Monotropism

A Complete Guide

Understanding the interest-based mind and its related concepts: attention tunnels, the monotropic split, atypical burnout, the monotropic spiral, lilipadding and nesting.

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1. What is Monotropism?

Monotropism is a theory of mind, originally developed to explain Autistic experience, which proposes that attention is a limited resource that different minds distribute differently. Monotropic minds concentrate their attention into a small number of channels at any given time, drawn powerfully towards their interests; polytropic minds spread attention more thinly across many channels at once.

The theory was developed by Dinah Murray, Mike Lesser and Wenn Lawson, and set out formally in their 2005 paper *Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism*. Crucially, it is an Autistic-developed theory; it grew from Autistic people's own accounts of their minds rather than from outside observation of “deficits”. It has since gained significant empirical support, including through the Monotropism Questionnaire (Garau and colleagues, 2023), which found that Autistic people, and many ADHD people, score highly on monotropic traits.

Monotropism reframes much of what deficit-based models pathologise:

- Intense interests become a natural consequence of how attention works, not an “obsession” to be extinguished;
- Difficulty with transitions becomes the predictable cost of moving a deeply engaged attention system, not “rigidity”;
- Sensory and social overwhelm become what happens when demands exceed available attentional resources, not “behaviour”.

Where many theories of autism describe what Autistic people supposedly lack, monotropism describes how Autistic minds actually work. It is a strengths-aware, ecological account; attention flows like water, pooling deeply rather than spreading shallowly.

2. Core Concepts

2.1 Attention tunnels

When a monotropic mind engages with an interest, attention narrows and deepens into what is often called an attention tunnel. Inside the tunnel, processing is rich, detailed and highly motivated; outside it, the world can fade almost entirely. Things outside the tunnel (hunger, time, background conversation, a person calling your name) may simply not register.

> **Key point**
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> Attention tunnels are not a malfunction. They are the monotropic mind's natural operating state, and the engine of deep expertise, creativity and joy. The difficulty arises when the environment refuses to accommodate them.

2.2 Interest, motivation and flow

Monotropism is sometimes described as an interest-based nervous system. Interests pull attention; attention feeds interest; and when the two align without interruption, monotropic people readily enter flow states; deeply absorbed, intrinsically motivated engagement. For many Autistic people, flow within an interest is a primary source of wellbeing, regulation and identity.

This has a practical corollary: motivation for monotropic people is not usually summoned on demand or through external reward and punishment. It is cultivated by connecting tasks to existing interest channels.

Behaviourist approaches that try to force attention where it does not naturally flow tend to produce masking, distress and burnout rather than genuine engagement.

2.3 The monotropic split

The monotropic split, a concept developed by Tanya Adkin, describes what happens when a person is yanked out of monotropic flow; when the attention tunnel is forcibly ruptured by an interruption, demand or transition that the person could not prepare for.

This is not a mild annoyance. For a monotropic mind, it is best understood as a form of cognitive injury. The person must tear deeply invested attentional resources away from one channel and reassemble them elsewhere, often instantly and under social pressure. The cost is real: disorientation, distress, exhaustion and a loss of the processing depth that had been built up.

> **Splits are cumulative**
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> A person subjected to constant interruptions and forced task-switching (a typical school day, an open-plan office, a household with unpredictable demands) accrues splits throughout the day. Each one depletes resources that are not instantly replenished; over time, this depletion is a significant driver of burnout.

2.4 Autistic inertia

Autistic inertia describes the difficulty many monotropic people have with starting, stopping and switching activities. A mind at rest tends to stay at rest; a mind in flow tends to stay in flow. Inertia is often misread as laziness, defiance or poor time management, when it is actually a direct consequence of how monotropic attention engages and disengages.

Understanding inertia changes the response: rather than demanding instant transitions, we build ramps; warnings, countdowns, associative bridges and environmental supports that let attention move at the speed it actually moves.

2.5 The monotropic spiral

The monotropic spiral, another of Tanya Adkin's concepts, describes what happens when the attention tunnel turns inward on something distressing. The same depth of engagement that produces flow around an interest can lock onto anxiety, a perceived threat, an injustice or an intrusive worry, spiralling further and further in with each pass.

In a spiral, the person is not “choosing to dwell”; the attention system is doing what it always does, but the content is harmful rather than nourishing. Spirals are a key mechanism in Autistic distress, and in the later stages of burnout they can become severe enough to tip into psychosis-like presentations.

2.6 Atypical burnout

Autistic burnout is increasingly recognised; a state of chronic exhaustion, loss of skills and reduced tolerance for stimulus, caused by the cumulative load of living in environments not built for Autistic minds. Atypical burnout, developed by Tanya Adkin with David Gray-Hammond, describes presentations of burnout that do not look like the stereotype of withdrawal and shutdown.

In atypical burnout, a person may appear energised, driven, even manic; what has been described as “meerkat mode”; hypervigilant, scanning, unable to rest, running on threat responses rather than genuine resources. Because the person looks “fine” or even “thriving”, atypical burnout is routinely missed by services, families and the person themselves, until collapse.

2.7 The burnout-to-psychosis cycle

Drawing these concepts together, Gray-Hammond and Adkin have described a burnout-to-psychosis cycle observed in monotropic people under sustained, unaccommodated pressure:

1. Monotropic split	Repeated forced ruptures of attention deplete cognitive resources
2. Atypical burnout	Depletion accumulates into burnout that may not look like burnout
3. Meerkat mode	The nervous system compensates with hypervigilant, mania-like activation
4. Monotropic spiral	Depleted and hypervigilant, attention locks inward onto distressing content
5. Psychosis	In the most severe cases, the spiral detaches from shared reality

This cycle matters because it is preventable at every stage. It is not an inevitable feature of Autistic minds; it is an ecological injury, produced by environments that repeatedly rupture attention and deny recovery. Intervening early (reducing splits, honouring recovery, supporting regulation) interrupts the cycle long before crisis.

2.8 Lilipadding

Lilipadding, a concept developed by Tanya Adkin, is a support strategy that works with monotropic attention rather than against it. Instead of demanding an abrupt leap from one activity to another (which produces a split), lilipadding guides attention gradually towards a new demand via a series of associative “lily pad” steps; each step connected to the last, each small enough for attention to flow onto naturally.

For example, moving a child from a video game to dinner might pass through: talking about the game; what the character might eat; what we are eating; walking to the kitchen together while still talking. Attention hops pad to pad across the pond, rather than being thrown across it.

2.9 Nesting

Nesting (sometimes AuDHD nesting), a concept developed by David Gray-Hammond, is the practical partner to lilipadding. It means deliberately arranging the environment so that everything a person needs (tools, drink, food, files, chargers, temperature control) is within reach before entering flow, so that monotropic engagement is not broken by avoidable demands.

A well-built nest prevents splits before they happen. It treats the attention tunnel as something worth protecting; an ecological approach to the workspace, classroom or home, where the environment is adapted to the mind rather than the mind forced to adapt to the environment.

3. Monotropism in Everyday Life

3.1 Meltdowns and shutdowns

Many meltdowns and shutdowns can be understood as the end point of attentional overload: too many splits, too many simultaneous demands, too little recovery. The nervous system either discharges (meltdown) or powers down (shutdown). Neither is a behaviour to be corrected; both are signals that the environment exceeded the resources available.

3.2 Communication and the double empathy problem

Monotropism intersects with Damian Milton's double empathy problem. Communication breakdowns between Autistic and non-Autistic people are mutual, not one-sided; and monotropism helps explain part of the mechanism. A monotropic person deeply engaged in a topic communicates richly within that channel; a polytropic listener expecting rapid topic-switching and broad social signalling may misread depth as disinterest in them. Neither party is broken; they are running different attentional ecologies.

3.3 Masking and its costs

Masking (suppressing natural monotropic engagement to perform polytropic social expectations) is extraordinarily expensive. It demands constant self-monitoring across multiple channels; precisely what a monotropic attention system is not resourced to do. Sustained masking is a major contributor to the split–burnout pathway described above.

3.4 Monotropism beyond autism

The Monotropism Questionnaire found high monotropism scores among ADHD people as well as Autistic people, and highest of all among those who are both (AuDHD). Monotropism is best understood as a dimension of human attention on which neurodivergent people tend to sit at one end; it is a theory of minds, not merely a theory of autism.

4. Supporting Monotropic People

A rights-based, anti-behaviourist approach to supporting monotropic people starts from a simple premise: the attention tunnel is not the problem; the rupturing of it is. Practical implications include:

1. Protect flow. Treat deep engagement as valuable, not as something to be interrupted for convenience;

2. Reduce splits. Audit the day (school, work, home, services) for forced interruptions and remove the avoidable ones;

3. Build ramps, not cliffs. Use warnings, countdowns and lilipadding for every necessary transition;

4. Nest the environment. Set up spaces so needs are met without leaving flow;

5. Work with interest. Connect learning and tasks to existing interest channels rather than against them;

6. Honour recovery. Schedule genuine downtime after high-demand periods; recovery is maintenance, not reward;

7. Watch for atypical burnout. Busyness, drivenness and apparent high energy can be warning signs, not evidence of wellness;

8. Interrupt spirals with care. Do not demand a person “just stop thinking about it”; offer co-regulation and gentle redirection via connected steps;

9. Drop the behaviourism. Compliance-based approaches manufacture splits and masking; they are incompatible with monotropic wellbeing.

5. Further Reading

- Murray, D., Lesser, M. and Lawson, W. (2005). *Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism*. Autism, 9(2);
- Garau, V. and colleagues (2023). *The Monotropism Questionnaire*;

- Murray, F.: monotropism.org, the central hub for monotropism resources;
- Milton, D. (2012). *On the ontological status of autism: the "double empathy problem"*;
- Adkin, T. and Gray-Hammond, D.: writing on the monotropic split, monotropic spiral, atypical burnout and the burnout-to-psychosis cycle at Emergent Divergence (emergentdivergence.com);
- Gray-Hammond, D.: *Supporting Autistic People: A Six-Point Framework Handbook*.

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