

AUTISM CONNECT 2026

April 7th

Thank You!



TO ALL OF OUR PLATINUM SPONSORS!

Scan Me



<https://mrlee.co/MentalLoadAudit>

What You Can't See Hurts Us:

Assessing the Mental Load of Autistic Learners

Stewart Lee, MS AgEd, PhD - ABD

This is not about fixing autistic students.

This is about fixing environments.

Today's Flow



**01. Reframing
cognitive load**

03. The 5-lens audit

**05. Tools &
Resources**

**02. Mapping
invisible demands**

**04. Subtraction &
implementation**

**06. Q&A /
application**



Why this matters

Autistic learners are often evaluated by what we can see.

But many of the demands shaping performance are invisible.

When environments consume capacity, academic ability becomes harder to access.

Ability $\neq$ Capacity

Capacity = What's left after everything else.

Sensory
Executive
Social
Transitions



Learning

Some demands are
structurally invisible
unless someone names them.

Double Empathy Problem — Milton, 2012

Load Multipliers



Invisible Load Multipliers

- Sensory input
- Working memory strain
- Social decoding
- Masking
- Context shifting

These increase when students are trying to do well.

Invisible Load Mapping

Choose one scenario: A Transition An Unexpected change A Multi-step verbal instructions

Academic



Executive



Sensory



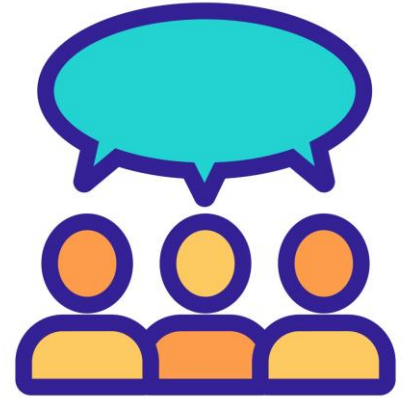
Social



Debrief

What did you notice?

How much of that was academic?



The Cognitive Load Audit

5 Lenses.

Not a checklist.

A way of seeing.

Link to Today's Handout:
mrlee.co/MentalLoadHandout

Cognitive Load Audit
Field Tool
Reduce environmental demand to restore capacity.


Stewart Lee | MrLeeTeaches.com

THE FIVE LENSES

1

Predictability
"What is assumed rather than visible?"
Unwritten rules · Unannounced transitions · Unclear participation norms
Observation: _____

2

Working Memory
"What must be held internally?"
Multi-step verbal instructions · Unposted deadlines · Simultaneous competing demands
Observation: _____

3

Sensory Load
"What regulation is required just to be present?"
Noise · Lighting · Crowding · Unpredictability · Emotional tone of the space
Observation: _____

4

Masking Pressure
"Where is participation actually performance?"
Eye contact expectations · Body language demands · Group participation requirements
Observation: _____

5

Context Shifts
"Where do the rules change?"
Between settings · Between adults · Following schedule changes
Observation: _____

Subtract One Demand
Identify a single demand to remove, simplify, or make visible.

The demand I will change: _____

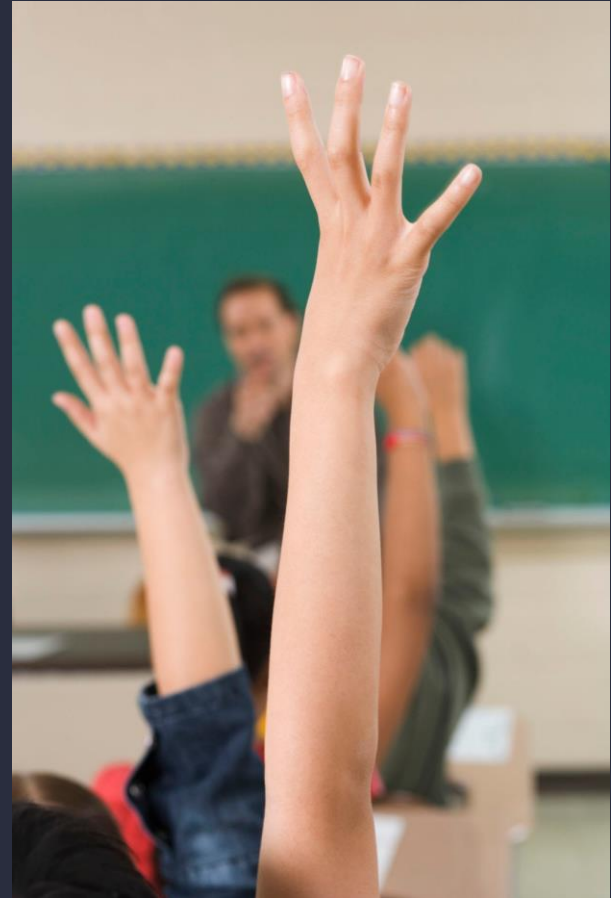
Observe Beyond Compliance
Watch for shifts in these areas over 1-2 weeks:

- **Capacity** Does initiation increase? Less prompting needed?
- **Recovery** How quickly does the learner regroup after

Lens 1: Predictability

What is assumed
rather than visible?

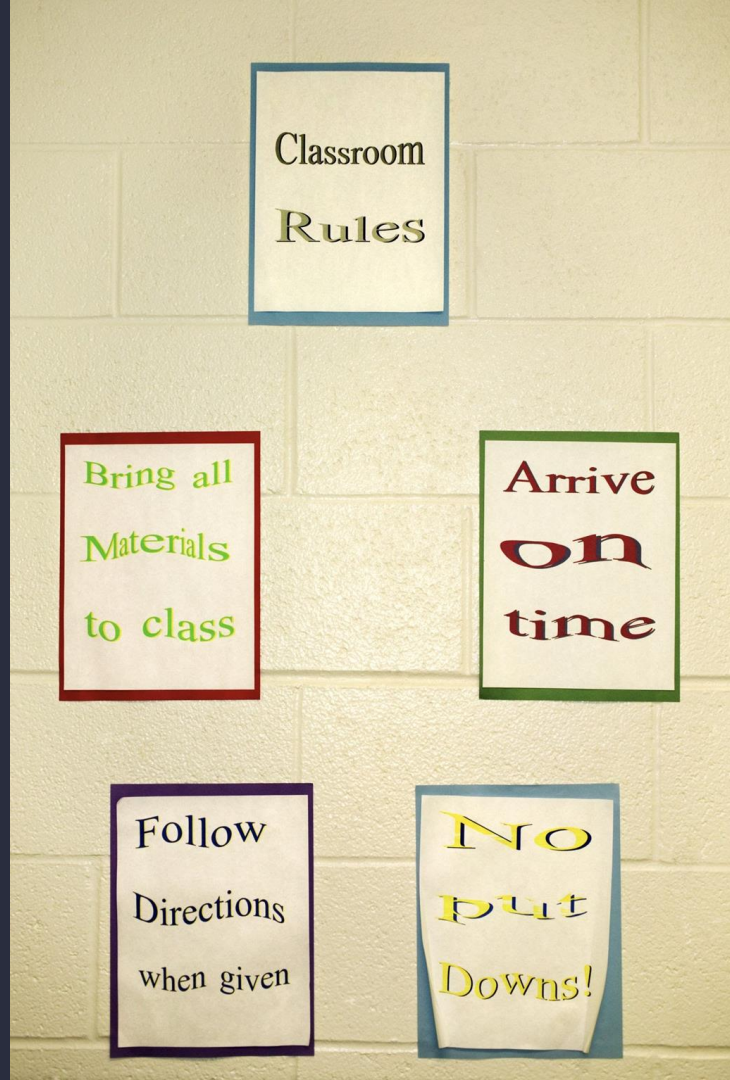
Make the unspoken visible.



Lens 2: Working Memory

What must be held internally?

Externalize > Memorize



Lens 3: Sensory & Emotional Load

What regulation is required
just to be present?

Lower the volume.



Lens 3: Sensory & Emotional Load

What regulation is required
just to be present?

Lower the volume.



Lens 4: Masking Pressure

Where is participation
actually performance?

If participation requires performance,
that is additional load.

What is the learner doing to appear okay?

- Monitoring facial expression, tone, and body language
- Forcing eye contact or socially expected responses
- Suppressing stimming, discomfort, or visible stress
- Prioritizing looking “fine” over actually feeling regulated

Lens 5: Context Shifting

Where do the rules change?

Clarify when the rules change



Lens 5: Context Shifting

Where do the rules change?

Clarify when the rules change

Where do the rules change without being explained?

- “Be honest” does not always mean literal honesty
- Expectations shift by person, place, and relationship
- Social rules are often implied instead of taught
- The learner may be judged for following the wrong version of the rule

When the rules change invisibly, flexibility becomes load.



THE CRITICAL SHIFT

Subtraction

The instinct in education tends to be to add.

But sometimes the most effective support is subtraction.

Implementation

Run Three Cycles

1. Choose one high-friction routine
2. Change one variable
3. Observe beyond compliance

Capacity | Recovery | Energy | Initiation



Reduce demand to restore access to learning.

[Load Removed] → [Capacity Restored]

Sensory
Executive
Social
Transitions



Learning

References

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**Any questions?
Ask away!**



For More Resources or Contact - <https://mrleeteaches.com/>



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Today's Slides



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[Cognitive Load-o-meter](#) (makes a copy)

[Cognitive Load Audit](#)

Session Survey



Ballroom A 1:30-2:30