

An Invitation

It's almost time for Joyful January to begin but if I'm being honest, I haven't felt very joyful lately. When I think about the word joy, the images that come up for me are ear-to-ear grins, laughing out loud, and a bold-kind of in your face happiness. This kind of joy is beautiful and worth celebrating, and it's not the only kind of joy. Emotions are complex, nuanced, and varied, just like the humans that experience them.

The concept of Joyful January came to us earlier this year - in the summer, when the days were longer, fresher, and brighter. We intentionally planned to hold off on hosting the project until January. We rightfully predicted that we might need it most in the winter (and of course Joyful January has a certain ring to it!). Now that it's approaching I've been thinking a lot about joy and the role it plays in our lives.

I recognize that this project might seem overwhelmingly positive in a time when there is so much to cope with. Please know that we see the daily challenges in the world right now - the grief, the toll of extended uncertainty, the collapsed roles, the loss of social supports, loss of resources, and so on. We hear you and we're feeling it too. We know that participating in this project can't help you with your most pressing needs like childcare, virtual school support, financial support, etc. We know that an effort to cultivate joy won't make these needs go away. But if it brings a smile, a laugh, or a connection that supports you, it will be worth it. In difficult times, we still need purpose, passion and joy, even if it looks different.

Joy has always been a deeply personal emotion. Each person experiences it differently, for different reasons. Another reason we think this project is important is that the world often overlooks the joy that autistic children and adults experience through their interests and passions. We often diminish these passions, labeling them as "special interests". This project is an effort to flip the typical narrative around "special interests". Join us to genuinely celebrate the varied and diverse interests and talents in the autism community. Let's encourage discovery, engagement, and connection around these passions. Let's build a community that welcomes all joy, in a time when it's needed most.

That laugh out-loud, bold joy isn't the kind I'm after this January (though I won't turn it away if it finds me).

For me and my family, I'm realizing my original expectation to discover a great new passion or create elaborate works of art during this time isn't realistic. I don't have the energy for this right now (but it's great if you do!). Instead, I'm going to spend Joyful January trying to notice and cultivate more of the simple and quiet joy that feels good to me right now. This means watching squirrels play outside my window a little longer, reading more, walking through the woods, and most of all, listening to the voice inside me that wants to do something just for the fun of it. I will be more intentional in facilitating joy with my kids as well, they need it as much, maybe even more than I do.

I want to extend an invitation to join me, and join us. There is space for you here, whatever your passion, and however your joy is expressed. I cannot wait to see what we can discover and create together this January.



Kirsten Cooper
Executive Director