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Essential Autism

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Disability Services Team Manager

T&L Conference

18th June 2025

What you will gain:



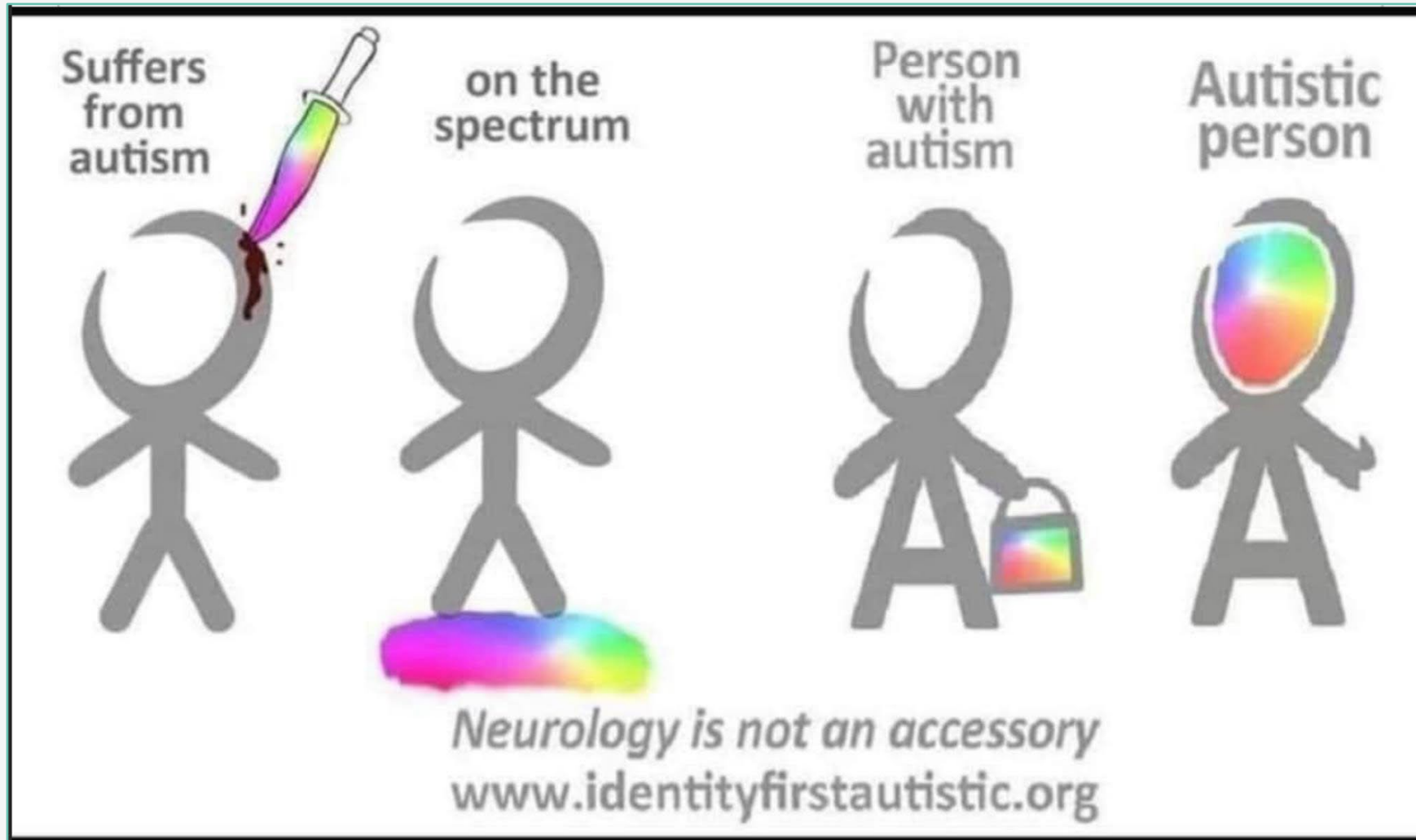
- A brief insight into the daily challenges faced by our autistic students and staff.
- Practical ways in which UoC can empower, support and provide an environment where autistic people thrive.

The session:



- How autism impacts mental health and can lead to burnout.
- The price autistic people pay in masking autistic traits to fit into a society based on the needs of non-autistic (allistic) people.
- How UoC can adapt and change to develop a more neuro-affirming ethos and be a neuro-inclusive and enabling institution.

Language and Respect



Language and Respect

- No single term everyone agrees on – ask!

Person-first language



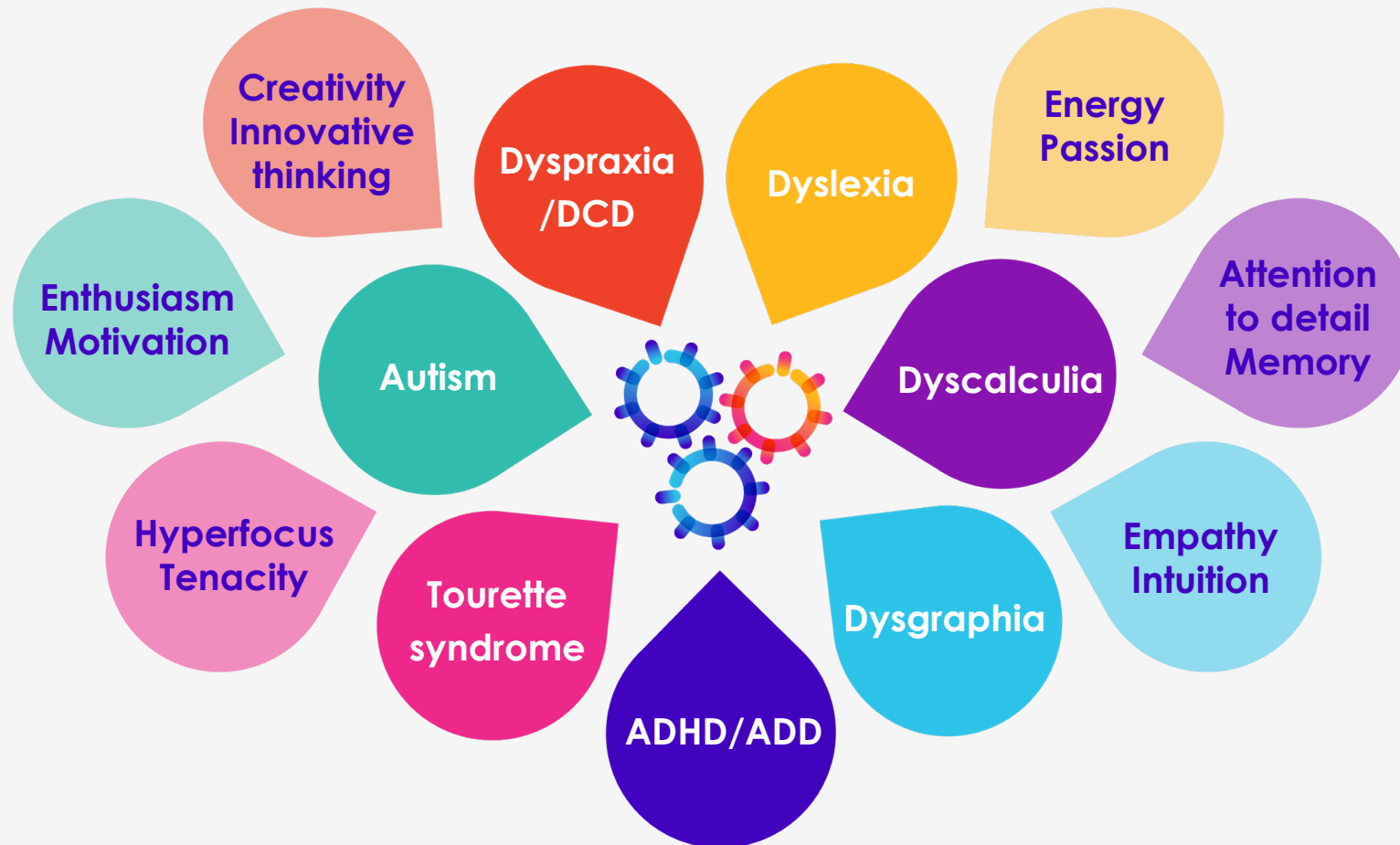
"I am a person with autism"

Identity-first language















































"I am autistic"

Neurodivergence



Co-occurrences: estimations

	Autism	ADHD	Dyslexia	DCD	Dyscalculia	DLD	Speech	APD	Tics
Autism								"common" Data unknown	
ADHD									
Dyslexia									
DCD									
Dyscalculia									
DLD									
Tics									
Speech									
APD	No data, APD often goes undiagnosed through diagnostic shadowing of other neurodivergent diagnoses. https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/departments/disability-inclusion-special-needs/resources/understanding-neurodivergence/co-occurrence								



Likelihood of it existing along with the primary diagnosis

In 'Understanding Neurodivergence'

- > ADHD
- > Auditory Processing Disorder
- > Autism
- > **Co-occurrence**
- > Developmental Language Disorder
- > Dyscalculia
- > Dyslexia
- > Dyspraxia/DCD
- > Neurodivergence Resources
- > Neurodiversity
- > Reasonable Adjustments
- > Speech Differences
- > Tic Conditions



What is Autism?

Autism is a difference in how someone:

- communicates with and relates to other people
- makes sense of the world around them.

Autism is:

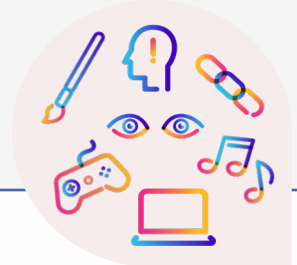
- clinically defined as a developmental disability
- a neurological difference
- estimated in more than one in 100 people
- a spectrum condition

Autistic Traits (NAS)

Social Communication and Interaction



Need for Certainty - structure, routines & interests



Sensory Differences





Autistic Traits

Catastrophising

Masking

Communication
Differences

Intense
Organisation

Literal/ Black &
White Thinking

Routine
Focussed

Socially
Anxious

Personal
Boundaries

Sensory
Sensitivities

Not Following
Social 'Rules'

Hyper-fixation

Monotropism

Adhere to
Timings

Alexithymia

Stimming



Autistic Attributes

Creative

Good Memory

Empathetic

Accepting

Good Pattern
Recognition

Unique Thinker

Attention to
Detail

Fair

Analytical

Observant

Determined

Honest

Innovative

Compassionate

Problem Solver

Goal Orientated

Organised

Sensitive to
Others

Logical

Good Verbal &
Visual Ability

Helpful/Kind

Compassionate

Passionate

Awesome!

- Society is designed and organised around an established idea of how people should live their lives, and what they need and like.
- Anyone who doesn't fit into this idea, someone who presents differently, may find society difficult to access.



Thinking Differently



Autism + Environment

“The physical and social environments we live in are not designed with autistic people’s strengths and needs in mind. This means that it’s often the environment that disables an autistic person, rather than their autism itself.”

Dr Luke Beardon

Autism + Environment = Outcome

Environment is everything...

When a flower
doesn't bloom,
you fix the
environment in
which it grows,
not the flower

Alexander Den Heijer

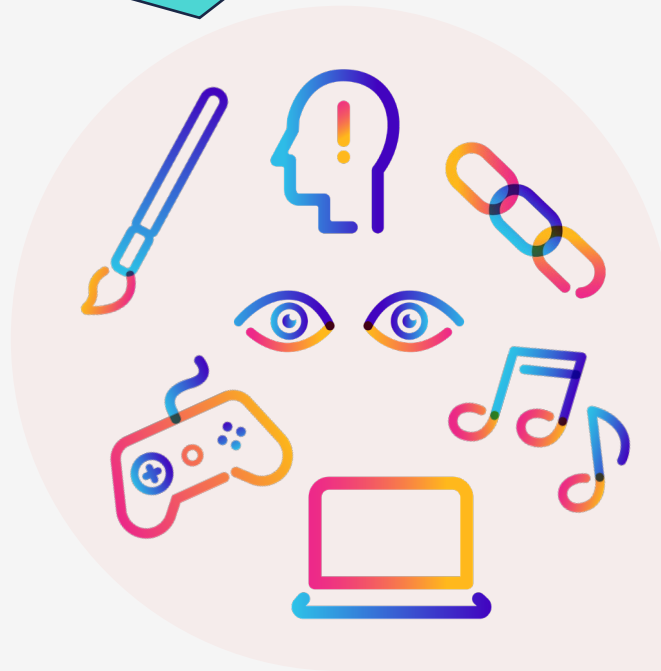


Need for Certainty

Autistic people
experience
uncertainty

Change may
create anxiety.

The world can seem
a very unpredictable
and confusing place.



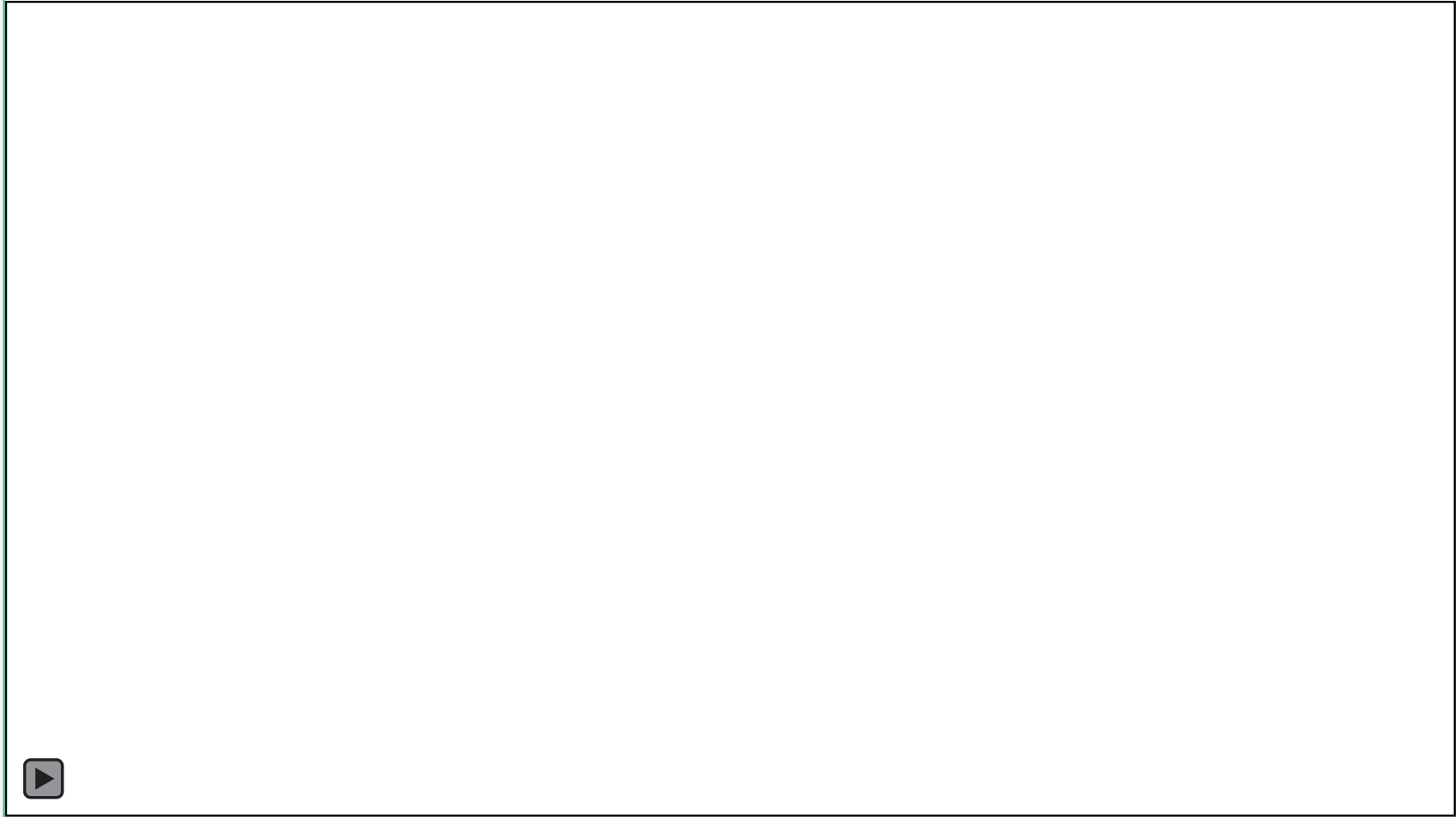
Rules and routines
help make sense of
daily life.

Focused interests
can provide
structure and help.

Communication and Interaction



Too Much Information



Adapting our Communication

- Clear, direct and concise
- Visual approaches
- Allow time for processing
- Positive information and feedback
- Intensive interaction
- Change expectations around eye contact & facial expressions
- Structure & routine



Enabling Interactions



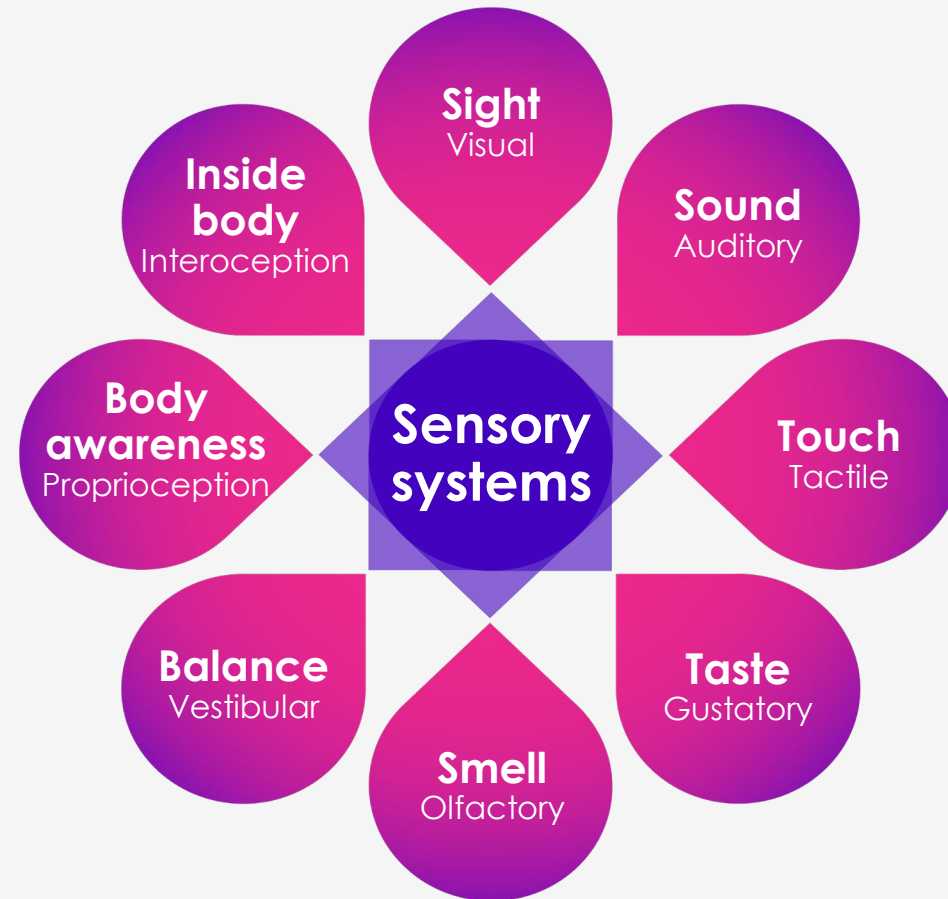
- Predictable
- Structure
- Listen and adapt
- Focus on interests

- Describe
- Social stories
- Sensory processing needs
- Balance of time

Sensory Differences



Sensory Differences:





Autism and the Senses

Sensory sensitivities can lead to:

- hypo- and/or hyper-sensitivities
- overload
- alexithymia
- a unique experience of the world.

Repetitive and self-stimulatory actions may be for:

- enjoyment
- interest
- blocking unwanted sensory input
- meeting a sensory need
- reaction to stress and anxiety.

Responding to Sensory Differences

Remove sensory
stressors

Environmental
Audit

Sensory Profiling

Appropriate
recovery time

Low arousal
environment

Provide preferred
sensory item/
activity

Give time to
process and
respond

Offer clear,
concise
information

Mental Health

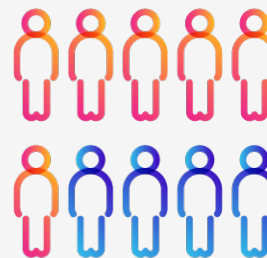


Trigger
Warning!

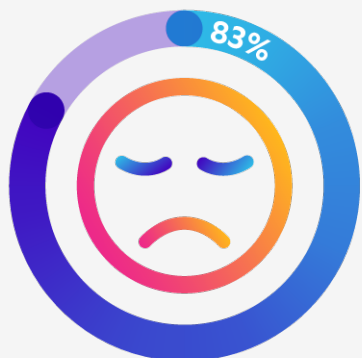
Autism is NOT a Mental Health Condition



94% of autistic adults reported experiencing anxiety.



Almost 6 in 10 said this affected their ability to get on with life.



83% reported experiencing depression.



Half said this had a high impact on their ability to get on with life.

Hear Our Autistic Voices – Listen Up!



Sumita Majumdar (Stories from the Spectrum)

Sometimes I've just wanted someone to ask if I'm okay - the reassurance of knowing I'm not alone can be grounding, and feeling grounded is very useful in these moments of loss of control. It's the balance of knowing someone is there with me, that I am not being negatively judged for a reaction I can't control, yet being given enough space to not be more overwhelmed by more social experience, until I can regain control again.

Fern Brady (Strong Female Character, 2023)

Sometimes I imagine what it must be like not to wear the weight of fear like a winter coat.

I wonder if others feel a lightness I will never experience.

Laura James (Odd Girl Out, 2017)

For most autistics existing in a world not build for them, anxiety is the baseline and constant background hum that their daily life has to play over.

Stress and Anxiety



Trigger
Warning!

High levels of stress and anxiety can impact on:

- everyday life, work and studies
- sleep
- community engagement
- families and relationships.



“Always lurking at the back of my mind is an anxiety about whether or not I’m perceiving things in the same way that people without autism do.”

Stress and Anxiety: Possible Causes



Communication/
Interaction

Emotions/
Catastrophising

Environment

Sensory Differences

Uncertainty

Planning and
Preparation

New Experiences/
Change

Masking/
camouflaging &
assimilation

Unexpected Changes: The Real Impact





Positives: Impact/Factors/Support

Self-awareness &
autonomy

Community
Understanding

Professional
Practice

Enabling
Environments



Autistic Culture &
Community

Masking, Camouflaging & Assimilation



Trigger
Warning!

Autistic Masking



Lifelong social survival strategy

Camouflaging/Compensating/Assimilating

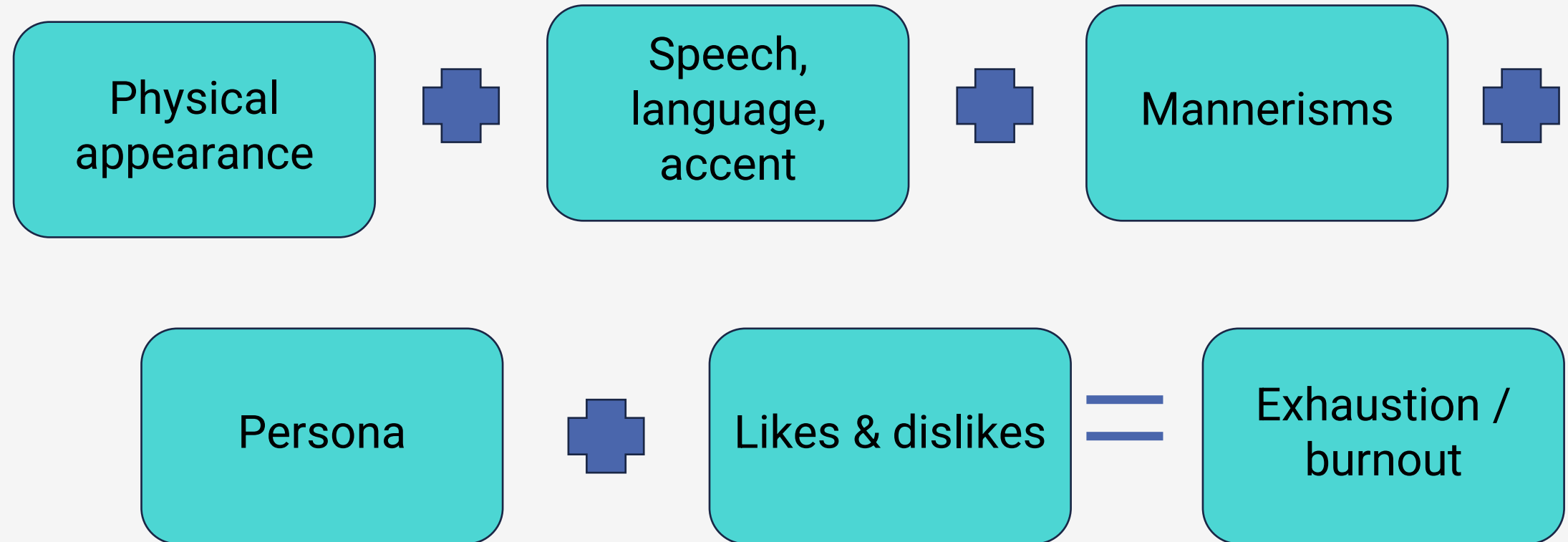
Suppressing natural emotions/behaviours

Acting to fit in

Scripting/learnt behaviours

Conscious/unconscious actions

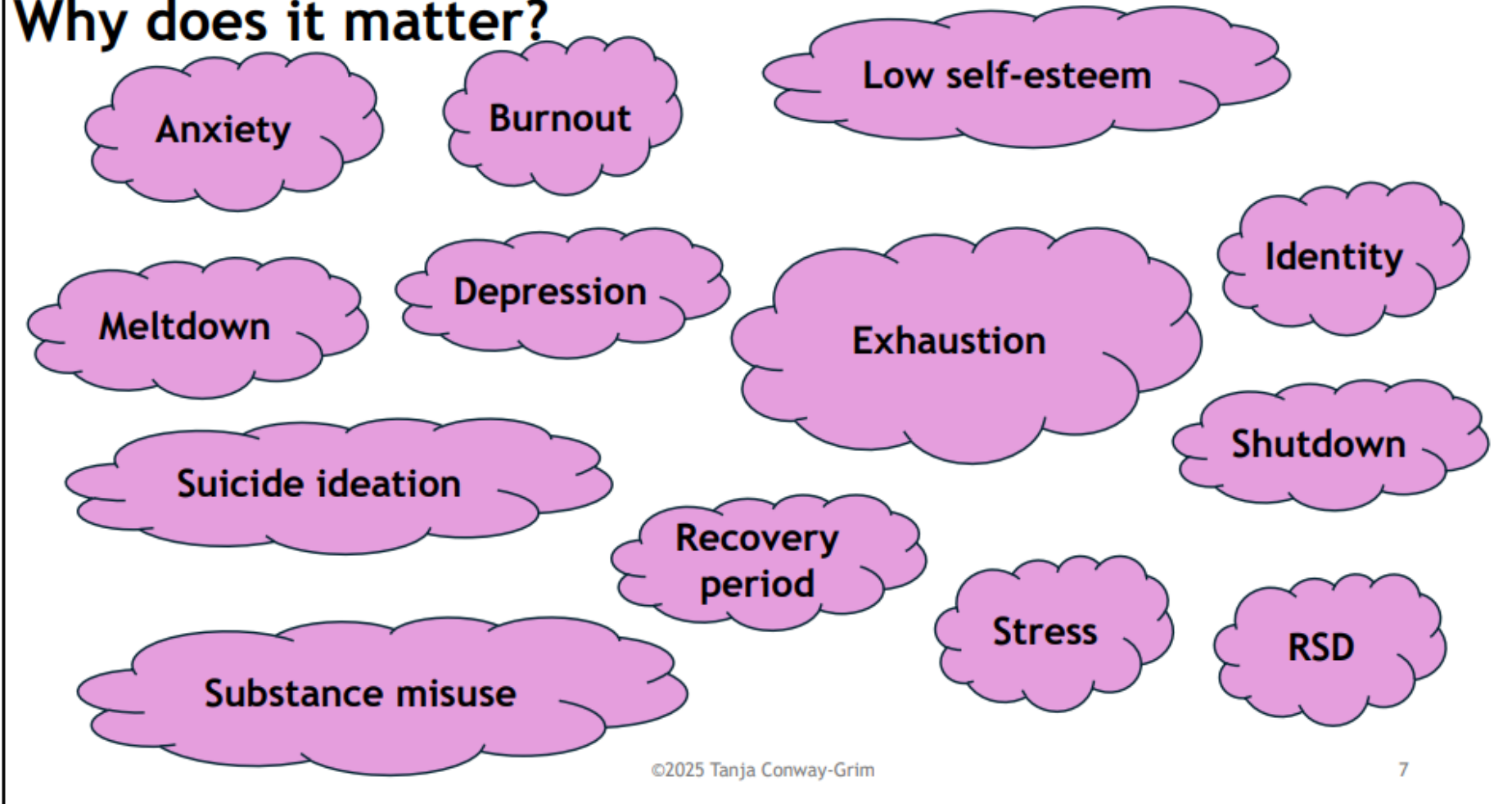
Fitting in at a price...



Masking leads to...



Why does it matter?



The Impact of Masking...



How it impacts other parts of life

Others not understanding daily struggles

Lack of effective communication

Mis- or delayed diagnosis

Always adapting to fit in

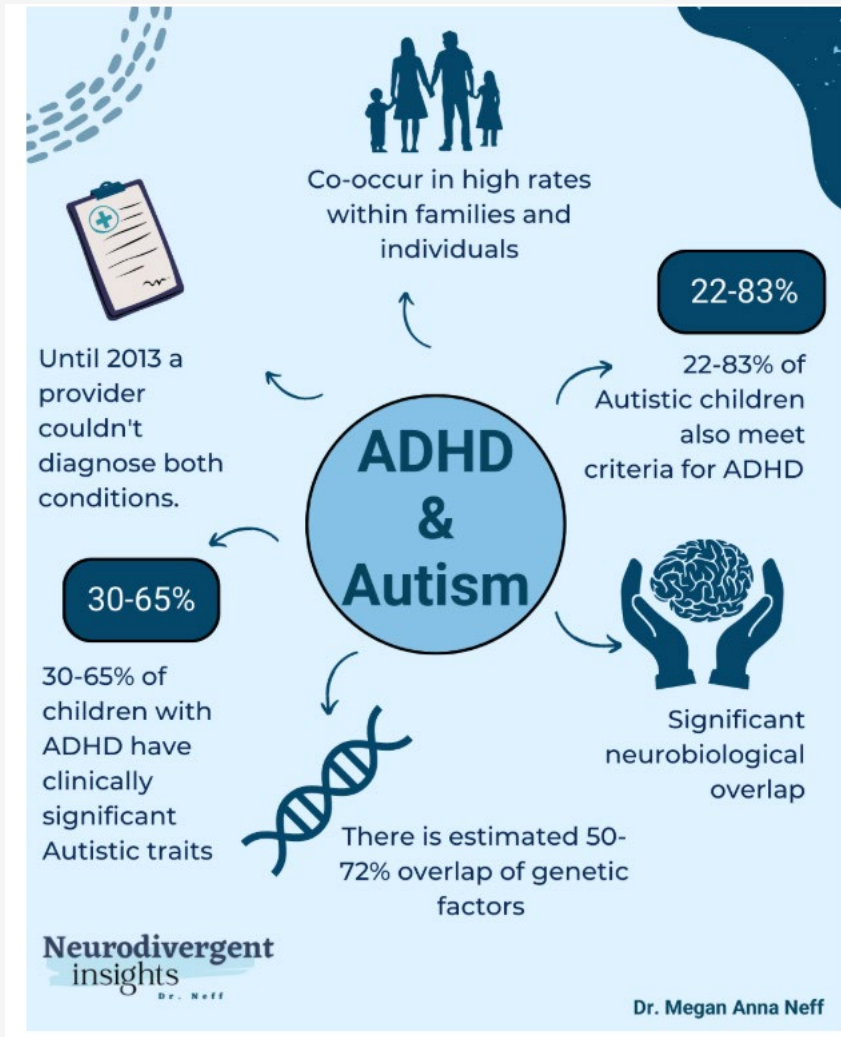
Missing out on support

Feeling like a failure (again)

Being misunderstood

Feeling lonely

Co-occurrences



🍏 Being AuDHD sometimes feels like I'm a walking contradiction. I can become preoccupied with an activity, only to lose interest within days, or end up forgetting to meet my basic needs if the hyperfixation becomes all-consuming. It's not all negative though - for me, AuDHD also means excelling in areas of interest and being incredibly empathetic.

GR, an AuDHD adult

Uncomfortable reading...



- 99-100% of people with ADHD have RSD
- 33% of people with ADHD say RSD is the most debilitating element and would change this if they could (they can't!)
- 24% of people with ADHD/RSD have attempted suicide



Think before you speak!

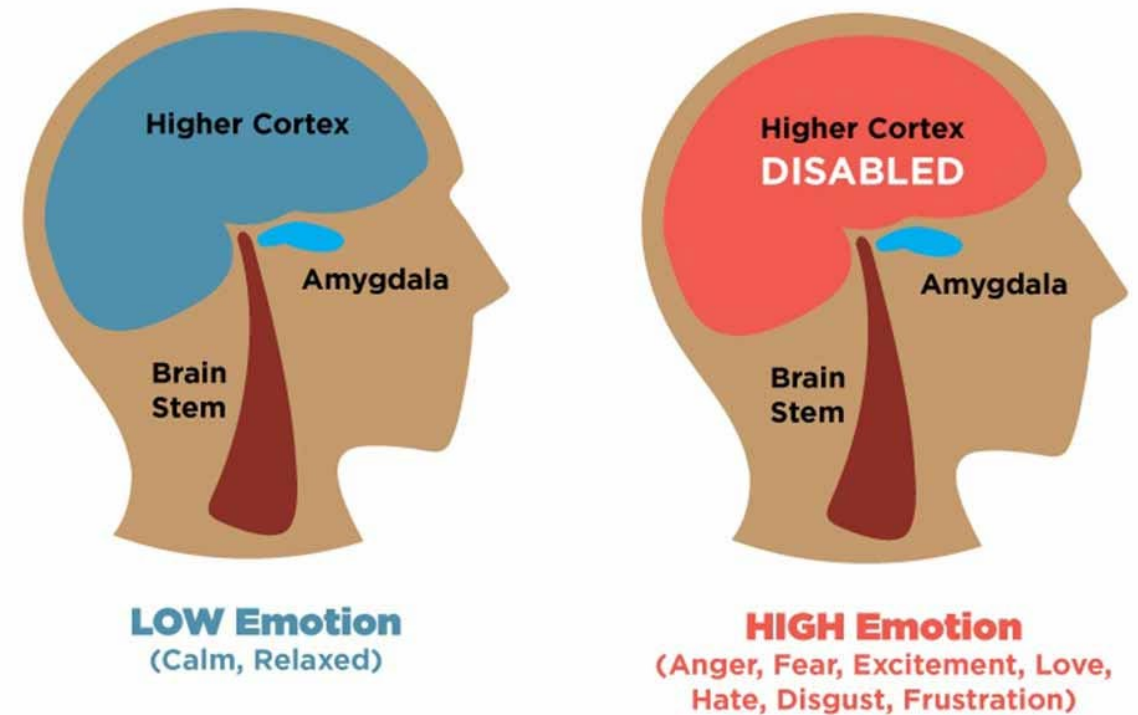
Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)



What it is...

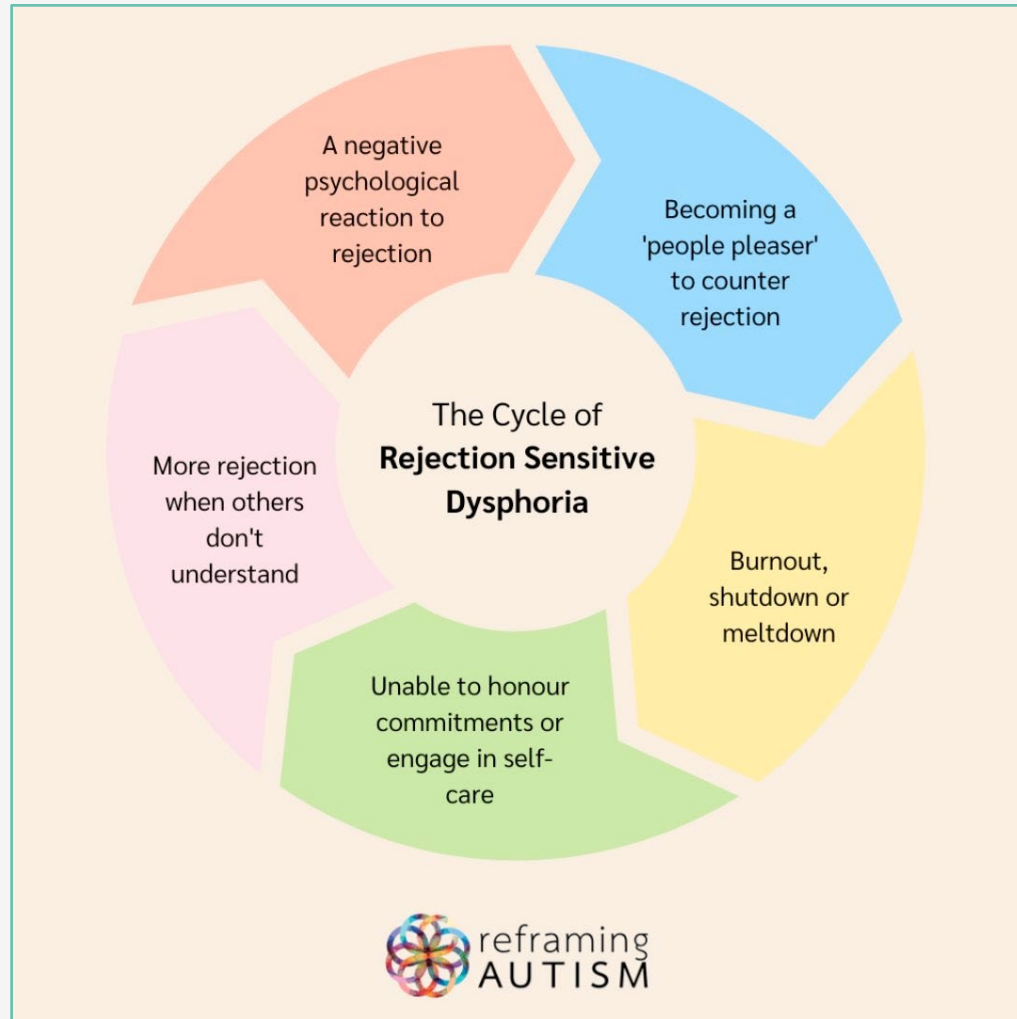
- Fear of rejection (fight or flight)
- Sensitivity to criticism (real or perceived)
- Rapid emotional shift (rollercoaster)
- Negative self-image (& self-talk)
- Emotional dysregulation (internalised and/or externalised)
- Characterised by frequency, intensity & duration (for diagnostic purposes)

Dysphoria means **UNBEARABLE**

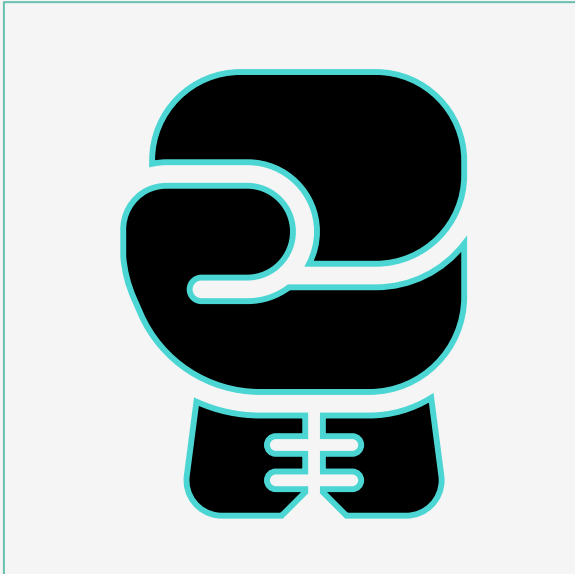


Amygdala hijack!

The challenge is REAL



Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)

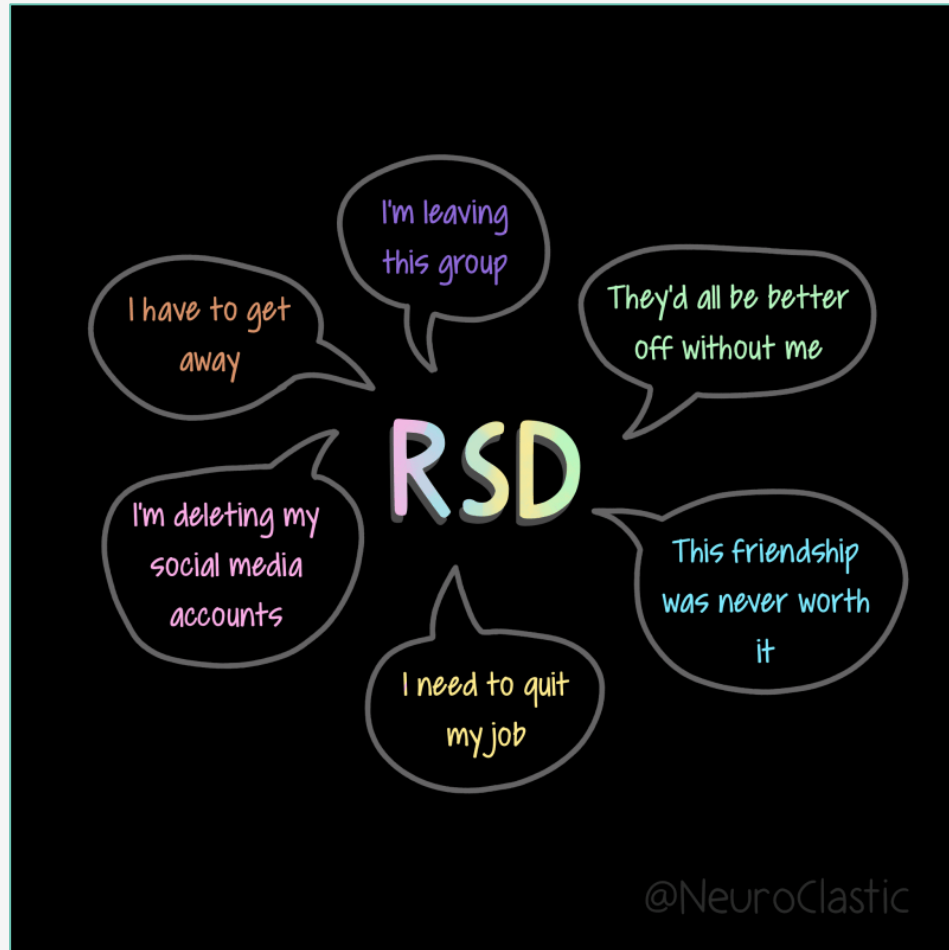


Feels like a physical punch!

How it impacts on daily life...

- Masking & self-monitoring
- Apologising/over-explaining/over-sharing
- Shame/guilt/frustration
- Imposter Syndrome
- Leads to low mood, stress & anxiety
- Low-self-esteem & confidence

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)



Leads to shutdown and/or meltdown

How it impacts on daily life...

- People pleasing
- Camouflaging/assimilating
- Social anxiety & withdrawal
- Over-compensating /pushing 'to the max!'
- Increased risk of accidents & mistakes
- Addiction/coping strategies
- Creates meltdowns/shutdowns
- Burnout & exhaustion = absence

Supporting Students & Staff with RSD



Be curious!

Set boundaries

Patience
understanding
& compassion

Clear, concise
communication

Create safe
environments

Reasonable
adjustments

Discuss
strategies &
support

Provide time &
space for
regulation

Behaviour **IS** communication

Staff Support: Workplace Adjustments Action Plan

NEW: Workplace Adjustments Action Plan

Reasons for Adjustments

Summary of disability/ health condition/ circumstances that require reasonable adjustment ●

Autism

ADHD

Chronic Migraines

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Workplace barriers

Identify workplace barriers created by the team member's health impairment or circumstances (include barriers caused by fluctuations in health) •

Commute to work can be exhausting

Masking in meetings

Lack of agendas/focus for meetings/processing speed

Not understanding the reasons behind a task

Lack of routines during the working day

Position in shared office - distractions/hypervigilance/overwhelm.

Bespoke Workplace Adjustments

Workplace Adjustment Plan

Reasonable Adjustment Agreed ●

Flexible working

Weekly 1:1 meetings with line manager

2 days working from home

Access to smaller (possibly) single office spaces where available

Clear processes/overview of tasks and 'why' they are needed

Line Manager as a 'sounding board' to address any issues (e.g rejection sensitivity dysphoria - RDS) arising within the team and wider colleagues or students

Support with managing energy levels

Self regulation strategies and regular sensory breaks - using dopamine menus/pomodoro timer technique for focus work

Student facing meetings at start of the working day and time to recover from masking

Agendas and minutes from meetings, including actions shared and reviewed

Working at own pace to manage diary and tasks when in creative flow/ hyper focus states, having less demanding admin tasks to switch between routine and less structured tasks

Access to DANN support within UoC

Desk position to be reviewed and time spent within the busy office environment monitored to reduce hypervigilance/masking/triggering.



Hear UoC Autistic Voices

I definitely resonate with the commute into work completely clouding my morning in the office.

I feel like office working can be so productive for me or it can be where my ADHD is really exaggerated and I cannot hold one thought for more than 20 seconds and as I'm in the office I feel a bit more trapped.

So office working can either be what I needed to get all my jobs boxed off or it can be very overwhelming/overstimulating.



Hear UoC Autistic Voices

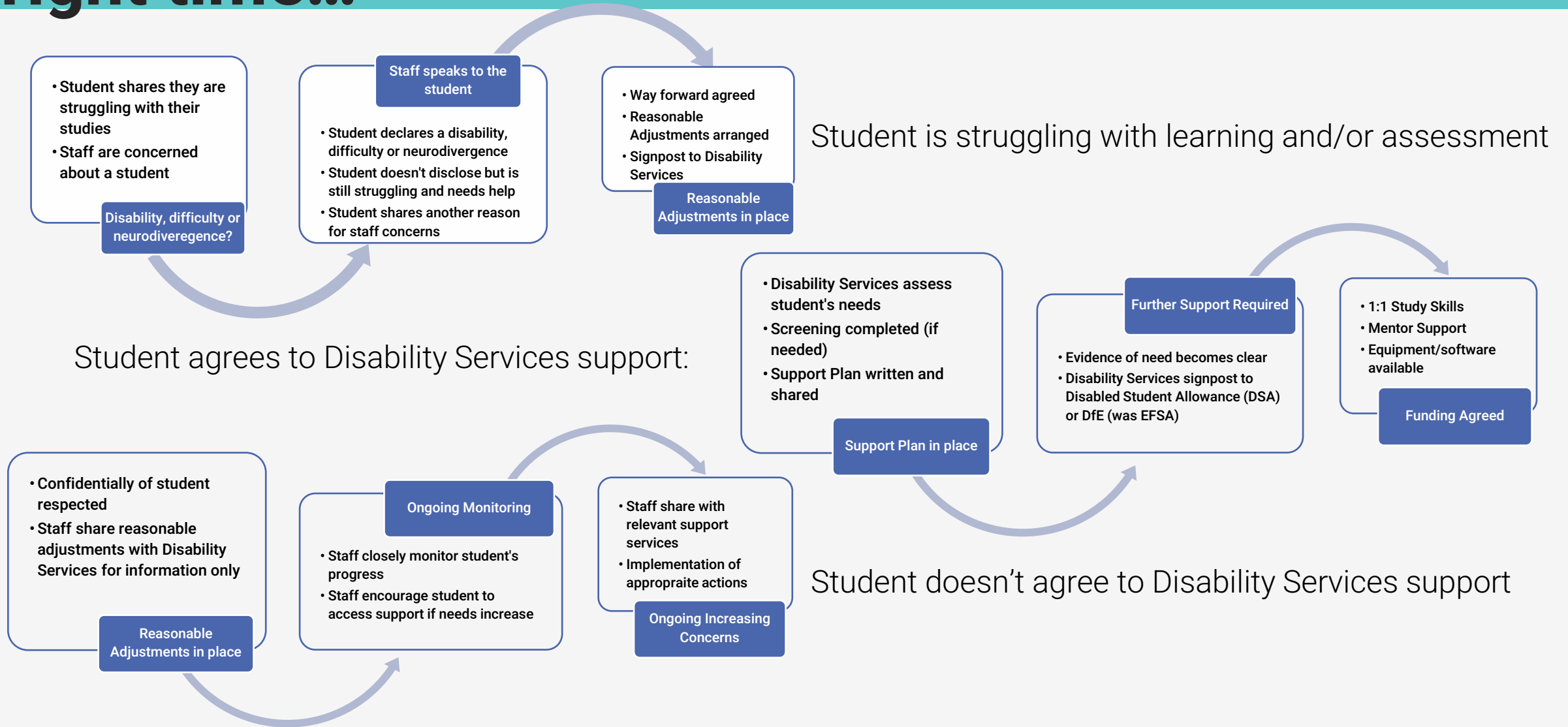
It's important to come to work with an open mind and be willing to listen. Enabling people to work rather than hitting all the trigger buttons.

I have learnt a lot going through it and it resonates so much with the kind of things I face daily in the UoC environment when I'm not being supported.

It's truly like night and day sitting at my laptop from home and feeling like I have the capacity to do my job vs being in fight or flight all day at work.

If it were to be acceptable for me to take this time flexibly and with understanding I'd be so much happier at work.

Student Support: Getting the right support, at the right time...



My.Cumbria Support

<https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Support/Disability/>

Disability and SpLD

We offer support and reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities, long term physical and mental health conditions, hearing or visual impairment, neurodivergence (such as Autism and ADHD) and specific learning differences (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia).



HOW THE DISABILITY TEAM CAN HELP



SUPPORT REQUEST FORM



BOOK AN APPOINTMENT WITH US

SpLD Screening and Support

<https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/Support/Disability/Screening-and-Assessment/>

Access to:

- Disability Officers
- Specialist Learning Advisors
- External Educational Psychologist Screening (cost incurred)

Strategies of support for RSD

One size doesn't fit all!



Hear Autistic Voices – Listen Up!

Vice Admiral Nick Hine (Stories from the Spectrum)

The pressure to fit in is huge and many autistic people, myself included, have developed coping mechanisms at work to cover being different.

This is immensely draining and we do it at a big personal cost.

Organisations need to change, not people.



NAS Young Ambassador (4 years)



Being autistic has created who I am: it's my identity, it's how my brain works, it's how I function as a person. It's also the reason why I'm doing my degree, because being autistic meant I had hyperfixations and special interests.

Maya (Stories from the Spectrum)

3 Simple Take-aways



Better late than not showing up



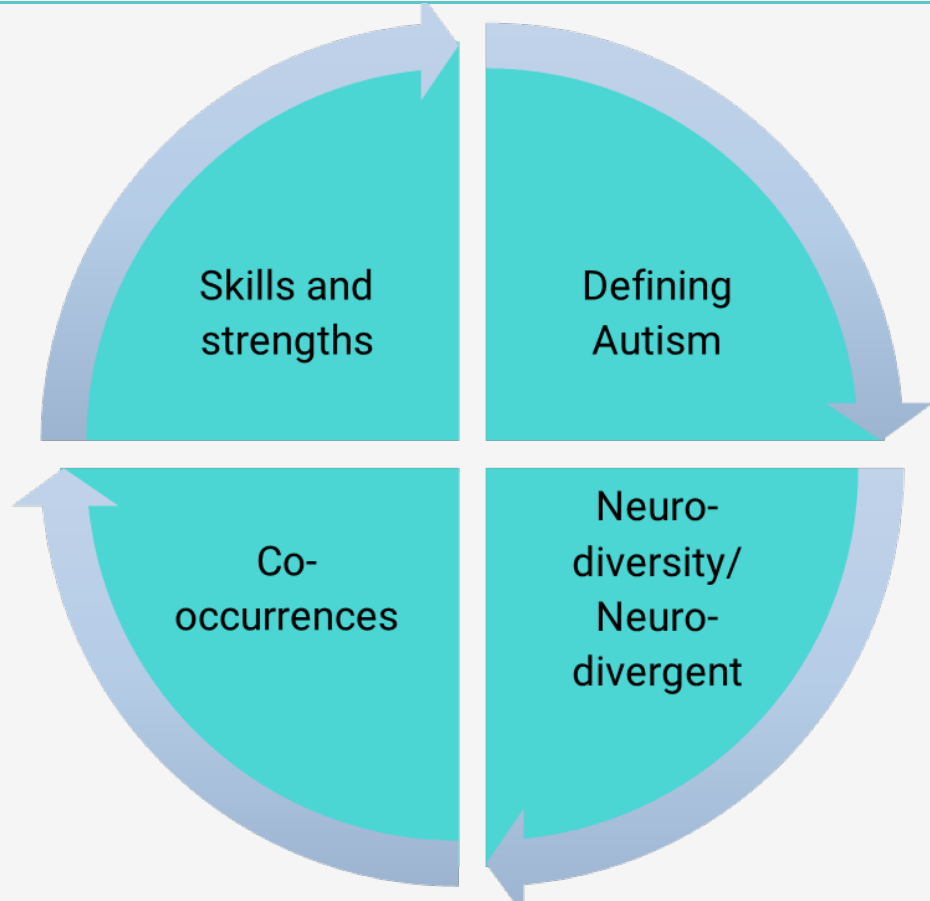
Tell us about the room (environment)



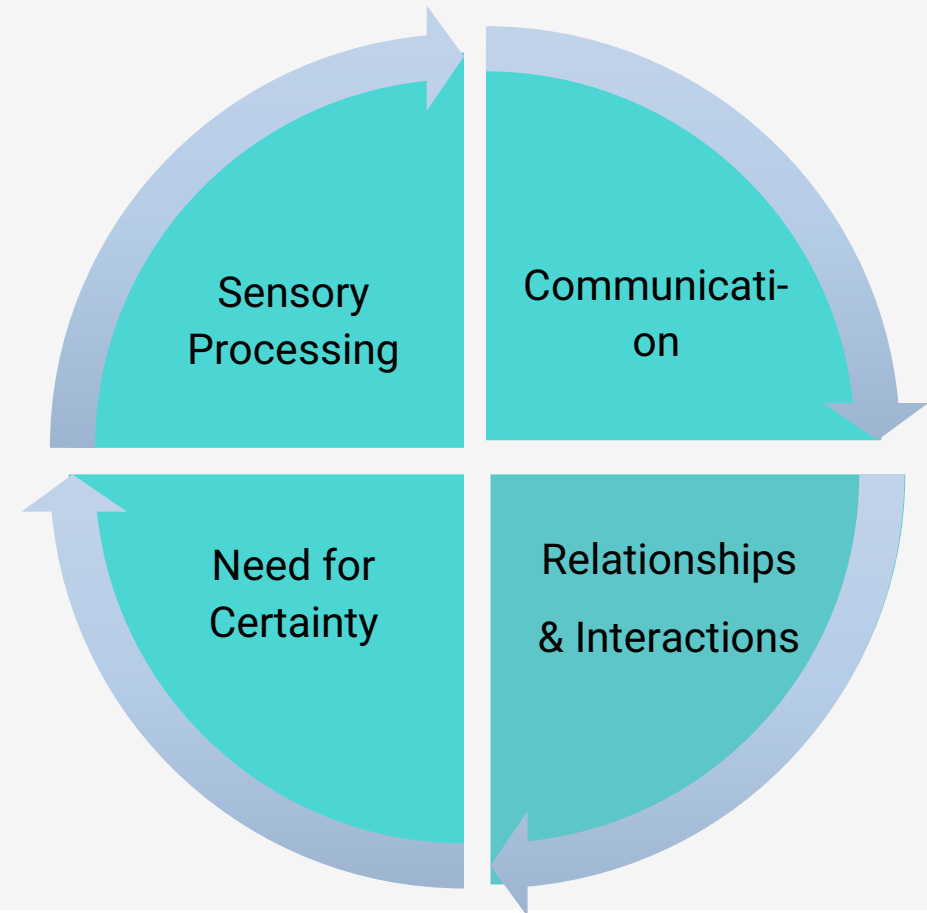
We understand the need for sensory regulation

Essential Autism (6-hour NAS course)

Session 1



Session 2

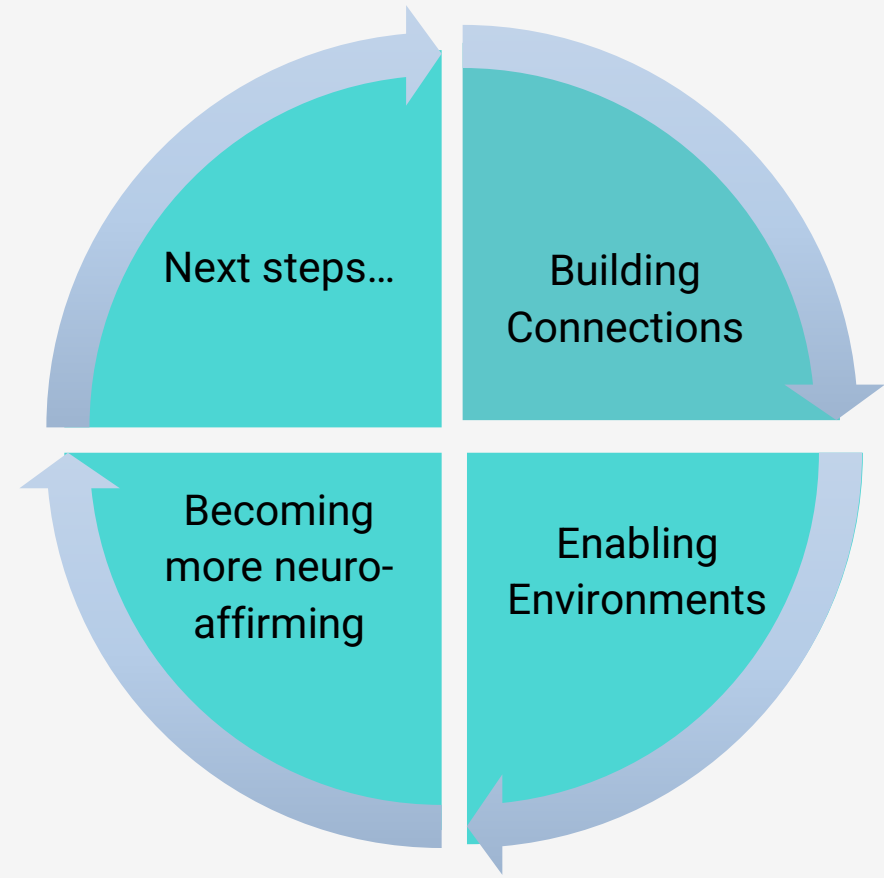


Essential Autism (6-hour NAS course)

Session 3



Session 4



Breaking News: We need you!

On 6th June 2025 a proposal to create a fully interactive, immersive and multi-media neurodivergent environment simulation experience was approved at UoC.

We are looking to hear from anyone with Autism or ADHD (or AuDHD) to contribute to the content, raising awareness of the bespoke strengths and challenges faced at UoC (and beyond).



Any questions?



Thank you for listening