



An Introduction to Monotropism



FREE DOWNLOAD

Inspired by the webinar with Nicola Reekie
delivered by:

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The PDA Space Portal

(www.thepdaspace.com)

Created by Helen Edgar



What is Monotropism?

Monotropism is often thought to be the central underlying feature of Autism. Monotropism could be seen to be a core thread that weaves through every aspect of a person's being and ways of experiencing and processing the world.

"In a nutshell, monotropism is the tendency for our interests to pull us in more strongly than most people. It rests on a model of the mind as an 'interest system': we are all interested in many things, and our interests help direct our attention. Different interests are salient at different times. In a monotropic mind, fewer interests tend to be aroused at any time, and they attract more of our processing resources, making it harder to deal with things outside of our current attention tunnel."

Fergus Murray (2018)

Monotropism

1. Coping with multiple channels is hard
2. Filtering is tricky and error-prone
3. Changing tracks is destabilising
4. Often experience things intensely
5. Keep looping back to interests and concerns
6. Things that drop out of awareness tend to stay dropped

Fergus Murray
www.monotropism.org

Find out more in The PDA Space Webinar
Friday 13th October 2023

The original 'Starting points for understanding autism' article written by Fergus Murray Jan 2019 can be found on their [Medium Page](#) & also www.monotropism.org



What is Monotropism?

Monotropism is a non pathologising theory of autism developed by Dr Dinah Murray, Dr Wenn Lawson and Mike Lesser (2005) in their article, *Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism*. They stated, "At any one moment, the amount of attention available to a conscious individual is limited". The authors suggest that "competition between mental processes for scarce attention is an important factor in shaping the cognitive process." (Murray et al., 2005).

The theory of monotropism suggests that autistic minds focus more energy (resources) on a smaller number of things at any one time. This has been likened to having tunnels of attention where monotropic people become so highly engaged in their specific interest that they may not notice what is happening outside of that space but equally could be hyper-vigilant within that attention tunnel. This can make work highly productive and enable people to enter flow states, allowing deep, focused creativity and providing joy.

If you are monotropic, it may feel distressing and take a lot of energy to switch channels of attention to different tasks/activities. Without careful planning and support, this could have a detrimental impact on a person's well-being and mental health.

The summary of [The Monotropism Questionnaire](#) (Garau et al. 2023) research showed that if you are Autistic/ADHD you are more likely to be monotropic.





AUTISM MEDICAL MODEL*	MONOTROPISM THEORY**
DEFICIT BASED	NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING
<p>Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, activities or interests (this includes sensory behaviours)</p> <p>Persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction that limits and impairs everyday functioning</p>	<p>Monotropic channels of attention and deep interest</p> <p>Differences in social communication and social interaction due to attention resources and the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012)</p>

* *The DSM-5 Manual info from National Autistic Society*

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/diagnostic-criteria/all-audiences>

**Murray, D., Lesser, M., & Lawson, W. (2005). Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism. *Autism*, 9(2), 139-156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361305051398>



The following six points discussed by Fergus Murray in their webinar with [The PDA Space](#) have been shared previously in the original '*Starting points for understanding autism*' article by Fergus Murray (Jan 2019).

This can be found on their [Medium Page](#). It has also been republished by [Thinking Person's Guide for Autism](#).

Monotropism affects how you think, process and respond to the world and people around you it affects the sensory system, cognition, communicating and socialising, executive functioning skills and a person's well-being.

1

Coping with multiple channels is hard.

This can be sensory channels or other information streams.

Monotropism may affect socialising and communication as more energy and resources are naturally channelled to focus on one thing. In a conversation, this may mean a monotropic person is directing more of their resources to focus on understanding the content with the result that some tone of voice/ body language or other social signals may then be missed. It also means group situations with many multiples channels of information occurring may be even more difficult and exhausting to manage.

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2

Filtering is tricky and error-prone

It can be difficult to tune things out, other times people may filter them out completely.

Home

It may help to adopt a flexible, low-demand approach at home, especially after a school day and have a safe space for children to relax and recharge. It can be stressful and exhausting having to constantly try and keep up with all the changes of attention tunnels in a school day and social and communication expectations on top of trying to learn!

School

It can be difficult to focus and concentrate if there are lots of distractions around your attentional tunnel. Verbal instructions may be missed. Sensory tools may help to control sensory input to support regulation and maintain an inner flow state.

Monotropism Top Tip

Create a safe space where your young person is able to relax and recharge in a way that meets their needs. For some children this may mean adding sensory input such as activities like gaming/ music/movement or for others they may prefer a quieter less stimulating environment.

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3

**Changing tracks is
destabilising.**

**Task-switching is hard, and
new plans take work.**

Home

Changing attention tunnels and shifting focus onto something different can take a lot of energy. At home, it will help to add in extra cushioning time around events, so you have some flexibility to decrease stress and anxiety.

The fewer events you pack into a day, the fewer transitions you will have to manage, and the easier your day may flow for the whole family.

School

Trying to manage a busy time table is exhausting with lots of shifts of subjects and teachers as well as rooms and sensory and social input. Some flexibility may be needed in the day for rest and recharge time, this may not be breaktimes as this can often cause even more overwhelm for many children.

Monotropism Top Tip

To prepare for any transitions it will help to give extra time and talk about plans in advance. Ideally collaborating together is the best way forward so your young person feels part of the decision making process, more prepared and less anxious. Visual reminders and auditory timers may help prepare and make the transition easier.

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People may often experience things intensely, usually things that relate to concerns and interests.

Home

Due to more attention and energy resources being channelled into fewer channels at any one time it means things will be experienced more intensely. This can be positive or negative. It also means sudden changes of plan may be more difficult to deal with, especially if your young person is in a deep 'flow state'. They will need time regulate and re-orientate themselves in a different attention channel.

School

Having the capacity to engage in a deep flow state of play or learning can be hugely beneficial in the right environment. It can help make learning a much more enjoyable and meaningful experience. Having topics or weaving in interests will help to support a flow state and create a more positive experience.

Monotropism Top Tip

Encourage and make time for young people to engage in their interests, some people may also enjoy focused interest groups to share their joy and passions with others. This can be great to support good mental health and for their well being. It is important that a person's strong interests are not used as incentives to try and make them do something else. This is not helpful and longer term can harm a person's mental health. Autistic people's interests are all different, and some may be more in line with what some people see as more socially acceptable or some are given a higher status than others but this should not let other interests feel less valid for anyone else, a special interest in astrophysics is as valid and meaningful as a special interest in spinning toys.



The original 'Starting points for understanding autism' article written by Fergus Murray Jan 2019 can be found on their [Medium Page](https://www.monotropism.org) & also www.monotropism.org



5

**Monotropic people may
keep looping back to
interests and concerns.**

It's hard to let things drop.

Home

If you are interested in something, you will likely want to keep talking about it or engaging in that activity, a lot! Having reliable times in the day when your child knows they will be able to engage in their interest may help the family dynamics run smoother. It can help foster positive relationships to join in shared interests alongside children. As long as it is a safe interest, try and embrace it rather than battle with it!

School

It is important to bear in mind just how important personal interests can be for many autistic/ADHD people. If these interests can be woven into their learning it will be more meaningful for them. Topics and more self directed learning opportunities can be greatly beneficial.

Monotropism Top Tips

It is important to consider that for some people the tendency to keep looping back to previous thoughts and concerns can impact mental health and create cycles of anxiety. It will help children and young people to have a reliable, consistent safe adult to talk to about things.



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6

**Things that drop out of awareness
/ attention tunnel tend
to stay dropped.
Reminders & visual aids
may be helpful.**

Home

If you are monotropic, more energy will be channelled into fewer attention streams at any one time; this means there will be less resources for everything outside of that channel. Even though you may have asked your child a 100 times to put their shoes on, if they are engaged in something else, it may not register and they may carry on playing. Having visual prompts and checklists can help manage other tasks.

School

Managing executive functioning tasks at school can be more challenging if you are monotropic. Packing your bag for all the different lessons, remembering homework and PE kits and everything else involves a lot of thought processing. Routines, checklists, timers and other gentle prompts may help (and also not having too much to try and juggle!).

Friendships

Monotropism may be a way of explaining why some autistic people have a very intense interest in just one or two friends whom they want to be with all the time and who are in their attention channel at that time. It also means that if people are outside of their attention tunnel and interests change, it can cause some difficulties that may need extra support to navigate.

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Monotropism at Home

Challenges

Loud and busy home environment

Increased stress and anxiety around transitions (e.g. waking up / day trips/ meal times)

Executive functioning (e.g. getting dressed, organising room etc)

Sensory/Social overwhelm resulting in meltdowns/shutdowns

Support

Having a safe space to rest and regulate and engage in own interests

Focusing on flexible routines rather than timetables to lower anxiety

Visual reminders and checklists may help to keep things that have slipped outside of the attention tunnel in focus

Spending time in flow state with interests enabling time to rest and recharge

At home, a greater understanding of monotropism and ways to manage energy flow and attention tunnels may help young people regulate. This will help reduce frequency and intensity of sensory and social overwhelm (meltdowns/shutdowns).



Monotropism at School

Challenges

Changes of teachers or
to timetable

Lots of transitions
through the day

Impact of environment
on sensory system

Executive functioning
and memory skills

Support

Consistent staff and
prepare for any changes

Flexibility and time
around events to rest and
recharge

Sensory tools (e.g. ear
defenders/ fidgets/
scents)

Visual reminders and
timers to support

In a school setting, trying to manage the many changes of subjects/teachers and busy environment can be a very difficult environment for many monotropic people. Having more time to spend engaging in interests and flow states will help regulate and balance the mind and body. A topic based curriculum could be more beneficial with more scope for self directed learning.



Signposting

1

www.thepdaspace.com

Family support workshops, webinars, coaching and online peer support groups.
(Founder: Nicola Reekie)

2

www.monotropism.org

Fergus Murray's website with a great collection of monotropism related research and resources including the archives of Dinah Murray's work

3

www.autismunderstood.co.uk

Website designed by autistic young people, for autistic people

4

www.autisticrealms.com

Helen Edgar's website - Autism/ education/ mental health writing and resources

Please seek professional advice if needed.





A free community resource
to support the webinar delivered by

Nicola Reekie & Fergus Murray

Created for
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By
Helen Edgar
Autistic Realms

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