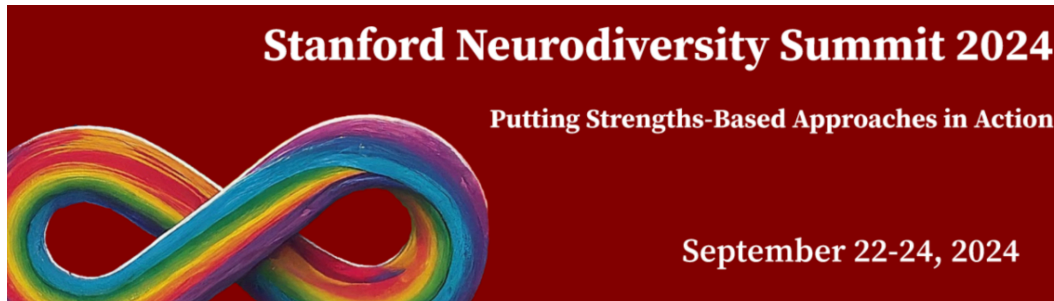


The Stanford Neurodiversity Summit: History and Personal Experiences

By: *Ashley Han and Lisa Pan*



Since 2020, the Stanford Neurodiversity Summit (SNS) has been a forum where everyone can unite and exchange ideas of neurodiversity. It was first started by the Stanford Neurodiversity Project (SNP) under the direction of Stanford Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior Dr. Lawrence Fung, whose son has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Additionally, there were many great speakers coming from a variety of different professions at the 2024 Stanford Summit. To name a few, there were speakers such as Dr. Cai, Dr. Sung, Dr. Greeter, and Dr. Cho, who introduced various ways to support neurodiverse individuals. SNS is truly an impactful experience, and we are an example of its influence. In writing this article, we hope to inform you on the history of the SNS along with personal experiences at the Summit.

This year's 2024 Stanford Neurodiversity Summit was hybrid, meaning people could attend either in-person or through Zoom. I (Ashley) had the fortunate chance to participate in-person, and the Summit took place in Berg Hall. The moment I stepped foot into Berg Hall, a subtle feeling of comfort and community seemed to welcome me with open arms. I (Lisa) attended online via Zoom, as did many other individuals not in the Stanford area.

SNS was thriving with diverse perspectives, and all participants were genuinely passionate about neurodiversity. In particular, the Strengths-Based Interventions and the Harnessing the Strengths of Neurodiversity in Medicine panels were especially impactful to me (Ashley) as they voiced important messages that widened my knowledge of neurodiversity.

The Strengths-Based Interventions panel, led by Dr. Cai, Dr. Sung, and Dr. Shah, highlighted using self-compassion as part of the strength-based approach. They mentioned that the strength-based approach isn't solely one method; there are multiple ways to utilize the approach to support neurodiverse individuals. Self-compassion, not to be misunderstood as self-pity, helps with building "understanding, resilience, and, most

importantly, self-love.” Just treating yourself with kindness significantly benefits your well-being and even more so for neurodiverse individuals. Additionally, the three speakers emphasized the importance of changing the environment, not the individual. Instead of expecting neurodiverse individuals to conform to traditional norms, creating supportive spaces with sensory-friendly areas and personalized strategies can promote inclusivity and help neurodiverse individuals thrive. Overall, these insights show the importance of embracing diverse strategies to support neurodiversity and have deepened my commitment to advocating for neurodiverse individuals.

The presentation done by the Harnessing the Strengths of Neurodiversity in Medicine panel was particularly eye-opening to how neurotypical people should communicate with neurodiverse individuals. The medical field is no stress-free environment, and the added challenges of the hidden curriculum only made the situation more difficult. The hidden curriculum, simply put, “is a set of unwritten or unspoken rules for successfully navigating the dynamics of higher education” and are related to social expectations and interactions that aren’t directly taught.² For neurodiverse individuals, these unspoken rules can create extra hurdles in a demanding medical environment. The panel emphasized the importance of being aware of these challenges to improve communication. By recognizing the hidden curriculum, neurotypical individuals can adapt their communication styles, use clearer and more straightforward language, and provide direct support. This not only helps neurodiverse individuals feel more included but also enhances collaboration and teamwork in the medical field, creating a better atmosphere for everyone.

Along with the Strengths-Based Interventions and the Harnessing the Strengths of Neurodiversity in Medicine panels, several students from the SNP-REACH summer program presented the projects they had created in their respective cohorts. The innovative projects targeted varying issues the neurodiverse community faced, but their responses to the issues all included the strength-based approach. Two of the projects presented were Cardibly along with Families Inspiring Neurodiverse Development (F.I.N.D.). The project I (Lisa) worked on during the 2024 SNP-REACH program, was Cardibly, a website for customizable communication cards. It was created to aid non-speaking individuals, since many of our group members, myself included, have connections to non-speaking individuals – through tutoring or personal connections. Seeing these projects – familiar ones from my cohort and new projects from the other cohort – was particularly interesting. It provided a sense of empowerment radiating through the computer screen I sat behind. The SNS showed the true scope of how many young supporters there are, all over the world, virtual and in-person, willing and motivated to make change.

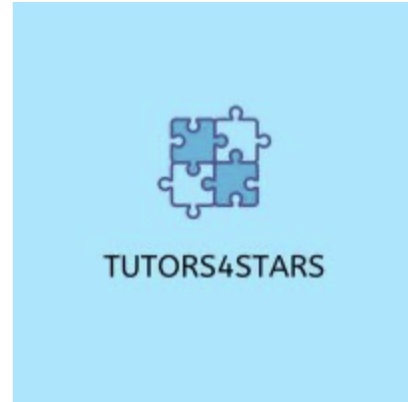
Truly, the Stanford Neurodiversity Summit connects everyone to the neurodiverse community, no matter who you are. The many perspectives we saw that day have led us to transform our thinking of neurodiversity and how we can implement change in our community.

Through Families Inspiring Neurodiverse Development (F.I.N.D.), I (Ashley) hope to spread awareness of concepts such as self-compassion and the hidden curriculum globally. Others and I founded the non-profit organization F.I.N.D. in order to support parents of neurodiverse individuals by providing free, accessible resources and removing the stigma surrounding neurodiversity. We offer a website containing a map feature that locates neurodiverse-friendly areas and activities, pamphlets about individual neurodiverse conditions, and a forum for parents to connect with each other. Additionally, I have established a F.I.N.D. Chapter at my high school, Orcutt Academy Charter High School, to better spread awareness of neurodiversity and advocacy in my community. By working with passionate students and teachers, we have already begun to overcome the stigma surrounding neurodiversity and are working on implementing a peer mentorship program.



F.I.N.D.
Specifically
Catered
Towards
Everybody.

I (Lisa) have been continuing to tutor neurodiverse students but with a new perspective and motivation to bring Cardibly to my non-speaking students. I plan to continuously improve this website with my team, bringing it to more individuals who need it, and enabling the tutors in my service club, Tutors4Stars, to tutor more neurodiverse students, both non-speaking and speaking.



Through this article, we hope to share the history of SNS and our personal experiences at the Summit, highlighting its impact and the valuable connections formed there. Change is an upward climb that both of us are willing to take in our communities thanks to the inspiration we gained from the 2024 Stanford Neurodiversity Summit.

Resources:

1. <https://rechargepsychology.com/self-compassion-in-adhd-and-neurodiversity/>
2. <https://olc.secure-platform.com/accelerate/gallery/rounds/82030/details/17078>

Images:

1. <https://med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/SNS24.html>
2. <https://www.findneurodiversity.com/>
3. <https://tutors4stars.org/>
4. <https://www.cardibly.com/>