Promoting Neurodivergent Student Success and Belonging in the Academic Library: A Brief Survey

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About Us

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction: Neurodiversity

- **Neurodiversity**: The natural variation in human cognition that promotes intellectual and cultural enrichment.
- **Neurodivergence**: Neurotypes that function differently from the neurotypical majority.
  - ADHD, autism, OCD, dyspraxia, dyslexia, etc.
- **Challenges** for neurodivergent students
  - **Sensory issues**- light, sound, & temperature
  - **Executive function**- memory & information processing
  - **Social communication**- double empathy problem
  - **Stigma**- "mental illness," "disability," "learning impairment"

LIS Neurodivergence Literature

- Defined as any LIS article focusing on neurodivergence broadly or one or more of these neurodivergent identities: autistic, ADHD, dyspraxic, dyslexic, and OCD.

- The LIS literature mostly investigates neurodivergence by medical diagnostic category (i.e. autistic students in the library).

LIS Neurodivergence Literature

- Common **themes** in the LIS neurodiversity literature. Neurodivergent students tend to...
  - Experience **stressors** that negatively impact academic performance (Barnhill, 2016).
  - View the library as a **refuge** from noise, crowds, & other stressors on campus (Anderson, 2018).
  - Not be well-served by campus **disability centers** or ADA **accommodations** (Anderson, A.H. et al, 2017).

Project Details

- **Our Goals**
  - Understand how and why neurodivergent students are using Sprague Library.
  - Document the spaces and services that are working well for neurodivergent Montclair students.
  - Identify opportunities to better support our community of neurodivergent learners.
- **Project scope**
  - Advertise our study to all undergrad and graduate students using university-wide listservs and flyers distributed around Montclair campus.
  - Mixed-methods approach with optional follow-up Zoom interviews for survey respondents.
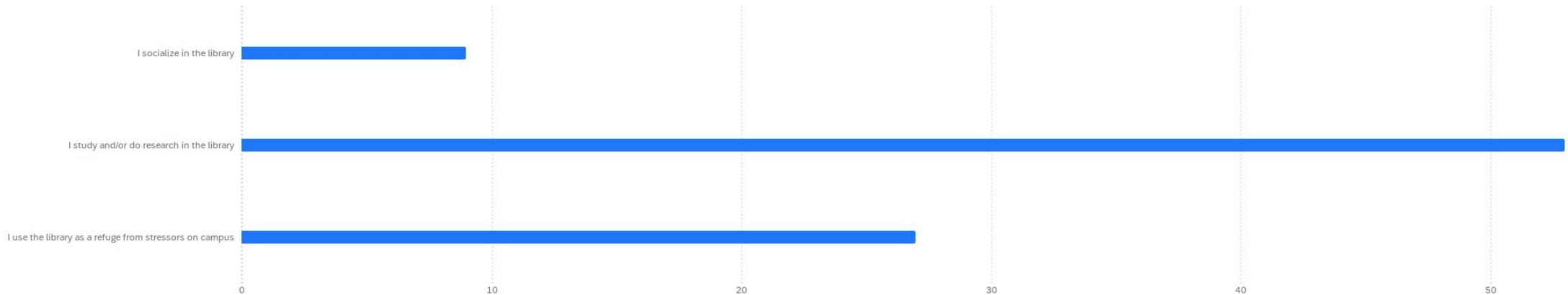
Methodology

Benefits
- **Inclusiveness**: multiple neurotypes are represented; our study doesn't require medical diagnosis, thus diversifying the population.
- **Population Size**: larger sample than neurotype-specific studies (i.e. only ADHD students).
- **Quality of Data**: mixed methods should yield more robust data than a survey alone, and neurodivergent students will have the opportunity to narrate their own experiences.

Limitations
- **Inclusion Criteria**: there is no standard definition of neurodivergence; self-identification relies on the honor system.
- **Response Rate**: true population size is unknown.
- **Uniformity**: lacks neurotype-specific data.

Library Usage

How do you use the library? (check all that apply) 57 ⓘ

I socialize in the library

I study and/or do research in the library

I use the library as a refuge from stressors on campus

0   10   20   30   40   50

Q: How do you use the library? (check all that apply)
- A majority of respondents (52) use the library for research and study.
- A considerable number of respondents (28) indicate they use the library as a refuge from stressors on campus.
- Very few respondents use the library to socialize (9).

What's Working

Do you feel like Sprague Library is an inclusive space for neurodivergent students? 55 ⓘ
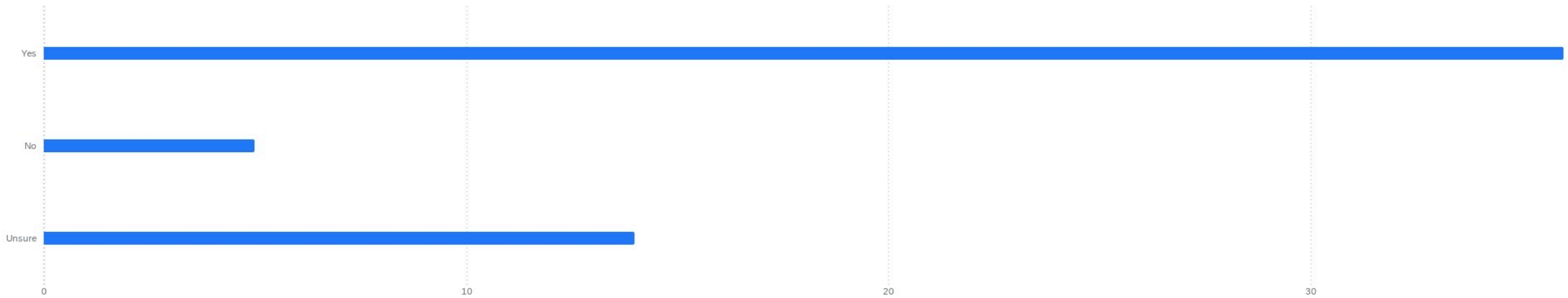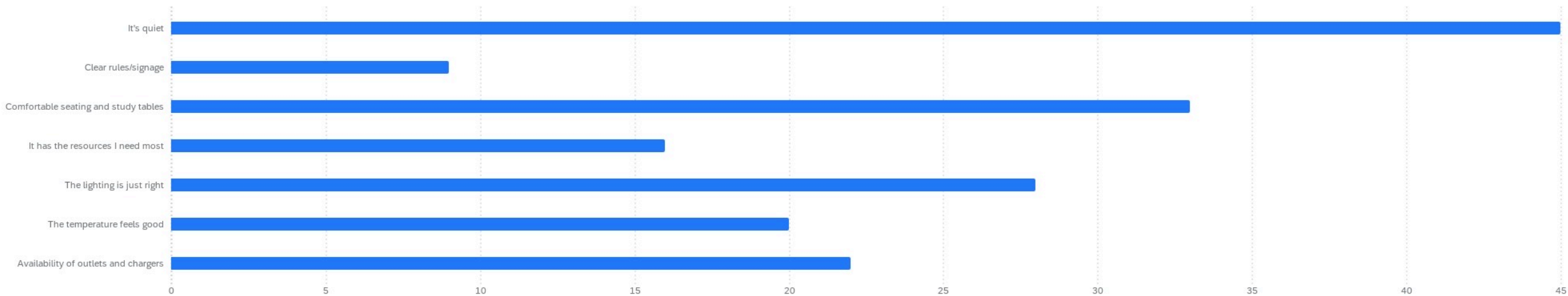

Q: Do you feel like Sprague Library is an inclusive space for neurodivergent students?
- 66% of respondents who answered this question believe the library is inclusive for ND students.
- Less than 10% who answered believe the library isn't inclusive.

What's Working

Why do you prefer spending time in this part of the library? (check all that apply) 57 ⓘ

Why do you prefer spending time in this part of the library?
- Noise level was by far the most important consideration in students' space preferences.
- The comfort level of seating/study tables and lighting were the next most important.

What's Working

On a scale of 1 through 10, how would you rate the anxiety you typically experience when you visit Sprague Library (is the lowest, 10 is the highest). 50 ⓘ

On a scale of 1 through 10, how would you rate the anxiety you typically ex...	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Anxiety Rating	50	3.24	1.00	7.00	50

Q: On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the anxiety you typically experience at Sprague Library.

- Students indicated generally low levels of anxiety when visiting Sprague Library.
- The average anxiety score was 3.24 out of 10.

What's Working

Do you feel like the librarians and staff at Sprague Library understand neurodivergence and provide adequate services for neurodivergent students? 69 ⓘ


Q: Do you feel like the librarians and staff at Sprague Library understand neurodivergence and provide adequate services for neurodivergent students.
- Despite the general lack of neurodiversity-affirming training among employees, most respondents believe the librarians and staff understand neurodivergence and provide appropriate support.

Opportunities for Improvement

Which of the following would help reduce the stress/anxiety you experience at Sprague Library? (check all that apply) 57 ⓘ
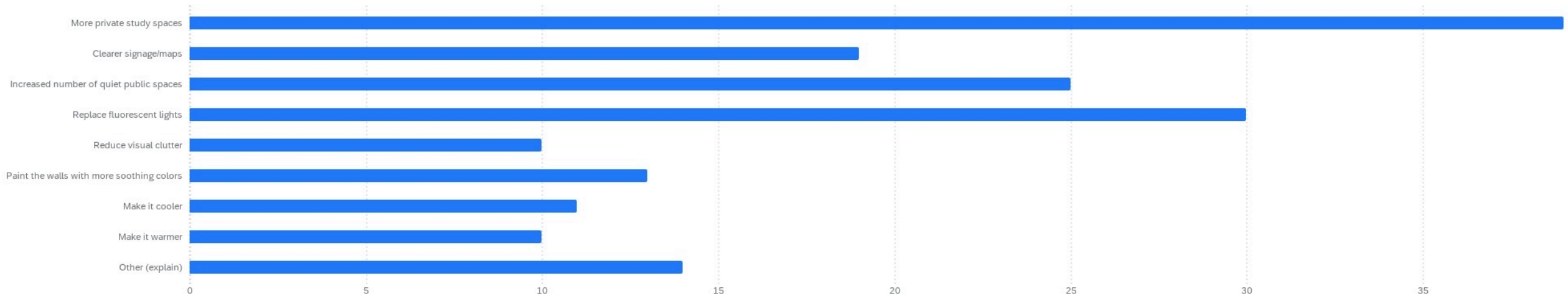
Q: Which of the following would help reduce the stress/anxiety you experience at Sprague Library?

- Demand for more private study spaces outpaced all other responses.
- Replacing fluorescent lighting and increasing the number of public study spaces were also well-represented.
- Reducing visual clutter and adjusting the temperature were least important to respondents.

Opportunities for Improvement

- "I've had issues before due to increased noise levels in some of the quiet study spaces which made it hard for me to concentrate. This is either due to others talking constantly or people blasting music through their headphones"
- "loud people"
- "Having to ask students to quiet it down because they are having passionate conversations via cell phone or music playing out loud."
- "People frequently eat, talk, not at a quiet level in areas designated as silent study spaces"
- "Sometimes there's a group of kids that go there to socialize instead of studying and it's very distracting. Librarians should be more strict about keeping the library quiet."
- "sometimes people will come to the library to hang out and talk and i find this incredibly distracting because the only times i go to the library is so that i can really focus and not have to worry about excessive noise. its very annoying."

Demographic Information

Do you live on or off campus? 68 ⓘ

I live on campus

I live off campus

0   10   20   30   40
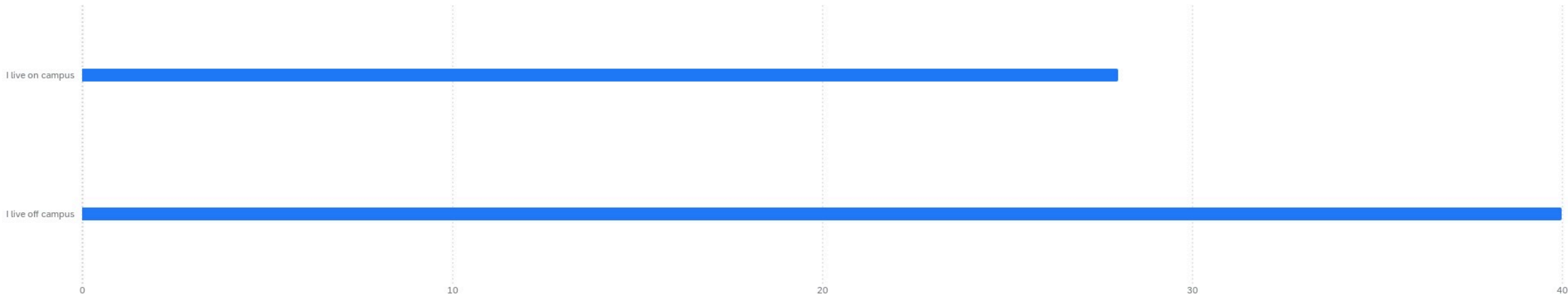
Q: Do you live on or off campus?
- Considering that 76% of Montclair State University students live off-campus, the responses to this survey are over representative of residential students.
- The literature indicates that residential students often use the library the most as an escape from sensory stressors in the dorm.

Discussion

- Overall, neurodivergent Montclair students view Sprague Library as an inclusive space where they can access important resources and work productively.

- Most challenges experienced by survey respondents relate to sensory issues within the building spaces rather than social or service-related issues.

- While libraries have been generally moving in the direction of facilitating social interaction, consequently increasing noise levels, the same changes that are motivating neurotypical students to use the library more may create obstacles for neurodivergent students.

Discussion

Respondents who left detailed feedback emphasized the following:

- The need for more private study spaces
- Lack of noise enforcement in quiet areas
- Replacement of fluorescent lighting
- Better access to outlets or charging stations
- More comfortable furniture.

Next Steps

- Additional survey marketing
- Analyze final survey results
- Conduct follow-up interviews
- Code and analyze interview results
- Prepare article for submission to LIS publications
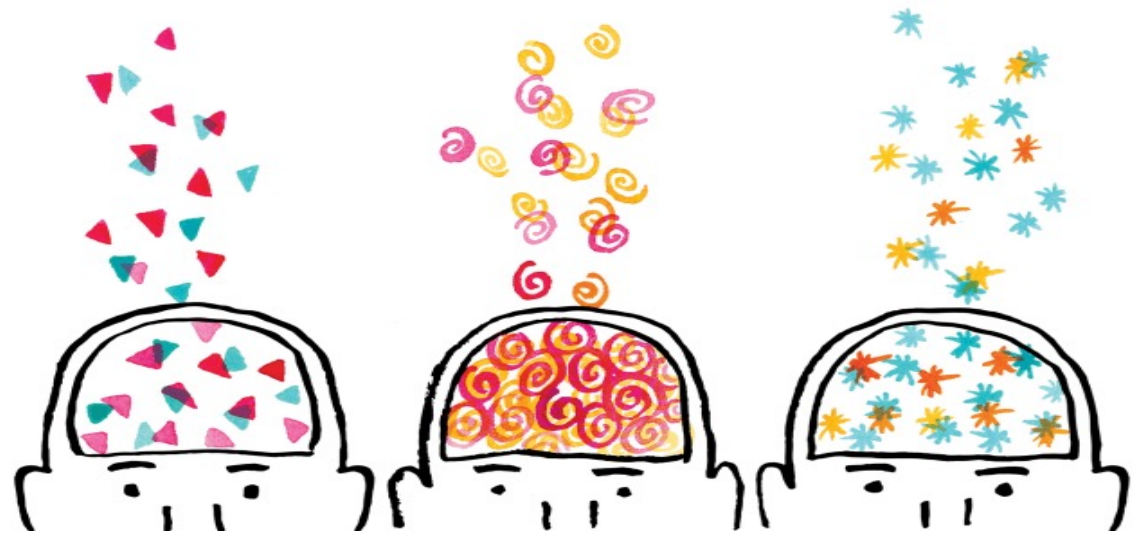
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