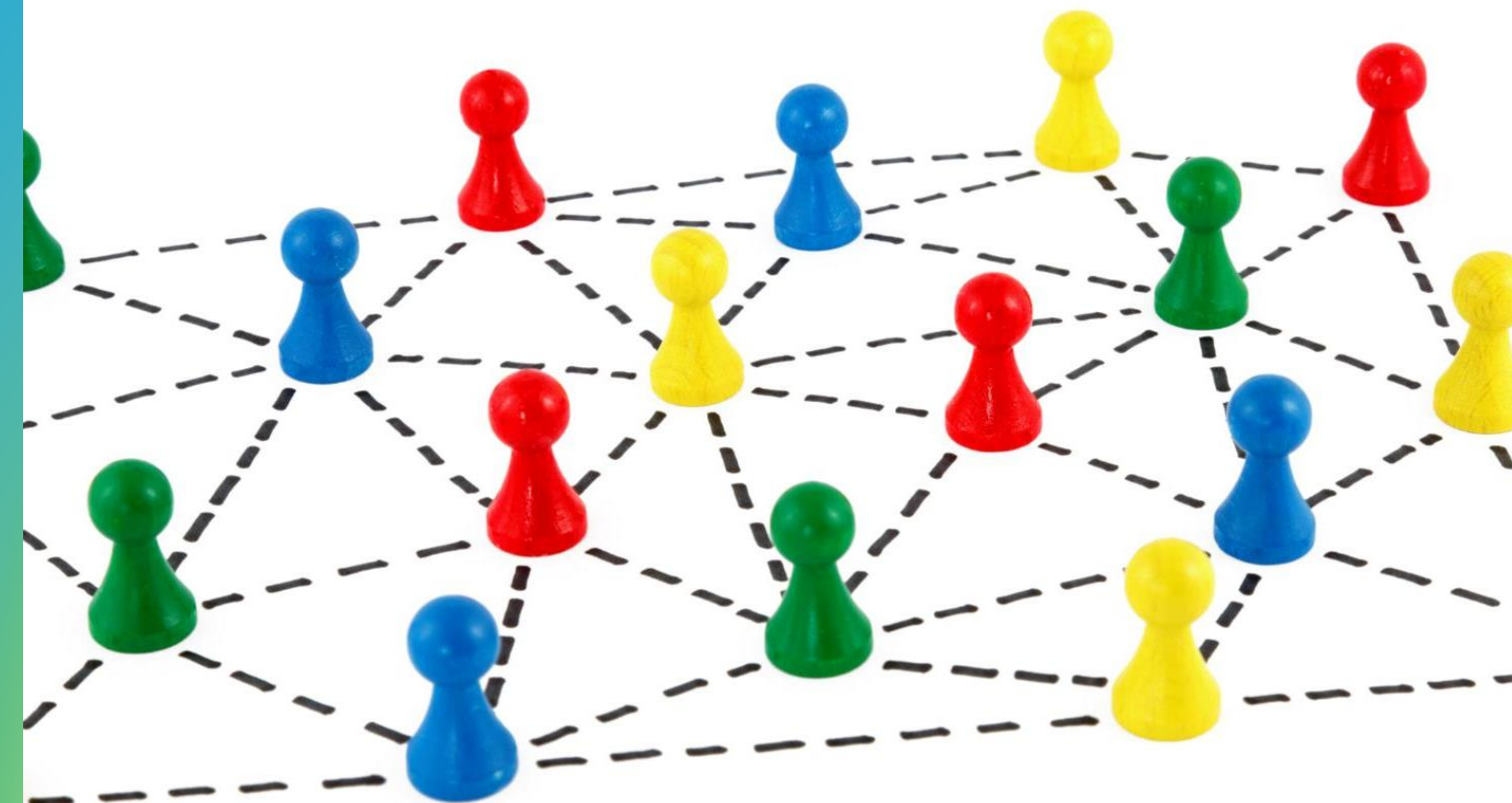


Stigma Reduction Models for Neurodiversity and Mental Health

Approaches to promote acceptance and understanding

Stigma Reduction



Overview of Stigma Reduction Models

Purpose of Stigma Models

Stigma reduction models address negative perceptions and internalised beliefs about neurodiversity and mental health. These frameworks promote inclusion and respect.

Evidence-Based Approaches

Models include stigma-informed ABA, neurodiversity-affirming therapy, community interventions, and language strategies fostering affirming practices.

Model Evaluation Criteria

Each model is assessed for mechanisms, impact on self-stigma, and adaptability across cultures to reduce stigma effectively.

From: Overcoming Stigma in Neurodiversity: Toward Stigma-Informed ABA Practice

Behaviors of stigmatizer
Public stigma
Negative attitudes (i.e., stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination) that the members of the general population hold toward members of a specific group who share a common characteristic(s)
Implicit stigma
Negative attitudes (i.e., stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination) toward members of a specific group, of which we may not be consciously aware
Personal stigma experiences of stigmatized individuals
Experienced stigma
A stigmatized individual's report of direct instances of any form of public stigma (discrimination)
Perceived stigma
Beliefs held by stigmatized individuals about the general population's negative attitudes toward them or their family members
Self-stigma (primary stigmatized individual)
Process of internalizing public stigma and applying it to oneself
Affiliate stigma (affiliates of the primary stigmatized individual)
Process of internalizing public stigma and applying it to oneself

Stigma-Informed ABA

Mechanisms and Impact



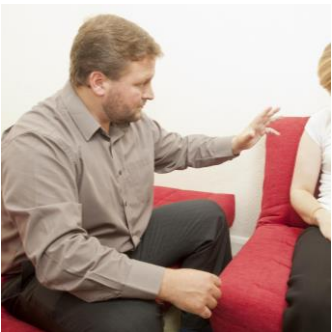
Compassionate and Responsive Care

Stigma-informed ABA emphasises compassionate care and cultural responsiveness in behavioural interventions.



Challenging Practitioner Bias

Practitioners are trained to recognise and challenge implicit biases to ensure affirming interventions.



Enhanced Trust and Engagement

Stigma-informed ABA improves trust, reduces shame, and fosters better engagement and therapeutic outcomes.

Čolić (2025) – “Overcoming Stigma in Neurodiversity: Toward Stigma-Informed ABA”

- Defines stigma using behaviour-analytic terminology and outlines strategies for reducing it.
- Emphasises the importance of **compassion and culture** in improving intervention outcomes.
- Argues that stigma affects **social validity**, which in turn impacts the **effectiveness and acceptability** of ABA interventions.
- Recommends practitioner training in **bias awareness, stigma assessment, and inclusive goal setting**.

Allen et al. (2024) – “Neurodiversity-Affirming ABA”

- Highlights the need for ABA to evolve in response to feedback from autistic and neurodivergent communities.
- Advocates for **affirming language, client choice, and dignity-based interventions**.
- Links affirming practices to **reduced internalised stigma** and improved mental health outcomes.

Vollmer & Pendergrass (2025) – “Social Validity and Contemporary ABA”

- Discusses how **social validity** is central to ethical ABA.
- Argues that interventions must be **acceptable and meaningful** to clients, not just technically effective.
- Suggests that failure to address stigma may lead to **reduced utilisation** of ABA services.

Neurodiversity- Affirming Therapy

Identity and Strengths-Based Approaches



Neurodiversity Affirmation

This approach celebrates neurological differences by shifting away from deficit-based models towards identity affirmation.

Strengths-Based Interventions

The model focuses on strengths-based interventions supporting authentic self-expression and trauma-informed care.

Improved Mental Health Outcomes

Identity affirmation reduces masking and internalised stigma, promoting self-compassion and better mental health.

Enhanced Therapeutic Alliance

This approach fosters trust between clients and providers, strengthening long-term therapeutic relationships.

Graf-Kurtulus & Gelo (2024) – *Rethinking Psychological Interventions in Autism*

- Critiques traditional approaches like ABA and social skills training.
- Shows that neurodiversity-affirming therapy improves mental health and self-acceptance by supporting autistic identity and adapting environments.
- Advocates for a dual focus: addressing comorbidities while affirming identity.

Cherewick & Matergia (2024) – *Autistic Strengths and Mechanisms of Change*

- Identifies perceptual, reasoning, expertise, and character strengths in autistic individuals.
- Links these strengths to affective, behavioural, cognitive, and physiological mechanisms of change.
- Suggests strength-based interventions improve wellbeing and reduce stigma.

Community-Based Interventions



Social Contact and Engagement

Community-Based Interventions

Projects use social contact theory and peer-led education to reduce stigma in communities.

Culturally Tailored Programmes

Programmes are adapted to culture, increasing effectiveness in collectivist and low-income countries and communities.

Reducing Stigma and Encouraging Help

Normalising neurodivergence lowers stigma and promotes help-seeking behaviours in society.

Mechanisms of Action

1. Social Contact Theory

- Based on Gordon Allport's intergroup contact theory (1954), which posits that **direct, meaningful interaction** between groups reduces prejudice.
- In mental health, this involves **engaging people with lived experience (PWLE)** in public education, workshops, and storytelling.
- Builds empathy, challenges stereotypes, and humanises mental health conditions.

2. Media Campaigns and Workshops

- Use **local media**, **community radio**, and **public events** to normalise neurodivergence and mental health challenges.
- Workshops often include **peer-led sessions**, **role plays**, and **interactive discussions**.
- Culturally adapted messaging ensures relevance and resonance.

Impact on Internalised Stigma

- **Shifts public attitudes**, reducing societal pressure to mask or suppress neurodivergent traits.
- **Encourages help-seeking** by making mental health conversations more acceptable.
- **Promotes community engagement**, reducing isolation and fostering inclusion.
- **Empowers individuals** through visibility and validation of lived experience.

- Systematic Review on Social Contact (Damsté et al., 2024)
- Reviewed 44 studies across LMICs.
- Found that **direct and indirect social contact** consistently reduced stigma.
- Emphasised the importance of **contextualisation, PWLE participation, and education**.

Language and Narrative Shifts

Reframing Neurodivergence

Language Shifts and Stigma Reduction

Shifting language to frame neurodivergence as diversity helps reduce stigma and promotes respectful communication.

Respect for Identity Preferences

Acknowledging identity-first and person-first language preferences supports individual respect and inclusivity.

Public Awareness and Education

Campaigns and education challenge stereotypes, fostering understanding and acceptance of neurodivergence.

Empowerment through Affirming Language

Affirming language empowers individuals to embrace their identity, boosting self-acceptance and resilience.



Neurocultural Competence



Definition and Applications

Understanding Neurocultural Competence

It is the skill to respect and work effectively with diverse neurotypes in varied cultural contexts.

Importance in Various Settings

Essential in clinical, educational, and organisational settings for affirming practices and reducing stigma.

Practical Applications

Includes adapting communication, modifying environments, and co-creating goals with neurodivergent individuals.

Training for Neurocultural Competence



Core Components and Pathways

Essential Training Components

Training develops self-awareness, neurodiversity knowledge, cultural humility, inclusive communication, environmental adaptation, and advocacy skills.

Structured Learning Pathways

Programs like ION Neurodiversity and NeuroCulture™ offer guided training pathways for educators and professionals.

Best Practices for Effectiveness

Embedding training in professional development, utilising case studies and lived experiences, and involving neurodivergent trainers ensure authenticity and impact.