

# 11<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Mental Health, Psychiatry and Wellbeing

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## Neurodiversity-affirming care: Why and How?

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Mental health disorders occur at a higher rate in neurodivergent individuals (e.g., autism, AD/HD). New research highlights the benefits for the neurodiversity-affirming paradigm in diagnosing, understanding, and supporting neurodivergent individuals. Dr. Helmen explains the problems with conceptualizing developmental disabilities (e.g., autism, ADHD, learning disabilities) through the framework of the medical model, which identifies disability through deficits and symptoms. How can we expect individuals with developmental disabilities to have sound mental health when they are described as a set of problems that need to be fixed? What does it mean when disability is integrated as a part of identity? This talk explores the history of the neurodiversity movement, how it integrates disability and identity, and the latest research that reviews the benefits of neurodivergent-affirming care. Dr. Helmen describes how empirically-driven, neurodiversity affirming practices can be implemented, emphasizing strengths, interests, and community. Understanding neurodiversity-affirming care and why it matters will benefit the neurodivergent individuals in your clinical practice.

### Biography

Dr. Megan Helmen is a highly experienced child and clinical psychologist, specializing in pediatric neuropsychology. Following undergraduate and graduate degrees in Child Psychology and Clinical Psychology, respectively, she completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Pediatric Neuropsychology at the University of Minnesota Medical School. With over a decade of postdoctoral clinical work specializing in developmental disorders, she recognized the problem with conceptualizing lifelong developmental differences through the lens of the medical model. In 2022, Dr. Helmen established her private practice, Developmental Discoveries, with an emphasis on providing compassionate and meaningful clinical experiences. Rather than fixing a problem with the child, the neurodiversity-affirming evaluation approach aims to provide more understanding and a set of recommendations that is meaningful to the child and family. Her approach combines connection, humor, clinical expertise, and research-based interventions with an emphasis on respecting the unique qualities of each child throughout the evaluation process.

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