

# Creating a Safe Environment Building Supportive Communities for Neurodivergent Families



**I am Autistic – Accept my Difference**

Abdulmalik Al-Sharif Abdulmaqsood Saleh

## The Working Group Project

Neurodivergence, encompassing conditions like autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia, presents unique mental health challenges for individuals and their families worldwide. Members of the AGYA Working Group *Health & Society* propose a collaborative and transdisciplinary approach between Arab and German researchers and practitioners. Together, they address and identify the vital needs to improve mental health outcomes for neurodivergent individuals and their families.

In the framework of the research project, the AGYA Working Group *Health & Society* developed recommendations and strategies for inclusive and effective support systems by sharing research, identifying best practices, and fostering a general acceptance for neurodivergent individuals in Germany and the Arab world.

This publication results from the International Transdisciplinary Workshop 'Creating a Safe Environment: Building Supportive Communities for Neurodivergent Families' and the research project 'Diverse Horizons: Empowering Neurodivergent Families in Libya and Egypt' of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR).

### About the AGYA Working Group *Health & Society*:



#### Prime responsibility

Sara Abdel Gaber, Majid Al-Busafi, Abdelhamid Alhassi, Mohammed Alkatan, Sarah Carol, Ali Elgayar, and Lobna Said

#### Copywriting

Lisa Kos

#### Artwork

Abdulmalik Al-Sharif Abdulmaqsood Saleh

#### Editorial work and design

AGYA Office Berlin

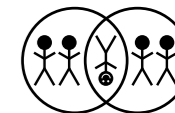
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Participants of the AGYA Workshop 'Creating a Safe Environment: Building Supportive Communities for Neurodivergent Families' in Regensburg  
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The AGYA Awareness Days Activities were implemented within the research project 'Diverse Horizons: Empowering Neurodivergent Families in Libya and Egypt' by AGYA members Sara Abdel Gaber, Abdelhamid Alhassi, Mohammed Alkatan, Sarah Carol, Ali Elgayar, and Lobna Said.

## Autism Thrive: Nutrition and Sport for Inclusion

Kafrelsheikh University, Egypt

**Prof. Dr. Sara Abdel Gaber**

AGYA Member, Nanomedicine, Kafrelsheikh University, Egypt

**Prof. Dr. Mohammed Alkatan**

AGYA Member, Medical & Health Sciences, The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait

As global awareness of autism grew throughout the last two decades, the world simultaneously witnessed a steep increase in autism diagnoses. AGYA member Prof. Dr. Sara Abdel Gaber highlighted how this contemporary widespread awareness is unique, particularly when considering the context of the Middle East. In parallel, a lack of awareness and knowledge raised vivid misunderstandings; people on the autism spectrum were often stigmatized, perceived as inhumane or even supernatural and their behaviours were mostly attributed to parenting failure. These deeply rooted misconceptions hampered the social inclusions of the autistics and challenged the daily life of their families. Parents lacked support and many children were barred from attending schools.

Currently in Egypt, there are numerous specialized centers, NGOs and governmental initiatives to early diagnose autism, provide vocational training, family support, and mediate public awareness. Legislations are as well now more considerate where autistic individuals are exempted from obligated military services. More effort is still awaited to smoothen the integration of the autistics.

### Group Cooking for a Tightened Bonding

Nutrition can be personalized to meet individual's needs, reduce stress, and improve behavioural patterns. In collaboration with gluten free expert Chef Hamdy, a group cooking day took place at the premises of the Egyptian Autistic Society. Parents joined the activity-based day, advocacy about gluten-free nutrition options was mediated through hands-on cooking activities. The participating autistic ranged in age from 5 till 14 years old. They synchronized their effort and expressed their preferences by decorating the baked food. Being a part of the cooking process resolved greatly their eating resistance that many express. This act has a great impact in increasing confidence, improving motor skills, strengthening social bonding and an overall improved case management.

### A Sports Day for Autism Inclusion

Being fit is a healthy lifestyle activity recommended and greatly encouraged by all communities. Individuals with

special physical needs are included within the athlete societies and socially recognized. For the autistic, more effort is needed to identify the baseline measures to be used as references and design affordable sport routines meeting the rapidly changing individual's needs. In collaboration with AGYA member Prof. Dr. Mohammed Alkatan and at the premises of the Olympic Centre for Sports, a Sports day was successfully implemented during the awareness days. The first activity was to measure base fitness parameters for each participant. That was followed by a lecture in which Prof. Dr. Alkatan explained the significance of those values and the foundation of a general sport routine. The day ended with a sport session.

Those activities emphasized the importance of advocacy. Through awareness campaigns, both governments and societies – in Egypt and beyond – will be able to understand autism in a way that is rooted in empathy, inclusion, and accurate knowledge.



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## Understanding, Supporting, and Embracing

University of Benghazi, Libya

**Dr. Salwa Mahmoud Alassal**

Founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Libyan Autism Society in Benghazi and Founder of the Benghazi Autism Center

**Prof. Dr. Abdelhamid Younis Alhassi**

AGYA Member, Engineering, University of Benghazi, Libya

**Prof. Dr. Ali Elgayar**

AGYA Member, Engineering, University of Benghazi, Libya

**Dr. Ruwida Snini**

Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Benghazi, Libya

It was not until 2014 that Benghazi established its first center for the diagnosis and treatment of children on the autism spectrum. Across Libya, support systems for autism remain severely underdeveloped, with a stark lack of proper treatment facilities. This forces many parents to seek care for their children in other countries such as Egypt and Jordan, where more advanced and accessible services are available.

Despite the rising number of autism diagnoses among Libyan children, the country continues to face significant challenges. At the heart of these challenges lies cultural stigma, which often prevents early diagnosis and appropriate intervention. Furthermore, the absence of well-equipped and specialized treatment centers has driven some parents to open their own schools for children with autism. While well-intentioned, these efforts are often problematic, as the parents typically lack the necessary training and expertise, leading to inconsistent and insufficient care. Nevertheless, Libya has witnessed notable changes in recent years, offering a glimmer of hope for the future. AGYA members Prof. Dr. Abdelhamid Alhassi and Prof. Dr. Ali Elgayar jointly

organised the AGYA Awareness Days in Libya together with Dr. Salwa Mahmoud Alassal, founder and chair of the Libyan Autism Society, and Dr. Ruwida Snini, Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy.

They highlighted a spirit of optimism, emphasising the potential for progress and the need to strengthen support structures for autistic children and their families.



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The artwork shown in this report were created by Abdulmalik Al-Sharif Abdulmaqsood Saleh during the AGYA Awareness days in Libya in 2024.



## One Community Embracing All Voices

Nile University, Cairo, Egypt

### Prof. Dr. Lobna Said

AGYA Co-President, Electronics & Electrical Communication Engineering, Nile University, Egypt

AGYA member Prof. Dr. Lobna Said had a pivotal encounter with a student during an exam. She noticed a male student staring at a blank paper for the entire two-hour exam, visibly anxious and insecure. Afterwards, the student revealed that he was struggling with mental health issues, overwhelmed with shame and unable to put anything on paper. This moment, for Prof. Dr. Said, underscored the deep stigma surrounding mental health in Egypt, particularly for men, who often face intense societal pressure to conceal their struggles and maintain an appearance of strength.

Motivated by this experience, Prof. Dr. Said launched a series of workshops aimed at breaking down mental health barriers, fostering inclusivity, and equipping students, parents, and educators with practical strategies to support mental well-being. These workshops featured expert talks, interactive sessions, and networking opportunities designed to raise awareness, provide accessible support tools, and strengthen connections

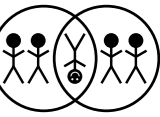
within the community. Recognizing the unique challenges in the Middle East, where mental health issues often go untreated due to pervasive stigma, these workshops aspired to create safe spaces for open dialogue and early intervention – helping to prevent situations like the one faced by Prof. Dr. Said's student.



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## Research & Recommendations



### Positron Emission Tomography Imaging as a Tool to Foster Inclusive and Supportive Environments for Neurodivergent Families

#### Prof. Dr. Raid J. Abdel-Jalil

Chemistry, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman

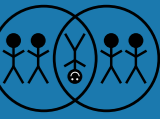
Prof. Dr. Raid J. Abdel-Jalil discussed the use of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) in detecting neurodivergent conditions such as ASD and ADHD at early stages. PET is an advanced neuroimaging technique that provides detailed insights into brain activity, particularly in regions associated with sensory processing, attention, emotion, and social interaction. For instance, PET scans have revealed atypical brain activity in areas responsible for social processing in individuals with autism, offering visual evidence of the neurological differences underlying these conditions. This information could support early diagnosis and enable more personalized interventions tailored to each individual's neurological profile.

Moreover, PET imaging plays a critical role in identifying sensory sensitivities, guiding environmental adaptations that can significantly improve quality of life. Adjustments such as quieter rooms, softer lighting, and noise reduction help mitigate sensory overload, creating environments where neurodivergent individuals can feel more comfortable and focused. This approach extends beyond homes and schools to inform the design of workplaces, public spaces, and therapeutic environments, fostering greater inclusivity and accessibility.

Additionally, PET data can inform the development of specialized educational strategies and therapeutic programs. By understanding which brain regions show heightened or diminished activity, educators and clinicians can customize interventions to enhance cognitive and emotional development. These interventions may include individualized learning plans, targeted behavioral therapies, and specific social skills training designed to address the unique needs of individuals with ASD, ADHD, and other neurodivergent conditions.

Overall, PET imaging advances both scientific understanding and practical approaches to supporting neurodivergent individuals in daily life. By bridging the gap between neuroscience and real-world application, PET technology has the potential to pave the way for more effective and individualized support systems.





## Support Services at German Universities

**Prof. Dr. Sarah Carol**

AGYA Member, Sociology, WZB Berlin Social Centre, Germany & University College Dublin, Ireland

**Lisa Kos**

Global Studies, University of Freiburg, Germany

Choosing a university is a complex process, even more so for neurodivergent students who face additional challenges in accessing and navigating information. AGYA member Prof. Dr. Sarah Carol and Lisa Kos analyzed 88 public universities in Germany to assess how well they address the needs of neurodivergent students. They examined various factors, including the use of visual aids, on-campus support, mentoring programs, and the functionality of web pages specifically dedicated to neurodivergent students. The guiding question was: how are neurodivergent students approached through a university lens?

The study revealed that many universities group neurodivergent students under broad labels like 'disabled' or 'health-impaired,' focusing mainly on physical or psychological impairments while often overlooking distinct neurodivergent conditions like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia. Tailored support for these students was rare.

On a positive note, some universities demonstrated a stronger commitment to inclusivity through 'Inklusionsportale' addressing discrimination, racism, and sexism – an approach seen as valuable. Instead of viewing neurodivergent individuals as an 'outside group,' there was an emerging emphasis on recognizing everyone's unique qualities and needs.

Creative and innovative support methods, such as neurodivergent messenger groups, workshops, collective projects, diversity rooms, storytelling cafés, and regular meetups ('Stammtisch') were also identified. Visual aids like diagrams and tables on university websites were perceived as useful in simplifying navigation for neurodivergent students. Moreover, most universities had designated representatives for neurodivergent students to ensure their needs are met within the university environment. However, Germany's technological support through IT services for neurodivergent students remains insufficient, with resources like noise-canceling headsets and quiet study spaces still in short supply.

To conclude, university websites – often the first point of contact between students and the university – must be clear, well-structured, and include dedicated sections for neurodivergent students. Yet, there is a fine line between making neurodivergent students feel seen without overdoing it. An 'inclusion portal' focused on the overall inclusion of students can help ensure this fine line is not crossed.

## From AI to Real-World Impact: Revolutionizing Neurodivergence Support through Cross-Cultural Diagnosis and Rehabilitation

**Prof. Dr. Sahar Selim**

Artificial Intelligence Program, School of Information Technology & Computer Science, Nile University, Egypt

Prof. Dr. Sahar Selim explored recent advances in artificial intelligence and their transformative potential in supporting neurodivergent individuals, particularly in rehabilitation and personalized intervention. AI-driven approaches show promise in advancing the understanding of neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism and ADHD through neuroimaging and functional brain connectivity analysis, providing valuable insights into underlying brain mechanisms. AI further supports personalized interventions by leveraging multimodal data and longitudinal profiles to design tailored learning strategies, behavioral assessments, and rehabilitation plans, assisting clinicians, educators, and caregivers in delivering more effective support.

AI also plays an important role in fostering more inclusive environments. In workplace settings, AI-enabled tools support neurodivergent individuals by offering features tailored to their needs, enhancing productivity and communication. In daily life, AI-driven assistive technologies promote independence and improve quality of life by supporting organization, communication, and routine activities. In addition, AI-powered tools, including large language model (LLM)-based applications, help individuals better understand social cues and express emotions, enabling more confident engagement in conversations and social interactions. From a research perspective, AI methods that analyze brain connectivity and neuroimaging data provide insights into how the brain adapts and changes (neuroplasticity), supporting the development of more personalized and effective intervention strategies.

## How to include Neurodivergent Students at Universities

### 9 Recommendations for Action

by AGYA Member Prof. Dr. Sarah Carol and Lisa Kos

#### 1. Recognize Neurodivergence and its Variety

Highlight neurodivergence as a valuable and distinct component of your university's culture (on- and offline).

#### 2. Create an Umbrella of Inclusivity

Provide a campus environment where every student feels seen, heard, and valued. It's essential to find the right balance – ensuring neurodivergent students feel supported without singling them out.

#### 3. Designate a Disability Representative

Offer personalized support to bridge the gap between students and the faculty.

#### 4. Offer Tailored Consultation

Go beyond general advice and be clear on what the services of consultation include.

#### 5. Offer Diverse Mentoring Options

Establish inclusive mentoring programs in novel ways; messenger groups for peer-to-peer support, 'Stammtisch' gatherings and workshops, as well as creative projects that promote alternative learning methods and peer collaboration.

#### 6. Give Specialized IT-Support

Provide neurodivergent students with essential tools to thrive: noise-cancelling headsets for concentration, access to quiet, sensory friendly rooms for focused study, and other assistive technologies.

#### 7. Offer Insights into External Support Networks

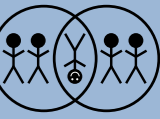
Facilitate connections with external organizations, self-help groups, and local neurodivergent communities.

#### 8. Provide Accessible, Consumable Information

Make your university website more accessible with interactive maps and visual aids (diagrams, videos) to guide students through resources and campus navigation.

#### 9. Aid Educators in Barrier-Free Teaching

Provide resources and training for faculty on neurodivergent students' needs.



## Physical Activities & Well-being for Neurodivergent Individuals in Oman

**Prof. Dr. Majid Al-Busafi**

AGYA Member, Physical Education and Sports Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman

AGYA member Prof. Dr. Majid Al-Busafi highlighted the benefits of implementing sports and physical activities in the lives of neurodivergent children, emphasizing improvements in motor skills, social interaction, and behavior. His study focused on children with autism in Oman, gathering insights from 80 caregivers and supervisors through questionnaires examining the impact of sports on neurodivergent children.

The top-rated activities for Omani children with autism included swimming, basketball, gymnastics, tennis, track and field, yoga, cycling, and horseback riding. Reported

benefits encompassed enhanced social communication, motor skills, coordination, focus, eye contact, and energy release.

However, challenges in implementing sports programs in Oman were noted, including a lack of specialized trainers and insufficient sports equipment. Prof. Dr. Al-Busafi's next step is to compare existing programs in Oman with internationally recognized ones to further identify areas for improvement.

## How can we Foster Emotional and Cognitive Development in Children of Different Cultures? – The Role of Sports and Mindfulness

**Prof. Dr. Petra Jansen**

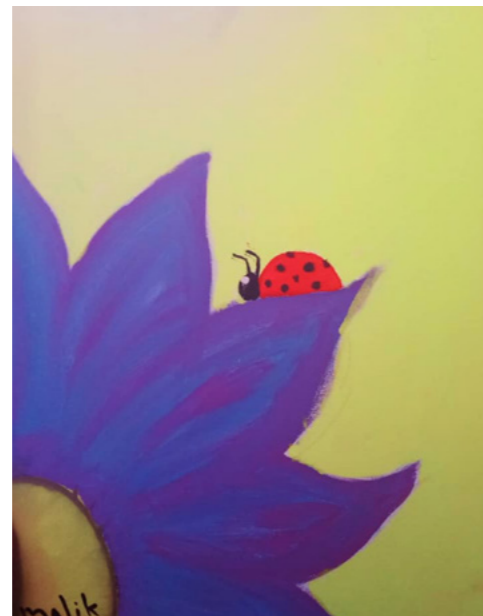
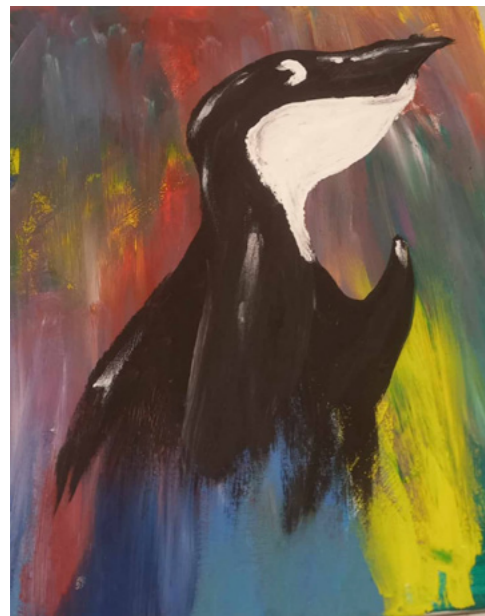
Sports Science, University of Regensburg, Germany

According to Prof. Dr. Petra Jansen, mindfulness and sports can enhance executive functioning, including cognitive flexibility, working memory, and response regulation. Both practices offer structured approaches to improving self-regulation and cognitive control, making them valuable for children with autism and ADHD.

Mindfulness cultivates cognitive flexibility by shifting attention from a task to the breath, reinforcing adaptability. It also strengthens inhibition skills by

filtering out irrelevant stimuli. These strategies effectively support attention, impulse control, and cognitive flexibility in children with autism and ADHD.

Moreover, mindfulness and sports can improve decision-making and enhance visual-spatial abilities – other cognitive functions children with autism and ADHD often struggle with. Incorporating these practices into their daily lives can offer meaningful benefits for their cognitive and emotional development.



## 8 Best Sports for Children with Autism

by AGYA Member Prof. Dr. Majid Al-Busafi

### 1. Swimming

Swimming is an excellent sport for children with autism because it is low impact and can help with sensory issues. The sensation of water on the skin can be calming and provide a sense of weightlessness. Swimming also helps to improve coordination, balance, and endurance.

### 2. Basketball

Basketball is another team sport that can help with social skills, communication, and teamwork. It also helps to develop hand-eye coordination, balance, and agility.

### 3. Gymnastics

Gymnastics is a great sport for children with autism because it provides a structured environment that can help with sensory issues. It also helps to develop balance, coordination, flexibility, and strength.

### 4. Tennis

Tennis is a sport that can be played individually or in pairs, making it a great choice for children with autism who may not feel comfortable in team sports. It also helps to develop hand-eye coordination, balance, and endurance.

### 5. Track and field

Track and field is a great sport for children with autism because it provides a variety of activities that can help with sensory issues. It also helps to develop endurance, speed, and coordination.

### 6. Yoga

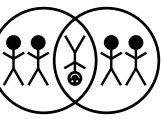
Yoga can be a great way to help children with autism develop mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and self-regulation skills. It also helps to develop flexibility, balance, and strength.

### 7. Cycling

Cycling is a low-impact sport that can help with sensory issues and provide a sense of independence. It also helps to develop balance, coordination, and endurance.

### 8. Horseback riding

Horseback riding can be a great way to develop social skills, communication, and self-confidence. It also helps to develop balance, coordination, and strength.



### Neurodivergent Aspects of Deprived and Maltreated Children – Long-term Effects and Interventions

**Dr. Simon Meier**

*Head of the Counseling Center for Children, Young People and Parents in Regensburg, Germany*

Dr. Simon Meier explored how caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness shape children's neurodevelopment. When parents struggle with severe disorders, addiction, or create an unsafe environment in other ways, children often face overwhelming emotions they cannot regulate. This frequently results in insecure attachment patterns: some children express emotions dramatically to elicit parental response, while others adopt avoidant behaviors, suppressing their feelings entirely.

A secure family environment is therefore crucial for long-term mental health, yet attachment disorganization is common across many countries, creating an internal conflict where children alternate between seeking closeness and avoiding it. Dr. Meier highlighted the profound impact of early security deprivation

– particularly between 6 and 24 months – on the development of the amygdala, which governs fear and impulse responses. As a result, these children often take longer to process social and emotional cues, even more so than children with ADHD.

Addressing attachment disorder requires raising awareness and providing children with stable, structured environments. Emotional self-awareness and validating a child's underlying emotions – like recognizing aggression as a response to fear or grief – are also essential. Dr. Meier emphasized the importance of foster care over institutional care, as it offers a more nurturing and secure environment for children.

### Presentation of the Support Group Autism in Regensburg e.V.

**Carolina Wolter**

*Board Member of the Autism Regensburg e.V. Association, Germany*

In her presentation, Ms. Carolina Wolter shared the challenges she faces as both a mother of a child with autism and a board member of Autism Regensburg e.V. Founded 35 years ago by six parents, Autism Regensburg e.V. has grown into a robust network of professionals, individuals with autism, relatives, and supporters. The association works to raise awareness and advocate for the rights and needs of autistic people, with influence extending beyond Regensburg. Nevertheless, Ms. Wolter emphasized the persistent difficulty of engaging German politicians in autism-related issues. Despite growing awareness, securing meaningful political support remains an uphill battle, and systematic gaps remain.

A major issue in Germany is the prolonged and often frustrating diagnostic process. Long waiting times place a heavy emotional toll on children, parents,

and schools, creating uncertainty and stress. The German healthcare system also falls short in providing comprehensive support, often failing to address the specific needs of autistic children. Bureaucratic hurdles make accessing appropriate care time-consuming and exhausting, diverting parents' energy from nurturing their children. Teachers and caregivers, meanwhile, face increasing demands without sufficient training to support neurodivergent individuals.

While Germany's autism support system is more advanced than in many Middle Eastern countries, Ms. Wolter stressed the need for improvement. Streamlining diagnostics, enhancing healthcare services, and reducing bureaucratic barriers are essential for building a more effective and compassionate support system for autistic children and their families.

### Neurodiversity & Learning Environments

**Jenny MacDonald, PGDE**

*Support for Learning Teacher, Scotland*

Jenny MacDonald has been a 'Support for Learning' teacher since 2017. She has worked in several schools across Scotland and has a particular interest in literacy interventions and neurodiversity. Additionally, she is responsible for referring neurodiverse learners to the health system when additional support is needed. In her presentation, she highlighted the challenges of meeting the neurodiverse needs of children within the learning environment. These challenges include emotional dysregulation, violent or aggressive behavior, poor mental health, anxiety, low attainment, poor attendance, low self-esteem, short concentration spans, and difficulties with memory and retention.

The school where Ms. MacDonald teaches is committed to addressing these challenges through various supportive initiatives. One such initiative is the implementation of the 'Green Room,' an alternative space to traditional classrooms. The Green Room features a

sensory tent, flexible seating, and a range of sensory and concentration-supportive objects designed to help children calm down, stay focused, or regulate their emotions. Additionally, the school promotes increased movement breaks, celebrates wider achievements in areas such as art, music, and physical education, and provides dyslexia-inclusive classrooms. They also closely monitor attendance, host regular parent-school meetings, offer shorter, chunked lessons, and prioritize increased staff training on neurodiversity.

Ms. MacDonald has also adapted the 'Edinburgh Sound Chart', a valuable tool designed to support children with dyslexia in pronouncing specific sounds, for her learners. This innovative resource exemplifies her dedication to fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. With her presentation, Ms. MacDonald vividly showed how involved (primary) schools can be in supporting the needs of neurodivergent children.

### Challenges of Neurodivergent Parenting – When Neither Kids nor Parents are Diagnosed

**Maria Elisabeth Doerk, M.A.**

*Neurodivergence Specialist for Women, Multi-Passionate Female Founder, Germany*

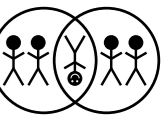
As an entrepreneur and mother of two neurodivergent children, Maria Elisabeth Doerk is intimately familiar with the immense pressure of juggling professional responsibilities, care work, and her own mental health. The year 2022 marked a critical low point in her journey—a time when the existing support systems failed to provide the answers she needed. In addition to her ADHD diagnosis, Ms. Doerk struggled with PMDD, a severe form of PMS. These conditions affect up to 90% of neurodivergent women but are frequently overlooked by gynecologists and psychiatrists alike. The resulting symptoms—ranging from severe depression and extreme mood swings to exhaustion—made the 'extreme balancing act' between her business life and family responsibilities feel nearly impossible. The societal expectation of the 'selfless mother' only deepened her isolation: „Once I had kids, I could no longer find a way to truly refresh myself.“

#### From Survival to Self-Empowerment

Ms. Doerk found traditional medical care insufficient, often receiving prescriptions without the practical tools needed to manage a complex, high-stakes life. What ultimately allowed her to reclaim her agency was a holistic, somatic approach: Creative Outlets: Writing poetry and songs; Regulation: Meditation, dancing, and Somatic Experiencing; Prevention: Nutritional therapy and cycle-aware management.

#### Advocating for Individual Paths

Today, she speaks out against the lack of informed medical professionals and the judgment from society—doctors, neighbors, and family—who often suggest "being more strict" as a universal fix. Instead, she advocates for neurodivergent families, and especially working mothers, to find their own unique rhythm. She champions flexible routines over rigid rules and urges parents to stop comparing their lives to neurotypical standards. For Maria Elisabeth Doerk, true success lies in radically prioritizing one's own needs and recognizing that every family requires its own bespoke path to thrive.



## How Increasing Awareness Leads to a Development of Services – Family and Society Perspectives

**Dr. Dahlia Soliman, MRS, MEd, IBA**

*President and Founder of The Egyptian Autistic Society & Education Psychologist, Egypt*

**Abdullah Ashraf Elsayed Tawfik**

*The Egyptian Autistic Society, Egypt*

**Radwa Nabil Ahmed Abdelmeguid**

*The Egyptian Autistic Society, Egypt*

Since founding the Egyptian Autistic Society (EAS) in 1999, Dr. Dahlia Soliman has been a leading advocate for autism awareness, transforming public perceptions in Egypt and beyond. She worked to challenge misconceptions that portrayed individuals on the autism spectrum as incapable of communication or professional success, showing instead that children with autism can learn and excel in specific areas.

Dr. Soliman emphasized the importance of early diagnosis to prevent feelings of misplacement and isolation among children with autism. To advance this cause, she launched national campaigns and leveraged social media to raise awareness and promote early intervention. These efforts culminated in a significant milestone in 2018 when autism was officially recognized in Egypt as a distinct neurodevelopmental disorder rather than a mental disability. She also harnessed the power of television and Egyptian celebrities to broaden her message. As she noted, "In Egypt, we love watching TV." By engaging well-known public figures and launching the hashtag #IAmTheFirstStep, she transformed autism from a misunderstood and feared condition into a central topic of public discourse, sparking national conversations and promoting acceptance and understanding.

### Autism under the Spotlight

To showcase the impact of the EAS, Dr. Soliman invited Abdullah Ashraf Elsayed Tawfik and his mother, Radwa Nabil Ahmed Abdelmeguid, to speak at the AGYA conference. Diagnosed with autism, Abdullah was born at a time when knowledge about the condition in Egypt was scarce, and stigma was widespread. Radwa struggled to find support until they joined the EAS, where they finally received proper guidance and resources.

Their moving Q&A session highlighted the NGO's vital role. Abdullah eloquently shared, "People are like planets; they all have their own perks." The EAS recognizes this uniqueness, providing a safe space and valuable resources for families like theirs. Abdullah has become an inspiration for the Netflix movie "Hala Khasa," in which the main character is based on his life – a film aimed at raising awareness about autism.

The EAS's impact extends beyond awareness, with many of its students securing employment and the organization continuing to support and empower more students each year. Abdullah's story underscores the importance of inclusion: autistic individuals deserve to be at the heart of society, not on its margins. And mothers like Radwa deserve the support they need to help their children thrive.

## Showing Artworks, Exposing Autism? On Akku e. V – Autism, Art and Culture

**Dr. Herbert Schwaab**

*Media Studies, University of Regensburg, Germany*

Dr. Herbert Schwaab described the 1960s and 1970s as a "stone age" in the understanding of autism, highlighting the significant stigma that surrounded the disorder at the time. In his presentation, he explored the valuable relationship that can exist between autistic individuals and artistic creation, offering a lens through which one can better understand and connect with people on the spectrum. He noted that autistic individuals often employ serialization in their art – a pattern that reveals an important aspect of how they interact with and interpret the world. But it is also of great importance to regard them explicitly as works of art, which is the main objective of his participation in the organisation Akku (Autism, Art and Culture), which supports artists with autism and curates exhibitions of their work.

Dr. Schwaab's presentation was particularly poignant given his personal connection to the subject. His brother, Richard Schwaab, is also on the autism spectrum. Through the medium of art, Richard has been able to show Herbert "what it is that impresses him." The series of works Richard created provided Dr. Schwaab with new insights into his brother's experiential world, ultimately bringing them closer.

As autism can sometimes hinder close connections and mutual understanding within families, art has the potential to break down these barriers and enhance interpersonal communication. Another crucial benefit of introducing autistic individuals to the world of art is that it enables them to be "seen as more than an autist." It highlights their potential to excel in specific areas of creative exploration – a point previously emphasized by Dr. Soliman – and offers a unique channel for expressing their inner world.

## About the AGYA Working Group Health and Society

Cancer, diabetes, and heart conditions have dramatically increased in our societies, urging the questions: Why have these non-infectious diseases spread so widely in the past decades? How do local forms of lifestyle and nutrition influence such an increase? And how do traditional and cultural conceptions of illness, healing, medicine, and food relate to these diseases?

Health and medical conditions are embedded within an increasingly complex, globalized, and multifactorial context. Therefore, the AGYA Working Group Health and Society recognizes and respects the need for an interdisciplinary approach to studying and addressing disease, thus bringing together members from disciplines as widely ranging as public health, medicine, biology, pharmacology, environmental science, sports, nutrition, psychology, sociology, and history.

As members of the Working Group Health and Society, we map, explore, and compare the contemporary health challenges faced by societies in both Germany and the Arab countries. We also examine how culture-specific health policies and legislation impact the general health and wellbeing of citizens and how health programs can be improved by taking into account the social and ethical dimension of health.

We adjust our focus to address contemporary challenges: Looking into the ongoing abuse of antibiotics; exploring how developing hand sanitizers could reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic; illuminating the connection between gender, class, and maternal health; and seeking to educate the public on overcoming obesity.





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Federal Ministry  
of Research, Technology  
and Space



## About AGYA

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is based at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW) and at the Academy of Scientific Research and Technology (ASRT) in Egypt. It was established in 2013 as the first bilateral young academy worldwide. AGYA promotes sustainable research cooperation between outstanding Arab and German scholars from all disciplines.

The academy offers its members the unique opportunity to develop and implement their ideas and visions in research projects and joint initiatives at the interface of science and society. AGYA members share an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to scientific enquiry, with the intention of seeking solutions to societal challenges. Together, they realise innovative research on topics such as Arab and German Education; Common Heritage and Common Challenges; Dynamics of Transformation; Energy, Water and Environment; Health and Society; and Innovation.

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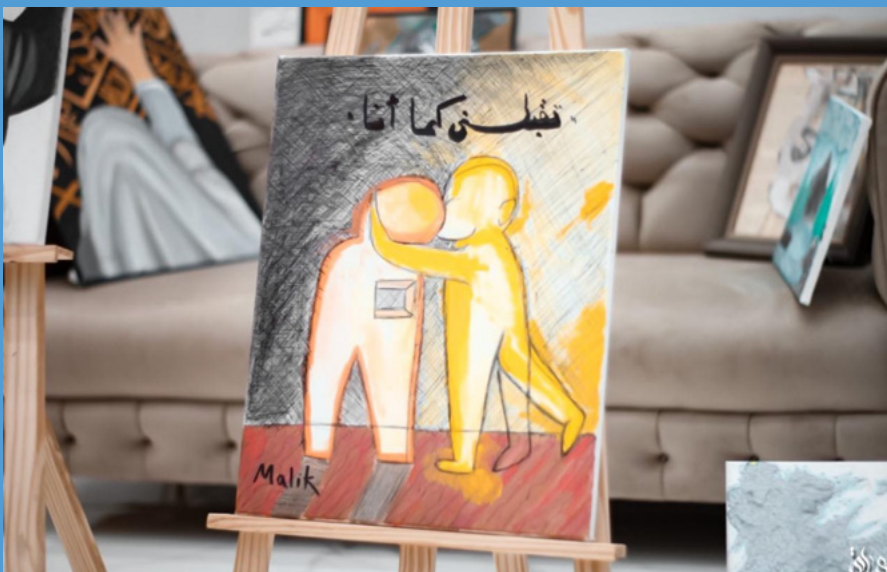
### AGYA Office Berlin

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA)  
at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW)

Jägerstr. 22-23  
10117 Berlin, Germany

+49 30 20 370-281  
agya@bbaw.de

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**Accept me as I am**

Abdulmalik Al-Sharif Abdulmaqsood Saleh