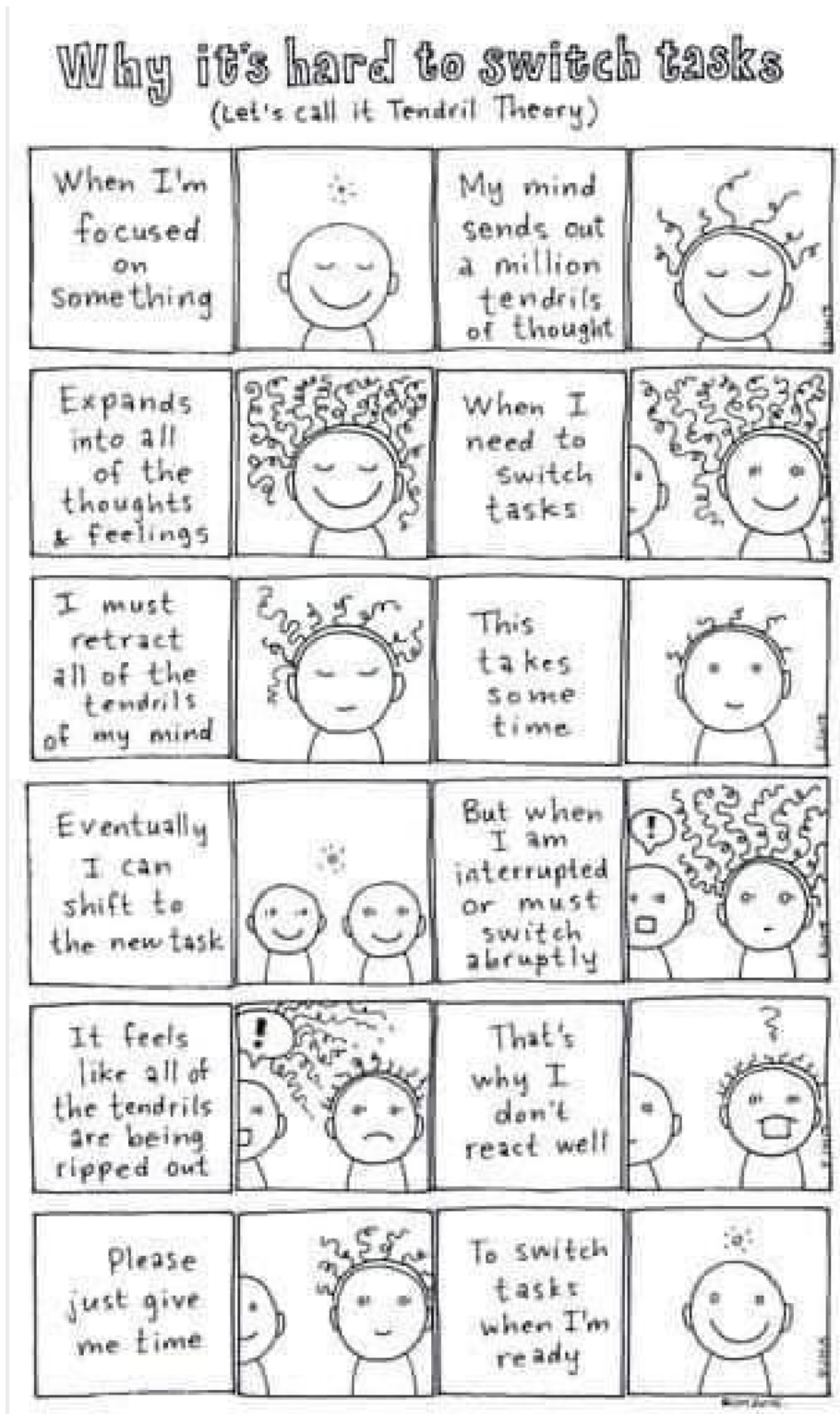


Autistic Inertia

Let's start by looking at "Tendrils Theory" below:



Definitions

Definitions from [Oxford Languages](#) · [Learn more](#)



inertia

/ɪˈneɪʃə/

noun

1. a tendency to do nothing or to remain unchanged.
"the bureaucratic inertia of the various tiers of government"

Similar: [inactivity](#) [inaction](#) [inactiveness](#) [inertness](#) [dormancy](#) [passivity](#)

2. **PHYSICS**
a property of matter by which it continues in its existing state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line, unless that state is changed by an external force.
"the power required to overcome friction and the inertia of the moving parts"

Autistic inertia relates to the inability to start something, then the inability to stop or transition from something started. Getting started can be hard. Stopping or changing can be hard. This is often explained with the Tendrils theory (in the picture on the first page).

The Autistic brain is monotropic. Monotropism is a term which relates to our polarised thinking and intense hyperfocus on things. This means that, unlike neurotypical people who can focus on many things at the same time with moderate levels of brain focus, we will focus intensively on polarised thoughts with a lot more intensity. This makes it harder for us to then shift these thoughts to something else.

In an article published in 2018 by Oswin the parallels to perceived laziness or intentional resistance is highlighted.

"So what does autistic inertia look like? It can look like laziness or resistance to change. When an autistic person has stopped for the day, or taken a break, or taken a vacation, it can be difficult to restart. This may look like resistance to getting out of bed in the morning, not necessarily because the person is tired, but because the steps to doing so are overwhelming. For school-aged children, this may be ending a school day and coming home and resisting to do homework, not out of laziness or out of an inability to do the work, but because they've kept it together for the day. They don't have anything else to give towards starting, planning and executing the homework.

But that's just half the story. When you get started, for instance with something of interest, it can be hard to stop. Even if you walk away from the book you're reading or the video you're watching, it's still consumes your thoughts, your conversation, and your movement. It can be a repetitive motion, that once you start you may not be able to stop. None of this is particularly a problem until you need to meet others demands."¹

Strategies

One of the tricks to responding to inertia **is to not highlight it**. Announcing change is hard for many people. Some manage this with timers and reminders and are happy with such accommodations. Others find reminders add to the feelings of overwhelm.

One of the best accommodations for someone experiencing issues related to inertia is a co-regulator – e.g., Someone who can help them move their brain to the next thing without them focusing on the state of transition. A simple example of this is to start talking about the next thing that they are going to be doing (the thing that will be hard to move towards). This might be demonstrated by the way our Therapy Assistants help children in our TecAntz Programs to be ready for going home. At approximately 20 minutes before home time, they start conversations such as asking “*what shows are you watching tonight at home?*” “*Ohh.. is mum making those meatballs you were telling me about tonight?*”, “*what game will you play on your computer tonight – is it the one with the balls you were telling me about?*”

Essentially, we try to get the child's brain thinking about the next thing. This means that there is no transition for their brain, as it's already in the next place. This strategy is **very effective**.

Purpose Driven Brains

The Autistic brain is purpose driven and sensory driven. This means that we aren't motivated by doing things because someone wants us to, because someone thinks we should, or because it's the normal next thing to do. We certainly often aren't motivated because doing

¹ Oswin, 2018 <https://www.divergentminds.org/a-look-at-autistic-inertia/> A Look at Inertia

something will make someone else happy (except for those with strong rejection sensitive dysphoria profiles – but that’s a whole different information sheet). We require purpose in tasks around us, or we don’t see the point. Going to school because ‘we should’ is unlikely to be a motivating factor, especially if some parts of school are not liked. However, going to school because “we need to go water the plants outside the classroom or they will die”, or going to school because “we need to tell Mrs Smith about the awesome weekend we had on Minecraft” might be motivating enough to help our brains see purpose.

Transition Management (Autistic Inertia)

One of the hardest parts of Autistic Inertia is transitions. Transition refers to when someone has to change something. This might be changing from one task to another, or going home from work, or going to a different parent’s house. This could also be the transition to turning off the computer / devices and having dinner. Transition is change and change is super hard for some people. Transition or change management is important to plan and consider and presenting and highlighting change is often very unhelpful as this can increase the ‘fight’ response in the person and make them want to resist the change **just because it’s change**. The nature of Pathological Demand Avoidance and Autistic Demand Avoidance means that demands or polite requests don’t have to be nasty or aggressive for them to be avoided. The mere nature of change often invokes a pathological opposition which fuels the person’s avoidance and fear.

Managing Transition - Transition is best managed by:

Preparation: Make sure the person is ready for and wants the transition to happen. They are likely to not feel this way at the time of transition, but preparation might include earlier agreements and/or discussions. Preparation may also include the use of timers with a countdown function and an alarm that goes off at the time of transition. Other options are lights, like the Nano Leaf™ lights which can be controlled to turn different colours to prepare someone for a transition. Preparing for transition doesn’t mean ‘announcing’ or ‘highlighting’

transition. It means that you have done as much as you can as a co-regulator, to make sure the environment is best for the transition to happen smoothly, without excessive highlighting.

Cognitive Placement: Prior to the time of transition, some people are better supported by chats and conversations about the next task/situation that they are going into.

Example: It's time to leave McDonalds and go home to watch a movie. As the person is finishing their food at McDonalds, start a conversation about the movie you might be watching. Get a bit excited about the movie and maybe discuss where you're going to sit to watch the movie and anything else which 'paints the picture' about the movie watching experience. Just having a discussion like this can help put this into the person's head.

Distraction: At the time of transition, distraction can be very helpful to those who are not coping with change and are not wanting to transition to do something different. Distraction might include starting a conversation about something the person likes to do, in order to take their mind off having to change from one task to another. Distraction might also be doing something silly as the transition is happening, so they are laughing at, and with you, rather than focusing on how difficult the change / transition is. If the person is ADHD, then distraction is almost essential as so much of the person's brain is likely to be fixated on what they were focused on prior to the transition. If the person is ADHD, most distractions will need to be dynamic and excitable and repetitious in order to work.

Situations like below, are far too common and can be quite traumatic for the person. Note: The below is an example of what an **unsuccessful** transition can look like.

Father - *"It's time to go to Auntie Jenny's house."*

Son - *"No, I don't want to go to Auntie Jenny's house, stop saying that dad, stop it."*

Father - *"Come on, time to go."*

Son – (yelling louder, becoming tense) *“No, stop saying this, stay home, stay here, not going to Auntie Jenny’s house.”*

The child is then likely to continue escalating, crying, hitting, screaming that he doesn’t want to do / go to the different thing.

Sample Transition Scripting (child)

[Preparation]: Father puts a timer on his phone for 30 minutes. At 20 minutes, father starts this conversation.

Father – *“I love how at Auntie Jenny’s house we can have a cup of warm tea while we watch the football.”*

Son – *“Yes, I love warm tea, can I have some now daddy?”*

Father – *“No, not right now, but I also enjoy how Auntie Jenny gets the big blanket with the blue wool, and we watch cartoons before the football starts, I love her pussy cat too and how he sits on her lap.”*

Son – *“I want the big blanket this time and I want to watch Bugs Bunny now.”*

Father – *“You can have the big blanket, once the timer goes off, we can go and get you that blue blanket.”*

***Alarm goes off, signalling time to leave.**

[Distraction]: Father drops a pillow on the ground, yelling ‘touchdownnnnnnnnn’ *“I scored a touchdown, I bet you can’t beat me, turn that off and meet me at the door.”*

Son – *“I can beat you, I’m much faster, I’m coming now, don’t forget the big blanket.”*

So, rather than **telling** a person you are going somewhere (e.g., To the shops, to someone’s house), it’s better to not focus on the ‘doing’ and focus on what it will look like when you’re there. Try to paint the picture, using words. Taking away the directional tone of your conversation makes it easier to manage.

In 2020 Quincy published a great article on Inertia which provided the following information.

“So if that’s inertia, then what is “autistic inertia?” Well, autistic inertia is the tendency that autistic people have to want to remain in a constant state. When we’re asleep we want to stay asleep, when awake we want to stay awake, when we’re working on one thing we want to keep working on it, when we’re doing one thing we want to keep

doing that one thing, etc. Now, yes, this tendency exists in everybody but you must understand that this is often significantly more pronounced in autistic people. This can also (at least in part) be due to executive functioning struggles. (There are many other reasons why autistic people may have trouble switching tasks, but here we'll only focus on executive functioning).

Accommodations

So, now that we've gone over a potential reason why many autistic people may have trouble switching tasks, let's go over some things that I have found helpful or I have heard other people have found helpful when it comes to task switching/initiation. The first important thing to remember is that executive functioning struggles absolutely do not represent laziness. I know that if you yourself don't experience executive functioning difficulties you might think this is all quite strange, because it "should be easy" because all you have to do is just "do the thing." However, difficulties with task initiation actually are a product of a very real cognitive "block" and very often can get in the way of our actual intentions."²

A few key, final takeaways from this are:

- Autistic brains are monotropic. This means they focus on singular, or polarized thoughts and frequently hyperfocus, rendering their attention spans limited to only this content.
- Inertia essentially means that it's hard to start something and hard to stop something, purely because there is too much of our brain to move across and it's just hard to do this (tendrill theory).
- Help us by not focusing on transition. Instead, start discussions on the next thing that we need to do and help us put this in our minds. Don't discuss it as a 'transition' (e.g., Don't say "remember next we need to do XYZ", instead, just say "wasn't it funny when we found those Pokémon at the shops last week? Do you remember how many of them that shop had?" – This will put 'the shops' into the person's head and provides them a purpose to enable it to be easy to then go there.

² Quincy, 2020 <https://speakingofautismcom.wordpress.com/2020/03/24/task-initiation-executive-functioning-and-autistic-inertia/>

- Inertia will be impacted by environments and purpose. If the person has no purpose to something, it will be much harder for them to switch to it. Focus on helping them find purpose in the next thing and it will become easier.

Further Resources Which Might Help

Link	Description	Author
Fighting Autistic Inertia	Explanation of Autistic Inertia and how the author keeps her inertia and depression at bay.	Becca Hector, GeekClubBooks
First Hand Accounts of Autistic Inertia	An autistic led study on inertia, involving first-hand accounts of inertia.	Karen Leneh Buckle, Kath Leadbitter, Ellen Poliakoff and Emma Gowen.
Speaking of Autism - Inertia	Task Initiation, Executive Functioning, and Autistic Inertia.	Published by Quincy
A Look at Inertia	Information about Inertia	Oswin