

# Supporting the wellbeing needs of neurodiverse colleagues

© 2021 Matthew Trerise and Angela Armstrong



# / Your experts



Matthew Trerise

[Matthew@MatthewTrerise.com](mailto:Matthew@MatthewTrerise.com)

Autism & Neurodiversity  
Consultant at DMA Talent



Angela Armstrong PhD

[Angela@AngelaArmstrong.com](mailto:Angela@AngelaArmstrong.com)

Leadership Coach and Learning  
and Development Consultant



[https://dma.org.uk/talent/  
neurodiversity-initiative](https://dma.org.uk/talent/neurodiversity-initiative)

# / Agenda

A workplace culture that supports, embraces,  
encourages and promotes wellbeing... for everyone

1. Explanation of **neurodiversity**, some **challenges** and **advantages**
2. Make **remote working** more permanent for neurodiverse colleagues?
3. How to support neurodiverse colleagues with **technology** within a blended working environment/whilst working remotely
4. How to navigate a **return to the workplace**
5. Long-term effects of **social distancing**
6. The impact of limited opportunities for **socialising**
7. Approaches to introducing/expanding **support networks**
8. The **long-term impact of the coronavirus and lockdown**

# / Poll 1 of 2

- If we asked you to explain neurodiversity non-stop, without repeating information, how long could you confidently talk for?
  - **A** Less than 10 minutes
  - **B** ten mins to 1 hour
  - **C** an hour to half a day
  - **D** one full day
  - **E** one week

# / Neurodiversity 1 of 2

- Neurodiversity is the concept that brain differences are normal and appear as a result of **normal variations** in the human genome/DNA
- Whether you are **left-handed** or right-handed is a small genetic variation
- The term 'neurodiversity' includes bigger genetic variations such as **Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, etc**
- If your brain is “wired” to work differently it **fundamentally changes** how you experience the world around you and how you can express yourself and contribute to the world
- The public often considers those with neurological variations as *deficient* not *different*, we seek to challenge the **stigma**, through awareness raising and facilitated conversation

# / Neurodiversity 2 of 2

- The medical diagnostic model seeks to identify distinctive capabilities that vary from neurotypical,
  - **Sensory**
  - **Cognitive**
  - **Social**
- Unfortunately, **the world humans have created** is constructed primarily to meet the needs of neurotypical brains, so others may struggle
- Sleep must be sacrosanct (heavier neural load takes longer to dissipate)
- Neurodiversity is a **protected characteristic** (it is classed as a disability)
- **Context matters**, a difference can be a strength or a disadvantage

/ Why now?

## Organisations embracing neurodiversity





# / Self-revealed neurodiversity hall of fame

Richard Branson  
Dyslexia



Sir Anthony Hopkins  
Asperger syndrome



Simone Biles (Gymnast)  
ADHD



Temple Grandin  
Asperger syndrome



Justin Timberlake  
OCD, ADD



Chris Packham  
Asperger syndrome

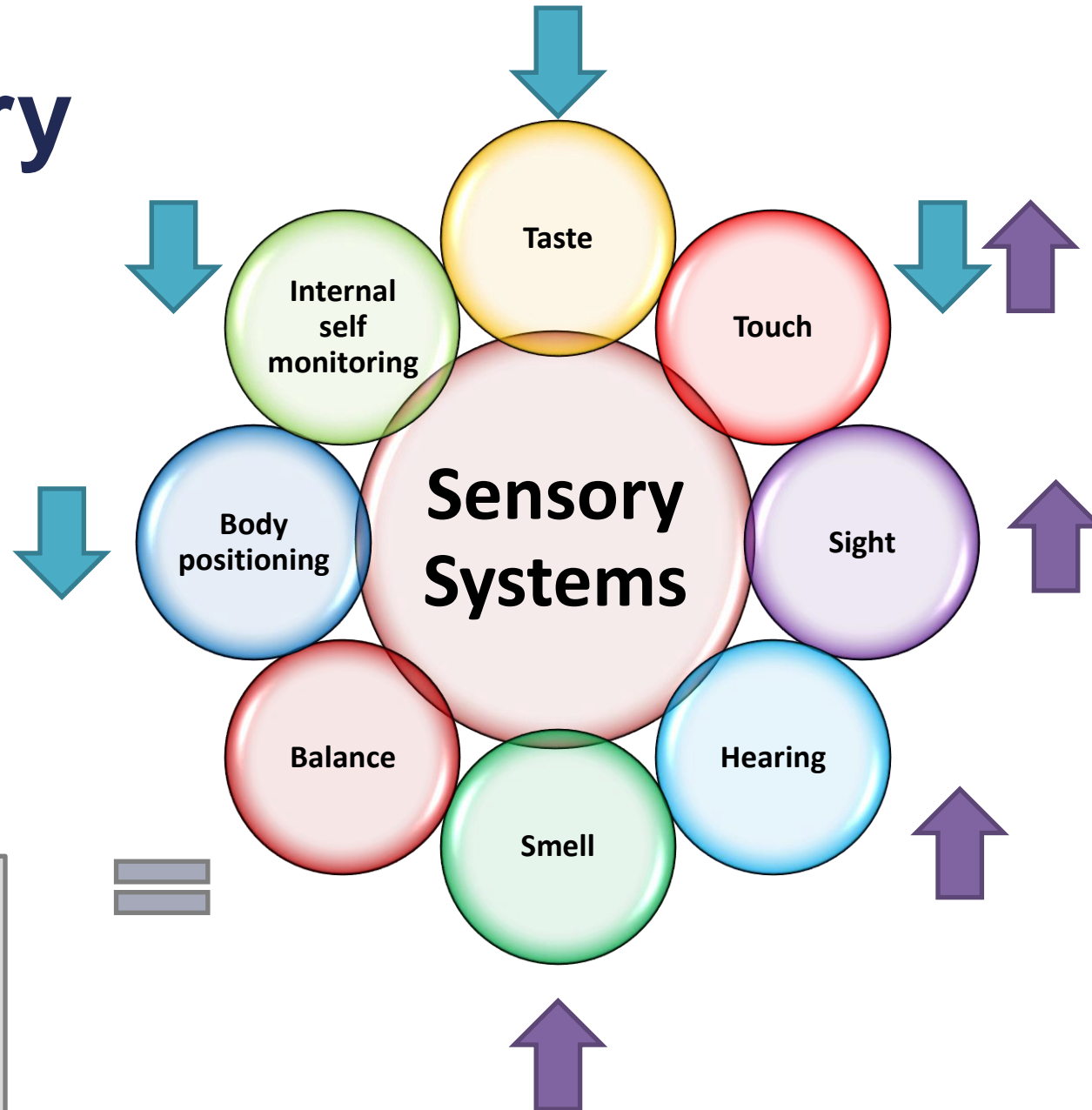


Satoshi Tajiri (Inventor Pokemon)  
Autism Spectrum Disorder





# / Sensory



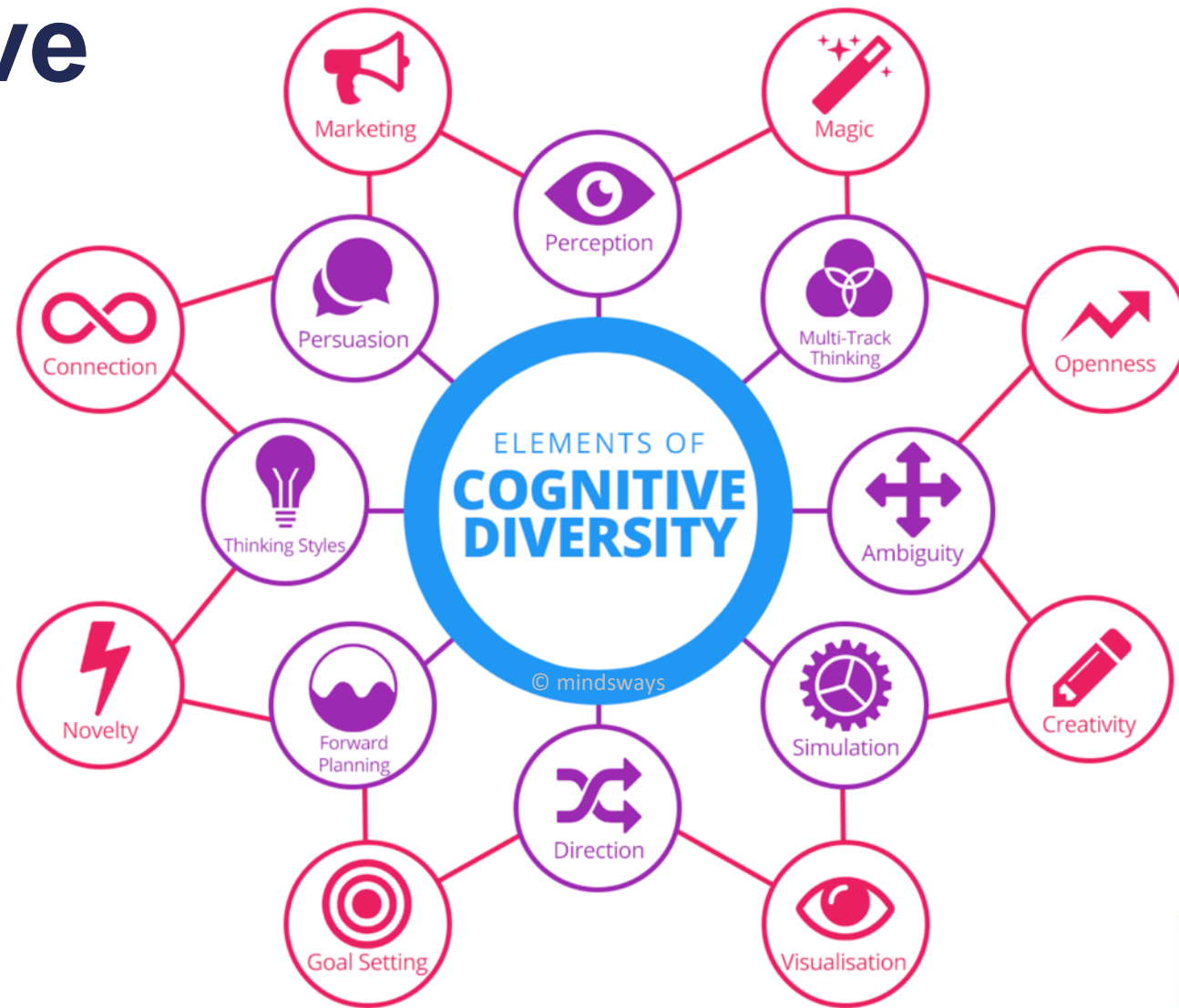
## / Challenges

- Constant environment-induced stress reduces endurance/energy
- Social stigma (e.g. ear defenders)
- Unable to distinguish useful noise (e.g. conversation) from background noise (e.g. networking or office environment)
- Strong physical response to smell, sound, touch, temperature etc.
- Irritations prevent concentration  
electrical hum, fluorescent flicker

## / Advantages

- Context specific:
  - Manager + hyper-sound (grapevine)
  - Chef + hyper-taste
  - Musician + hyper-sound
  - Sewage worker + hypo-smell

# / Cognitive



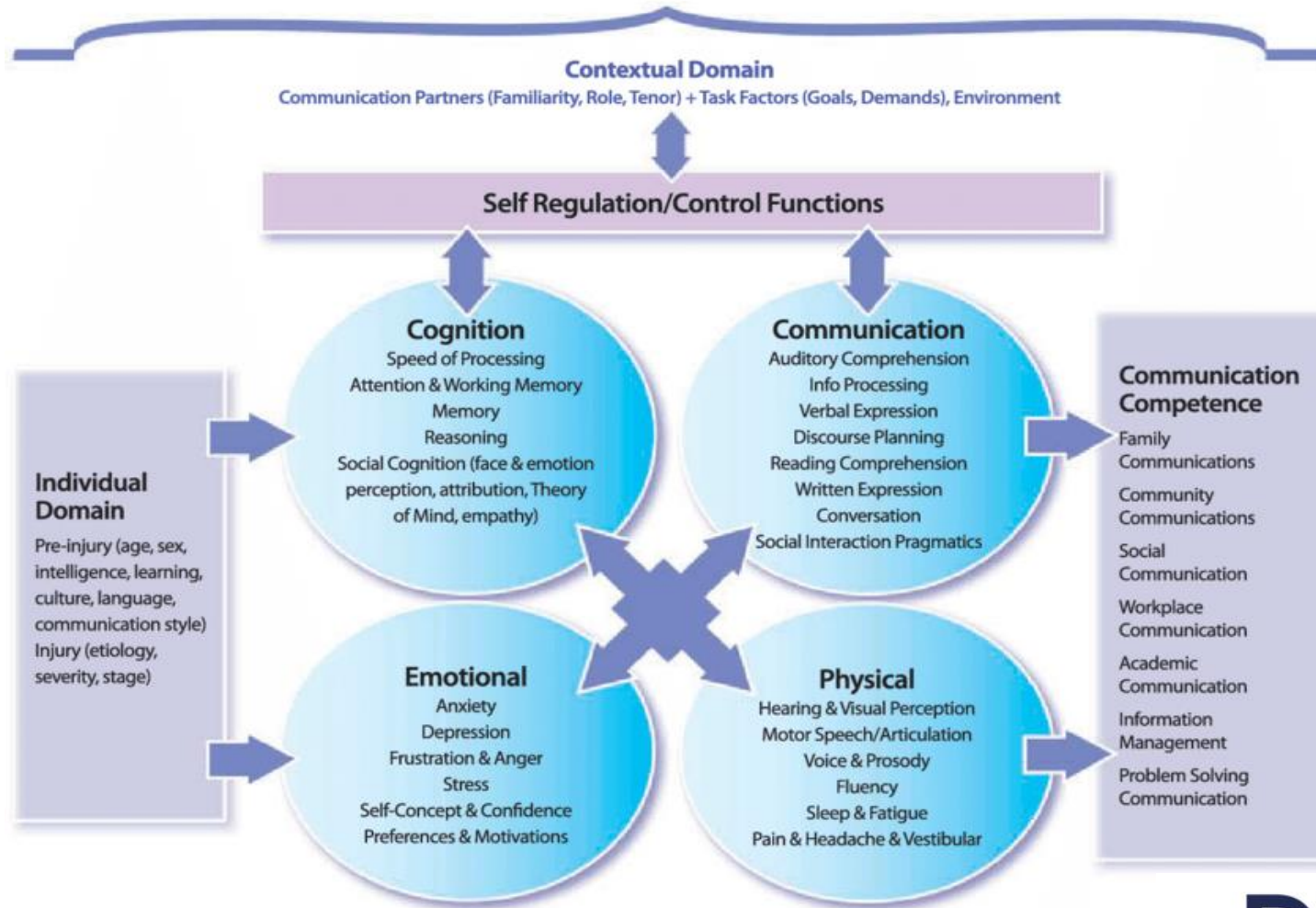
## / Challenges

- Strong logical, or creative, bias
- Ability to hyper-focus (internal dialogue)
- Analysis paralysis
- Decisions more head than heart
- Tolerance for boredom

## / Advantages

- Excel at finding patterns (e.g. in data) or excel at 'thinking outside the box'
- Ability to hyper-focus (on job at hand)
- Above average IQ (for some)
- Different thinking = different solutions
- Aptitude for and patience with detail

# / Social



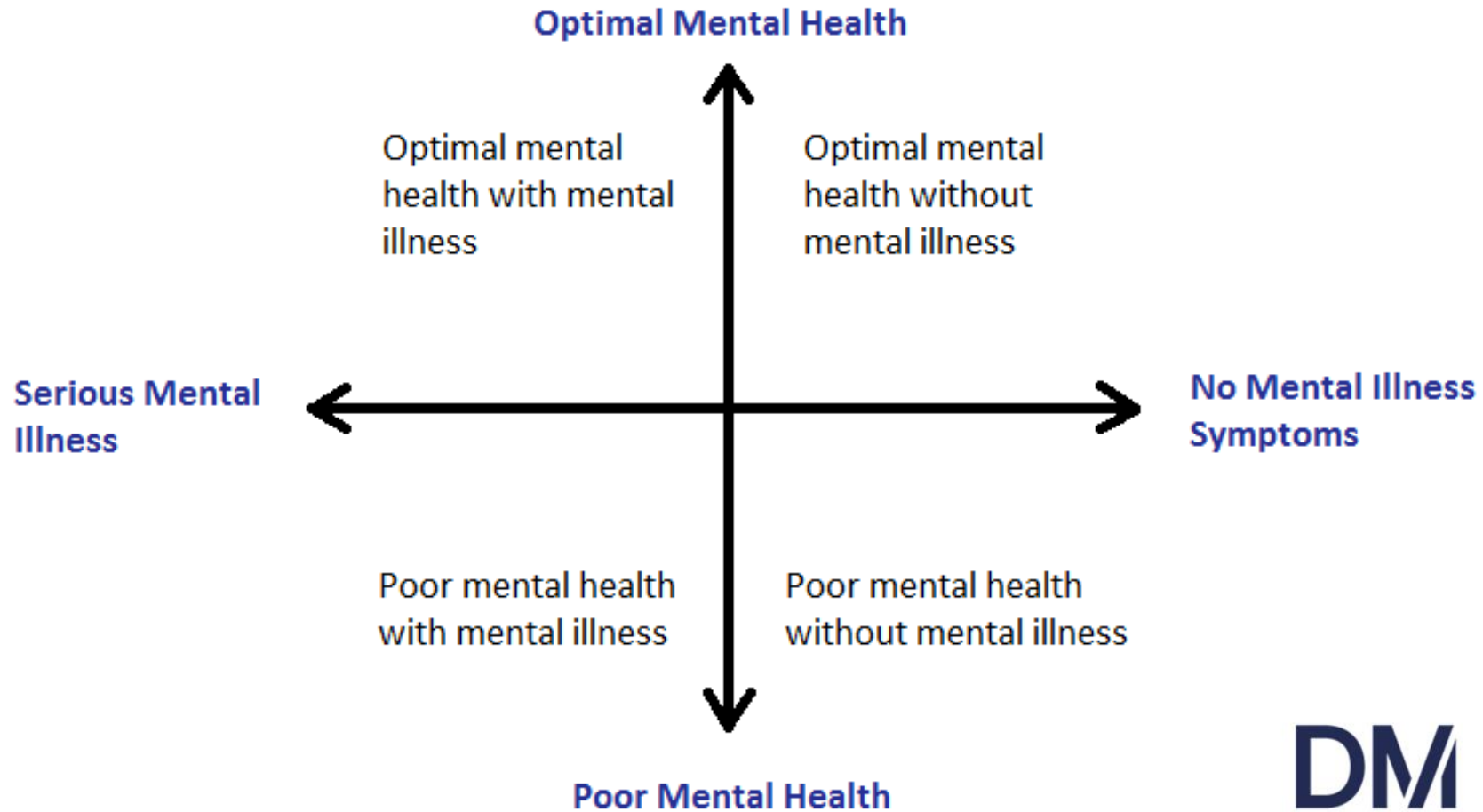
## / Challenges

- Social stigma/pressure to 'mask'
- Social etiquette
- Office politics
- Moderating debate effort vs empathy
- Slow to build relationships
- Smaller social support network

## / Advantages

- Less concerned about others' opinion
- May say what no-one else will
- Trust and integrity-based relationships
- Well-informed on special interests
- Extremely loyal, keep a confidence
- Used to being a self-starter

# / Mental 'illness' vs mental 'health'





# / Mental health: anxiety & stress

TIME ->					
How I feel	<b>Baseline</b> You on a good day	<b>Trigger</b> You start to feel anxious	<b>Escalation</b> You feel more anxious and get physical signs of this i.e. heart beats faster	<b>Peak</b> You feel very anxious and may need to escape situation	<b>Recovery</b> You may feel tired or depressed and need time to recover
What I can do	Try new things	Strategies are most likely to work at this point	Strategies can still work at this point but may be harder to use	Strategies less likely to work, focus on safety and protecting yourself	Strategies are important here to prevent another crisis give yourself time to recover



**Neurodiverse colleagues**  
 Higher baseline due to living in a world not made for you

**Prevention is better than cure**

**Neurodiverse consequences**  
 Shutdown.  
 Brain literally pulls the plug!  
 Days to recover

# / Supporting neurodiverse colleagues with stress & anxiety

- **Discover root cause, is it neurodiversity** (unchangeable => reasonable adjustments) or **mental health** (neurodiversity-friendly strategies can be learned)
- Offer support to develop resilience habits to manage work-related stress and anxiety
  - Encourage neurodiverse colleagues to support each other & share strategies
  - Provide resources e.g. mindfulness & relaxation sessions, assistive technology
- Think about stress and anxiety holistically, it could be due to things outside of work
  - Ask people if they have any unmet support needs in life
  - Signpost to local services e.g. GP, talking therapies, support groups
- Provide clear guidance around Covid and returning to work
  - Ask people individually if they have specific concerns

# / 1. Remote working

Make **remote working** more permanent for neurodiverse colleagues?

- **Sensory**      Clothing? Partner? Home-schooling?
- **Cognitive**    Head-space? Methods of collaboration?
- **Social**        Desire: Extrovert/Introvert? Capacity?

## / 2. Technology

How to support neurodiverse colleagues with **technology** in a blended working environment/whilst working remotely

- **Sensory** headset, desk ergonomics same, texthelp
- **Cognitive** working patterns, interruptions vs blocks, automation
- **Social** clear ground rules, inclusive events, small groups

# / 3. Return to workplace

How to navigate a **return to the workplace**

- **Is it necessary? Is it safe?**
- **Sensory** environment, flex-commute, dedicated parking?
- **Cognitive** working patterns, interruptions vs blocks, automation, explain 'why' and 'what' give freedom to 'how'
- **Social** a day for reconnection?
- **Overwhelm vs. gradual return?**

# / 4. Social distancing and socialising

Long-term effects of social distancing and limited opportunities for socialising

- **Introvert/extrovert?**
- **Sensory** accustomed to personal space, less sensory stimulation
- **Cognitive** rule/routine change
- **Social** out of practice, capacity? misinterpret 'banter', frequency and group size, honesty
- **Overwhelm vs. gradual return?**

# / 5. Support networks

Approaches to introducing/expanding **support networks**

- **Culture** Awareness, allyship, embracing diversity, inclusion
- **Invitation** Diagnosed, or not. Optional. Regular and consistent
- **Peer-led** Natural empathy, psychological ‘safe space’, shared experience, workarounds, no need to ‘mask’
- **Support** Environment. Quiet space.  
Clarity on who, where, when, how
- **Nothing about me without me**



# / 6. Long-term impact

## The long-term impact of the coronavirus and lockdown

- **Person** Happier? Mental health issues become more apparent?  
Lockdown mindset = isolation or safety? Grieving?  
Take mental health seriously
- **Place** Increased opportunity to work remotely, may suit some
- **Profit** Able to work to suit own rhythms so more productive
- **Support** Ask, allow time, give clarity, reasonable adjustments,  
perspective checking, reframing negative thoughts

# / **Co-create win:win solutions!** i.e. reasonable adjustments

- **Sensory**
  - Respect self-management and allow some control over environment
- **Cognitive**
  - Play to strengths, recognize that not every skill can be learned
  - Context matters, job role, explain 'why' and 'what' and flex on 'how/when'
  - Presume competence, expect honesty
- **Social** (a sense of belonging)
  - Praise, encourage, appreciate
  - Social support network, be an ally
  - Being accepted for who you are
  - Inclusive activities

# / Final points

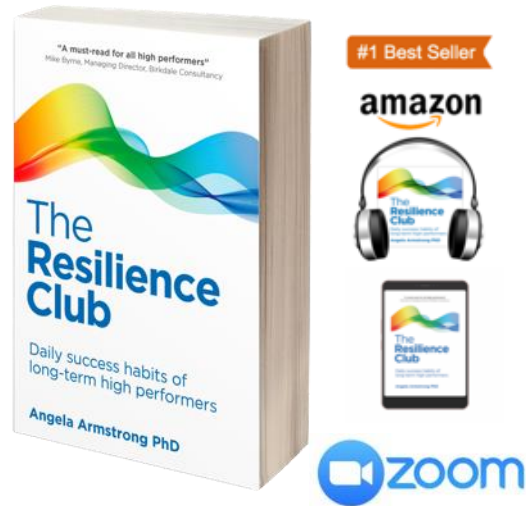
- **Make it is safe** to talk about neurodiversity and mental health
- **Know who:** which of your colleagues self-identify as neurodiverse? Who is a willing ally?
- **Know how:** Provide awareness raising sessions for your whole workforce, and in depth training for line managers, recruiters & HR personnel
- **Personalise:** Ask individuals what they need 😊. Lead with empathy, clarity, honest communication and understanding.
- **Start now:** What are your next steps to create a workplace where neurodiverse colleagues feel valued, understood and supported

## / Poll 2 of 2

- As a result of this workshop, what action will you take next?
  - **A** Find out more about neurodiversity and practical solutions
  - **B** Explore our internal need/demand for support
  - **C** Implement (at least) one of the suggestions
  - **D** More than one of the above
  - **E** I didn't discover anything useful or interesting today

# / Q&A

## Wellbeing for everyone



[Angela@AngelaArmstrong.com](mailto:Angela@AngelaArmstrong.com)  
[Matthew@MatthewTrerise.com](mailto:Matthew@MatthewTrerise.com)

## Neurodiversity in the workplace



<https://dma.org.uk/talent/neurodiversity-initiative>



# Live-Online Workshops on Neurodiversity

If you want to be a leader in inclusive workplace practices, demonstrate the business case for doing so and invoke change, then let us guide you to more inclusive practices across the employee lifecycle

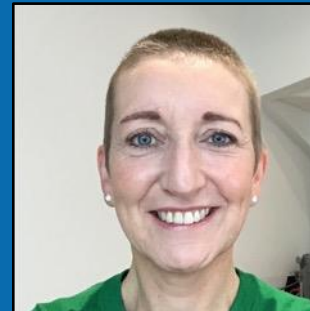
1. **AWARENESS:** Signs - Strengths – Struggles
2. **HIRING:** Attraction – Recruitment – Selection
3. **INSPIRING:** Onboarding – Environment – Performance
4. **DEVELOPING:** Learning – Development – Succession
5. **RETAINING:** Reward – Change – Communication – Exit
6. **NAVIGATING the workplace:** for neurodiverse people

## Expert Co-Facilitators



Autism & Neurodiversity  
Training and Consultancy

[Message me to connect on LinkedIn](#)  
[Matthew@MatthewTrerise.com](mailto:Matthew@MatthewTrerise.com)



Inclusive Leadership Training  
and L&D Consultancy

Mobile: 07971 480894  
[Message me to connect on LinkedIn](#)  
[Angela@AngelaArmstrong.com](mailto:Angela@AngelaArmstrong.com)