



## Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 15 April 2026

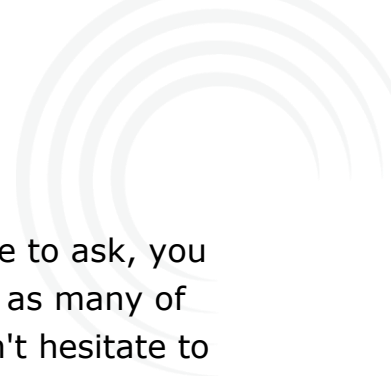
### Sensory workplace design

**Speaker:** Nicole Done, Xceptional Academy

**Host:** Sally Karandrews, DEA

SALLY: Good afternoon, everyone. And welcome to this week's Lunch & Learn. My name's Sally. I'm the Inclusive Employment Australia Policy Manager here at Disability Employment Australia and I will be your host for today's session. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which each of us are dialling in from today. For me that's the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung People. I would like to pay my respects to Elders past and present and recognise that this was sovereign land that was never ceded.

These Lunch & Learns are delivered in partnership between the Centre for Inclusive Employment and Disability Employment Australia. The Centre for Inclusive Employment - sorry, the Centre for Inclusive Employment exists to provide training, practical resources and tools to help support the delivery of high quality employment services and it's a partnership that is followed by the Centre for Social impact at the Swinburne University of Technology, and they have formed a consortium with Inclusion Australia which is the peak representative organisation for people with an intellectual disability, Disability Employment Australia we are a peak body for employment service providers, the National Disability Services, Family Advocacy and the University of Melbourne. Together we bring a strong mix of both research, knowledge and lived experience to the work that we do. Today's session will be live captioned by Expression Australia, and Liv will pop the directions on how to access those live captions into the chat now. The session will be recorded and that recording will be made available on the online hub after the conclusion and it will be accompanied by both slides and a transcript of today.



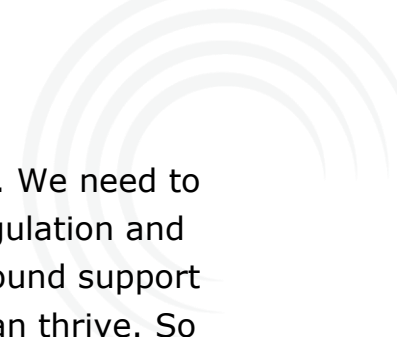
Throughout the session, if you have questions that you would like to ask, you can pop those into the Q&A and we will endeavour to respond to as many of those as possible. If you have questions post session, please don't hesitate to reach out to us with those as well.

Today I'm joined again by Nicole Done who is the principal at Xceptional Academy and Nicole is going to be talking to us about sensory sensitivities in the workplace. Nicole comes with a couple of decades worth of experience both providing training and consultation and advocacy in this space and working with neurodivergent people. So it is my pleasure to hand over to Nicole.

NICOLE: Hi Sally. Thank you so much for that lovely introduction. Hi everybody. It is lovely to spend the next 45 minutes with you during your lunch break. Just to give you a little bit of a snapshot where I come from, I work for an organisation called Xceptional Academy, neurodiversity experts. We work very closely with the Centre for Inclusive Employment and DEA. We're very proud of the work we do. We also work with all sectors of the workforce. So we do a lot of advisory work on workforce planning, we do neuro-inclusion training both on-demand training as well as workshop-style training. We do, like I said, that advisory work. And we do assessment and coaching. It's not diagnostic assessment. We actually do workplace assessment where we marry raw skill set into roles and we support individuals in work-style coaching. But a lot of our coaching is also with managers. What we know when it comes to neuro-inclusion is if we can uplift managers to understand how to work best with all individuals, those principles of universal design, it makes a great difference to the whole workforce.

I'm a pretty casual presenter. I'm very happy for questions to come through as we come through. I know this is quite a topical conversation. So by all means, keep them coming if you do have questions throughout. But we will also open up for a Q&A in the back end.

So let's get started. What are we going to do? Today in this session we're going to pull apart exactly what sensory sensitivity is. We're going to look at the connection with neurodivergence and we're going to look at how it actually



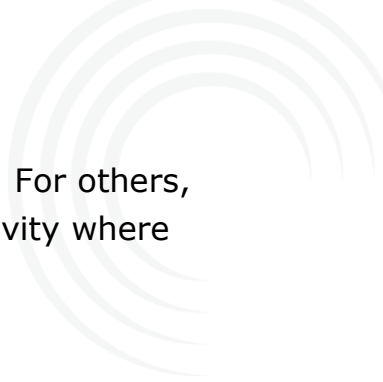
impacts workplaces; what are the priorities we need to focus on. We need to look at reducing sensory load, what the role of masking, self-regulation and burnout has in this topic area, and how we can provide wrap-around support for individuals to make sure that everybody in our workplaces can thrive. So let's take a little step back for a moment and I want you to just think about the modern sensory environment. We're living in an environment where it is sensory intense for everyone. What this looks like can be constant visuals and movement, ongoing noise, auditory interruptions, multiple competing stimuli, busy, crowded environments, exposure to different smells and lighting. You will see this video I have, it is a busy sorting centre and this sensory onslaught is very high.

But then if we start thinking about other workplaces, it could be hospitality, it could be retail, or it could be as simple as a quiet, shared office space. Even in these quieter spaces there's ongoing interruptions throughout a day.

And then when we look beyond the workplace, there's traffic, crowds, background noise, continuous movement. That is, honestly, for some people, a very high load. Sensory load is constant and it accumulates throughout the day.

But what's important for us to stop and think about is do we assume that others experience the environment the same way that we do? What if the world around you feels completely different to somebody else? What if the same environment feels overwhelming for one person but barely noticeable for another? Those are the experiences of the sensory world and we understand the sensory world in different ways. And some individuals may be sensory sensitive. When we talk about sensory sensitivity we're referring to how individuals perceive, process and respond to the sensory environment, respond to the environment around them, I should say, and also how their body responds. Sensory sensitivity isn't about tolerance; it's about how the brain is wired to process the world. The key thing to understand is that the environment is the same for everybody. But how we experience it is not.

Our brain filters and processes sensory information differently. For some people, that filter lets in a lot of input. This is quite often referred to as



hypersensitivity where things can feel intense and overwhelming. For others, the brain filters out too much. And this we refer to as hyposensitivity where they may need more input to feel engaged.


So the environment hasn't changed but the experience has, and that's what drives different types of behaviour in individuals.

Sensory processing differences are greatly linked to brain-based conditions. We know that research shows there's differences in neural pathways, sensory gating and brain connectivity in autistic individuals. Those differences very much are impacted by the way they filter, integrate and prioritise information that's coming through. And we see it across many other areas of neurodivergence. So key research findings show us that up to 97% of autistic individuals experience sensory differences.

We also know that the criteria has been adjusted, so that sensory differences are now one of the diagnostic measures with autism. ADHD, we see that higher ADHD traits report more sensory difficulties. We see a higher rate of hyper and hypo responses to multiple sensory domains. What I mean by that is some people may find the interruptions that are happening within their environment, they're hypersensitive to it. But we also see with ADHDers a response where they can go into deep focus and they're hyper-responsive. So they don't actually take in the sensory information around them. This can be actually seen as a great tool for some people to block out a lot of interruptions in the workplace. So there is positives and negatives there. But it also might mean that they're sensory seeking if they are hypersensitive. They may be looking to take greater risks, they may be looking for foods that are a lot more rich. It might be that they're needing to do excessive exercise to get that response.

And then we see the same with dyslexia. So challenges with the visual and the auditory related to the sensory environment, and difficulty filtering out distractions and overhead lighting is something we do see within this proportion of the community.

So we know all this is going on. Why is this important when we're talking about workplaces? Well, there is a business case for sensory inclusion. We know 1 in



5 Australians are neurodivergent. And we also know to be neuro-inclusive we need to be sensory inclusive. So if we start thinking about how we can design environments that reduce sensory load, we don't just support the individual; we actually improve performance across the board. Reducing that load is going to create better productivity, better wellbeing, stronger retention rates. We know that when people are comfortable in their work environment and have lower stress levels, there's fewer sick days, higher engagement, and in modern workforces one of the business cases that is so important is that greater innovation, that greater unique thinking that we get when we have a diverse workforce. But making that possible is only going to happen if we think of how we can be inclusive, including how the sensory environment impacts.

So let's have a look at the sensory needs of individuals. If a person struggles to regulate their sensory environment, they may encounter exhaustion, decreased productivity, anxiety and it leads to what we would refer to as sensory overload. This happens when the brain finds it challenging to handle the overwhelming amount of sensory information simultaneously.

What happens is individuals may feel overwhelmed. They may retreat from their is your surrounding environment, refrain from speaking, seek a calm environment to recover. And we see this in all settings. It's not just in an office-based scenario. When we think of public transport, coming to and from work, we think of meetings that happen in busy locations, including cafés. We think of the environment that somebody may seek to have lunch and where it can be calming for them.

Let's watch this video to give us some insight into the impact of being hypersensitive to the world around you. I'm going to put this on. And I'll just let you know, as I say I'm going to put it on, it's not coming up with the play button, so I'm just going to wait one second and hopefully it will come up. As we put this video on, it is an indication of how - it didn't like that for some reason. Let's go back. We might come back to it if it is going to play up on me. The purpose of this video is to show that when somebody is hypersensitive to their environment, they're going to feel the sounds, movements, light and the auditory environment much more intensely than many others. For some reason it doesn't want to let me go on. What we'll do is - I'm sorry, we'll move on and maybe at the end if we've got a bit of time come back to it.



So what is the impact of a high sensory load at work? Well, we do know that when somebody feels the sensory input too high or they're trying to regulate themselves, there is impacts. There's cognitive functioning impacts, reduced concentration, slower processing speed, difficulty making decisions and possibly increased errors. We know that emotional regulation is a challenge. So heightened stress and anxiety, irritability, feeling overwhelmed and that increased emotional reactivity to the way that they are responding.

We know that in terms of behavioural responses, if somebody has a high sensory load they may withdraw or shut down. They may avoid situations. So you might find that they're avoiding meeting in groups. They might avoid the physical work environment. Or they may avoid tasks within the group. It may even be as simple as social aspects of the work expectations that they find harder. It may be that they're restless or agitated. It may be that they mask, so they put a high effort into disguising some of these challenges which causes fatigue.

There is the physical impact. So fatigue and exhaustion, headaches are very common and very intense headaches from a high sensory load. And then overall energy levels are also impacted. When it comes to communication, we have problems processing verbal information. So that auditory processing. Reduced ability to articulate thoughts and find gaps in conversations to actually speak up in meetings. You might find that you've got somebody who doesn't give a lot of input and it's not that they can't and not that they don't want to; it's that in that communication setting they're finding it hard to speak up because of the sensory load and their working memory is impaired. And then appearing disengaged or unresponsive. So that assumption that because somebody is not looking at you, it may be that they're not interested. It may be that they're working very hard to process what's going on around them, to use that auditory processing so they do need to look away. And then there's obviously longer-term impacts which we'll talk about throughout the presentation.

But the most important area here is to understand that the brain is overloaded. And when that happens, performance drops. Not because of capability but because of capacity, because the environment is not working for

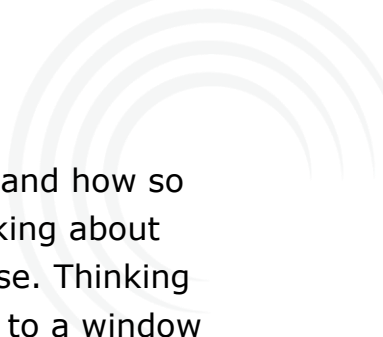


that individual.

So if the issue is sensory overload, not ability, how do we actually reduce that load? The most simple answer to that question is we need to start asking the right questions. We don't make assumptions for anyone that we're working with, we don't decide what might be best for them, decide when we're shaping a role what they will cope with. We have those conversations. The same way we would ask somebody about how best may you approach learning a new task at work, or how do you like to receive feedback? We would ask questions like how does the workplace environment work for you? How do you find the set-up when we're standing around having a conversation? Can you hear because of the background noise? Where is the best place for us to have a conversation one-on-one so that you're going to be able to engage? How does the physical environment work for you? How's the distractions within your set-up and your work station if somebody is working in a desk role?

When we start asking the right questions, we start understanding what is going to be best for that individual, and how we can make those adjustments.

So let's consider some of the areas that we do need to think about when it comes to sensory inclusion. It's important, when we look at these adjustments, we look across all different work environments because it's going to be different for everybody, the difference between an office-based role to a more blue collar factory-based role, compared to hospitality. So the first one that becomes very obvious is the environment. And it's not necessarily around changing the physical environment, although workplace design is very important, but with the physical environment it's around understanding how somebody will cope within that current environment. So thinking about light. We know that strip lighting and overhead lighting is very exhausting and a very intense experience for a lot of individuals who are hypersensitive. We know that noise and the acoustic amenity. Many people say in my office it is like having 30 different TV stations going at once because of all the different noises and being able to pick up on individual conversations and what's happening with a machine at the back, or the photocopier, or the kitchen just near me.

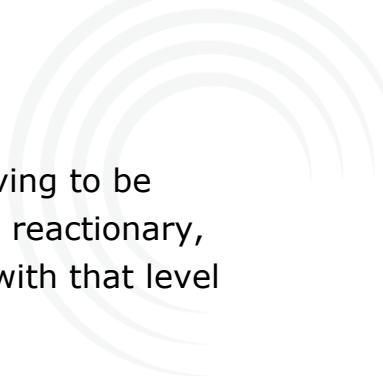


We also think about the acoustic amenity of a work environment and how so often there's hard surfaces. So how things can be softened. Thinking about stations that have acoustic padding around them to minimise noise. Thinking about the light putting somebody in a work station which is close to a window with a blind where natural lighting is easier to moderate. Thinking about smells and if somebody is hypersensitive to the environment, they may find being close to the kitchen to work difficult. Thinking about people eating food at desks. I have worked with a woman for years who is hypersensitive to smells and coffee makes her feel very ill. She quite often would have to go home if she got a headache from those coffee smells. Lids on keep cups are no problem. So we're talking very minimal changes that make a big impact.

Understanding that temperature and work flow and the visual distractions have an impact. Over the years I've had managers say that this person just doesn't seem to be able to engage when we're in a team meeting, but they have large screens with moving advertising around the particular organisation that that person worked which were constant visual distractions. So the person was finding it very hard to concentrate because of that constant sensory onslaught.

When we think about equipment, thinking about the way somebody can sit, what the chair looks like, whether they would benefit from something like a higher chair with arms around them that quite often makes the sensory environment feel better. Thinking about uniforms and clothing. Quite often fabrics have a great impact on those that are hypersensitive. And just the general movement between spaces. We see a lot that if we're working in buildings where somebody comes out of a lift into a very large, well lit area, or there is digital screens straight at the lift, it can be quite disconcerting in terms of the physical set-up and how that impacts.

Thinking about the type of tasks that we ask people to do. So within the hospitality industry, front-facing, understanding sensory inclusion or the sensory environment in hospitality and working with the general public will have a cumulative impact. Recently been supporting somebody who does do front of house in the morning but in the afternoon they're given a task to work in the back half restocking because the sensory environment and the lack of load required works much better for them. The pace is much better. Understanding that task switching can be hard in an environment where there

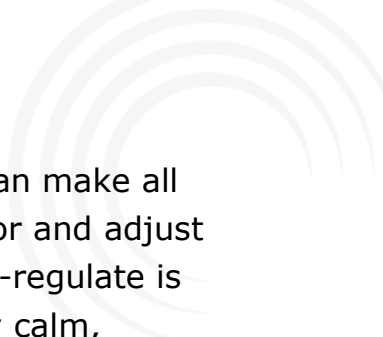


is a high sensory load. So having very clear set tasks and not having to be reactionary if somebody does have challenges with needing to be reactionary, maybe that's not the role for them, that role shaping, especially with that level of predictability.

Talk about meetings rooms and thinking about the space and the acoustic amenity and being able to see people's faces which helps thinking about if the acoustic amenity is challenging, also having the written component to allow somebody to be able to communicate in a written form on a shared screen. Thinking about the travel. So I've mentioned that public transport has a high sensory load. So thinking about the fact that maybe setting meetings at 9 am after somebody has just arrived, then it's going to be more challenging for them, giving them half an hour to decompress. Understanding that some people will find travelling to and from work very difficult in peak hours, with buses or on trains. So that idea of allowing that shift timing. So to be able to start earlier and finish earlier to avoid those high intense times on public transport.

Quite often what happens is when somebody isn't feeling safe enough to discuss that, they'll arrive super early and leave late, so they're working much longer days than they need to. Having quieter spaces for people to decompress, and understanding if they leave their desk at lunchtime and they may be seeking a quieter space, there is a function to that behaviour and we need to allow people that space to do that.

Thinking about how we instruct individuals. So verbal instruction in busy areas compared to written instruction for many roles. And then the flexibility to be able to shape your day. So not every role is going to allow somebody to work from home. But having low sensory days, days if somebody can work from home - and it can be as minimal as just a couple of days a week where on those days they can moderate their environment, their lighting, they can wear more comfortable clothing. They can have minimal social interactions which actually means that those low sensory days help with that cumulative impact. Allowing individuals that autonomy to work out how to structure their day makes a really meaningful difference to the way people work.

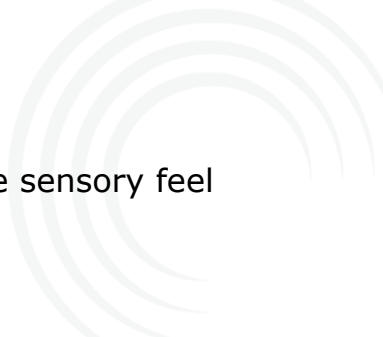


Of course, supporting self-regulation is really important. So we can make all these adjustments but allowing somebody an individual to monitor and adjust for their needs is very, very important. What we do when we self-regulate is we adjust our emotions, our behaviour and our responses to stay calm, focused and engaged. When it comes to sensory regulation, we all learn to do it. Toddlers have tantrums at 2 and 3 because they're learning to communicate their needs and those meltdowns or those tantrums are because they don't have in place that ability to self-regulate. And all adults within the workforce do learn and have learned as they've grown up to self-regulate. And it is going to look very different for every individual.

Self-regulation shows up in different ways, in terms of cognitively people might use strategies for planning, they may use apps and different technology to break down their work to help with that overload. We've got that opportunity for breathing techniques, looking away. I worked for years with a wonderful individual who at lunchtime finds a very quiet meeting room and puts on his noise cancelling headphones and dances. And that is a way for him to self-regulate and it works really well.

Mmm people will fidget, take a walk, change their environment to help with their energy levels. Obviously there is the way somebody chooses to engage or taking time away.

A common way people self-regulate, particularly within the neurodivergent community, is through stimming. Now, stimming behaviours are super important. I constantly say, "What is the function of the behaviour?" So if you're seeing a stimming behaviour, it is serving a purpose. Stimming is a way for individuals to regulate that sensory input, the emotion and focus through repetitious movement and actions. Stimming activities can be used to calm but it also can be used for regulation to help with attention. So it may be as simple as playing with a fidget toy. Many individuals might play with a ring or a piece of jewellery. A stimming may be as simple as rubbing your lips together or stroking the inside of your mouth with your tongue to calm yourself down. Some individuals leave the house with a soft piece of fabric or something in their pocket that they can stroke that helps. It may be self-talk. It may be a simple rocking activity, or playing with a pen or some silly putty. It may be actually movement. It may be sitting on an exercise ball at your desk and

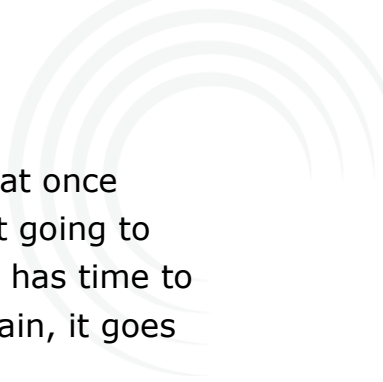


rocking. Many individuals like particular keyboards because of the sensory feel of that keyboard and that keeps them regulated.

We need to understand that there is functions to all of these behaviours and what it does is allow people to be their authentic self and regulate themselves at work. If we don't allow that, if we don't allow people the option to be themselves, as simple as wearing noise cancelling headphones, as simple as taking themselves out for momentary breaks to allow themselves to do what they need to do, what happens is they struggle to be their authentic self. And we refer that as masking. That is the consciously or unconsciously suppressing one's natural behaviours. There is great impact when people mask to an extent that it can impact their wellbeing. We know that masking - I like to say it is almost like going on stage every night, how exhausting that is for an actor. Imagine if you're masking and suppressing your natural tendencies at work all day every day.

So what happens is when we mask, we have exhaustion and burnout. We see that there is a loss of identity, not knowing where the mask begins and the real self starts. We see great links with anxiety and depression and low self-esteem from masking. But also it delays diagnosis. So we see it especially with women and gender diverse people where masking is so common because they are expected to have those social reinforcements.

And if we don't allow people to just be themselves and ask and discuss their specific sensory needs at work, unfortunately it's greatly linked with burnout. Burnout within the neurodivergent community is becoming increasingly common. I'm work being a lot of organisations on minimising this risk at the moment because of the high rates that are reported. Burnout is deeply linked with the nervous system. What happens is an individual, the way they process and regulate that stress and that sensory input, it cumulatively builds. It is a constant state of adjusting behaviours to fit in. It can be, like I said, that exhaustion. It can mean that somebody needs to, unfortunately, when they are in this state they become even more sensory sensitive, and as a result what we see is that nervous system becomes overworked. And without rest and regulation, it hits a wall. And that is where we see burnout come in. And the impacts of burnout obviously are well known but what we don't talk about is the extended leave that so often somebody needs. So we're taking people




out of the work environment. And what is so important here is that once somebody has time out and we have a gradual reentry, that's not going to support that gradual reentry success, even if the nervous system has time to rest if we haven't changed the areas that are being impacted. Again, it goes back to how to support that sensory environment to help.

Before we finish off and go into questions, here are some day-to-day areas that, as an individual, you can support somebody with their sensory overload. What you can do to simply help them. So one of the first things that is really important is that if you know that somebody has particular sensory needs and you've been asking the right questions, they're open with the conversation. What we need to do is we need to allow people to have the autonomy to tell what is needed, to leave and not have to ask for permission if there is a challenge to maintain that psychological safety. So it may be there is an inbuilt mechanism. There is a discussion that if somebody is having a hard day, this is what they will do.

I like to talk about a strategy that I have had a lot of coaching clients use over years that's really successful. I call it the purple post it rule. It could be any colour. But as simple as the idea that if somebody is having a really hard time, the work colleagues that are closest to them, if they see that purple post-it put in a location that's predominant, so it might be on a computer screen, and that person has disappeared, that's their signal to say, "I've just needed to step away for a while. I needed a break." And it's as simple as just allowing somebody the autonomy to do that. And it may be for half an hour they've stepped away and they'll come back. Recognising that it is a cumulative. Each day it is a cumulative but it also is a cumulative over a week. So that flexibility is so important. As a team leader or as a colleague, I always am willing to step in. It may be as simple as saying to somebody, "I can see that you've had a really tricky day or your workload is really busy. If you would like to step away from this meeting today, that's fine. We'll just give you the notes."

If you're on a Zoom call or Teams call, just sending a message and saying to somebody, "If you'd like to turn off your video for processing this afternoon, that's absolutely fine." Or actually showing that inclusion and it's all okay. So showing vulnerability and discussing that yourself. "Everybody, I've had a really hard week. It's Friday morning. I'm sorry, I just have to keep my



camera off today." So showing that you understand that that flexibility is needed.

And understanding that it's going to be very different at different - from week to week, how much support somebody might need. Timing does matter. So if you do see that someone's really having a hard time, and maybe they have stepped away, having a conversation with them about it at that point is adding to their sensory load. You're asking them to communicate and discuss and explain to you about the challenge. The kind thing to do is to allow that person time and space to self-regulate, but not forgetting that that's happened and have a conversation with them at another time. It may be the next day or two days later. Just saying, "I noticed the other day you were having a really hard time and I'm so glad that you stepped away or I'm so glad you put your noise cancelling headphones on or you chose to sit in a quiet meeting room to get your work done. But is there something we could do to support you to prevent you getting to that point?" So you're having those conversations proactively to be able to support somebody.

The last thing that's super important is to understand that sensory sensitivity does not improve simply with time and exposure. Asking an individual to have to justify why they need an adjustment, to have to justify why they may need a locked desk or why they would prefer their work station to be at a particular time, or why their shift is better in the evenings because it is quieter. All those areas and that justification is not inclusion because what it's saying is, "We've helped you for a short time but you should have pulled yourself together. And we can't continue to do that." We know in this situation it doesn't improve with time. So we do need to lean in and advocate for people and understand that this is an adjustment that needs to be made long term, and it is to help them thrive, to help them feel safe and to help the wellbeing of that individual but the whole workforce.

Now, I have been talking for 40 minutes, and I'm sure that there is a lot of questions. What I'm going to do is - I'm just going to see for some reason if this video does choose to come up. But if it doesn't, I'm sure what will happen is that the link will be sent with the recording, the transcript and obviously the slides. Doesn't appear to, unfortunately. We did set it up and did a practice before everybody jumped on. I'm really sorry that hasn't happened. We'll



share that with the group remotely.

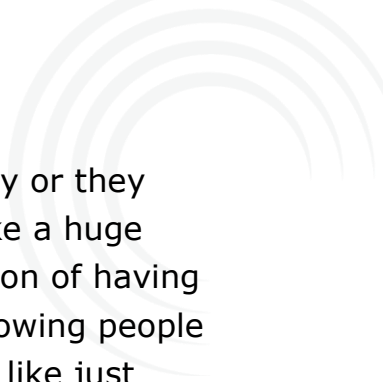
What I will say is if you are interested, Xceptional Academy has a lot of different resources. We have one on sensory sensitivity that's a resource you can download to share with other team members if that's helpful. We've things on on boarding and explaining different areas of neurodivergence. By all means, jump on to our website. But I'm going to open up for questions, if there's any questions now.

SALLY: Thank you so much for that, Nicole, and for all of that, yeah, excellent information around sensory sensitivity and overwhelm is and how it can appear in the workforce, but also how we can support our colleagues who might be experiencing those kind of feelings of sensitivity and overwhelm as well. That's been incredibly helpful and insightful.

I'm just checking questions. We've got any recommendations for a quiet rooms? Not much more context than that but --

NICOLE: Sure. Look, a lot of workplaces do have quiet zones these days and that is a great addition if you have it. But there needs to, obviously, if somebody is going to use a space that's a quiet room, it needs to be that they feel safe to be able to do it. It needs to be that that is an environment that is used by a lot of individuals and it is not just seen as something that's put together just for that individual.

If you work somewhere that doesn't have a quiet zone it doesn't mean there are not smaller quieter offices. When I say offices, sorry, I mean meeting rooms. When I say meeting rooms quite often meeting rooms have the ability to lower light which is a lot more friendly for a lot of individuals. We do see that somebody being able to work in quiet zones in offices. I always talk about a wonderful office in Sydney that they have the transport for New South Wales where in the back half of one of their levels they have a whole section which they call the quiet zone, a bit like a quiet zone in a train, but it is set up with individual work spaces where people can go and work and there is minimal interruption, it is quiet, there is no sensory distractions, and it's a productive space. That ability to wear those noise cancelling headphones, to be able to sit



in situations or in desk set-ups that have greater acoustic amenity or they have higher screens around them. Those things are going to make a huge difference to somebody's working ability. But obviously the addition of having any sort of quiet space is going to be really practical. But also allowing people to step away from their desk when they need to. There's nothing like just being able to get some fresh air that does quite often help individuals.

SALLY: Amazing. We have had a bit of a flurry of questions come through right at the end however we are out of time. What I might do is keep a record of those questions and, yeah, I might discuss them with you post session, if that's okay, and maybe we can send some additional answers.

NICOLE: Absolutely, no problems.

SALLY: I wanted to say thanks so much for coming along and sharing - encourage everybody to watch that video, we will send out a link for it, but also check out the resource that Nicole mentioned. Don't forget to log your CPD points for today, two points for coming along to each of our Lunch & Learn sessions and we will be back in a fortnight with Liz and Eoin who will be sharing their lived experience of Down syndrome in the workplace. Thank you again to Nicole for sharing today, for Liv for doing all the work in the background, and everyone being here and sharing their lunch break with us today. Thank you so much.

NICOLE: Thank you.