Centre for Inclusive Employment

Disability Employment AUSTRALIA

Sensory Workplace Design:

Supporting sensory sensitivities in workplaces

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Who are we?

XCEPTIONAL ACADEMY

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

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In This Session, We'll Cover

- What sensory sensitivity is and why it matters
- How it connects to neurodivergence
- Why it's a business priority, not just a people issue
- The real impact on focus, behaviour, and wellbeing
- Practical ways to reduce sensory load
- The role of masking, self-regulation, and burnout
- How to create consistent and sustainable support
- Open discussion and questions


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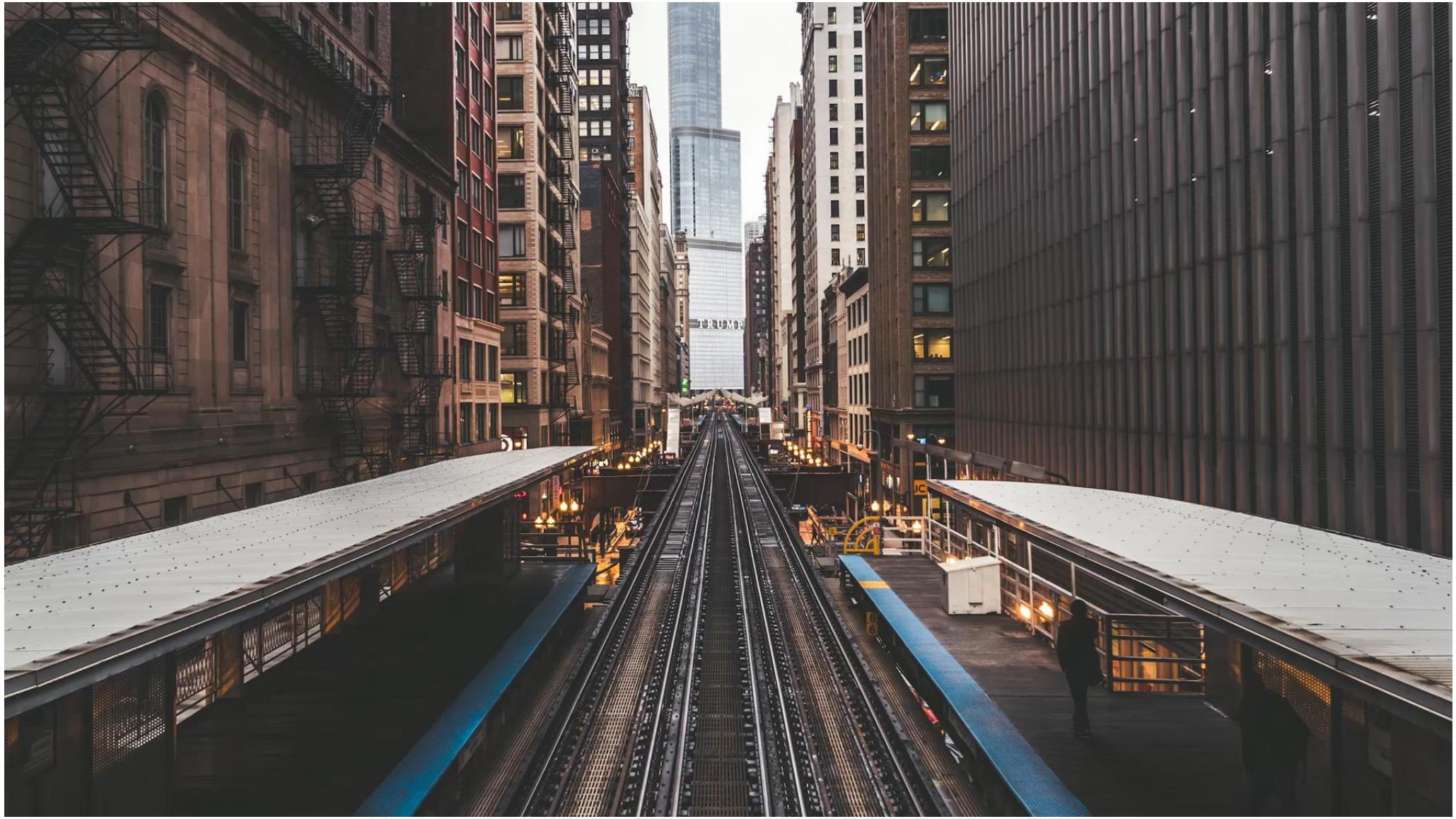

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Is the sensory world the same for everyone?

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Sensory Sensitivity
Refers to how individuals perceive, process, and respond to sensory information from their environment and their own body.

"Sensory sensitivity isn't about tolerance, it's about how the brain is wired to process the world."

Sensory Processing Differences

Hypersensitive
(Over-responsive)
"Too much input"

- Sounds feel louder
- Lights feel brighter
- Textures feel uncomfortable
- Easily overwhelmed

👉 Brain processing:
Reduced filtering → more sensory information comes through → intensity increases

Hyposensitive
(Under-responsive)
"Not enough input"

- May not notice sensory input
- Seeks movement or stimulation
- Higher threshold for pain or sound
- Appears under-responsive

👉 Brain processing:
Increased filtering or reduced registration → less sensory input is detected

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Sensory processing differences are linked to brain-based differences

Research shows differences in **neural pathways, sensory gating, and brain connectivity** in autistic individuals

These differences affect how sensory information is:

- filtered
- integrated
- prioritised

👉 This is why sensory sensitivity is not behavioural; it is **neurological**

Key Research Findings

Autism

- Studies show **up to 97% of autistic individuals** experience sensory differences
- Sensory differences are now included in diagnostic criteria for autism

ADHD

- Research indicates individuals with higher **ADHD traits report more sensory difficulties**
- Hyper and hypo responses across multiple sensory domains

Dyslexia

- Challenges integrating: **visual** (reading) **auditory** (sounds)
- Difficulty filtering distractions and overhead lighting

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The Business Case for Sensory Inclusion

Prevalence

- 1 in 5 Australians are neurodivergent
- To be neuro-inclusive we need to be sensory inclusive

When we reduce overload, we unlock performance

- Better focus → higher productivity
- Lower stress → improved wellbeing
- Inclusive environments → stronger retention

What this leads to:

- Fewer sick days
- Higher engagement
- Greater innovation

👉 **Inclusion isn't just the right thing to do, it's how organisations perform better**

Understanding Sensory Needs

01

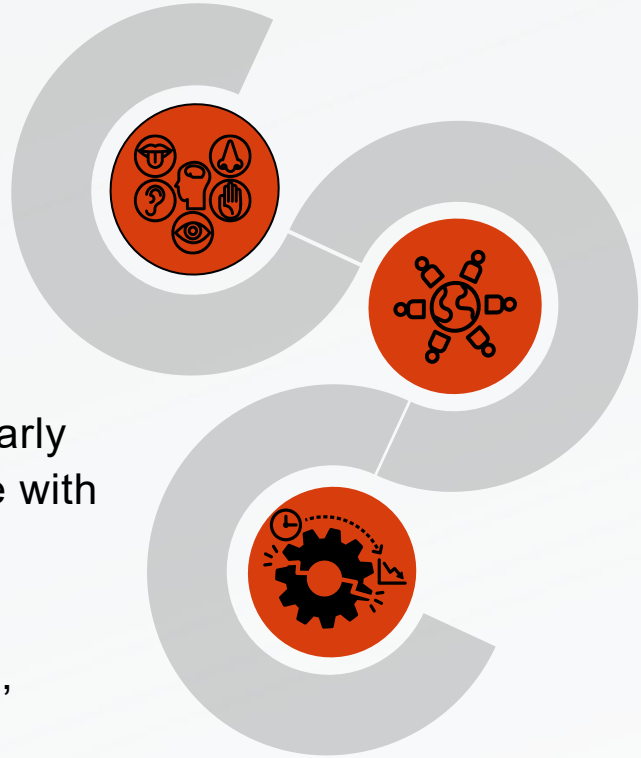
Individuals with heightened sensory sensitivity may find everyday environments overwhelming due to hypersensitive processing of sensory inputs like light, noise, movement, and smells, leading to sensory overload.

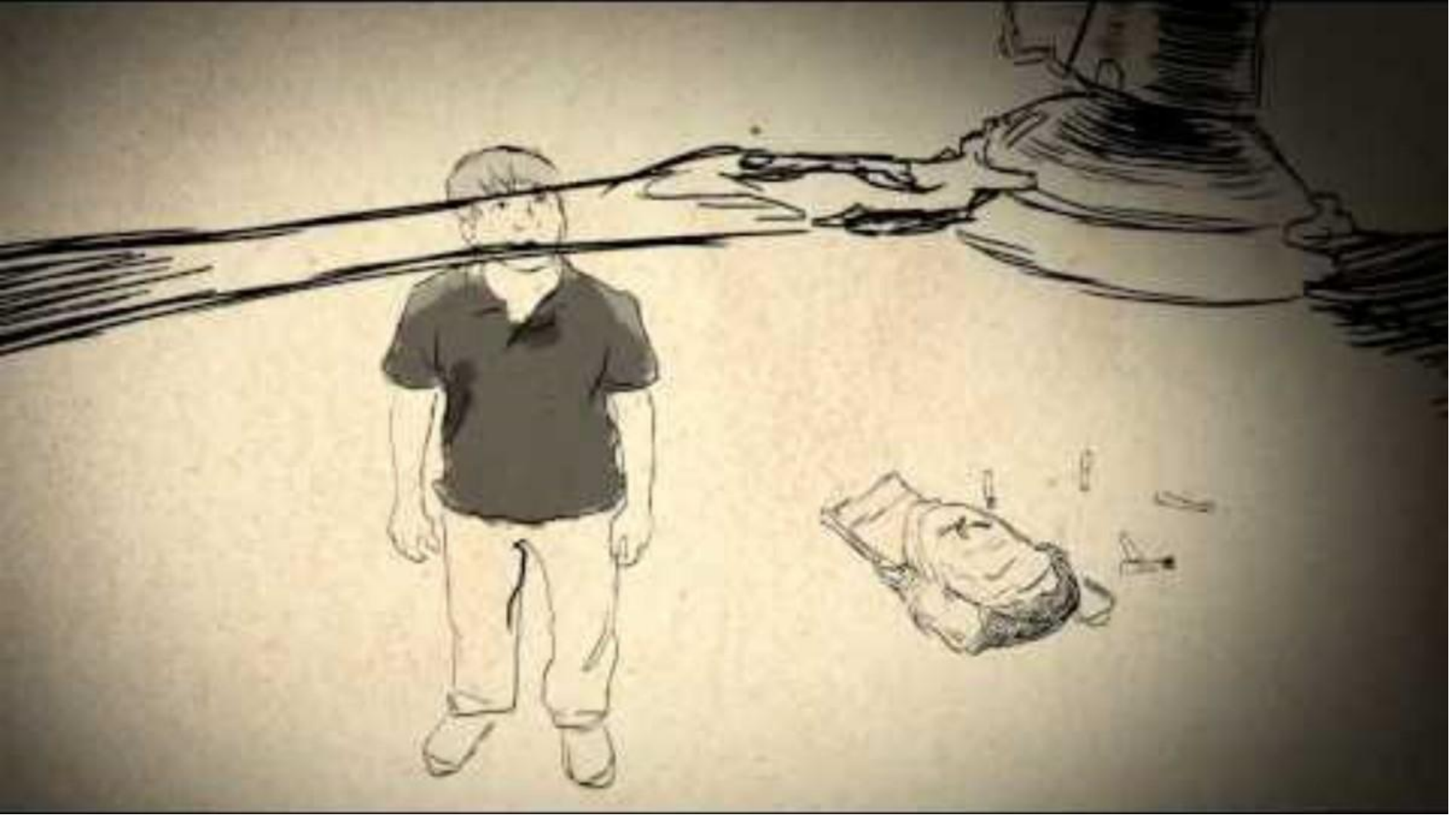
02

Crowded public transport, cafes, and busy offices or workplaces can be particularly challenging, causing cognitive load, distraction, exhaustion, and stress for those with heightened sensory sensitivity.

03

These environments can negatively impact an individual's productivity, stress levels, morale, and overall well-being.





https://youtu.be/K2P4Ed6G3gw?si=hSXGea2QpPE5lTEw

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Impact of High Sensory Load at Work

When sensory input is too high and cannot be regulated, it impacts:

- Cognitive Functioning
- Emotional Regulation
- Behavioural Response
- Communication
- Potential Longer-Term Impacts

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If the issue is sensory overload, not ability, how do we reduce the load?


Ask the Right
Questions

Areas to Consider for Sensory Inclusion

Environment

- Light
- Noise and acoustics
- Smells
- Temperature and airflow
- Visual distractions

Physical Work Setup

- Workstation (where applicable)
- Equipment and tools used
- Uniforms or clothing (fabric, fit, PPE)
- Movement between spaces

Task & Role Design

- Type of tasks (repetitive vs varied)
- Pace of work
- Task switching
- Level of unpredictability

Location & Movement

- Meeting and workstation location
- Time of meeting or shift
- Travel between sites
- Break spaces and access to quiet areas

Social & Communication Demands

- Customer interaction (e.g. hospitality, retail)
- Team proximity and interaction
- Verbal instructions vs written instructions

Work Patterns & Flexibility

- Working from home (low sensory days)
- Shift timing and length
- Break frequency and timing
- Flexibility in task allocation
- Autonomy over how work is completed and location

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Supporting Self-regulation

Self-Regulation

Cognitive Self-Regulation

- Using a planner or app to break tasks into steps and stay organised
- Delaying an impulsive decision
- Reframing negative thoughts

Emotional Self-Regulation

- Taking a break or using a “reset” activity
- Using mindfulness or breathing exercises
- Having a quiet space to retreat to when overstimulated

Behavioural Self-Regulation

- Setting timers to stay on task
- Stimming
- Avoiding known triggers when possible

Social Self-Regulation

- Preparing scripts for challenging interactions
- Choosing when to mask or unmask depending on safety and comfort
- Practising self-advocacy

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Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour) is a way individuals regulate their sensory input, emotions, or focus through repetitive movements or actions.

- Fidgeting or tapping
- Rocking or pacing
- Playing with objects
- Repeating sounds or words
- Doodling or clicking a pen
- Movement

Masking: consciously or unconsciously suppressing or hiding one's natural behaviours, thoughts, or responses in order to conform to social norms or expectations, particularly in neurotypical environments.

Behaviour
- Suppressing stimming or natural movements
- Appearing calm externally while feeling overwhelmed
- Over-preparing or over-checking work

Communication
- Rehearsing what to say before speaking
- Forcing eye contact
- Mirroring others' tone, language, or body language

Social Interaction
- Copying how others interact
- Avoiding speaking unless certain
- Saying "yes" to avoid standing out

Work Patterns
- Working longer hours to "keep up"
- Avoiding asking for help
- Pushing through fatigue or overload

Sensory Workplace Design; Nicole Done

Understanding Neurodivergent Burnout

Burnout is a state of **chronic physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion** experienced by many neurodivergent individuals after long periods of trying to cope in environments that are not well-suited to their needs.
It's not the same as general workplace stress or neurotypical burnout. Instead, it's often caused by the **cumulative toll of masking**, sensory overload, social strain, and constant adaptation.

The Role of the Nervous System

Causes and Impacts

Management Best Practice

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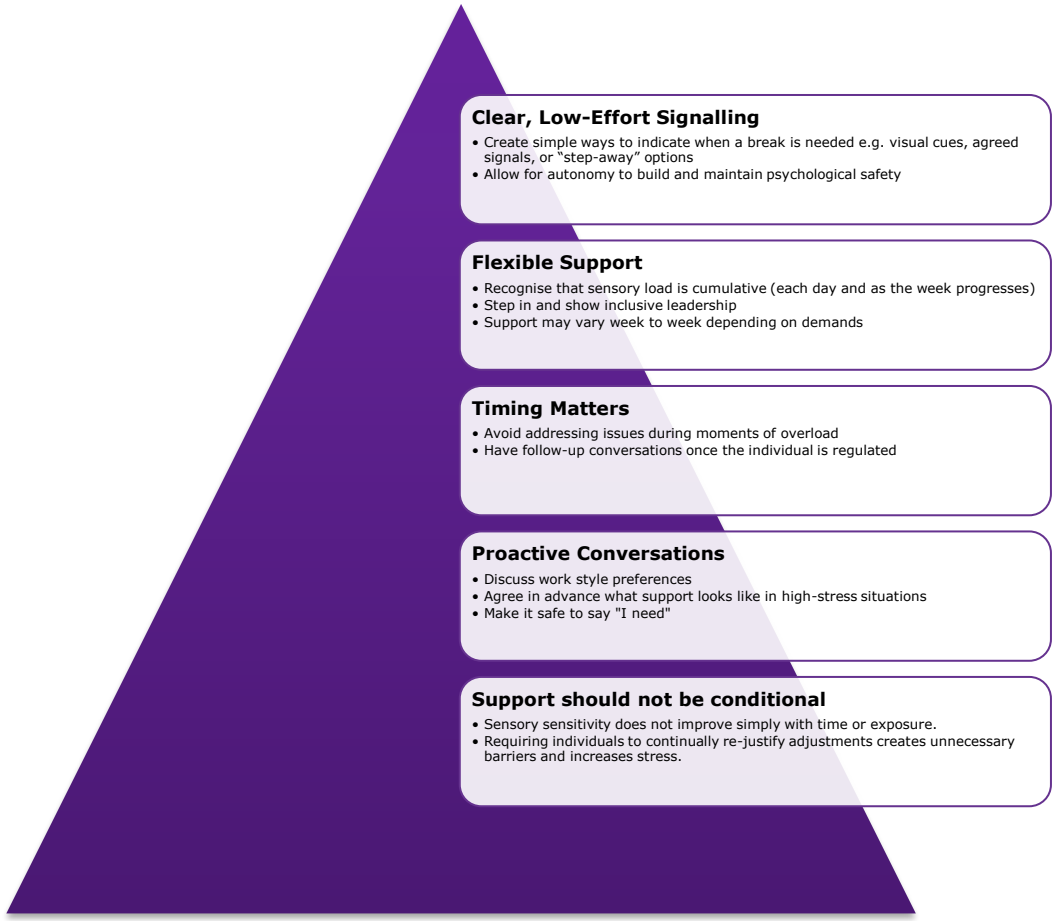
Supporting Neurodivergent Individuals Day to Day

Recognising sensory overload and responding effectively can make a significant difference to wellbeing and performance.



Looking for resources?

Free Downloads

http://xceptionalacademy.org.au

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Q & A

Thank you

Let’s stay in touch!

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