

# Understanding Neurodiversity:

Language, Inclusion and Psychological Safety



## Who are we?



## About Us



Xceptional Academy are **neurodiversity experts** who work with leaders in the private, public, and community sectors to create genuinely safe workplaces for neurodivergent people. Our team combines lived experience, academic research, and industry knowledge in co-designing a suite of solutions for employers.

- Workforce Planning
- Neuro-inclusion Training
- Neuro-inclusion Advisory
- Assessment and Coaching



Centre for  
Inclusive  
Employment

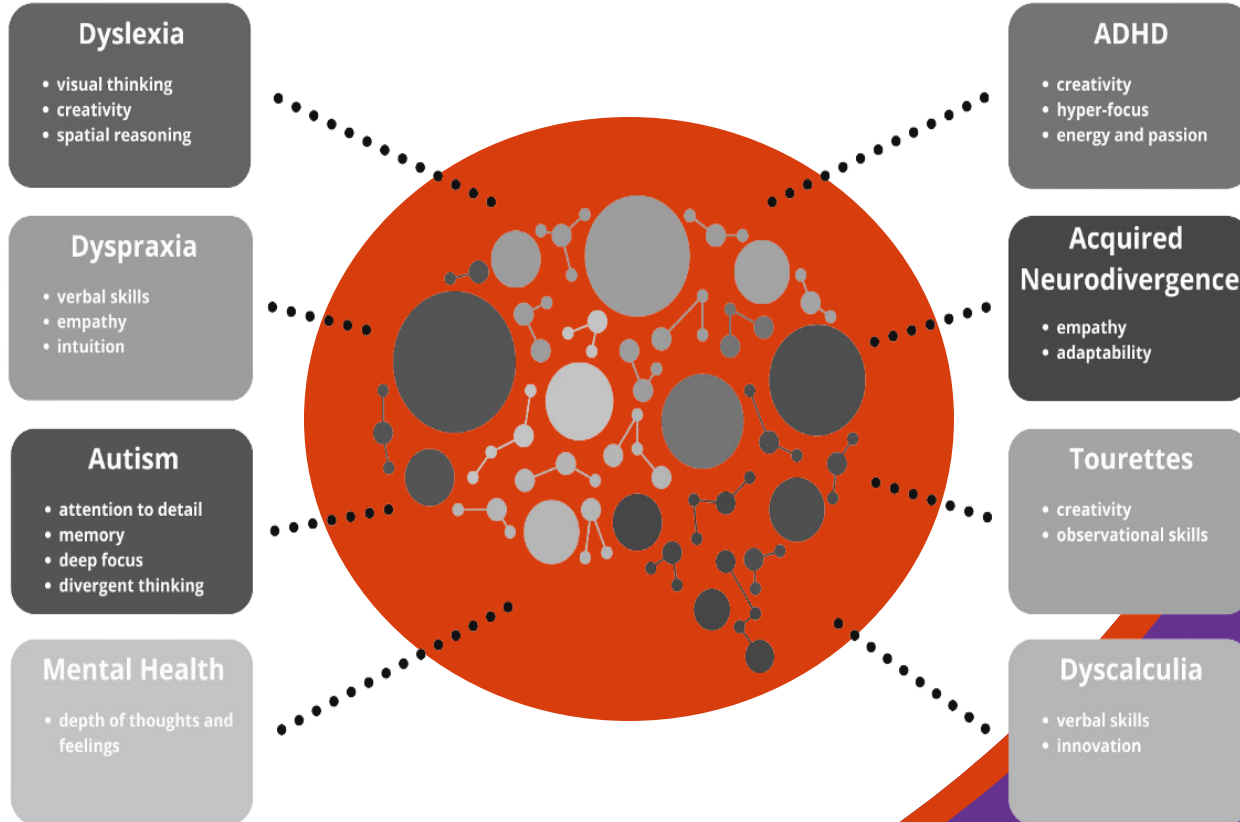


Disability  
Employment  
AUSTRALIA

## Today's Session

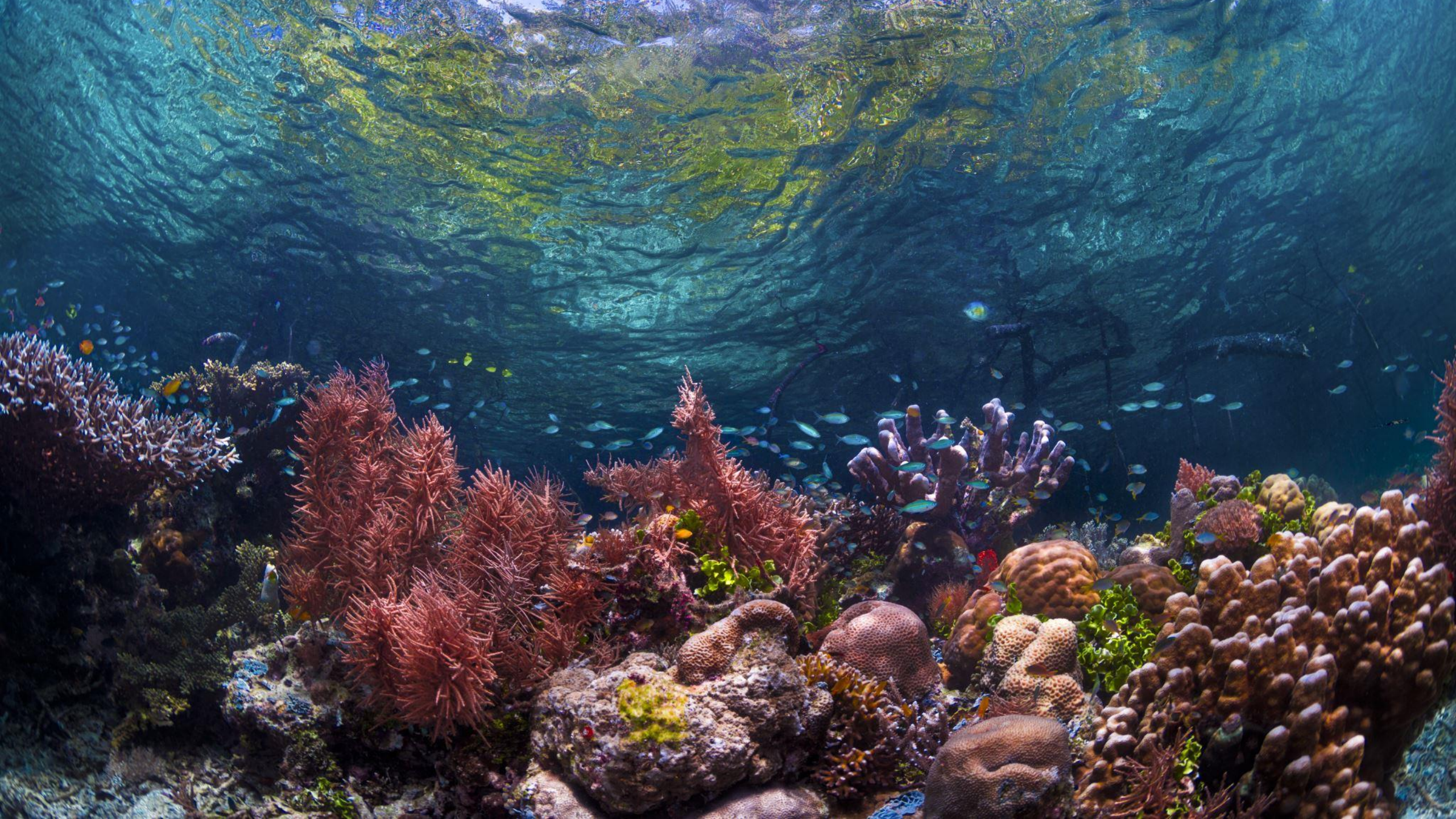
Unpacking the key concepts on Neurodiversity

- Strengths & understanding a skills profile
- Building a movement
- Language and terminology
- Prevalence
- Current trends
- Workplace context
- Psychological safety in practise
- Q & A



# Unpacking Cognitive Diversity











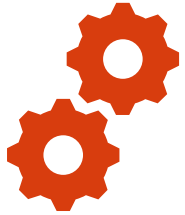
## Diversity is nature's design, not an exception



Just as biodiversity is essential for ecological health, neurodiversity is essential for

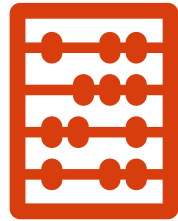
- **human health**
- **innovation, creativity and problem solving**
- **resilience**

# Valuing Neurodivergent Strengths



## SUSTAINED CONCENTRATION

Deep focus  
allows  
distraction-free  
innovative work



## FASTER PROBLEM SOLVING

"Autism at Work  
employees were  
**48% faster**  
and as much as  
**92% more**  
productive."

[JP Morgan](#)



## SUPERIOR MEMORY

In-depth  
knowledge  
driven by  
enhanced visual  
recall



## STRONG ATTENTION TO DETAIL

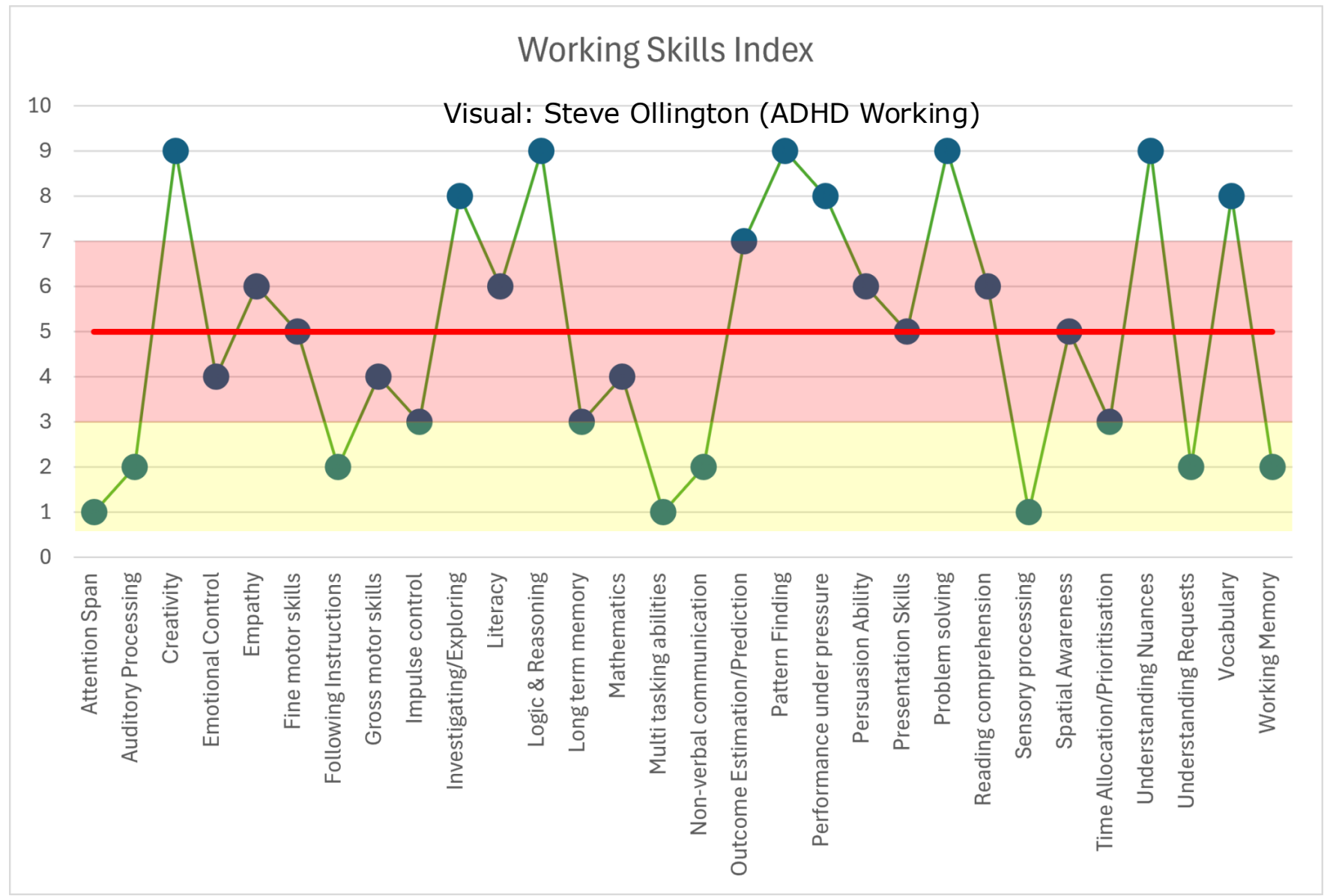
Strong  
analytical skills  
and ability to  
identify fine  
details and  
patterns



## HIGH INTEGRITY

Incredibly loyal  
and honest  
employees  
**92% retention  
rate** SAP





# Building a Movement Timeline



## 1940s – 1960s: Early Clinical Foundations

**1943** – Leo Kanner publishes the first clinical description of autism.

**1944** – Hans Asperger describes a profile later referred to as “Asperger’s syndrome”.

This era frames neurodivergence primarily through a **medical/deficit model**, shaping decades of public perception.

## 1990s: The Birth of the Neurodiversity Paradigm

**1993** – Australian Disabilities Discrimination Act (DDA) signals a structural shift toward rights, access, and anti-discrimination.

**1998** – **Judy Singer**, an autistic Australian sociologist, coins the term “**neurodiversity**” in her honours thesis, framing neurological differences as natural variations in human cognition.



## 1970s – 1980s: Disability Rights & Self-Advocacy

The broader **Disability Rights Movement** expands, championing autonomy, access, and inclusion.

Foundations for **self-advocacy** and the challenge to purely medicalised interpretations begin to solidify.

## 2000s: Community Organising & Cultural Recognition

The term neurodiversity enters mainstream academic and online discourse.

Autistic-led organisations grow. The concept of “**nothing about us without us**” strengthens as a guiding principle.

ADHD and dyslexia communities begin adopting neurodiversity-aligned framing.

## 2010–2015: Global Expansion & The Rise of Lived Experience

Research starts shifting toward **strengths, executive functioning, sensory processing, masking, and burnout**.

Major diagnostic updates:

**2013** – DSM-5 restructures autism under ASD umbrella; removes Asperger’s label.

Large-scale autistic, ADHD, and dyslexic advocacy online pushes for identity-first language and recognition of masking, trauma, and late-diagnosis pathways.

Shift from “awareness” to **acceptance and inclusion**.

## 2020–2025: From Recognition to Neuro-Inclusion

A **sharp rise in adult diagnosis**

The neurodiversity paradigm became embedded in workplace DEI, government policy discussions, higher education, and mainstream media.

Research accelerated around burnout, executive functioning, trauma, and the impacts of masking.

Shifted to **neuro-inclusion as an organisational responsibility**. Workplaces moved beyond recruitment programs toward broader systemic design, focusing on inclusive leadership, sensory-aware environments, Universal Design for Workplaces, and trauma-informed, dignity-first practices.

Growing awareness of the harm caused by pathologising language and functioning labels

## 2016–2020: Workplace Neurodiversity Takes Off

Global tech and finance industries begin neurodiversity hiring programs (e.g., Microsoft, EY, JP Morgan, SAP).

**“Neurodiversity at Work”** becomes a defined organisational strategy.

Explosion of consulting, training, and specialist employment programs.

Surge in late-identified autistic and ADHD adults, particularly women and gender-diverse people, due to social media education, improved screening, and cultural destigmatisation.



# Language & Prevalence



Centre for  
Inclusive  
Employment



Disability  
Employment  
AUSTRALIA

## Neuro-affirming Language

### **Neurodivergent, neurodistinct, neurotypical**

– when describing an individual person

### **Neurodiverse**

- when referring to a group of people
- an individual can not be neurodiverse

### **Neurominority**

- when describing a population or group of people with the same neurodivergence





## Neuro-affirming Language

### Person First Language

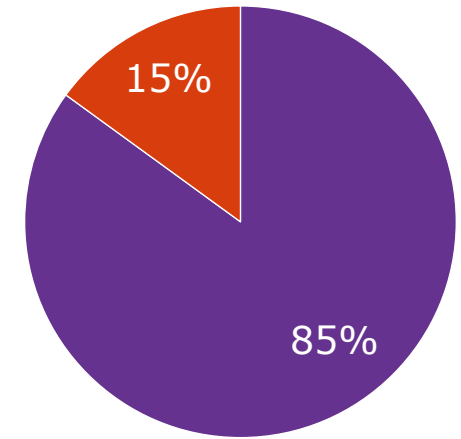
- A person with.....

### Identity First Language

- Autistic, ADHDer, Dyslexic or Dyspraxic

### Someone is or identifies as neurodivergent

- Avoid someone living with
- Avoid commenting on functioning or perceived ability



■ Identity First ■ Person First



**“[So called] Mild autism doesn’t mean one experiences autism mildly..... It means YOU experience their autism mildly.**

**You may not know how hard they’ve had to work to get to the level they are.”**

**-Adam Walton-**



# Prevalence

Neurodivergent



1 in 5

Dyslexic



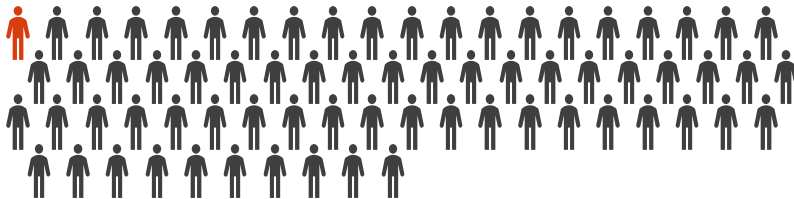
1 in 10

ADHDe



1 in 20

Autistic



1 in 70

Dyspraxic



1 in 20

Dysgraphic



1 in 20



## Trends we are seeing in our work at Xceptional Academy

- **Unemployment remains high**, autistic and neurodivergent individuals remain significantly under-represented in stable employment. Unemployment rates is often 2–6× higher than for non-disabled people.
- **Late identification is rising**, with adults seeking support after burnout or long-term work instability.
- **Younger generations expect inclusion**, flexibility, and psychological safety
- **Executive function overwhelm is common**, especially in hybrid work, requiring clearer scaffolding and predictable routines.
- **Masking fatigue is widespread**, showing up as mental health decline and inconsistent work participation.
- **Demand for neuro-affirming practice is growing**, shifting from compliance to enablement and personalised support.
- **Strengths-based matching is essential**, as industries increasingly value neurodivergent thinking.

# Psychological Safety



# Persona: Emily Lawson (She/Her)

---

## Background:

Emily is a 45-year-old administrative officer in a medium size regional office. She is highly organised, detail-oriented, and dependable, ensuring that everything runs smoothly behind the scenes. However, Emily avoids discomfort at all costs, often limiting herself to what feels safe and predictable. She stays in the background, hesitant to step forward, even when she has valuable insights to share.

## Personality & Strengths:

- Meticulous, ensuring tasks are completed with precision.
- Reliable and consistent, always meeting deadlines and expectations.
- Excellent at following procedures and keeping things structured.
- Deeply empathetic and intuitive, often picking up on office dynamics without engaging too much.
- A careful thinker, considering all angles before making decisions.

## Challenges:

- Avoids speaking up in meetings or sharing ideas for fear of being wrong.
- Hesitant to ask for help or clarification, worrying it will make her seem incompetent.
- Struggles with unexpected changes, noisy office environments and preferring predictable routines.
- Turns down professional development opportunities due to fear of discomfort.
- Overthinks interactions, replaying conversations and worrying about how she was perceived.

## Workplace Behaviour & Coping Strategies:

- Sticks to familiar tasks, avoiding challenges that might cause anxiety.
  - Keeps communication brief and professional, rarely engaging in casual office chats.
  - Double-checks emails and work excessively instead of asking for clarification.
  - Declines social events as she can become overwhelmed by the noise but sometimes wishes she could participate.
  - Relies on structured lists and routines to maintain control.
-



## What They Wish Others Understood:

1. She isn't unambitious—she just needs a psychologically safe environment to take risks.
2. She often wants to engage more but struggles with the fear of discomfort and unpredictability.
3. Small, structured ways to contribute (like written feedback instead of verbal discussions) help her feel included.
4. Encouragement without pressure makes a big difference in her willingness to step forward.
5. Gentle reassurance that asking questions is a sign of engagement, not incompetence, would help her feel more comfortable seeking clarification.



1. Their directness isn't rudeness—it's a commitment to clarity and honesty.
2. Neurodivergent people are not less and should be met without resistance.
3. Emotional investment in their work isn't a flaw—it's a strength.
4. They're not trying to be difficult; they just refuse to shrink themselves to fit in.



1. Just because they seem "fine" doesn't mean they aren't struggling.
2. Social exhaustion impacts their productivity, even if they never show it.
3. They would thrive with more asynchronous communication and fewer surprise meetings.
4. Recognising their work without requiring public acknowledgment would be appreciated.



## What does Psychological Safety look like for Neurodivergent Individuals?

Psychological safety for neurodivergent individuals means feeling safe to show up authentically, without fear of negative consequences for being different in how they think, communicate, process, or work.





## Creating Psychological Safety for Neurodivergent Individuals



Predictability



Freedom to be authentic



Valuing diverse communication skills



Space to self-regulate



Respecting differences in executive functioning



Environments that support focus



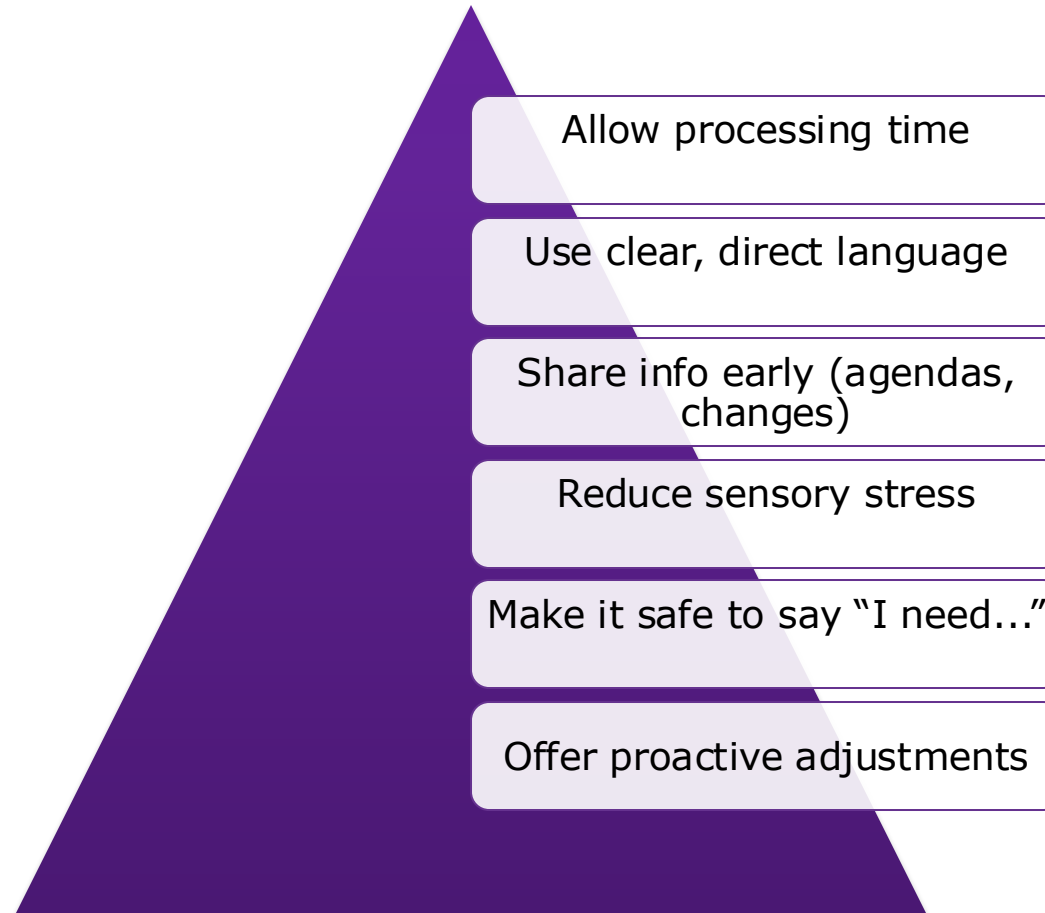
Safety to disclose (or not)



Flexibility



## What practical tools could you start using today?



# Looking for resources?



**Free Downloads**

<http://xceptionalacademy.org.au>

# Q & A

## Thank you

Let's stay in touch!



**Nicole Done**

Principal, Neurodiversity Enablement

 +61 405129483

 [nicole@xceptionalacademy.org.au](mailto:nicole@xceptionalacademy.org.au)

