



## **Autistic Spectrum, Dismissive Attachment, and the Immanuel Approach**

(©Copyright 2024 Karl Lehman MD, New 7/20/24, Modified 7/31/24)

I have only worked with a handful of people on the autistic spectrum or with dismissive attachment, so I am not an expert, but here are a few observations and thoughts from my modest experience:

***Trauma does not cause autism, but can precipitate autism:*** As of July 2024, the exact cause of autism is still not fully understood. Most people studying autism believe it to be caused by a combination of genetic vulnerabilities and neurodevelopmental problems. And most people studying autism perceive that psychological trauma can cause these genetic vulnerabilities and neurodevelopmental problems to manifest as the behaviors and symptoms of observable, clinical autistic spectrum disorders.

***Trauma can mimic autism:*** Early traumatic experiences and/or extreme stress can sometimes cause behaviors and symptoms that resemble autism. In these situations, psychological trauma can cause mimic autistic spectrum disorders, and resolving the trauma can resolve the mimic disorders.

***Trauma can exacerbate autism, healing trauma is always helpful:*** When “little t” traumas are included, everyone has at least some trauma.<sup>1</sup> And psychological trauma can exacerbate specific autistic behaviors and symptoms, and will always exacerbate the overall clinical picture. Correspondingly, it will always be helpful for a person with an autistic spectrum disorder to get healing for trauma.

***Less emotional intensity, but the process still works:*** I have gotten e-mails from a number of facilitators who have used the Immanuel Approach with people at various points on the Autistic spectrum. What everyone reports is that people with autism usually experience much less emotions at all points in the process. For example, it can be difficult to tell whether they are feeling appreciation when they describe their positive memories. Nevertheless, they are usually able to go through the process and they are usually able to connect with Jesus. And it seems that something good always happens, in one way or another, when they spend time with Jesus and interact with Jesus. (Even if the recipient does not resolve traumatic memories, it is always good to spend time perceiving and interacting with Jesus.)

***The Immanuel Approach is very gentle:*** The Immanuel Approach is very gentle. The first steps in the process (recalling and connecting with a positive memory, and then perceiving and connecting with Jesus) are especially gentle and safe. If you do not feel comfortable doing trauma work with recipients who are on the autistic spectrum, I encourage you to at least try the initial steps to the point of connecting with Jesus.

---

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of how minor painful events can cause minor (or “little t”) trauma, see chapter one in Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself: Catching your Past Invading the Present and What to Do about It* second edition (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2014).

***Resolving Strategic Trauma can Dramatically Benefit Dismissive Attachment:*** One person I worked with eventually went to a specific memory in which he could remember making a clear choice to stop needing or wanting emotional connection—it was just too painful to need and want emotional connection that he never got. And when he went through this memory with Jesus, resolving the trauma and releasing his vow/choice to stop needing or wanting emotions, his progress with respect to dismissive attachment took a huge step forward.

***Please send testimonies/case studies:*** I would greatly appreciate additional information regarding the Immanuel Approach and autistic spectrum disorders. If you are facilitating Immanuel Approach sessions for people on the autistic spectrum, please send me any details that the recipients are comfortable with you sharing.

**Additional thoughts from a friend and colleague (Mary Anne Quinn):**

“I have not facilitated Immanuel Prayer for anyone who has been specifically diagnosed on the autism spectrum, but I have facilitated for people who have some characteristics that overlap with the spectrum and who have substantial dismissive attachment style....As a learning specialist, I have worked with some students with high functioning autism. I approach challenges with accessing Immanuel Prayer the same way I approach learning challenges. I break down and analyze each step in a process and then think about a creative way for people to access each step in a way that fits how they process information. If you are wanting to use the Immanuel Approach with someone who has dismissive attachment or who is on the autistic spectrum, and you are familiar with how they process information, emotions, and relationships, you can use your insight to analyze and develop creative methods in the same way.

“Dr. Lehman's description of people with autism and/or dismissive attachment being able to experience the presence of Jesus and this making a real positive impact, while manifesting less emotional affect, fits my experience as well. It is important to be intentional about acknowledging their experiences as real, valid, and meaningful, since they may have difficulty recognizing this for themselves, especially if they are comparing themselves to others' more emotional experiences or feel pressure of an expectation of a certain level of emotional experience. Validating ways in which they connect with God's thoughts and truth as being just as meaningful as connecting emotionally is important. I also focus on communicating my own appreciation for their experience and being glad to be with them.

“Since both people with autism and those with dismissive attachment tend to focus on literal interpretations and following rules to the letter, it is critical to adjust the language used in prompts when facilitating Immanuel Prayer with them. If they hear a prompt to focus on or share a story where they experience a strong connection with God and/or for which they felt a deep sense of emotion, they may disqualify their experiences and stories as not matching those expectations. Using language such as "a positive experience" that they "recognize as a gift or blessing from God" helps them participate in a way that they recognize as valid and meaningful.

“Because people with autism are often challenged with perspective-taking, they may have difficulty seeing themselves from God's perspective, so it's helpful to identify ways you recognize God expressing his emotions and care. This is also important when working with people with dismissive attachment, who struggle with believing that they are worth God's attention. Again, communicating our own glad to be with them and appreciation for them and their experiences is huge.

“I hope this is helpful and encouraging. It can take time, patience, and creativity, but Jesus

appreciates our autistic and dismissive attachment family and friends even more than we do and he created them and he knows how to speak their language and connect with them in meaningful, affirming, and heart-transforming ways. He is also kind and helpful to guide those of us who are passionate about supporting them in interacting with him and growing in his character and love.”