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Different People, Different Minds

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I spent most of a recent weekend day with my twelve-year-old daughter. In the afternoon, we took one of her friends to see a movie. Later, we had dinner with some family members who are in their seventies. Each activity involved interacting with people with neurological differences.

My daughter's friend is one of millions of Americans with an autism spectrum disorder. She struggles to read social cues, and conversations with her can take unusual pathways. At the same time, her enthusiasm for her preferred topics can be infectious. My daughter and I learned quite a bit about the

Pokémon Pikachu that afternoon!

During dinner, we spent time with an older family member who is experiencing a condition called "mild cognitive impairment." It is more pronounced than normal age-related cognitive decline, but is less severe than dementia. He might ask a question, then ask the same question again a few minutes later, or might lose the thread of a story as he tells it. Conversation with him can meander, but he is at times clever and funny, and he always has a lifetime of insights and experiences to share.

Reflecting on the day after my daughter was in bed, I decided that she was fortunate to spend

the day in the company of people she cares about who process and function differently than she does. Life is full of people whose neurological and cognitive pathways and capabilities differ from our own, and my daughter is lucky to understand that and to be able to practice interacting across differences.

These social experiences are pertinent to the workplace. We may encounter others in our work with neurological and cognitive differences, some of which may be beneficial. For example, a university professor I know has an autism spectrum disorder. His neurological differences make it hard for him to understand and adhere to certain social conventions, but may contribute to his ability to approach his field with focus and fresh insight.