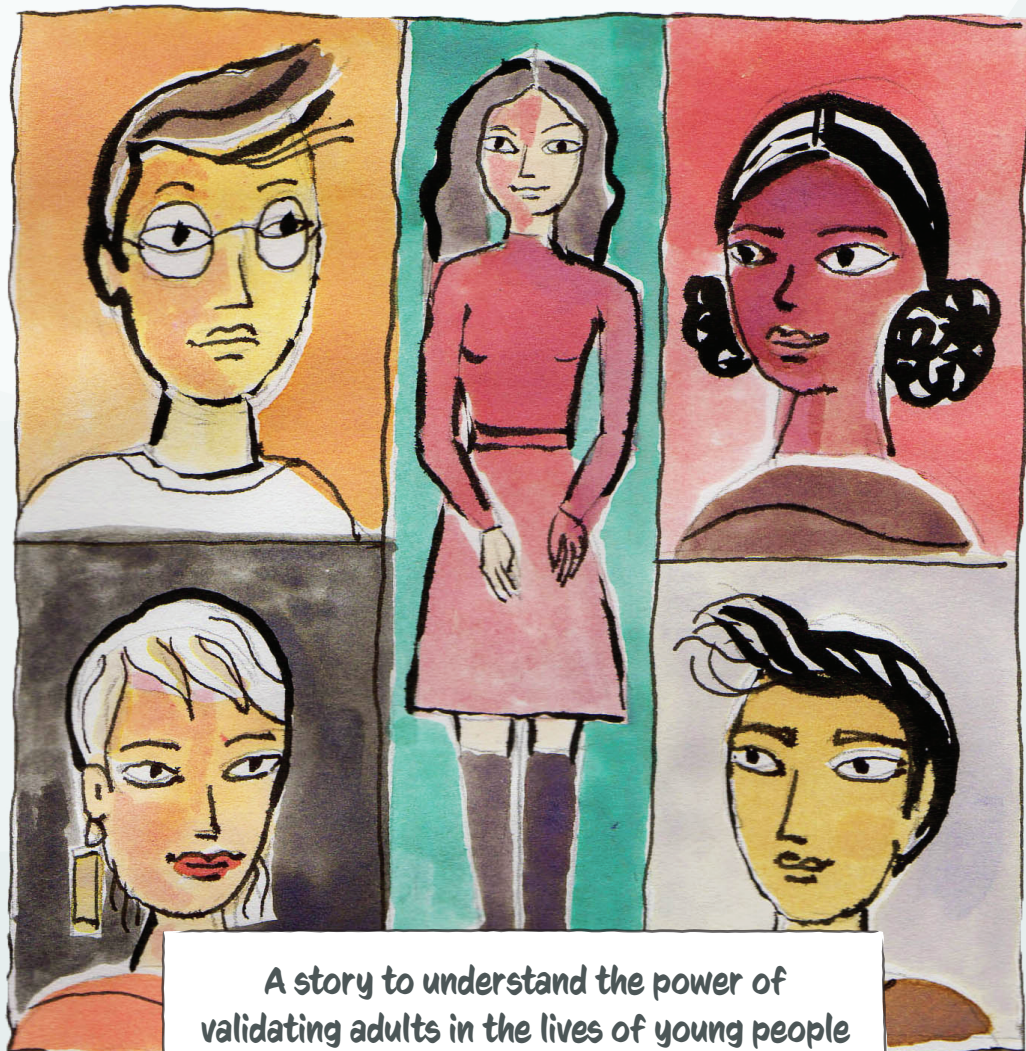




Beyond the spectrum

validating neurodiversity by being curious and open



A story to understand the power of
validating adults in the lives of young people

This comic is part of the Validating Voices resource created within the Attune Project which investigated how Adverse Childhood Experiences affect young people (10-24y) and what could help them to recover and thrive.

Young people explained that one thing which keeps the harm of early adversity going is invalidation by adults. They said this happens often and in everyday situations with professionals in places like schools, colleges, community groups, health services, social services and the workplace.

Invalidation may be unintentional, may happen because the adult is stressed or because they do not think it is a big deal - but young people said invalidation is a very big deal. It is 'salt on their wounds'.

Invalidation of a young person's needs, experiences, feelings, identity and adversities makes them feel ashamed, excluded, angry, sad and anxious. It makes them feel they do not know themselves, are being dramatic, should try harder or do not matter. These are messages they have been dealing with since childhood. They wished adults knew this.

When adults are validating, it really, really helps, even if its brief and light touch. It brings relief and comfort, lowers stress, and really helps them to know they are okay even when life is feeling hard.

So, to help adults understand how important validation is for young people with ACEs, young people in the Attune project co-created Validating Voices - a resource for professionals and young people to embed validation as a helpful experience in their settings.

This comic was co-created by young people from the Attune Project to supplement that resource. The stories and images come from young people and learning from the Attune Project. The comic supports the Validating Voices resource by sharing stories of invalidation and validation that bring young people's experiences to life. Young people hope this inspires adults to spot their tendency for invalidation and take a moment to remember that validation can be a super-charged, positive experience for young people living in adversity.

Ways to use this comic

- For your own understanding and to help you be more validating
- To open up discussions with young people in your setting about where and how they experience invalidation and what could be different
- To begin talking about invalidation as an idea, before using the Validating Voices full resource.

Be Ready

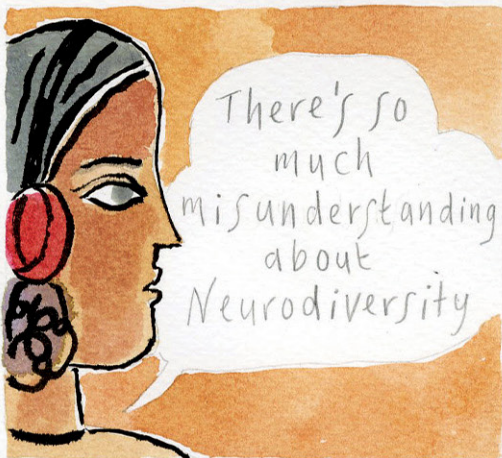
*Beyond the Spectrum is a story about neurodiversity. You might be surprised at the feelings and thoughts the story brings up for you. We encourage you to be aware of what happens for you as you read this story and to let thoughts and feelings settle. Young people want us to be moved by their lived experience and this in turn can help our capacity for empathic validation.

Within days of starting college
we found each other. It was like there was
an invisible force drawing us together.
Like we'd known each other FOREVER



As they say ~
birds of a feather







Sometimes it
feels as though
they think we
are like a
different
species



yes~
like they
think we're
from a
different
planet



Which
planet
are each
of us
from?



I'm from
planet fidget



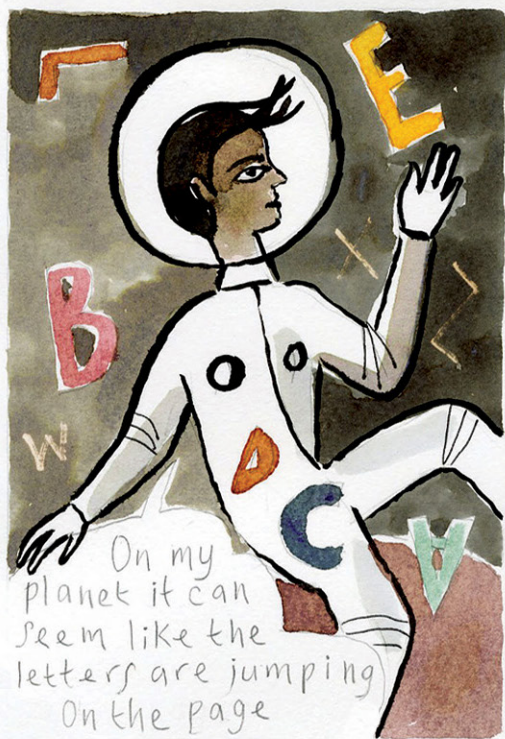
I'm from
planet
Calculus



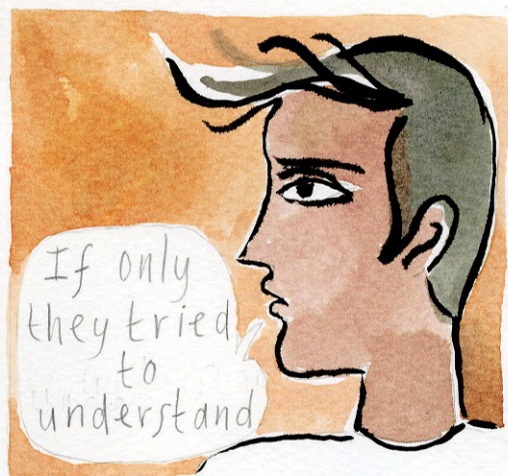
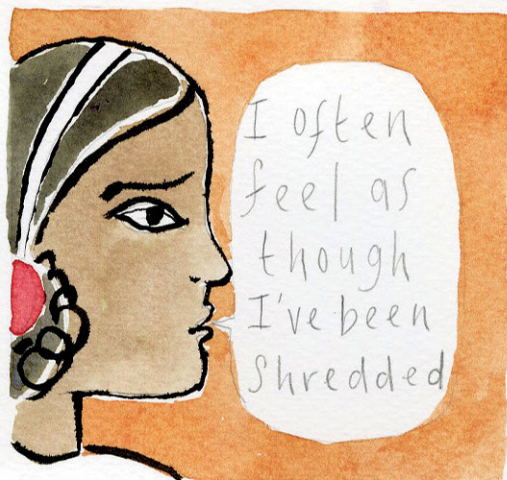
I'm from
planet
DOODLE



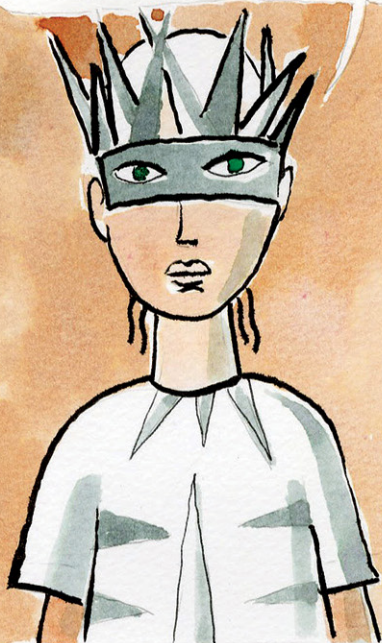
I'm from
planet
DYSLEXIA



But seriously~they don't realise what it's like to be
us



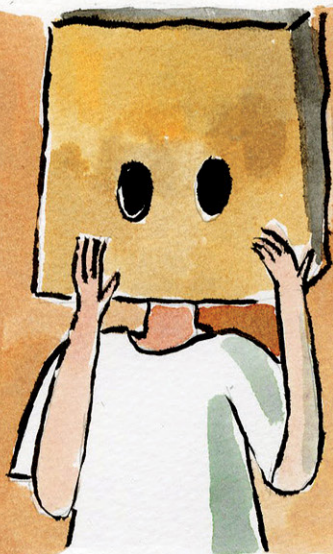
They Say I'm too spiky



They say I don't speak
enough



They Say that I don't
look at them enough and
that I'm rude



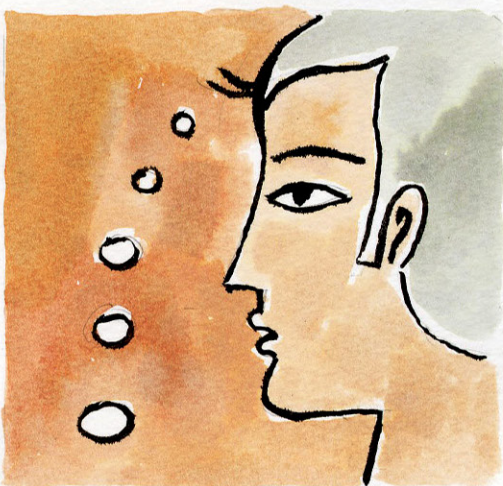
I'm so
alone

Why
don't you
understand
?

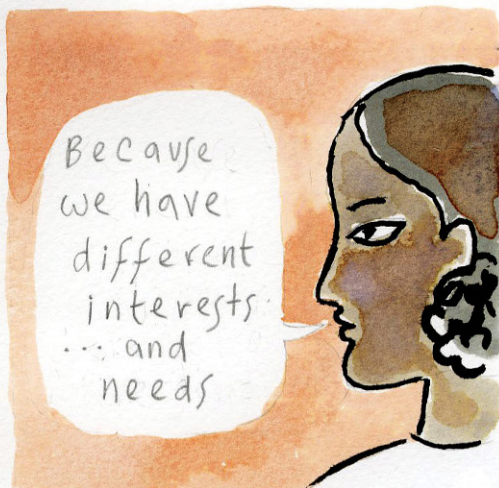
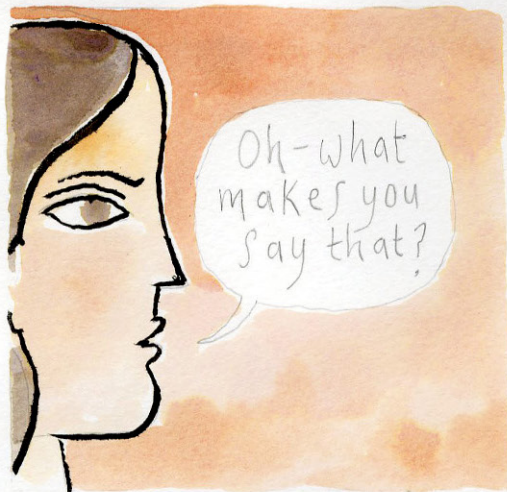
It's
too
hard

STOP
telling me to
fit in!









Some things to think about

- What was the main character going through?
- Did you spot where invalidation happened (the list below might help!) What did this do to the main character?
- Did you spot where validation happened? What effect did this have on the main character?
- How would you change this story to make it more relevant to you or the things that you see happening?
- What do you feel is the take-away message from this story?

Examples of invalidation Examples of validation

- Dismissing them (their experience, feelings or needs) as unnecessary, misplaced or unimportant
 - Rewriting their needs or experiences from the adult's viewpoint
 - Not believing them
 - Forgetting their adversities, traumas or present circumstances
 - Not showing acceptance of their identity
 - Comparing them to others to minimise them
 - Assuming something about them
 - Saying they are being dramatic, attention-seeking, needy, weak or purposefully difficult
 - Not showing empathy, care or concern
 - Not listening, ignoring or rushing them
 - Giving responses that do not help or not helping at all
- Listening to understand
 - Taking the young person seriously
 - Being curious so you don't assume, judge or dismiss
 - Showing acceptance of a young person's identity
 - Conveying empathy, care or concern
 - Telling them they make sense
 - Giving them time and space – confidential if needed
 - Remembering their past or present circumstances
 - Never comparing them to others
 - Taking action when needed to support them

A final message from young people in the Attune Project!

We hope this reminds you that sometimes all it takes is one moment — one kind word, one person who sees us — to make the dark feel a little lighter.

We're asking you to stay curious. Ask questions. Listen to understand, not to fix. See us as equals — not problems to be solved or projects to work on. Just people, like you, wanting to be heard and understood. That's how you can make a difference.

What will you do differently now?





Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

Economic
and Social
Research Council

Medical
Research
Council

This comic was created by a team from the Attune project. The young people were Arina Grosu, Nick Green, Grace Bennett, Christina Arena and Srhya Lalh. Story generation was coordinated by Professor Siobhan Hugh-Jones (University of Leeds) and Ellie Baker (Art Psychotherapist). Illustrations by Linda Scott (Falmouth University).

The Attune project was funded by the UKRI Medical Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant number MR/W002183/1), the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Oxford and Thames Valley Applied Research Collaboration (OxtV) and Oxford Health NIHR Biomedical Research Centre.

For more information, contact Professor Siobhan Hugh-Jones, University of Leeds, s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk or Professor Kam Bhui, University of Oxford, k.bhui@psych.ox.ac.uk

©2025 The Attune Project. All rights reserved.