

REVIEW: THE REASON I JUMP

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Autism can baffle parents and practitioners. I speak from experience: Having worked with children and, increasingly, adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) for close to a decade, I often hear stories of symptoms seen from the *outside*—flapping, spinning, meltdowns, refusals. But having been trained and influenced by the work of the American Defeat Autism Now! group (originally known as DAN!—now called ARI for the Autism Research Institute in San Diego) and based on the pioneering work of Bernard Rimland, MD, and many others, my clinical focus is

Thinking of autism in terms of expression, not simply as a disorder, is an alien concept for some. For years, I have wondered if we could be getting it wrong when we assumed that x symptom meant y problem necessarily in every ASD patient. Having studied graduate linguistics and history before becoming an ND, I knew things could often be lost in translation between one language and another, and between past forms of our own language and the ones we use today. Why would this not be the case in autism? Maybe our patients *are* in fact experiencing the

I FOUND MYSELF RECOGNIZING MANY OF MY OWN PATIENTS IN THIS BOOK

to look at many of the more troubling behaviors as symptoms of a whole body *medical* disorder.

The whole body approach fits well within the ethos of naturopathic medicine. Over several years of attending conferences, I've learned to categorize many of these symptoms into recognizable patterns—from GI distress, poor digestion, heavy metal toxicity, poor methylation, food sensitivities, imbalanced immunity, and other myriad factors. Many of these patients have improved considerably as a result. Rarely, however, do we get a glimpse *inside* the inner world of the person with autism, because of the many speech problems that characterize this disorder. Instead, our training leads us to look at *symptom improvement*—fewer meltdowns, better speech or eye contact, less self-stimulating behaviors—as markers of medical recovery from ASD. Of course, others in turn evaluate these symptoms—parents, teachers, occupational or behavior therapists and, yes, naturopathic doctors like ourselves.

One of the great advantages of being an ND treating ASDs is that our longer consult time allows us to see the subtleties that can be missed in the standard 10-minute family practice or pediatric encounter. Still, with my patients who have poor verbal skills, or are non-verbal, I often feel even now that I'm having to guess about behavioural change: Whether an increase in stereotyped behavior, or meltdowns, or regressions in speech that I can see with my own eyes (or which is reported by their parents or intervention team). Is how my patient is actually *experiencing* their condition worse for them or an indication of something they want us to know but are having trouble expressing?

world differently and are trying to communicate with us in the ways they know how to do.

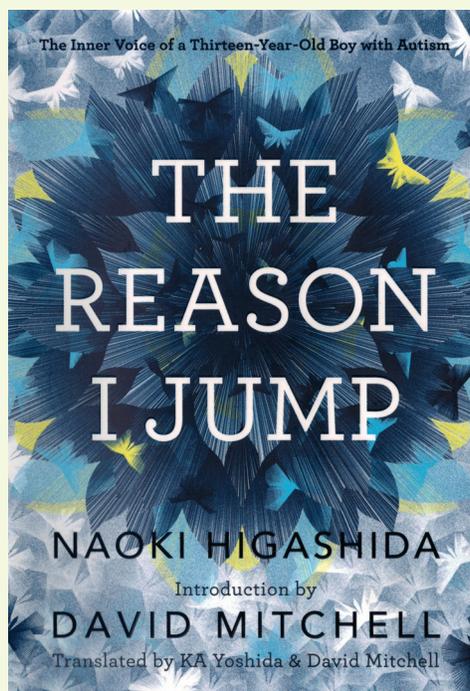
I have a particular patient in my practice—a forty-something woman with autism and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) who lives in a group home and who comes into my office with her caregiver. Often, as the caregiver is explaining a certain problem to me, she will look straight into my eyes with a particularly intense expression as she struggles to say words to describe her feelings. I often find myself wishing that I had a special decoder to help us understand her symptoms from her point of view instead of having to do our best to approximate.

This is one of the reasons I was profoundly moved after reading a new book out this year in an English translation from the Japanese called *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism* (trans: KA Yoshida and David Mitchell, Alfred A Knopf Canada, 2013). Written completely and painstakingly using an alphabet grid to form letters and words with the help of a caregiver, it chronicles the author's experience of living with autism from the viewpoint of a highly perceptive, even poetic, non-verbal 13 year old.

In the book, the author answers many of the questions that many people (including myself) might have about autism's odd behaviors in many of our younger patients, including jumping, the behavior referenced in the title:

But when I'm jumping, it's as if my feelings are going upwards to the sky. Really, my urge to be swallowed up by the sky is enough to make her heart quiver

....So by jumping up and down, it's as if I'm



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