Transcript for Educators Guide to Executive Functioning: How it Impacts on Learning and Behaviour and What You Can Do to Support Neurodiverse Students (ASD, ADHD, PDA, ODD)

Lesson 1

Well, welcome Dean. I can't wait for you to share with us your amazing information.

Thank you, Sue. It's lovely to be back with you guys again. I did a course for Sue, I think, about three years ago now, and it's lovely to be back with you guys again. I'm aware that some of you will be watching because you're teachers. Some of you will be watching because you're teacher aides. I'm sure some of you will be watching because you're coming from a parental perspective. I'm also hopeful there'll be a good chunk of you that are fellow autistics too. And so I've planned this session to be relevant to all of those groups.

So let's tell you about me first. I am Dean Beadle. I am an autistic speaker, trainer. I've spent 20 years sharing my experiences of being autistic at conferences, teacher training days, and parent talks. You'll see some pictures on the screen now, some pictures from across that time. And I've also been lucky enough to do four tours of Australia and New Zealand with Sue between 2013 and 2016. It's a whole webinar in itself telling you about some of those experiences. I'll spare Sue's blushes and not tell you all of those stories right now. But we had a wonderful time and met so many fabulous people that really wanted to make things better for autistic people.

The main thrust of this presentation is about making the world better for autistic people - not making autistic people fit the world, but making the world more accessible to autistic people. And I always make a point at the start of every talk I ever deliver to say: I am one autistic person, with one autistic perspective. I do not claim to be a voice for the entire autistic community.

I say that because I was doing a session for parents a few years ago and a mum came storming up to me at the end of the session and she said, "I love what you said and I love what you shared." It was the most aggressive thank you I've ever received, but "you are nothing like my daughter. You do not speak for my daughter." And it's my job to be nice to these people because the invoice hadn't been paid yet. But inside I was screaming, "Funnily enough, I'm nothing like your daughter because I'm not your daughter!"

She then said, "How can you and my daughter both be autistic if she hates music and you love music?" And I thought, well, nowhere in the diagnostic criteria does it say, "Must have Kylie Minogue on your Spotify playlist." If that was the criteria, as a homosexual autistic, I'd be doubly autistic. I've been padam padamming since last summer.

It misses the point entirely. We are all very different from each other. And of course our experiences will differ. So I hope in what I deliver to you in this course, there'll be lots that's relevant to the autistic people that you know, that you love, maybe yourselves if you're autistic watching this. But I'm also mindful that we're all very different and I could never claim to represent or speak for anybody else. I wouldn't have the arrogance.

I'll also tell you, because this made me smile - this course has been a few years in development. I started developing it in lockdown. And then earlier this year, it was a topic I was talking about a lot in my other sessions that I deliver for schools. Earlier this year, somebody contacted me and said, "Could you make this topic into a longer form course?"

That was back in February, and so I was developing the course, and I knew in my head I needed to put this course together, and I needed to gather the materials and do the research and make the presentation. And as this day was coming forward, the deadline was getting nearer. I was struggling and struggling to put it together. And I contacted a friend of mine who's a fellow autistic, and I said to her - she's been phenomenal, incredibly supportive, you know, when you contact someone and you know they just know what you're experiencing - I said, "I'm not sure I'm the right person to do this. I can't put this presentation together. I can't form the ideas to put it together."

She went, "Let me ask you something. Are you telling me that you're struggling with executive functioning and autistic inertia about a talk that's going to be about executive functioning and autistic inertia?"

I said, "Yes."

"I think you're perfect for it, mate."

And so that gave me the reassurance to get through and get it made. And so this session is very much going to be about executive functioning and autistic inertia. But before we get to that, there are a few crucial key points that I wanted to talk about with you before we get started. This is sort of the grounding of everything else that we'll talk about, the foundation. These are beliefs that fuel everything that I work on.

So, on the screen you'll see lovely Charlie Tate. She was doing a Facebook Live during lockdown for Scottish Autism, where she was the former deputy CEO. And she was talking about autistic experience of transition - so, moving house, moving to school, but also micro transitions: moving room to room, activity to activity, task to task. And she was saying, when we see autistic young people who struggle with transition, from the outside we see "stuck." But what that person is experiencing is safety and familiarity.

And that was such a powerful statement for me. For all too long, we see autistic people who struggle with transition as being intransigent or refusing or digging their heels in or saying no, when actually what the person is experiencing is safety and familiarity. So the question we need to ask is: what can we do to make what we're going to do feel as safe as where the young person is?

Because let me tell you, as an autistic, you spend your entire life just getting used to something. And the second you get used to it, someone then says, "Okay, on to the next thing." And again, we're going to be looking at executive functioning and inertia through this session. That's all about transition. That's all about moving tasks to tasks, initiating tasks, planning tasks. It's all about that transitionary moment in life between activities.

From the outside, we see "stuck." But what that person is experiencing is safety and familiarity. So instead of trying to tear a child away from safety to uncertainty, what we need to do is think about: okay, how can we maintain that feeling of safety? How can we protect that safety and carry it through to the new activity? Carry it through to what we're doing and where we're going? It's about promoting safety going forward. It's about familiarity. It's not the child digging their heels in and refusing. It's them saying, "I finally feel safe where I am and you're asking me to leave it."

So we need to always think about what we can do to make where we're going feel as safe and familiar as where we're asking the child to leave. Now, on the screen now, you'll see Dr. Luke Beardon. He is an academic in the field of autism in the UK. I think he's done more than 30 years in the field at Sheffield Hallam University. He is the most phenomenal ally to the autistic community. He wrote the wonderful book that you can see on the screen, "Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Children." Just incredible.

And in that book, he uses this equation that I live my life by, and I think it's important when we're thinking about our practice that we foundation everything we do in this: Autism plus environment equals outcome. And it's a simple equation, but it's the basis of everything. Autism plus environment equals outcome.

All too often in the UK - UK perspective, but all too often in the UK - autistic young people are developing mental health issues, anxiety, OCD, and they're being referred to mental health services who are saying, "Oh, they're just anxious because they're autistic." It is perfectly possible to be autistic and calm. It is perfectly possible to be autistic and happy. We are not distressed because we're autistic. We're distressed because we're autistic in the wrong environment.

So it's the environment we seek to change. All too often people are assuming that the baseline of autistic experience is anxious and distressed. The reality is the anxiety and distress comes from being in the wrong environment. So it's about changing the environment, not trying to change the young person. And by environment I mean the physical space. But I also mean us - we are the environment. You know, the way we respond to our young people, the way we understand them, the way we communicate with them, we are the environment too.

So "autism plus environment equals outcome," by the wonderful Luke Beardon, who is just an absolute icon as far as I'm concerned. Okay, this is a quote from Lynn McCann. She is an autism advisory teacher in the UK, north of England, I should say. She wrote two books last year, all about autism - one for primary teachers, one for secondary teachers. And she said this that I thought was really powerful:

"There will be times in your teaching career where you will hear from parents that their child is having meltdowns at home almost every day before or after school, and they will want to know what is happening at school to cause these. However, to your eyes, there will not be a problem at school. To you, they are fine in school, and therefore it is easy to assume that the problem is that parents are doing something wrong. This is a common problem for autistic children who have learned early on to mask their difficulties and autistic characteristics. It's more than just trying to fit in. It's often driven by huge anxiety and

rejection sensitivity. This causes panic and trauma at the hint of getting something wrong or being found out."

Now, if I had a pound or a dollar for every time I said to a teacher, "This child's incredibly anxious," and the teacher says, "Well, we're not seeing it," then I'd be incredibly wealthy indeed. It's important to remember, home - generally speaking - home will always be more predictable than school, or at least it should be if home is a safe space. Home will always be more predictable than school.

So the vast majority of our young people will be concealing all day long how overwhelmed they are, how distressed they are, how anxious they are, how much they're struggling to transition between activities, masking their executive functioning difficulties, masking their inertia, and all of the things we're going to go on to talk about. It's important to remember that just because you can't see it, doesn't mean that child isn't overwhelmed.

And I remember going into one school - my goodness it must have been about 15 years now - and I'll never forget it. There was a young lad in this class and they said to me, "We want you to come in and observe this class and tell us what you think about one of our most anxious children." But they didn't tell me which one it was; they wanted to make it a sort of autistic guessing game for me - how kind, like a game show.

So they said, "Come in and observe, you'll spot who the anxious child is." And at the start of the lesson, I saw this child spinning around on the spot, rocking backwards and forwards, bouncing. And my instinct was, I didn't think that was anxiety-led. I thought that was sensory seeking. That was him regulating his senses. And of course, that's exactly what he should be allowed to do. He was regulating his senses, doing what he needed to do to balance out his sensory environment.

Now, I'm no expert. Never trust anybody that says they're an expert. An X is an unknown quantity and a spurt is a drip under pressure. Trust nobody who claims they're an expert in anything. We're all learning all the time by getting it wrong, mostly. You know, the one thing we'll know in ten years' time is how wrong we were today. That's progress.

But in that moment, my instinct was that his needs were sensory-led. I didn't think it was necessarily about anxiety. My eyes were drawn to a lad at the front of the class, who was sitting quietly doing his work, and every time - it was maths they were doing - and every time he did a maths equation, he would get up with his book, and he would walk it to the teacher. He'd ask her to mark it, then he'd take it back to his seat, and he did that repeatedly throughout the lesson.

At the end of the lesson, when all the kids left, I said to the teacher, "You know he's your most anxious student, don't you?"

She said, "What makes you say that? He's diligent, he's committed, he's invested, he really cares about his work."

I said, "Imagine how anxious you would have to be, how fearful of getting something wrong you'd have to be, that would lead you to get someone to double check everything you ever

did." That was intense anxiety - just because it wasn't on the surface doesn't mean it wasn't there. He was masking it incredibly.

You know, there was a bit of a scandal in the UK about five years ago. Like a soap opera in Britain cast an autistic actor to play an autistic part, and the scandal that came off the back of it was that people on Twitter - now X - were saying, "But how can an autistic person act in a show? Surely that goes against their diagnostic criteria to be able to act."

And I was ready to type - it would have all been four-letter words, let me tell you. I was ready to type. And then someone got there before me and said, "Have you actually met an autistic person? They are the best actors in the world. They spend their entire days masking how overwhelmed and distressed they are."

You know, just because you're not seeing the needs doesn't mean it's not happening for that young person. And we overlook that at our peril. Often our young people will be concealing all day how overwhelmed they are until they get home to their safe and familiar place where it will all come out. And parents will then say, "My child's distressed." And schools will often say, "Well, it's nothing we're doing because they're calm with us." Just because you're not seeing the overwhelm and distress during the time they're with you, doesn't mean the seeds of it haven't been sown while they're with you. And we all have a part to play in reducing distress for autistic young people, as I said, by changing the environment, not trying to make the child fit the environment.

And finally, I wanted to talk to you, before we go into the main thrust of this session, I wanted to talk to you about so-called school refusal. Now, I'm not sure whether this is as big an issue in Australia as it is in the UK, but there's a big debate about this at the moment. We have a growing number of - we always have had, but particularly since lockdown - we've got a growing number of youngsters who haven't returned to school. And a huge number of those are youngsters who are neurodivergent: autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, dyspraxic, and so on.

And what's frustrating in this discussion, in this discourse, is that those children are referred to as though they're avoidant. They're "school avoidant," they're "school refusers." As though the child is saying, "Well, I could go to school, but Home and Away is on this afternoon, so I'll give it a swerve." It's not a choice. The child isn't making a choice. It isn't about the child refusing. The child cannot access school.

And Ruth Moyse - Dr. Ruth Moyse - who is the director of AT Autism, an autistic-led research organization, did some research with autistic teenagers around those that weren't accessing education at the time. And she particularly spoke to autistic adolescent females. And she said, "For many children and young people, such as the autistic adolescent girls who participated in a study with me, they are not rejecting learning. They're rejecting a toxic environment."

And that's a tough pill to swallow, but the truth is, if our young people are refusing to access what we're giving them, then the environment probably isn't right. And that isn't to blame anybody or point the finger. It's just, in order to move forward, we need to realize that for a lot of young people, the system just doesn't work.

And I'm sure, because you're watching this session, you're good cogs in that wheel. We have to acknowledge that the wheel as it is - it doesn't fit a huge number of our young people. You know, the work we're all doing is merely to mitigate a system that doesn't necessarily work for our young people. And that doesn't mean that we can't make enormous difference to their experience - of course we can.

But it's important to remember that we should not blame our youngsters for not accessing school. You know, it's such a big part of discourse in autism at the moment, this notion of school refusal. They aren't refusing school - they're just burnt out completely. Even if they're five years old, they've had two or three years in nursery, in preschool, in early primary school, and they reach a point where they just cannot access that environment anymore. It's too much.

We need to shift the narrative from thinking about our youngsters refusing to realizing they just can't cope in the environments we're providing them with. So again, as - and I'll repeat this a lot as we go through - you'll find it's about changing the environment.

So, those are the tenets that I base everything I talk about in. I think it's crucial when we're looking at executive functioning and inertia that we talk about those things. Because I think they all have a relevance to looking at the experiences that our autistic young people might have in school.

LESSON 2

I'm going to talk to you about some myths and misconceptions around autistic experiences of executive functioning and inertia.

And I'm going to accompany these myths and misconceptions with facial expressions on the screen to show you what I feel about them. So the first one is, "Autistic people just won't." Now this ties in beautifully with what I was telling you about just a moment ago - this notion that autistic people are willful, that they refuse, they dig their heels in, they say no, that they won't.

We need to shift across from thinking about "won't" and realize we're talking about "can't." When our autistic young people are struggling, it's not because they won't do a task, it's very often because they can't do a task. They deserve our understanding and compassion, not our judgment, not us presuming they're refusing for the sake of it.

It's not about won't, it's about can't. And one of the areas that would cover this thing of not "won't" but "can't," of course, is executive functioning. So I looked for a good definition of executive functioning for you guys, and I looked online, and I searched, and I looked and looked and looked, and I couldn't find anyone that I liked or that I thought was particularly useful, until I read Robin Stewart, who is a brilliant autistic advocate.

I think she's done some work in Australia. She has done some phenomenal work. She now works in the arts and works for creating accessible spaces for neurodivergent performers, which is just a wonderful thing. And she's doing incredible work. And in her book, "The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods," which may I say is a brilliant resource for any young person who might be about to experience menstruation.

It's a really, really good resource in preparing them for what it's going to be like - the practicalities of it, the sensory aspects of it. It's really wonderful. And what's great about it is that there are practical pictures showing you every stage of how to use sanitary products, all of those things. But there's also bits of paper that you can cut out to put over them. So if the images are overwhelming, you can just read the text. It's a really lovely resource.

And in there, Robin talks about executive functioning. And she gives this definition, which I think is brilliant: "Executive functioning is the skills a person uses to figure out what they have to do now or in the future. When they have to do it, what order they have to do it in."

Someone referred recently to executive functioning as the brain's admin team. So it's the part of the brain that enables you to be where you need to be at the time you need to be there, with all of the stuff you require to be there and to be ready.

I read recently that 80 percent of autistic people experience difficulty with their executive functioning. I don't know how solid that statistic is but it's a statistic I see often. It's also important to remember that executive functioning is an enormous challenge for ADHD folk, and we know that a huge proportion, I think it's about 70 percent, of autistic folk are also ADHD.

And it's important to point out that until 2013, the Diagnostic Manual told diagnosticians that you could only diagnose autism OR ADHD. You couldn't diagnose both. Which means there are now generations of people, autistic people, other neurodivergent people, who are realizing their ADHD as well. And to be fair, I suspect I might be one of them.

So we know that executive functioning is an area of enormous difficulty for ADHD folk. We know that it can also be an area of challenge for autistic folk. And of course, very many autistic folk are also ADHD. So we know that executive functioning is going to be an area of need for a huge number of our autistic youngsters who may struggle with organization, with planning, with timekeeping.

But through this session we're going to look at practical ways to support that. One thing that Robin said in this book that really amused me - I'm sure she won't mind me telling you this - is she really helpfully lists all the different terminology for sanitary items. And there were terms on there I'd never heard before, and the one that really tickled me was that some people call their sanitary towels "menstrual napkins."

Menstrual napkins! Presumably for dabbing the corners of one's vagina after a heavy meal. That tip will be more than I can tell you, but that's just my inappropriate humor for you. So, executive functioning is the ability to plan what you've got to do now or in the future, when to do it, what order you have to do it in.

If your executive functioning is firing on all cylinders, you'll be able to do most of that stuff without giving a second thought to it. But for those of us who struggle with this stuff, it takes every part of our being to plan where we need to be, to be organized, to be there on time. My partner and I have been together now for 13 years, and we often talk about this because he'll disappear off to the bathroom to get ready.

He'll disappear in there for 45 minutes. I've still not worked out what he does in there, but he'll go in there for 45 minutes and he'll come out of the bathroom and find I'm sitting in the exact same position where he left me with one leg in my trousers and one leg out. And he'll say to me, "It doesn't take 45 minutes to put your other leg in the trousers, it doesn't take any thinking."

And I'll say to him, "Exactly, it doesn't take any thinking for you." But for me, every stage in that process is like climbing Everest. Overwhelming. Too much to do. And that's as much a part of executive functioning as it is about autistic inertia, which we're going to come to in a moment. But just being mindful that whilst this, if you're watching this as someone who doesn't experience executive functioning challenges, it may be impossible to imagine that everyday tasks that don't take any thought at all can actually be incredibly overwhelming and distressing for neurodivergent young people.

I heard one autistic woman on Twitter say you have to remember that it takes 50 percent of my energy every day just to get dressed and get out the front door. So they've then got 50 percent of their energy left to spread across 90 percent of their day.

You know, we often think as teachers, particularly in schools, that our young people are arriving at 9am, and that's the start of the day. It might be for you. For them, they might have

had two hours of what feels like climbing a mountain with their executive functioning, with struggling to enact tasks and struggling with inertia too.

So just be mindful that our young people will struggle with this in ways that you might not be able to imagine. And of course, that's what this course is about. It's helping to demystify that for you. We want you to understand it. But even if you can't understand it, the key is to believe what our young people are telling us.

On to our next myth and misconception: "It's just laziness." Now, I hear this an awful lot. It's important to realize that laziness is about saying, well, I could do that pile of laundry, but I'd much rather do ten other things so it can wait. There's no judgment here, that's perfectly acceptable behaviour, but that's laziness.

Executive functioning difficulties is knowing something needs to be done, but really struggling to know what order to do it in, when to do it by, time framing it. Now, the person isn't sitting there enjoying avoiding the thing they're doing. They're struggling. It's not laziness. And equally, that links us nicely onto autistic inertia.

Now this is a really new area in the field of autism. I know that in the field of ADHD, they're talking about ADHD paralysis, which I suspect is along similar lines. But in autism, we talk about autistic inertia. And the first bit of research on this came out in 2021. I've got it on the screen there for you, and we're going to come back to it later.

But it was by Buckle et al printed in Frontiers in Psychology Journal, and it was published in 2021. And it was called - isn't it depressing that research often has such heavy titles? And this title was "No Way Out Except for External Intervention: First-Hand Accounts of Autistic Inertia." And so in this graphic from that research they give you this definition:

"Autistic inertia is a widespread and debilitating difficulty acting on intention. It is discussed in autistic communities but has not been researched. Inertia might be an umbrella term where the inertia has different causes. It might be due to socio-economical factors, executive dysfunction, movement differences, or something we're yet to identify."

So if executive functioning is all the planning you do before you do a task - when will it start, what do I need to take with me, what do I need to wear, what time do I need to catch the bus? All of that pre-planning is about executive functioning. Autistic inertia is about what happens at the moment that you're due to start something.

It's about changing states, it's about going from stop to go and go to stop. So many of our autistic young people will really struggle to start a task. And also, equally, a lot of autistic young people will struggle to finish a task. It's all about changing states. It's all about shifting gears. It's all about changing modes.

You know, once I'm in GO, I can be incredibly productive. But getting into GO is one of the challenges for me. Other autistic folk, once they're into an activity, asking them to stop could be really distressing too. And we're going to look at some practical ways to support our young people with that as we go through.

But the crucial underpinning thing about all of this is we're not talking about laziness here. We're not talking about willfulness. You know, when I experience inertia, and it's something I have experienced a lot in my life - when I experience inertia, one of the big challenges for me is that I'll spend the entire day knowing I need to do something but not being able to start it.

So I'm not lying in blissful avoidance. I'm spending that entire day, all I can think about is "I should be doing this, I should be doing this, I should be doing this," but not being able to start. I often refer to it as being frozen. You know, it's not a pleasant place to be, so it isn't our youngsters being willfully avoidant.

In fact, just yesterday - so the way that I plan my courses is I, about two or three weeks before, put the slides together. And then I look over the slides, I tweak them. I probably drove Sue mad over that, because I was due to send it to her earlier than I did. I sent it to her yesterday, I think, or the day before.

I spend ages tweaking them. I do last-minute tweaks, and then I send them off a couple of days before the course. And then the day before the course, I'll then sit with my trusty pad and pen - you can see here - and I will make notes. Notes I'll almost never look at. Sue will know when we were touring together, I have copious notes behind me. I never look at them, but they need to be there. And when I put things on paper, it sort of goes into my head a bit easier.

So, I make the notes. And making the notes is the thing I get frozen on. So, I woke up yesterday knowing all day I'd need to make my notes. And I know my rhythm by now. I'm 35 years old. Well, I only admit to being in my very, very late 20s. But 35. The Zoom beauty filter is hopefully bearing out that I'm still in my 20s even though I'm not. But all day yesterday I knew, because I know myself well, I knew I would spend the day thinking "I need to do the notes, I need to do the notes, I need to do the notes."

And yesterday was one of those rare days - it's very rare this happens to me - where I woke up and I thought no, I'm not losing the whole day to "I need to do it, I need to do it," because I'm just lying in suspended animation. So I pushed myself and I did the notes first thing yesterday morning, which meant I got the rest of my day back.

Because I can't enjoy the day while I'm not doing the task. You know, I'm frozen. I'm sitting there thinking, "I should be, I should be, I should be." Yesterday was one of those rare days, and it's very rare I can do this. Yesterday was one of those rare days where I just thought, right, rip the plaster off, do the activity first, and it gifted me the rest of my day back.

But it points to the point I was making - inertia's not an enjoyable thing. It's not the child lying there in delightful laziness. The child is lying there thinking about the thing they should be doing, but not being able to do it. There was a - I was lying on my bed about two years ago, I've laid on it since, but about two years ago - and there was a crisp packet on my bed, because I'm a ruffian. There was a crisp packet on the bed that needed to be put in the bin.

But in order to put it in the bin, I needed to move the laptop off the bed. So because I couldn't do that task in one movement, because I couldn't just pick up the crisp packet and put it in the bin, because there were obstacles, physical obstacles in the way, I was

completely frozen on it. Just staring at the crisp packet, staring at the laptop, not being able to move.

I wasn't enjoying that. It took me hours to move that crisp packet. I wasn't enjoying avoiding putting it in the bin. It was all I could think about. So we're not talking about laziness here. We're talking about inertia.

Now, this next slide, you might wonder what this means: "A lot of my life is dominated by the anticipation of the thing."

Now, what do I mean by this? I've got a fellow autistic colleague who I talk to a lot about this because we experience the same. We'll message each other and we'll say, "Oh, I've got a thing today." And we'll know what the other person means. For me, things tend to be - the worst thing of all, for me, is phone calls.

Even 20 years into my career, I still struggle sometimes to advocate for myself. I'm getting better at it. Much better at it. But, for years, people would say in emails, "Could we just have a quick phone call about this?" And phone calls are like my kryptonite. I just can't. And so many autistic folk will tell you that phone calls are really overwhelming.

I'd much rather deliver a presentation to 200 people in a hall. Much rather do that than talk to one person on the phone. I've never liked it. I think it's partly that you can't see the person. I think it's the fact that it feels incredibly exposing somehow, and I always feel really vulnerable on the phone.

Always found talking on the phone really overwhelming. Video calls I find much easier because I can see the person. And maybe it's also because you've only got the voice to go on. So you've not got the ability to see them, you can't look at their body language or any of that stuff. So for me, phone calls are really overwhelming.

And people have spent 20 years contacting me saying, "Could we just have a quick meeting about this?" And for 20 years I've gone along with it. And let me tell you, in 20 years of doing quick chats on the phone for work, I can only think of one time in that 20 years where that phone call couldn't have been an email.

A lot of the time it's just because hopping on the phone is quicker for the other person. They don't realize how distressing it is for the person on the other end. And I do a lot of work now with workplaces, helping them to think about ways they can make the workplace more inclusive, more accessible to neurodivergent workers.

And one of the biggest things I tell them is, if in doubt, put it in an email. You know, picking up the phone to me, you're adding social anxiety. My ability to process what you've said to me is reduced because you're making me do the thing that makes me anxious. Thanks. Put it in an email. I can read it back.

You know, it takes the pressure off of it. I can read it back more than once. And again, we're looking at executive functioning. Having those visual reminders can be incredibly useful. If in doubt, write it down. If in doubt, send a voice note. We'll come back to all of this later. But for me, phone calls are a thing.

And if someone says to me, "Can I call you at two o'clock on Tuesday?" From Sunday onwards, heavy in my thoughts will be that two o'clock phone call. Now, for most other people, they won't think about that call until maybe 10 minutes before, when it might pop up in their reminders, and they'll join the call or whatever.

For me, all day Tuesday, I'll be frozen, thinking "I've got that call at two, I've got that call at two, I've got that call at two." And I feel distressed and overwhelmed and on the verge of tears sometimes, and then I force myself through the call, and then after the call, I'm so wrung out. I'm good for nothing for the rest of that day, completely exhausted.

You know, we forget that what might seem like a quick task for everybody else can hang over an autistic person's day like an anvil about to drop. And all we can think about is that thing. And that thing can freeze us. You know, I think a lot of autistic inertia is, "I've got that horrible thing in my day that I can't do, that horrible thing that's overwhelming me."

And it's taken me 20 years to be able to say, actually, phone calls don't work for me. Phone calls aren't accessible for me. And as you can see from this image - a nice diagram there of things I'd rather do than make a phone call. For years I'd force myself, because I thought that was what I needed to do.

I needed to do phone calls because everybody else did them. That was me keeping up with everybody else. I realized, who was winning there? It certainly wasn't me. Don't get me wrong, once I'm on the call I can do it. But I pay an enormous price for it. So be mindful, there will be tasks through the day that we think are everyday tasks that don't involve much thought. But for autistic young people, those tasks can be so overwhelming that they can completely freeze them. And for me, it's phone calls.

LESSON 3

The concept of time. Now we know that executive functioning is all about planning, it's all about pre-empting what's going to happen, planning for it time-wise, being somewhere on time.

My concept of time is a little challenging. Let's put it that way. I think everything is 20 minutes away. I've come to this conclusion just recently. My train station is 20 minutes from my house. And so I will lie in bed until the point where there's 20 minutes I need to get to the station, and I still think I'm gonna make it on time.

I never factor in the time it's gonna take to get dressed. I never factor in the time it's gonna take to get out the house. Everything's 20 minutes away. I've been with my partner for 13 years now, and I still think his house is 20 minutes away. And so for 13 years, I've been leaving the house thinking I've got 20 minutes, I'll make it.

I actually put his address into Google Maps the other day. And Google Maps told me it's 36 minutes away. And that'll explain why I've never ever been at his house on time. Or met him from work, which is even further away, on time. Because I think everywhere is 20 minutes away. The interesting thing about Google Maps is, I always think, how do they work out the average of how long something will take?

Like, it says 36 minutes, but I don't think they're factoring in the size of my thighs. You know, that's 45 minutes for my little legs. But my concept of time is challenging. Which means that getting places on time can be difficult. Which means that catching trains on time, potentially for some autistic young people, will be difficult.

Getting to lessons on time will be difficult. You know, not because they can't tell the time, not necessarily, although some will struggle with that, but because their concept of time may be different to others. How long is a minute? What does five minutes feel like? That's an abstract concept. You know, five minutes will feel different to each person.

So we must be mindful. Some of our young people, our autistic young people and our neurodivergent young people, their understanding of time may be different to ours. Their concept of it may be different. You know, it's funny, I'll lie in the bath thinking I need to get out of the bath at half past eleven because I need to leave the house at twelve.

So I need to get out of the bath at half eleven. I'll keep an eye on the time. At 11:28, which is the point most people would say, "Time to pull the plug out of the bath and start drying, because I need to be out of here by half eleven," I think, "Oh I've still got two minutes," not factoring in that I'll then lose another five pulling the plug out, draining the bath, drying off.

I think of time as start and stop in black and white, and don't think about the amount of transition between tasks, and that's where I can end up quite flustered and running behind. So being mindful that for a lot of autistic youngsters, it's around difficulty with concept of time.

Okay, moving on. Modes. Home is home and school is school. This was a big one for me, you know, when my uniform was on, I was in the school building, I was at school. When the

uniform was off, and I was at home, I was at home. Blurring the two can be a real area of difficulty. Homework requires us to remember what the work was during lesson time, what it is we're being asked to do, the things we were taught in lesson that apply to it.

We have to remember when it's due in by, to pre-plan when to hand it in. It involves so much executive functioning. And then to start the activity involves a hell of a lot of autistic inertia too often. Just being completely frozen on, "I should do that essay, I should do that work." If I just even remember that it needs to be done before it's due. So, being mindful, it's all about modes. The struggle to move from one environment to another and that transitionary thing.

And so many parents told me during lockdown who were home educating, that their autistic child was struggling to do the work at home because it was in the wrong environment. And then the parents that did, that seemed to be more successful with home education were the ones that were telling me they'd set up a workspace at home. They tried to make a corner of the house feel like a learning space. So there was a distinction between work and home.

Now, being mindful that shifting gears - the changing modes could be an area of real difficulty for autistic young people and autistic adults. In fact, you know, we like life in a predictable pigeonhole. And so crossing those boundaries can be really difficult. And that's why homework could be an area of such difficulty for autistic young people. And later on with the second half of this session, we're going to look at solutions. We're going to look at ways to make homework a bit more accessible.

"I'll be frozen on B until I do A." The minute A is done, B suddenly seems possible. Now what does this mean? Earlier on I was telling you about when I developed this course, and I had three new talks to produce. There was one that was due on the Friday, there was one that was due the following Wednesday, and there was one the following Friday.

So there were three new talks I had to deliver across the week. All of them required me to build a course from scratch. If we were to call them Talk 1, 2 and 3, I knew what I needed to do for Talk 2 and 3, but I couldn't even make the slides until Talk 1 was done. Because the task that's coming up most immediately is the one that dominates my brain.

If it's a thing, let's put it that way. If it's something new, if it's something uncertain, that will dominate my thoughts. That means I cannot do the tasks that follow it. And so I spent all of that week building up to delivering this talk for the first time, back in February, thinking, "Oh, I need to plan for the other talks," but I'm not doing it, but I'm not doing it.

The second I delivered this talk for the first time - the second I pressed "leave meeting," because it was a virtual talk - the second I pressed it, the ideas started flooding in for the next two talks. So I sat and did the slides in minutes. Now, it was that I was frozen on those until I got number one out of the way.

You know, doing things in order. So very often, I can't even think about Monday until I've got Friday out of the way. My partner will often say to me, "What are we doing on Sunday?" He'll ask me that on a Thursday and I'll say to him, "Don't ask me that now. I've got Friday to deal with first." Don't ask me to make a plan for three days' time, because it's overwhelming.

One day at a time. And again, that ties in beautifully with some of the solutions to executive functioning and inertia that we're going to look at in a moment. So, that's introduced areas of executive functioning and autistic inertia.

And again, I'll repeat: Executive functioning is the planning for tasks, and autistic inertia is the difficulty in changing states from stop to go and go to stop.

So what can we do about this? The good news is there's plenty we can do that might help. So, executive functioning hacks for at home. And again, I mentioned to you that we're going to look at this from the perspective of supporting parents, supporting those in schools, and thinking about us autistic folk ourselves.

I should say thank you to Leicester NHS Trust in the UK, because a couple of these bullet points I found on their website and they were too good not to share, so I've included the link on the slide at the bottom there.

The Executive Functioning Hacks for at Home: Water bottles. Now, I've got my handy water bottle here. You can also see it on the screen. It's a lovely purple number. I'm covering up the brand names - they don't pay me to promote them. But a lovely purple number. It holds two liters of water.

Now, why is this important? My doctor told me a few years ago that they were worried about my liver, and they were worried about my liver because of dehydration. I really struggle to keep myself hydrated. In order to have the recommended eight glasses of water a day, I need to be going downstairs to get eight glasses of water a day. That involves the pre-planning, the getting up, the going downstairs, the inertia of starting that task. It's just never going to happen.

Eight trips to the sink is just not going to happen. So a few years ago, I bought this water bottle. And it's very American in its design, but we'll forgive them that. So it's got encouragement up the side: "Almost there, never say never, have a nice day!" Which is a little bit patronizing for me, so I don't tend to look at that side of the bottle.

But for those of our youngsters that want encouragement, it also timeframes what time to drink the water by, which I think is really helpful. I don't go by that though. My rule is try and fill it up once a day. I don't always manage it, but try and fill it up once a day, and by the end of the day, make sure it's empty.

I keep it beside me, in whatever room I'm in. It catches the light beautifully, because it's a lovely purpley color. When I spot it next to me, I'll have a glug of it. Because one of the difficulties for me is I don't really experience thirst that often. I need to be reminded to drink. You know, my mum - I live with my mum and she'll often come into the room saying, "Have you drunk anything today? I've not seen you drink anything since yesterday."

Remembering to drink - I wish I could forget to eat. That's never been a problem. That's why I'm such an impressive size. But forgetting to drink has been an area of real problem for me. And dehydration has been a real area of difficulty. So this water bottle ensures I at least get some liquid down me. And just to model it, I'm going to sip some for you now. It just reduces that need to do all the executive functioning of eight trips to the kitchen.

So when we're supporting executive functioning, we're going to look later at developing these skills, because all skills can be developed. But we also need to think about these hacks. What can we do to take unnecessary planning, unnecessary overwhelm out of the equation for our young people?

Another one - you'll see on the top of the screen there some toothpaste and a toothbrush next to some mugs. I keep my toothbrush and toothpaste by the bed. Our bathroom is downstairs. The chances of me at the end of the day dragging my carcass downstairs to get my toothbrush and toothpaste and do it in the bathroom - it's just not going to happen. So I keep my toothbrush and my toothpaste by the bed.

And at the end of the day, I'll brush my teeth. I'm not a classy bird, so forgive me. And then I'll spit my toothpaste out into a cup or a bowl or whatever it is I happen to have in the room at the time. It means I've still got teeth in my head. You know, sometimes we have to step aside from these social expectations of, "Oh, you should do your teeth in the bathroom." The key is that we do our teeth.

So what makes it easiest? Keeping it by the bed makes it easier for me. Having clothes in the same place so you don't have to hunt for them. You know, so many parents talk to me about how their child really struggles to get ready in the morning. One of the ways we can reduce that distress is by making it predictable, putting in place a routine.

So, the picture in the bottom of the screen there, that fancy dress costume - I'd hasten to add that is not mine. I do not own that outfit, I wish I did. But it's an example I found of clothes being laid out in order that you put them on in. So, the night before, we could lay across a table, across a sideboard, across the bottom of the bed even, the clothes for the morning. We could lay out the clothes in order that you put them on in.

So, all the child has to do is start at one end and work their way along. It takes out all of that: "Where are my trousers? Where are my shoes? What do I need to wear? Oh gosh, I need to put a vest under my shirt." You know, all of those stages of process that most people seem to be able to do on autopilot takes so much thinking for those that struggle with executive functioning.

So laying the clothes out is a way of reducing that processing because you've done it for them. Even having a visual on the wall of what order to put the clothes in. Making sure that trousers always go in one drawer, that socks always go in another. It took me until just last year to build a system that worked really well for me.

We have a spare room in our house and I have my underwear and shirts on one set of drawers. I have my trousers in another set of drawers, a wardrobe there. And I know in one standing position, in three movements, I've got the things I need to put on. Whereas I spent my entire life going, "Where's my socks? Where's my trousers? Why can't I find my shirt?" Because things were just shoved. My way of tidying all my life has been to shove things in places. Which, again, is a challenge of executive functioning.

So having things in the same place, having those systems, makes a lot of difference. One thing I did in school, in secondary school/high school, was I kept my bag packed. So if there are a load of books that you're taking on different days, that takes so much executive

functioning. What do I need? What book do I need to take with me? What lessons am I going to have? It's a lot.

So what I did is I kept all of my school books in a rucksack. Not great for my back, I hasten to add, but I kept them all in a rucksack so that I didn't ever have to pack my bag. And I made sure that the books always went back in the bag. So if I ever had to do homework, I could find everything in one hit.

Now, I'm not saying it's great from a physical point of view. It's probably not great for the back. But I'd have most of my exercise books with me all of the time. Which meant wherever I was, if I got five minutes, I could quickly do the homework. Then I wouldn't have to do it at home.

So even when you look at approaches for schools in a moment - even having two books for a lesson. You know, one that comes home with you, one book that stays in the class just in case. So if the young person forgets to bring it, they've got a replacement that they never take home, that you keep in a little slot for them.

It can be a way of making it easier, so that if our youngsters do struggle with packing their bags, they can come in and just get the replacement one. Now they can do their lesson in that book, but put it back in the slot. Now take a photo of it so they can take the work home with them. Now all of those strategies make the world of difference.

What stages can be skipped? So I was talking to a parent just recently who was struggling with her child getting ready in the morning. And she said to me, "Dean, I'm panicked every morning. We're not going to get out of the house because it will take my daughter two hours to get herself ready."

And I said to the parent, "First of all, have you ever not made it to school?"

She said, "Oh goodness, Dean, we always make it."

I said, "Right, so then the problem here is that you're worried. You need to remind yourself, okay, it takes her two hours. And structure in time for that. Because you can't speed up someone's processing."

Now, it takes her two hours. That's how long it takes. That's not her being difficult, that's how long it takes. So, it's about accepting how long things take and to schedule time in for it. But also, what stages can be skipped? If the child is struggling with putting their shoes on this morning, okay, let's get in the car in our socks. Bring your shoes with you. We'll see how you feel about your shoes when we get to the other end in the school car park.

What stages can be skipped? If putting on socks is overwhelming today, are socks essential? Will school know if the trousers are covering my shoes? They won't spot the socks aren't there. And actually, it's not a big reasonable adjustment to ask schools to allow our young people not to wear socks because socks can be a sensory nightmare for so many young people.

But what can be skipped? What can I cut out altogether? If something is overwhelming me, if something is something I just can't get past today, then can it be skipped altogether?

Making a list makes it tangible. And this works in two parts. I find writing things down on paper stops me feeling overwhelmed because I can work through it methodically. But also I do retrospective to-do lists as well. When I get to the end of the day, if I've not ticked everything off the list, I'll then add to the list the stuff I did do that wasn't on the list and tick that off.

Because we live our lives, you know, as neurodivergent people thinking about stuff we didn't manage to do today. We don't give ourselves credit for the stuff we do. But putting it down on paper can just demystify it. Otherwise it's just too much, swimming around all these things I need to do. Listing it down makes the world of difference.

We touched earlier on distance and how far things are. But how far away is school? Like I said, I think everything's 20 minutes away. How far is it going on Google Maps and planning the journey? What buses do I need to take? You know, screenshotting bus timetables, screenshotting the walking path that I need to take - all of those things just to make sure that I know how long the journey takes.

And then to allow extra time on top of it is a good method too. So I try now to add on 15 minutes more than I think I need. Because I know that my concept of how long things will take me is very different to other people's. So actually looking at how far away things are, how long will things take.

Also choose your battles. You know, sometimes it is a direct choice for me between cooking and washing. There have been times before where I've thought, I either have the energy today to have a bath, or I have the energy to go to the post office and send the letters off. I haven't got the energy for both.

And there were years where I would force myself to do both. And I was exhausted. Now I've learned to respond better to what my body's telling me. If my body is saying I haven't got the energy for both, which is the most important today? Rather than forcing myself through everything because I "should."

And this is a really important point actually - I heard a - I'm a massive Doctor Who fan, and I heard an actress from Doctor Who talking on some YouTube Doctor Who convention footage. I told you I was autistic, didn't I? My idea of fun is old, classic Doctor Who convention footage.

And she was talking about the word "should." And she said, when we "should" ourselves, when we say to ourselves, "I should do this, I should do that," that's about what other people think, that's about shame, that's about pressure from others to do what they think we should be doing. "I should really wash today because it's the appropriate thing to do, I should send that letter off today, I should..."

She said, when you swap "should" for "could," you take the power back. It was such a beautiful sentence for me, such a life-changing one. As someone who spent my entire life

living under "should." Oh, I should do this, I should do that. Changing it to "could." I could have a bath today. Do I want to? Have I got the energy to?

Do I want to go to the post office today? I could go to the post office today. It removes the pressure. So instead of "I should do this" or saying to our young people "you should be doing this," we should say to them, "Well, if today you could do this." I can make a choice that enables them to choose their battles because trying to do all of the tasks some days is just out of the question.

There are some days where we rattle through all of it. And I think that's what people struggle with regarding executive functioning in terms of understanding it - is that some days we can, but some days we can't. You know, it's an area of need that is quite dynamic. It will change. It's all to do with the wonderful spiky profile we have.

There are some days where we can, and there are some days where we can't. And just because we can on one day doesn't mean that we will be able to the following. And equally, just because we can't on one day doesn't mean it won't be easier the next day. Realizing that our executive functioning is responsive to all sorts of things - to tiredness, to overwhelm, to anxiety, all sorts of things.

One thing that can be really useful for executive functioning is reminder apps and alarms on your phone. So many neurodivergent people rely on this. You know, a reminder a day before, an hour before, ten minutes before - where they need to be, what they need for it. I have notes in my phone, a memo app on my phone where I'm forever writing memos of anything that pops into my head.

Sometimes for jobs six months' time where I know I've got to talk about something new. Anytime I have a thought about it, it goes into the notes. So I know when the time comes to sit down and do it. In the notes, I'll already have months of thinking because that's the other thing - when I'm frozen on a task (we're coming back to inertia in a minute), but when I'm frozen on a task, very often I'm thinking about it. And that's really valuable thinking time too. So it isn't all completely lost time.

But having those reminders on your phone and just a way of knowing that you don't have to rely just on your memory. Because of course executive functioning is all about working memory. Voice note reminders - you know, if we're going to ask a young person to do anything, if we ask them face to face, they may be processing the fact that we're in their space.

The social overwhelm: "Oh my goodness, they're saying something to me. I must remember it. What is it they're saying? What is it they're saying? They're looking at me." You know, that eye contact can be really distressing for a lot of young people, but still adults will insist on doing it to our young people, which is horrific.

You know, it is perfectly possible for autistic young people to learn and pay attention without looking you in the eye. And don't get me wrong, there are many autistic young people who do eye contact and it's not a problem for them. There are just as many autistic folk like me - if you look me in the eye, it feels like it's stinging.

So be mindful that eye contact is really overwhelming. So if you say, if you come into my space and you're physically there, chances are all I'm thinking about is the fact that you're stood there saying something to me. I won't necessarily process what it is you've said. And then you'll go away and I might have only picked up 5-10 percent of it.

And then the anxiety builds: "I can't remember what they asked me to do. That means I can't do the task, they're gonna be cross." Send a voice note, send a WhatsApp message, so the young person can read it back, so the young person can look over what you've said, in times when they're not overwhelmed and pressured, and can absorb the information.

Giving a backup - as a teacher, if you're asking to do an activity, then give the child a written, or even better, a visual backup, for them to be able to do it later on. Write it on the board, put it on a post-it note, you know, as a backup. So they're not just relying on hearing the information, but they can actually read it too, or see it in a visual.

LESSON 5

Okay, so now thoughts on supporters wanting to scaffold and support these skills.

To prepare this presentation I did some research around the area to look at what current thinking was and I found this wonderful podcast from the Sendcast and they were interviewing Victoria Bagnall, who is a neurodivergent person and education professional who works around executive functioning skills.

And she was talking very much about the brain science behind executive functioning, which of course I'm not a scientist nor would I claim to be. But this was what came out of it that I thought was useful to share with you. And I would recommend having a listen to this podcast, but I know we're all time poor now, aren't we? And we're working incredibly hard. So I pulled out the key points for you here that I think are useful.

In the podcast, Victoria said we need to model it. You know, we are the models for our young people in how to manage these things. So we say to our young people, "Oh, I had a terrible night's sleep last night. Will you help me to remember to pick up the cat food when we go to the shop? Will you remind me that I need to get the books out of the store cupboard at school? Will you remind me?" You know, teachers can do this, parents can do this. "Can you remind me? Because I had a terrible night's sleep last night. My working memory is not great today."

By modeling it, what you're doing is you're empowering the child that it's not just them that struggles, which is so important. So many of our youngsters grow up thinking it's just them. You're modeling that all of us can sometimes have difficulty with executive functioning. But what you're also doing is you're creating a safe environment for them to learn how to do it.

If they're helping you with yours, they're developing those executive functioning skills without the pressure. Because when it's about them, it's, "I'm getting this wrong, I'm struggling, I'm failing, I'm rubbish," which so many of our kids are made to feel. If you're saying, "Can you help me with mine?" by modeling it, you're taking the pressure out of a situation that means they can learn in an environment that doesn't feel pressurized, that doesn't feel overwhelming.

Equally, honor how they're feeling. "I can see this is hard for you." You know, we talk a lot in autism at the moment about co-regulation. And I thought, "Oh, here's another thing I'm going to have to go on a course about." It's going to be a 48-hour course about co-regulation. Then I discovered co-regulation basically means stay calm and be nice.

You be the calm for the child to come back to. You know, you're the calm, reassuring influence when they're distressed and overwhelmed. So honoring how they're feeling, co-regulating. "I can see this is hard for you."

I wasn't intending to tell you this story, but I'm telling you it now. About seven years ago, me and my partner had a bit of a falling out. Nothing major, you know. We were in a long-term relationship, any of you watching this, you know what it's like. Sometimes you have a bit of a bicker. And we'd had a bit of a heated discussion. And I was sitting with my partner and I

said, "Look, you've listed all the reasons why you're annoyed with me at the moment. Could you possibly list just one reason why you love me? That would really help in this moment."

And he sat and he thought about it for a bit too long. And then he looked back at me and he said, "I love you because you try harder than anybody I've ever met." And I sat there, and I sobbed. And crying isn't something that happens often in my life. I feel overwhelmingly sad emotions, but it doesn't often translate to crying for me. It's just not something that happens to me very often.

And I sat there and I sobbed. And he said to me, "Why are you upset?" And I said, "Because you can see. You can see how much effort it's taking to do all of this stuff, to be in all of these places." You know, looking back now, realizing executive functioning and how much inertia I was going through, you can see it.

The beauty for young people, for an adult who can see that they're experiencing difficulties, who can say to them, "I can see this is really difficult." We cannot underestimate the power of being seen by young people. The good thing is that, you know, all brains are plastic. You know, not literally. Please don't take me literally on that.

But brains are plastic in the sense that they develop all the time. Which means we can build skills all the time. All humans develop skills. Regardless of our neurodivergence, you know, we grow and we learn, you know, we learn differently, but we grow and we learn. So yes, we can develop executive functioning skills.

You know, I'm not sitting here saying I have none. I'm saying I struggle with mine, but it doesn't mean that I haven't developed huge amounts of skill in that area. And autistic young people have developed huge amounts of skill in that area. So we need to give them credit for it. We need to say, "I know getting here for nine o'clock is really hard. Well done. You remember to bring your book in today, that's fantastic, I know how hard that can be."

Honoring when they do manage to do it. You know, because often our children will only register what they think are their mistakes. What we need to do is build up a catalogue of successes as well. But ways we can build these skills, again in this podcast they were talking about games like "What will I need on my holiday?"

Doing imaginary shopping lists. Getting young people to help you with the laundry. Asking children in your class to help you with the register, to go and collect something from reception. And again, I'm not saying pile loads of responsibility on kids who struggle to cope with it. You know, you will be the best judge of which child will be able to thrive with that or struggle with that.

But all of those things enable us to develop those skills. It's crucial, though, to point out that metacognition is not fully possible until adulthood. You know, reports vary. I've seen various reports recently. Some reports suggest that 20 is the age that we can fully develop metacognition. Some reports say 28.

And yet we're expecting 5-year-olds to be able to have a helicopter view of themselves. To be able to reflect on what they've done. It's impossible. You know, we talk a lot about

emotional regulation in education at the moment, and we're expecting seven-year-olds to be able to regulate their emotions, when us as adults struggle with it.

None of us really are, as humans, effectively regulating our emotions. Most people watching this have chucked your phone across the room before, slammed a cupboard door, gone and screamed in the garden, gone for an angry drive. No, please don't do that. Be safe on the roads. Safety first. But all of us as adults struggle with emotional regulation, of course we do, mostly because it's not something, historically, that's ever been on the curriculum.

But we expect our youngsters, our neurodivergent youngsters, to be able to manage emotions at a ridiculously early age, and that's unfair. So be mindful that being able for the child to look back on what they did and see why it was difficult is something that's far beyond their years. So, as an adult, we need to help them scaffold that.

Now, of course, not in the moment that they're struggling, because they're in the moment then. They're distressed. We don't want to add to the distress. But in the calm after the storm, we can have that conversation. "I can see getting ready this morning was tricky. I could see getting to lesson on time was hard for you today. What should we try tomorrow to make it easier?"

Because if the young person comes up with the solution, they are far more likely to go along with it, because it's their suggestion, they're invested in it. You're working on it together, that's so empowering.

Remember that any new skill needs 60 iterations to become habit. That means you've got to do it 60 times before it becomes something you can do without thinking too much about it. That's once a day for two months. That's once a week for over a year. Just because a child does something once doesn't mean they'll be able to do it again tomorrow. Doesn't mean they've mastered it. It's something we need to practice again and again and again to develop that new habit.

Another key area here is that - I don't know if it's the same in Australia, but it's certainly the same in the UK - is that we've lost a lot of project work in our curriculum now. So much of our curriculum is heavily exam-based now.

So when I went to school, once you were on to doing your end of school qualifications, a good 40 to 50 percent of some of your courses were coursework based, so project work you'd do through the year, which meant you went into the exam in the knowledge that 50 percent of your grade was set. What changed in British education about five or six years ago now, was they removed the focus on project work, and made everything - some courses are like 98 percent exam-based.

Which for those of our youngsters who find exams incredibly anxious, incredibly anxiety-making and overwhelming, puts so much pressure on that final result, on that final day. But also, project work utilizes executive function skills. Coursework, planning what you're going to do, when are you going to do it, hitting the deadline, all of that is practiced early on for executive functioning.

And so the danger of removing that from education - and again I don't know if that's what's happening in Australia but it's certainly happened here - the danger of removing project work is that we remove that opportunity for our young people to develop those brilliant executive functioning opportunities.

Because project work is a lovely way of "what do I need, when will I need it, when do I need it by?" You know, it's a long-term way and a safer way for our young people to develop those skills. So I worry that in education we're losing those.

Now I mentioned a little bit about brain science. I'm not a scientist, but this is really important. So you'll see on the screen there, there is a picture of a brain. The bit that's colored in orange is what they call the prefrontal cortex. That's the part at the front of the brain. They say it's the last bit of the brain to develop. I always call it the full frontal cortex, which would be a completely different thing altogether.

Prefrontal, prefrontal. The prefrontal cortex is the last part of the brain to develop and the prefrontal cortex, and again, as I said, doesn't fully develop until your twenties. The prefrontal cortex is the bit that fires most of executive functioning. What education does is it expects adult levels of executive functioning from six-year-olds and some six-year-olds will be able to do executive functioning brilliantly, you know, but they are the anomalies and what education is guilty of is seeing those six-year-olds who do it brilliantly and assuming that that's the baseline for everyone when actually the reality is that child just is superhumanly able to do executive functioning years before their age.

You know, that's wonderful for them. We can't assume that that's, or think that's the baseline for everyone else. Certainly when I was at school, there were one or two kids who were just incredibly punctual, who were on time, remembered what they needed to bring in, were always well put together. The opposite of me. And I was being judged against them. That's not fair. Actually, the reality is, the science tells us, the reality is people will struggle with organizational skills until their twenties. So to expect or to be frustrated with twelve-year-olds who have forgotten to bring their book in is unfair.

Equally, the prefrontal cortex that powers executive functioning is at the front of the brain. When we're in fight or flight, when we're overwhelmed or distressed, that's all powered by the amygdala, which is the bit at the back of the brain. They call it the reptilian brain, don't they? It's the bit at the very back at the bottom of the brain.

If we're trapped in anxiety or distress, we can't access the prefrontal cortex. So in summary, what I'm saying here is what we cannot do when someone is struggling with their executive functioning is pressure them to be better at it. If we add pressure, we are actually reducing their ability to develop executive functioning, because if we're trapping them in fight or flight and anxiety, they'll never be able to access the bit of the brain they need in that moment to do the executive functioning.

So standing over a young person saying, "Well, why haven't you done your homework?" It's never going to enable them to be able to do it tomorrow. That's not going to help. That's just adding more pressure on, which will reduce their ability to pre-plan. What we need to do is offer compassion. Like I mentioned earlier, "I can see it's difficult for you. I can see it's hard. What would make it easier?"

Moving across. Thoughts for the classroom. Have paper and pens by the door. So if a young person forgets they've brought their book in, if they forget to bring their book in, if they forget to bring in what they need, chances are they'll remember ten minutes before the lesson, "I've not got my book," or they'll open their bag and it's not there, and they'll think, "Oh, I'm going to be in so much trouble," and the anxiety and the distress is building.

If they know there's pen and paper by the door, they can just grab it as they come in, or maybe at the back of the room they can just quietly go and get some, without having to draw attention to the fact they've forgotten their book. Takes the pressure out of it. And the key is to make sure they know it's there, that all our youngsters know it's there, so that we establish it's okay sometimes that we forget things.

We pressure youngsters to be perfect, when none of us are. And if they know, "Okay I haven't got my book but this is my plan B," that could be really useful. Or as I said earlier, having a spare book in a drawer at school they know is there. So if they forget to bring theirs, they can put it in the book, take a photo of it, so they've got it on their phone, so they can transfer it to their book at home, you know, or photocopy it and put it in their book at home, whatever.

But providing that alternative, so if they haven't got their book, then it isn't the end of the world. Can we start homework in lesson time? Very often we set homework at the very end of the lesson, when kids are packing their bags up, getting their coats together, it's noisy, and we'll quickly tell them what the homework is.

Whether our youngsters will be able to absorb that, whether they've taken the information in, whether the sensory environment has been so overwhelming they've been able to tune in to what you've said, will they be able to remember all the detail - they might have written two words down of what you've said.

If we start the homework in lesson time, then we know that we've scaffolded the work properly. They're not going home thinking, "Oh, what is it they want me to do? I don't understand the task." If we set the task in lesson time, you know, in the last ten minutes, and start them off, you know, "Give me your first sentence on this," then when they get home, they've got something to start from.

And I think this is so true of working in the classroom too. Try and avoid blank pages, because blank pages for me, if I start it means I've got a mountain to climb. Whereas if I've got sentence starters or prompts, "Think about this here, think about that here, questions..." So if you're setting an essay, for example, give me a crib sheet with questions on it, with gaps in between.

My essay fills the gaps in between. We take the questions out, you've got your essay. You know, just starters so that I'm not looking at a blank page. I'm not sitting there thinking "I don't know how to do this. I don't know what it is they want." You know, when we start, when we give those prompts, it makes a world of difference.

And we can also help with that by starting the homework in lesson time. Also in schools, can we allow time at the start of the day to finish off getting ready? If our young people are

arriving and they've not got their shoes on, can we just allow them time to do it without making a fuss about it?

Realizing it was obviously hard for them today to put their shoes on, and allowing them time to do that. Can we include buffer time at the start of the day for the young person to recover? As I said, it takes so much energy to get out of the house and to school in the morning, and then you've got to do travel and transport.

It's overwhelming. Can we give time at the start of the day just for the young person to get their breath back? "Okay, what do I need? Have I got everything ready? Have I got my shoes? Is my tie on?" I would argue that ties are also a sensory nightmare that we need to really rethink. But "Have I got everything I need?"

Giving that time without judgment at the start of the day. Breaking work into smaller chunks. You'll see on the screen there, there's a visual of having work all in one block or having it in smaller blocks. Smaller blocks are much more manageable. It's much less of a mountain to climb. And I've seen so many teacher aides sit with the work in blocks on the table, and then they'll put a blank piece of paper over the top and just reveal one task at a time.

So all the child has to think about is what's now, rather than "I've got to do all of this." You know, "now, next, later" can be really useful for this too. But for some of our youngsters who are overwhelmed by too many tasks, putting a piece of paper over what's coming and just doing one at a time, you know, and only saying we have to commit to the next thing once we've done the first thing, means you're breaking things into much smaller manageable blocks.

Time framing tasks. How often in education do we say to our youngsters, "Off you go to do activity number one." What we forget to do is we forget to time frame it. So for that child, when you've said off you go to do activity number one, potentially they're thinking, "I've got the rest of my life to do this."

So I've got time to think about yesterday, what's happening tomorrow, what's happening in six weeks' time. And then you say, "OK, on to task number two." What? I've not even thought about one yet. And we think we're being helpful by saying, "I'll just skip number one, come back to it later." I can't do two if I've not done one.

You know, I don't start a ladder from the middle rung, so we've got all of this distress building all because we didn't time frame it. And again, as I mentioned earlier, for some of our youngsters who struggle with the concept of time, it's about showing that time passing. Whether it's with an actual sand timer, whether it's with a sand timer on the screen, a digital clock on the screen, it's about showing that time passing.

A progress bar on the screen that shows them how much time has passed and how much time's coming. Reminders when they've got a minute left, you know, all of those things that show time passing. That we, you know, in the technology we now have in our classrooms, we can put on the screen fairly easily. Those things make the world of difference too.

Is there somewhere online where I can check what the homework was? So if I haven't noted it down, if I can't remember what it is you've asked, is there somewhere I can check? And so many schools have shared areas now. Is there somewhere I can check? Type in my class name and find out what today's homework was.

So that reminder is there. Allowing the child - I know we have sort of anti-phone policies in schools now - allowing the child to take photos to aid their memory. If there's something they need to remember, something that's on the slides that you're using for your lesson, allowing them to take a photo of it, allowing them to take a photo of their work.

It enables them - they're far less likely to lose their phone than they are a piece of paper. So, having that reminder on their phone actually enables them to remember what the work was. It's not a distraction, it's actually an aid to remembering. And color coding. If we color code work, when I was doing my revision, I'd make sure that different topics were different colors of paper.

Something was on green paper, something was on blue, something was on yellow. That color coding in my head enabled me to work out what goes with what. So using colored stickers, colored paper for different tasks and topics. Sometimes using different colors of ink can make that difference too, for different bits of work.

Because that color coding just helps us to separate what goes with what. And again, we're talking about organization and planning. That can make the world of difference. I've touched on this, but it's always worth saying it's really crucial to use visuals. And you'll see on the screen now, there's a lovely visual here that I got from northstarpass.com. It was a free resource download. I checked this website yesterday and the server was down on it. So I don't know if it still exists, but this resource is here on the screen.

Several reasons why visuals are important from an executive functioning perspective. If we're giving a visual, it's far more easy to process than the written word. It's far more easy to process, particularly than spoken word. But the key when we're using visuals is to make sure they're relevant to what we're talking about. I go into some settings where they think visuals is putting pictures everywhere. When actually what that's doing is creating distractions. We need to use our visuals cleverly.

The visuals should back up the key points. The visuals should be there to create a visual reminder in the child's mind of what you've said. So use your visuals cleverly. Now, visual timetables. Visuals to go with the key points in text that's on the screen. Because the visuals will be a reminder, a visual reminder in the head of what's been said.

The child's far more likely to remember the picture than they are to remember a load of text. You know, that's just true for most of our young people. So, visuals make the world of difference. But also, visuals are unpressured. So if we're providing a set of visuals rather than a set of words, they're much less threatening, much more accessible, and much more empowering. They're much less anxiety-making than just loads of text, "I've got to work at this, work through and decipher and make sense of."

Use visuals, and actually they'll make the world of difference for all learners. Actually, all of this is a really crucial point. Sometimes education workers will say to me, "Well, if I do this

for the autistic child, invest all this time, what about all the other kids?" And I say to them, you're missing the point. If you do this for your neurodivergent youngsters, it will benefit almost everybody else in the room, including you, as the teacher or teaching aide.

Having those visuals actually helps all of us.

LESSON 6

Thoughts on how to support our youngsters through autistic inertia. So we've looked at executive functioning, now let's look at autistic inertia - our autistic youngsters who struggle to start tasks, who feel frozen, like I was talking about earlier.

Now, at the beginning we talked about this piece of research and I said I'd come back to it. This piece of research was a series of interviews with autistic adults who were attending the AutScape Autistic Research Convention. I think it moves every year, but I think it was in Scotland that particular year, in 2021 in Edinburgh. And they interviewed a series of autistic adults who had experiences of this autistic inertia, who struggled to start tasks, who struggled to finish tasks, and what came through from all of those adults that were surveyed.

And when I read this bit of research, it was life-changing. I felt seen because I struggled so much in lockdown with self-initiation. I'm pretty good if someone says to me, "Can you be on Zoom at this time?" I can do that. It's not easy, but I can do it. If someone says to me, "Can you come and deliver a talk in our school at 9am?" I can get myself there. Not with ease, but I can do it. When it's self-directed, that's when I really struggle.

So in lockdown, I thought, "Oh, I've got all this time to write a book. I've got all this time - when I'm a singer and a songwriter - I've got all this time to write my album. You know, brilliant." And I did none of it and I felt like a failure, but I was so frozen for so much of that time in lockdown and then I saw this bit of research and it was like a present from on high because I realized that so many autistic people struggle with this.

I wasn't lazy. I was stuck. I was frozen. And what so many of these autistic adults said that ran so true for me in this research - they said if there is one task in my day that feels like I can't do it, then the whole day becomes "I can't do it." There's one link in that chain of activities that feels like I can't do it - the whole chain becomes "no."

And so what the outcome of this research was, is they said the one thing that would help the most, is if those that are supporting us would say "All you have to do is..." Not in a pressurizing way, not in an "Oh for goodness sake, all you've got to do is this," but in a compassionate way.

"Okay, those things are difficult. Those things are overwhelming. All you have to do is this." So if we're looking at a list of activities and activity number three feels like something I can't do, okay, all you have to do is activity number one. Focus on what the person can do. It means they can start with something they feel safe with.

And actually, once we've then started with an activity that we feel we can do, chances are we've then shifted gear and moved from stop to go, chances are we'll rattle through all the other stuff anyway. It's all about that moment of struggling to start. We'll never be able to start if we feel like we're being asked to climb a mountain with rocks in our bag.

So it's starting with what feels safe. As educationalists watching this, starting the day with tasks that are low demand. Starting the lesson with tasks that are easy. So if a child has

that in their bank, has that in the tank, "I've achieved that, I've got that in the bag," it fuels you for the next task.

"All you have to do is..." And so many autistic adults said what really helps is when other people say "All you've got to do is this." Forget all the other stuff that's overwhelming you, we'll just pick out the most important task that you feel you can do and we'll start with that.

Around that point, it's about working out what freezes you and planning around it. So I've realized in recent years that once I'm in water, I freeze. So, when I get in the bath, it can take an awful lot to get me into a bath. I managed it, well, last night. It's the morning where I'm recording here. So I've had a bath within 12 hours, you can rest assured.

But, it can take a lot to get me into the bath. I've learned once I lie in water, that relaxes me so much that I can lie there for hours. And I spent years lying in the bath, getting late for things, struggling to get other stuff done. Thinking "I should get out of the bath and do this. I need to do that. I need to do this."

And then I learned recently, okay, I'll probably, once I'm in the bath, I'll probably be in there for quite a long time. So I then start to think, "Okay, what can I do while the bath's running?" I live in a house where the bath takes a long time to run. Because I know I'm going to be frozen, okay, what can I do while I'm waiting for the bath to run?

I can put washing in the washing machine. Okay. I can wash some plates that are in the sink. I can put the bins out. So that I know when I'm in the bath, there aren't tasks I need to do once I get out. So I plan for when I'm going to be frozen. I know what is likely to freeze me. I know that being in the bath is where I lose a lot of time.

So I've learned, okay, if I've got to get in the bath, what can I do before the bath that means I can lie in the bath without that worry of "I need to be doing this, I need to be doing that, I should be doing that." The amount of emails I have sent in the bath is astonishing. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've emailed Sue Larkey from my bath before.

What an honor for you, Sue! Only ever an email, never a video call I hasten to add, I wouldn't do that to her. But I've learned to plan around those times of the day when I'm going to be frozen. Because I realize that certain things, certain tasks overwhelm me. Certain tasks like being in the bath will completely zap my energy.

So, planning around those. More thoughts on inertia. What can I do while I'm in "go" mode? There are days like yesterday where I woke up and I was ready to tackle tasks and those days do happen. When I've got one of those days, I think to myself, "Okay, this won't last forever - tomorrow might be a day where I can't do anything."

So what can I do while I've got the energy? What can I do whilst I'm in "go" mode? That doesn't mean overwhelming the child and adding too much. It's just saying, okay, what can I rattle through today while I'm doing stuff? So I know tomorrow I've got a clear, a slower, more sort of recovery time. Today might be a "can't" day.

That doesn't mean tomorrow will be. So many of our youngsters think "I'll never be able to do this stuff. You know, I can't do a task. I'll never be able to do it." Reminding them, again,

that ability to have a reflective view of yourself in childhood is something that doesn't happen until adulthood. Reminding our youngsters, "Well actually there's been days before where you couldn't, and then a couple of days later you could."

You know, everything passes. You know, reminding the child, "I've seen you before really struggle, and then the next day you struggled less. So tomorrow might be easier. Just because you can't today, doesn't mean tomorrow will be a 'can't' day." You know, we'll go with you rather than against you.

We mentioned earlier, give the child credit for what they have done. So many of our youngsters only remember what they feel they haven't achieved, not what they feel they have. You know, they'll take what they've done and achieved for granted. And they will only register the bits they're struggling with. We need to be the reminder of, "Well, actually you'll say you're beating yourself up because you can't do question number four, but let's look at the questions you did do. You did numbers one to three. Brilliant. That's good enough."

Really important. Also thinking about how can we remove the obstacles. If there is a task that the child is stuck on, how essential is it? Can we take it out of the picture altogether? So if the child is struggling with question 4, can we give them permission to not do it?

Can we say, "OK, question 4 is overwhelming you, meaning that you can't do any of it. I'm giving you permission not to do number 4. We're going to start with number 1. 1's alright, isn't it? We'll do that." And then we might come back to four later, or the child may well say to us themselves, once they've shifted gear and they're doing the others, "Alright, let's give four a go then."

But equally they might not. But it doesn't mean that's less of an achievement, they've still rattled through the other questions. It's about saying to them, if something is freezing you, we can step round it. All through my childhood there was such a pressure to just keep pushing through, to just keep trying harder, just keep forcing myself through.

So many of our youngsters are hitting burnout because of that. We need to empower our youngsters to say, okay, what can I do? We'll start with that. What feels like a "no," we'll park it for now.

Also think about when the child can work. So I was a journalist for five or six years, and I would sit all day at my laptop as a freelance journalist staring at a blank screen. I told you only a blank screen would be incredibly overwhelming for those of us that struggle with starting tasks. I'd sit with the blank screen all day staring at it, not being able to start.

And then at two in the morning, always two in the morning, I would then manage to knock out the whole article and get it sent off by the deadline. And it took me a good year into my journalism career of trying to force myself through my days to write. And I started to see the pattern. I thought, hang on, I work best at 2 in the morning. So I just won't do the work till 2 in the morning.

And I did the same with my secondary school homework. I'd do it in the early hours. That's the time when my brain works best. So if you're watching this as a parent and the child isn't

doing their homework at 6pm, but they are doing it at 11pm, that's obviously the time they work best.

So, giving them that time, giving them that flexibility to do it when they can. At school, it may be that the child doesn't do the work until the last ten minutes of lesson time, and then in that ten minutes they churn out excellent quality work - well then that's just when they do their best work.

Trying to force them through fifty minutes of work when they can't actually reduces their chance of being able to do brilliant work in the last ten minutes. So it's about working around that child's working pattern. It might take them fifty minutes to feel settled. It might take them 15 minutes to be able to tackle the task.

So learning what the child's work pattern is, and working around that rather than continuously trying to push a child to work when they can't. Be clear what the task actually is. Because what happens to me is that I spend a lot of time thinking, "What's required? What's required?" If it's something new I've got to do, "What's required? What do I need to do?" And if I haven't got a clear answer, it becomes so enormous in my head, so much bigger than the task actually is.

It's about clarity, about being absolutely clear, "I want you to do this for me." Because often, we say to our neurodivergent youngsters, "Write me an essay about King Henry VIII," and most kids will come back with one page of A4, and neurodivergent youngsters like I did, will come back with ten pages, because we didn't tell them exactly how much we wanted.

You know, they spent the whole weekend doing it, when actually it was only supposed to be an hour's task. So saying "One side of A4 is enough, 500 words is enough," you know, setting out what the task actually is. Because if we don't, chances are a youngster's head will make it much bigger than it needs to be and a much bigger pressure than it needs to be.

And it will seem much further away from what they're capable of to them. Unless we are absolutely clear about what the task is when we set it. And also, what does "good enough" look like? Again, I do a lot of work in workplaces now, and a lot of autistic neurodivergent adults in workplaces are working themselves so hard, much harder than their neurotypical colleagues, because they're frightened if their work isn't perfect, they'll get in trouble.

They're worried they'll lose their job if their work isn't perfect. Meanwhile, their neurotypical colleagues are chucking in an 8 out of 10, "Sod it, it'll do, it's good enough, never mind," you know, and that's good enough. What we need to do from the earliest point when we're teaching autistic young people, or indeed in the home, is define what "good enough" looks like.

What do I want from you in this task? What would be great if you could, but what's the baseline of good? What's good enough? Because otherwise the task can become a much bigger pressure for the young person than we intended it to be. Tell them what good enough looks like.

I mentioned about celebrating the wins, really important, and starting with what feels possible, starting with what's easy, starting with what the child feels they can do. And I

mentioned this - you'll see on the screen, a picture of Kermit the Frog being supported in a medical setting because he struggles to put fitted sheets on his bed. That's me. I will sit on the bed for hours, staring at my fitted sheets, willing them to put themselves on.

And even after 35 years, I've not learned that they don't put themselves on. I will sit there staring at them for hours, completely frozen. And I messaged a friend of mine who's a fellow autistic, who also struggles with this. And I said to her, "I can't put the fitted sheet on the bed. I've got loads of other stuff I need to be doing. I'm sat here, I've been here for an hour, just staring at the sheet. I can't get started."

Remember what I said to you about if one thing in the chain is a "can't" - if one task is a "can't," then all of them become a "can't do it." She said to me, "OK, what other things are on your list?"

I said, "Well I need to take the plates down to the sink. I need to wash up. I need to put my laundry on."

She said, "How do you feel about those?"

I said, "Oh they're all fine."

She said, "Right, well then we're noping the sheet."

And I said, "What?"

She said, "We're noping it. I'm giving you permission to nope it. We're not putting the fitted sheet on today. If you have to lie on a bare bed without a sheet on it, then so be it. We're not doing it."

And then I fired through the other stuff on my list. And that was the first time in my life where I was given the permission to say actually this task feels like a nope, so I'm not doing it.

All my life I've just forced myself, constantly exhausted myself, pushing myself through tasks I couldn't do. Giving our youngsters the power of nope is enormous. Okay, what do you feel you can do? If something is a total nope, then we'll park it. We might come back to it later, tomorrow, another day. But for now, we'll start with what feels safe.

It's that safety and familiarity thing again, that we touched on at the beginning. We'll start from what you feel you can do, and we'll park the nope, because one task in the chain that feels like a nope means they're all a nope.

And while I remember it, one of the biggest challenges I've always had in my life is taking plates downstairs to wash them up. And I also have OCD, so I'm a mixed individual, a mixed profile. And so, the autistic inertia of taking the plates down means I never do. And then after a day or two, once they're starting to, you know, have families growing on them and algae - once that happens, then the OCD kicks in of, "I'll never be able to wash that bacteria off, and then someone will get harmed," and so on and so on.

And so what would happen is, I'd just develop this pile of plates, which I'd eventually put laundry over so I couldn't see them and in the end, every three months or so, I'd end up going to the supermarket and buying replacement plates. They were part of the works in the supermarket. And I'd always go to a till that wasn't his, and I'd see one of his colleagues, and they'd see me buying this canteen of crockery.

Four plates, four side plates, four bowls. And without fail, every night I'd get a call from my partner, and I thought he didn't know about it, and he'd say, "You've done it again, haven't you? You've chucked out all the plates, bowls, and cups, because you haven't washed them." Because his colleagues would all whisper behind my back with sneaky sobs.

II haven't had to do that for many years, but that was a time of real difficulty for me. And actually, it had a financial cost to it, and I'm not a wealthy person by any stretch of the imagination. But it meant we had plates. It was a step around, and forcing myself to wash up those plates would have really triggered my anxiety once they were developing that bacteria. It was just easier at one point to nope the old plates and buy new ones.

I hasten to add I now have a system in place where no plate sits in my room for more than one night. So I'm sitting, as we speak now, next to last night's dinner plate. That'll get taken down today. I try and stay in that pattern now. But it took me such a long time - again the prefrontal cortex doesn't develop until well into the twenties and it took me until my thirties to be able to put those routines and patterns in place.

So giving our young people the power of nope is really crucial. This on the screen is a wonderful colleague of mine called Jo Butler. She was a co-writer on the book "Is That Clear?" Which is a really good resource for non-autistic people in how to change their communication to make it more accessible to autistic people.

For so long the narrative has been, "We need to teach autistic people social skills." Well, autistic people already have social skills, they're just different ones to the majority of society. There's plenty of research that proves that, not least the work of Dr. Catherine Crompton at Edinburgh University in the Department of Autism Research and Technology.

She's done tons of work around autistics' communication styles, and how we don't lack social skills, we just have different ones. The focus has always been on teaching us social skills. We have plenty. What we struggle with is understanding non-autistic social skills in the same way that non-autistics struggle to understand us.

It's two ways, and yet the blame for that communication breakdown has for too long been placed on autistic people. What this book does, and it's brilliant, is it gives practical guidance to non-autistic people on how they can make their communication more accessible to autistic people. What they can do to be clearer, to be more easily understood, to be less ambiguous, to give clarity.

Really lovely book that's really empowering, I think. Autistic learners saying you're not the problem here. The problem is the world doesn't understand you. So let's get them more understanding, not shift you to fit the environment. And she said to me - she's a dear friend - I was struggling with my autistic inertia in lockdown.

And she said to me - I said, "I'm not achieving any of the things I wanted to." And she said to me, "Dean, we're human beings. We're not human doings. You are allowed sometimes just to be." And I think with the pressure in education, with the pressure in the world to achieve, to attain, to hit targets, to meet goals, we often forget to tell our kids they're allowed to be.

There's so much focus on what we're doing, when actually we have huge value just because we are, just because we're being. I mean, you're allowed to be, and there is no such thing as doing nothing. Nothing is recovery time. Nothing is "I've just spent six hours at school and I'm completely overwhelmed."

Nothing is anticipating what's coming. You know, a friend of mine who's an autistic advocate, Chloe Gilley talks about "power saving mode." I think this is brilliant. She was telling me the other week that she had a big thing coming up. She was moving house and that was a thing. Of course it was. Who wouldn't think that was a thing?

But she was saying, "I'm struggling with packing my boxes up, getting the house ready." I know I'll do it in time, but right now it's a week in advance of her moving day. She said, "I can't do it now because I'm in power saving mode." She said, "I'm just reserving as much energy as I can, because I know that's coming up."

We're not doing nothing. We're recovering from something that's been overwhelming, or we're preparing ourselves for an enormous thing that's coming around the corner that we know is going to be difficult. One of the challenges for me as an autistic person is that I am rarely in the moment. One of the reasons I love training and delivering presentations is that it's probably the only time of my life where I'm actually in the moment, and the only thing I think about is what I'm doing right now.

The rest of my time I'm either processing what's been and recovering from it, or anticipating what's coming. So my partner will often say to me, "Shall we do something on Sunday?" And my answer will be no, because I've got a job on Tuesday.

That's too close together. I'll be in power saving mode. My brilliant colleague Chloe Gilley gave me that phrase, and she's brilliant. There is no such thing as doing nothing. It's recovery or it's preparation time. It's preparing for what's coming, it's recovering from what's been. Because being in the moment can be really difficult for autistic folk, and that's what's so frustrating about the whole discussion around mindfulness.

"Clear your mind." I'm neurodivergent, that's never going to happen. The matter of my brain works, and to put that pressure on us to expect that we can is really unfair. This quote is really powerful, and I wanted to share it with you. I'm mindful we're coming towards the end of our time together, but this quote is really crucial for me.

My partner and I were having a discussion about executive functioning, and he knows I tell these stories. And he says to me, "Please stop making me the villain in your pantomime." I said to him, "Darling, you're the hero of the piece, but sometimes heroes get it wrong." He was having this discussion with me. I was having a video call, and I was trying to explain to him why executive functioning was difficult for me and why autistic inertia was difficult for me.

And I was doing the best I could to try and help him to understand it. And my partner isn't autistic. We won't hold it against him. He's brilliant in lots of ways. It just happens he's not a fellow autistic. He is a fellow neurodivergent. He's dyslexic, but he isn't autistic. So, I was trying my best to help him to understand why executive functioning and inertia were difficult for me.

I was doing all I could, and was really struggling. And in the end, after 45 minutes of trying, I realized, he's never lived through these difficulties. He can get dressed and be where he needs to be and leave the house and do all of that stuff. He can do it on autopilot. Whereas for me, every time's like the first time I've done it.

And I realized it's wrong of me to expect him to be able to understand it. He's not lived it. So I said to him, "Look, I don't need you to understand. I mean, that'd be lovely, but I don't need you to. I just need you to believe me." And if you take no other message from this, as someone who supports autistic folk, it's believe them.

They may experience things that you can't even conceive. Won't make any sense to you because you've not experienced it. Doesn't mean it isn't the reality for them. The biggest gift we can give neurodivergent young people is to believe them when they tell us something is difficult. To believe them. You know, so many kids say to us, "That light's flickering."

They'll say to us, "I can hear a loud noise from next door." And we'll say, "I can't hear that. The light isn't flickering." And we completely invalidate what they tell us. What we do is we validate what they tell us. "I believe you. That's what you're telling me. That's what you're experiencing. I believe you."

The easiest thing we can do is to validate what our young people tell us and believe them. Funnily enough, after that conversation with my partner and I was explaining to him executive functioning, he said to me, "You know, you should do talks on this." I had to muffle a scream at that point. I do! It's part of my job.

He came to Australia for three of the four tours I did with Sue and Sue knows Chris well, and he's a phenomenal, brilliant person who has empowered me to be who I am. Not despite who I am, but because of who I am. And that's a wonderful thing that we should be doing for all of our young people.

But I appreciate that if someone else isn't autistic, they're not going to instinctively understand what I'm experiencing. What they can do is believe me when I tell them what I'm experiencing.

LESSON 7

I haven't had to do that for many years, but that was a time of real difficulty for me. And actually, it had a financial cost to it, and I'm not a wealthy person by any stretch of the imagination. But it meant we had plates. It was a step around, and forcing myself to wash up those plates would have really triggered my anxiety once they were developing that bacteria. It was just easier at one point to nope the old plates and buy new ones.

I hasten to add I now have a system in place where no plate sits in my room for more than one night. So I'm sitting, as we speak now, next to last night's dinner plate. That'll get taken down today. I try and stay in that pattern now. But it took me such a long time - again the prefrontal cortex doesn't develop until well into the twenties and it took me until my thirties to be able to put those routines and patterns in place.

So giving our young people the power of nope is really crucial. This on the screen is a wonderful colleague of mine called Jo Butler. She was a co-writer on the book "Is That Clear?" Which is a really good resource for non-autistic people in how to change their communication to make it more accessible to autistic people.

For so long the narrative has been, "We need to teach autistic people social skills." Well, autistic people already have social skills, they're just different ones to the majority of society. There's plenty of research that proves that, not least the work of Dr. Catherine Crompton at Edinburgh University in the Department of Autism Research and Technology.

She's done tons of work around autistics' communication styles, and how we don't lack social skills, we just have different ones. The focus has always been on teaching us social skills. We have plenty. What we struggle with is understanding non-autistic social skills in the same way that non-autistics struggle to understand us.

It's two ways, and yet the blame for that communication breakdown has for too long been placed on autistic people. What this book does, and it's brilliant, is it gives practical guidance to non-autistic people on how they can make their communication more accessible to autistic people. What they can do to be clearer, to be more easily understood, to be less ambiguous, to give clarity.

Really lovely book that's really empowering, I think. Autistic learners saying you're not the problem here. The problem is the world doesn't understand you. So let's get them more understanding, not shift you to fit the environment. And she said to me - she's a dear friend - I was struggling with my autistic inertia in lockdown.

And she said to me - I said, "I'm not achieving any of the things I wanted to." And she said to me, "Dean, we're human beings. We're not human doings. You are allowed sometimes just to be." And I think with the pressure in education, with the pressure in the world to achieve, to attain, to hit targets, to meet goals, we often forget to tell our kids they're allowed to be.

There's so much focus on what we're doing, when actually we have huge value just because we are, just because we're being. I mean, you're allowed to be, and there is no such thing as doing nothing. Nothing is recovery time. Nothing is "I've just spent six hours at school and I'm completely overwhelmed."

Nothing is anticipating what's coming. You know, a friend of mine who's an autistic advocate, Chloe Gilley talks about "power saving mode." I think this is brilliant. She was telling me the other week that she had a big thing coming up. She was moving house and that was a thing. Of course it was. Who wouldn't think that was a thing?

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