

**Title: Strength in Neurodiversity: Creating a Workplace Where Everyone Can Belong**

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**Peggy Mihelich:** Hello, and welcome to our latest installment of Supercharge Your Presence. This is Peggy Mihelich, senior director of member content here at APA. Today's webinar focuses on strength in neurodiversity, creating a workplace where everyone can belong. Some important points before we get started. The views expressed in this presentation are those of the presenter, and may not reflect the views of the American Psychological Association. This program does not offer CE. However, we will email everyone watching live today a Certificate of Attendance. Attendees must watch for a minimum of 45 minutes to receive the certificate.

This presentation is being recorded and everyone who registered will be emailed the recording in about two weeks. We will chat out a link to the slide presentation during the webinar. If you miss it, don't worry. We'll include a link to the slides with the recording. During our time together, you will be on mute. If you have a question for a presenter, type them in using the question box located in your webinar screen. We'll have time to answer some of your questions after the formal presentation has concluded.

Our speaker today is Dr. Daniel Wendler, a best-selling author and nationally recognized keynote speaker on topics including neurodiversity, loneliness and leadership. Dr. Wendler built a life of deep connection, despite the social challenges of his autism diagnosis and went on to found ImproveYourSocialSkills.com and become a clinical psychologist so he could help others find social success too. He is also the founder of Marketing For Therapists, a leading online marketing agency for private practice therapists, featured by *Bloomberg Newsweek Magazine*. Welcome, Dr. Wendler.

**Daniel Wendler:** Thanks so much. I'm excited to be here. I got a lot to share, I think I'll just jump right in. I did want to talk about one component of my story that's important to recognize in addition to the professional credentials. In order to tell that story, we're going to have to go back in time to the woods of Minnesota when I was just a little Daniel. As a little Daniel, I enjoyed my life but I had a problem. My problem is that I was weird. I don't just mean a little weird, I mean really weird. I don't just mean really weird, I mean industrial strength, super ultra weird.

Obviously, this is because as I would later learn, I have a diagnosis of autism and a lot of the the social skills that came naturally to other people didn't come naturally to me. A lot of the ways that other people expected me to behave, I wouldn't behave in those ways. Over time, I've been able to overcome a lot of that. I've been able to find a community that really loves and accepts me for who I am. I've been able to build a career helping other people discover the same community and connection that I've found. I just want to share that this is not just an area of professional interest for me but this is something that is a part of my lived experience.

I've seen firsthand the damage that can come from being in spaces where difference is not celebrated but rather condemned, or where instead of being able to accept me for who I am, people just try to change me and force me to fit into a box. I'm hoping

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that this talk will equip those of you who might not be neurodivergent to create a more acceptant space for other people, and those of you who might be neurodivergent to maybe be able to create a little bit more of a good space for yourself or find out where those spaces might be. Without further ado, let's jump in.

Our agenda for today, we're going to start with just an introduction to help you understand what neurodiversity is and some of the core components of that idea and the movement behind it. Then we're going to apply neurodiversity to autism, just as an example or an application of those concepts to make sure that you have that locked in. Then finally, we're going to conclude by talking about how do we apply these things to creating workspaces specifically where everybody can belong, whether they're neurodivergent or neurotypical, and we'll define those terms in just a second.

Obviously, this is for the APA and a lot of the focus is going to be on clinical type workspaces. I think that a lot of the stuff should be applicable no matter what your workspace is. Let's jump in. Before we really get into the heart of neurodiversity, I want to offer a couple of definitions so that when I say these things, you know what I'm talking about, and you're not left behind. First, neurodivergent refers to somebody whose brain performs differently than what society considers the norm. For me, with autism, we would say that I'm neurodivergent.

Neurodivergent is a little bit of a tricky term because typically it's used to refer to people that have lifelong conditions, that have significant effects on how they think, process information, make decisions. It generally applies more to things like autism or ADHD and less so to things like depression or a phobia. Obviously, it's a bit of a gray area because we know that there can be a neurological and a genetic component to depression. We know that depression can be a thing that travels with somebody throughout their lifespan.

It's not really my place to determine specifically who counts as neurodivergent and who doesn't. I just want to introduce you guys to the conversation, which is that typically people would use this to refer to folks with autism, ADHD, similar conditions and not so much for other things. Also neurotypical, that's the word that we use to describe somebody whose brain functions in the way expected by society. If your brain works basically the same way as what folks expect, you would be neurotypical. Neurodiverse refers to a group with both neurodivergent and neurotypical people.

You wouldn't say that a person is neurodiverse for the same reason that you wouldn't say that-- A person isn't diverse by themselves, a group is diverse. Then the neurodiversity movement is this grassroots effort advocating for improvements for how neurodivergent people are viewed and treated in society. As we go along, we'll talk a little bit more about some of the core components of that and how we can apply it to your workplace for the work that you're doing. I also see that we do have some questions and some chat coming in. I'm not going to be able to look at that, but I will review that at the end of the talk. If anything is super urgent, then APA will butt in and let me know.

I wanted to also talk about how to use this language in an inclusive way. It's important to use neurodivergent rather than abnormal. It's important to use

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neurotypical rather than normal. The reason is because normal and abnormal have judgment calls associated with that. If I say, "Well, my friend John likes watching reality TV shows but I'm normal and I like watching other shows," obviously I'm making a judgment about reality TV. I'm saying that there's something wrong with it. In the same way, if I say, "Well, Dan has autism, but I'm normal," you're saying something- criticism about myself and we don't want to do that.

Instead we just use neurodivergent and neurotypical rather than normal or abnormal. It also tends to be good to use neurotype rather than disorder. Obviously, in the DSM, it says autism spectrum disorder and things like that. In certain contexts you do have to use that language. In general, it can be good to refer to these things as neurotypes rather than disorders because it gets at the idea that autism and other areas of neurodivergence, it's not a disorder so much as a different way of being. Finally, with autism specifically, it's usually a good idea to use autistic rather than person with autism.

That might be different than how you were originally trained, especially if you were trained a while ago. The reason is because folks in the autistic community have determined that if you say person with autism, you're ashamed of the autism. You have to put the person part first to apologize for the autism and they say, "No, autism isn't something to be ashamed of." It's not something I need to hide. In the same way that I could say I'm an American person or I'm a tall person, it's just a part of my identity and I can put autistic right in front.

However, when in doubt, you should always ask because different people like to be referred to in different ways. The best thing is always to use the language that the person that you're actually interacting with prefers for themselves. Now that we have some groundwork of the language, let's talk about neurodiversity. In order to do that, we're going to first talk about bears. There's a saying about bears, like what to do if you encounter a bear in the wild? If it's black, fight back because a black bear, you're going to be able to fight it off, scare it away.

If it's brown, lie down because a grizzly bear, if you play dead, they might leave you alone. If it's white, good night because if you're out in the Arctic and you encounter a polar bear, you're done for it. There's nothing you can do, that bear is going to eat you for lunch. Let's say we took a polar bear from the Arctic, and we moved it to where I am in Texas, where it's currently 100 degrees outside. That bear would not be very impressive anymore. It would be super hot. Its white fur would make it stand out from a million miles away. Its claws that are really good for grabbing onto a seal probably wouldn't be very good for going into the woods and getting a deer. That bear would really have a lot of trouble.

If that were to happen, would you look at the bear and say, "Well, the polar bear is just a bad bear. Maybe we should diagnose it with polar bear disorder." No, you wouldn't. You would say the bear is just fine. It's just that the environment is not set up to allow the bear to succeed. That's the idea of neurodiversity. Just like a black bear and a polar bear, it's not that one bear is better than the other, it's just that they're adapted to different environments in the same way an autistic brain or a neurotypical brain, it's not that one brain is better than the other. It's that both brains, both kinds of brains, both kinds of thinking, have strengths and weaknesses.

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This is expressed by probably the most famous autistic person in the world, Dr. Temple Grandin, when she says, "I am different, not less." Autism and other forms of neurodivergence within this idea- it's not a thing to be pitied. It's not a tragedy, it's just a different way of thinking and a different way of experiencing in life. We can summarize that with the idea that, number one, neurodiversity is a natural part of human life. Just like it's totally natural and okay for us to have black bears and brown bears and polar bears, it's totally okay for us to have autistic people and people with ADHD and neurotypical people.

That's just a part of human diversity. Typical is not better. Obviously, most people, their brain works in a particular way, but just because the way that my brain works is less common doesn't mean that that's bad or a problem. Because my autistic brain, it does have some unique challenges, but it also has some unique strengths compared to a neurotypical brain. That's okay. Again, that's just a part of diversity. There's both pros and cons to being tall versus short. It's not that one is better than the other. However, there's something that, where we are I think different or have a different opportunity than polar bears.

A polar bear is just stuck in whatever environment you put it in, but we as human beings have the ability to shape our environment. That's why these last two components are really important. First, the idea that our environment affects our abilities, like a disability, might simply be a person in an environment that isn't set up to accommodate them. We'll talk a little bit more about that in the next few slides. Then also, we can design environments that allow everybody to flourish. Instead of creating environments that meet typical needs, we can create environments that meet all needs.

Let's explain that a little bit. These ideas actually draw not from the neurodiversity movement but from the disability rights movement more broadly. In fact, back in 1990, the disabled advocate Mike Oliver coined the idea the social model of disability. Basically, what he argued is that disability is not caused by a condition, it's caused when society fails to accommodate the needs of that condition. Society automatically meets the typical needs, but people with less typical needs get left out. The way that we can understand this is by thinking of the context of a movie theater. Let's say you want to go see the new *Indiana Jones* movie this weekend, and you go sit down in a movie theater.

If you are a deaf person, you're still fully able to enjoy that movie as long as the theater provides you with subtitles. Your ability or disability to enjoy the movie, it's not caused by your deafness, it's caused by the movie theater, either created in an environment that works for you or not, or similarly with an autistic person. If an autistic person is struggling to understand a conversation that's not because that person is autistic, that's because the person that they're talking to did not provide them with explicit verbal communication and instead is relying on body language and subtext and other things that the autistic person might not be well equipped to understand.

We can even expand this more broadly, like if you happen to have two left feet, you're not a very good dancer. That doesn't mean that you can't enjoy being on the dance floor. You just need an environment where the DJ is going to play the

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*Macarena* or something like that, that everybody can dance to, even though they might not have that ability. These are all just examples of this core concept that instead of blaming the person, instead of saying, "Well, okay, you're autistic and that means that you can't be social, and that means that we should exclude you from the social thing, or you're uncoordinated so you shouldn't dance at my wedding." We can create an environment that works for everybody.

Let's apply this to autism to bring this idea home and really make it clear. Obviously, we're here at an APA talk, and so we're all probably pretty familiar with how the DSM tells us to understand autism. Persistent difficulty in social interaction, restricted repetitive patterns of behavior, et cetera, et cetera. The thing is that the DSM frames all of these as problems. You would never open up an entry in the DSM and say, "Oh, that sounds fun. I would want to have that." The fact is, obviously, autism does bring several challenges with it, but the DSM diagnosis misses many components of autism that are really integral to what it means to be autistic.

The DSM doesn't say anything about how an autistic person might have a unique perspective or innovative thinking that they bring to the table. It doesn't say anything about how an autistic person might derive deep joy from their special interests that's a really important part of their life, or be able to have a sensory sensitivity that allows them to get really great pleasure from a particular sensation more so than they could if they were neurotypical. We are trained to look at just the problematic parts of a diagnosis and not recognize all of the gifts and strengths and positive parts of that. Obviously, because this is- talk about a workplace, we can also consider it from the lens of an autistic person as an employee.

Again, instead of focusing on challenges, we could say, "Well, an autistic person on your team is going to bring fresh ideas. They might think of something that a neurotypical person might not think of." Just like how we know all forms of diversity help to provide better thinking, better decision-making, an autistic person is going to bring that form of diversity to the decision-making process. Also, an autistic person might have deep knowledge on areas of interest. If something relates to their special interest, they might be an expert on that. That might be a real strength for your organization.

Finally, autistic people can sometimes have a strong commitment to ethics because some of how the autistic thinking can prefer to have more explicit rules, things like that, that lines up really well with obeying an ethical code, following morals, being a voice to advocate for doing the right thing in an organization. Obviously, being in the workplace, autism can also bring challenges, miscommunication, stress from sensory overload, difficulty with change or adaptation. The point is that these challenges shouldn't be viewed in isolation. You shouldn't say, "Oh, having this autistic person on my team is a liability," because for every challenge there's also a strength or something unique that they bring.

Obviously, I'm making generalizations here. Dr. Stephen Shore, who is a autistic disability educator, he famously said, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." I don't mean to make any of these a blanket statement about autistic people. I'm sure that there's autistic people out there that don't struggle at all with sensory things or that don't have any code of ethics whatsoever. This is

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just a general overview that gets to the heart of this idea that autism is different, not less. The way that we can understand this is that in terms of how we respond to someone with autism in the workplace, is to recognize that, okay, a person with autism needs understanding.

We need to try to figure out why is it that they're doing something, why is it that they're struggling in a particular way instead of just jumping to a conclusion? Then people with autism need acceptance. They need, if they're doing something in a different way or if they need a particular kind of help or support instead of judging that, criticizing that sort of offering some acceptance, some empathy, some compassion. Then autistic people need customized supports. Whatever the problem is, try to offer a solution to that. When I was doing my clinical training, I was at one particular site where we didn't have an online EHR.

Everything was handwritten notes. Part of my autism is that my handwriting is really bad. My supervisor worked with me and figured out a system where I could print out my notes and still store them in the paper health record system, and so that was a customized support that I needed. The thing is though, I still would've needed customized supports even if I had not been autistic and I still would've needed understanding and acceptance because this is just stuff that everybody needs. We all have times where we need other people to give us the benefit of the doubt and try to understand us instead of jumping to a conclusion.

We all need people to offer us acceptance, care, a little bit of empathy and we all need customized supports because everybody has things that they're better at and worse at than other people. Everybody has stuff that is uniquely challenging for them, and in order to be successful in an environment, everybody's going to need help and support for that. It's just that we normally find it much easier to offer this understanding, acceptance and support to people that are like us, which means that in an environment dominated by neurotypicals a lot of the stuff gets offered to neurotypicals, but somebody who's neurodivergent these things don't get offered to them, and that's a problem.

Dehydration is also a problem, I'm going to take a water break real quick. Now that we understand these things, how do we apply it to the workplace, how do we take this idea instead of viewing neurodivergence as a problem or as a reason why we might want to avoid having a person on our team, but instead just realize this person could probably be just as successful as a neurotypical person if I gave them the same supports. How do we apply that in practice? You could write an entire book on that, but I'll touch on some examples in a few specific areas.

Again, this is not exhaustive, this doesn't mean that these supports are going to be necessary for everybody, but it'll hopefully get you the wheels turning and help you be thinking about this stuff. First of all, I think that starting with sensory needs is a really huge component of how to offer accommodations because sensory issues can be one of the biggest ways in which neurodivergent people have a struggle that neurotypical people don't understand. There might be something that a neurotypical person looks at and they're like, so the light is flickering a little bit or there's a little bit of a chemical smell from the cleaners.

What's the big deal? I'm experiencing the same thing. It doesn't bother me, why can't you focus on your work? The experience of the neurodivergent person might be way different. That bleach smell that might be a little unpleasant to you, to a neurodivergent person might smell like standing in the middle of a sewer, and you wouldn't be able to do good work if you were standing in the middle of a sewer. That buzzing sound that seems just a little annoying to you that's coming from a light or something, to a neurodivergent person that might feel like standing on the runway of an airport with jet engines all around you.

Being able to address these sensory issues is huge, especially because a lot of times neurodivergent people are hesitant to bring this stuff up because we can learn that people won't understand, people might shame us for it, people might tell us it's not a big deal, just suck it up. A lot of times these sensory needs go unmet, how do you acknowledge that and adapt to that? The first thing is to have a policy of allowing people to make reasonable changes to their environment.

If a person is in an office and the overhead light is this bright fluorescent bulb that really hurts their eyes, they should be allowed to maybe swap that out with a different bulb, or they should be allowed to get a lamp that they can use instead that maybe has a lampshade that helps them. If the environment is really noisy, they should be able to put in a white noise machine or maybe some soundproofing, something like that. I'm not saying that you got to build somebody an entire new office just for them. That wouldn't be reasonable, but anything that is not super disruptive, not super expensive, I think allowing that goes a long way.

Also even if the wider environment can't be changed there's a lot of tools for neurodivergent people to control their own sensory experience. There's noise canceling headphones, there's sunglasses, if you have a particular work uniform or particular professional attire, there might be modifications to that can make it more comfortable. Same thing, if it's possible to do so reasonably then I think that you should allow people to wear earplugs, wear sunglasses, modify their work uniforms so it's more comfortable, et cetera. Also there can sometimes be sensations that are particularly unpleasant or particularly challenging for somebody.

These things are sometimes even worse if they are unexpected. Helping somebody avoid or plan for strong negative sensations can also be really huge, if you know that the cleaners are coming on a particular day and they're going to spray bleach everywhere, and you also know that there's somebody on your team that has a really strong sensory aversion to smell, maybe allow that person to work from home on that given day, or maybe allow them to come in late and leave late so that they can miss the time in the morning when the cleaners are there.

If you know that there's going to be construction noise happening on a particular day, maybe let a person know so they can bring in their noise canceling headphones, give them information so they can manage themselves. I think it's also important to acknowledge workflow needs, this can be particularly a challenge for people with the ADHD neurotype, but it can show up in general. I think one of the big things that can be useful is to give people as much as possible the ability to adapt their schedules to attention. What I mean by that is that sometimes a particular task might be a lot easier to accomplish than another task.

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Giving flexibility to work on whatever task happens to have the mojo behind any given moment rather than have it be really regimented can be valuable. Sometimes there can be times of the day where attention comes easily and you might be able to work on a more difficult task. Then other times of the day where attention doesn't come as easily, and then you might only be able to work on a more routine task. Again, trying to create systems where that can be accommodated is helpful. Obviously depending on the job, the role, things like that, there's limits to how possible this is going to be, but you want to do it as much as you can.

It's also important to allow for stimulation or simplicity as needed, what I mean by that is that sometimes it can be really difficult to focus on a task when the task is all that's there. If the task is boring, if the task is tedious, then focusing on it alone can be really difficult. Offering stimulation, allowing somebody to listen to music, allowing somebody to go for a walk while they're doing the task or something of that nature can make that more engaging. Then conversely, sometimes extra stimulation, extra distraction can just make it impossible to focus on something.

Allowing somebody to say, hey, in order to complete this task, I really need simplicity. I really need no interruptions, no other noise, don't knock on my door, don't call me. Allow me to put my noise cancelling headphones on. Don't make me multitask. That can be another thing that can be useful. Also I think it's a really good thing to keep in mind to always create-- If somebody is having difficulty with completing a part of their workflow and they've tried once or twice and they're just not successful with it, that's not a sign that they're lazy or that you need to push them to try harder, that's a sign that they need some tool or some structure.

If somebody is having a hard time paying attention to completing their clinical notes, maybe they need more of a template. Maybe they need a specific time blocked out to work on their notes, something that is going to make it easier for them to do rather than relying on just the brute force, because especially for a neurodivergent person, trying to say, "Just do it," probably there's something about it that is making it really hard for them to do it, and that they probably are already trying as hard as they can. Trying to push them to do it harder doesn't really work and it just makes them feel ashamed.

Instead you want to find that unmet need, give them a tool or a structure. Also communication needs, this can be a thing that can pop up a lot for neurodivergent people. I think that the biggest thing that is helpful here is to use direct and explicit communication. Say exactly what you mean, say exactly what you want the person to do. If for whatever reason there's a breakdown of communication, a person doesn't do what you expected them to do, they don't complete an assignment in the way that you thought that they ought to, instead of getting mad at them first ask yourself, "Did I communicate directly and explicitly what it was that I needed?"

Because oftentimes when there's these breakdowns it's because there wasn't that explicit communication. It was just like a question of, "Hey, how is that report coming along?" A neurotypical person might understand that to mean you're behind on your report, you'd better prioritize it, but a neurodivergent person might have no idea that that's what that means. Also in a similar vein, inviting clarification is really useful. When you're communicating something, have a moment to say, "Hey, does that

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make sense to you? Or can you feedback to me what you're hearing to make sure that I communicated it correctly?"

That doesn't mean that you have to do that every single time. You should adapt it to what a person needs, but especially for higher stakes kinds of things, getting that feedback, making sure that they can ask for clarification when they need it, is really valuable. Also documenting expectations and instructions is a good idea, because even if you've communicated something verbally to somebody it might feel overwhelming to them to be in that verbal conversation with you. If they struggle socially or if they struggle with attention, they might not have retained everything that you told them.

Writing it all down so that they know exactly what to do, they know exactly what your expectations are, that can be helpful. Also writing down unwritten rules can be really useful. For instance, if you invite somebody to a potluck, and they happen to be somebody that struggles with understanding social rules, including in a line that's like, "Everybody's expected to bring a dish," that can be useful. Or if you're inviting people to some after work social thing, having an expectation of how they should dress, that sort of thing can be useful, so that you're not leaving people out by failing to communicate something that you feel like they should just know.

I also want to talk about supporting clients in the therapy room. How do you make your therapy room a space that is accessible for neurodivergent clients? I think one way that's really easy is to make sensory objects available. Have a little tray of fidget cubes or a blanket or a scarf that they can run their hands over. That is both helpful because they're going to access it, and it functions sort of like putting pronouns in your bio. That communicates to trans people, hey, this is an affirming environment and having sensory objects available communicates to neurodivergent people, this is a space that validates neurodiversity.

It's also a good idea to ask about sensory needs, because again, neurodivergent people, a lot of times we've trained ourselves to just suppress whatever distress that we're feeling around sensory things because we're used to people not getting it. It might be that in your therapy room there's a noise or there's a light, or there's the smell of your perfume, who knows, that really bothers the person, but they're just not going to bring it up. However, if you ask them, if you say, "Hey, I really want this to be an environment that you feel comfortable in, is there anything that I can do to change the sensory environment?" Sometimes they'll tell you.

It's also important to set affirming goals. A lot of times people come into therapy and the treatment goals roll around making them normal. Like, okay, well, you're an autistic person, let's teach you how to make eye contact. You're a person with ADHD, let's teach you how to sit still. I'm not saying that- there can sometimes be times where having the ability to turn that on might be useful if you really want to get hired somewhere and it's really important at that particular job to make eye contact, maybe that's the thing you got to learn.

I think that rather than just knee jerk teaching them to be normal, it's worth setting affirming goals and really exploring what do you want for yourself, and how are you going to find a place where you feel most comfortable as yourself? What the client

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might find out is that maybe getting that job at a place that's going to require me to make eye contact all the time isn't actually what's right for me. It's also a good idea to consider reasonable policy flexibility, generally for ethical reasons, it's a good idea to have the same policies in place for everybody, treat everybody the same, but you might add a little appendix to your policy where certain things could be flexible for neurodivergent people.

For instance, if maybe your policy is that you don't text people session reminders, you just expect them to remember that for themselves, maybe for your neurodivergent folks, you do that. Also with your therapy approach itself it's important to offer to adapt that. To ask people, "Is this working? Is this not working? Is there something I can do that'll make this more accessible for you?" It might take the form of, with an autistic person, maybe taking more time to explain explicitly what certain indirect things might mean, with a person with ADHD it might mean playing a card game or something while you talk so that they have some stimulation.

Don't be rigid in your approach, really adapt it to them. I also want to talk about how we can support clinicians in the therapy room, because obviously there's a lot of neurodivergent clinicians out there, and they deserve to be able to be successful just as much as a neurotypical clinician. These are things that if you are a clinician you might be able to just set up for yourself, but also if you are in leadership, if you manage a practice, these are things that you might want to consider applying as a policy in order to make your space somewhere that's welcoming for everybody.

First, people with neurodivergent neurotypes can sometimes struggle with time management or time blindness. Obviously you can just throw up a clock or something, but sometimes even that isn't enough of a support. The good news is that there's a lot of other supports that are out there, and so you could consider something like TimeQube with a Q for tracking session time. Which is, I've got no affiliation with it, but it's this colored cube that will shift from one color to the other over the course of a session. Instead of looking at a clock, calculating how much time you have left, you just look at the color and you can instantly gauge, oh, this is about how much time there's left in the session.

There's also a Pomodoro Timer for note taking. Which there's a lot of these just on Amazon where it's very, very easy to set a timer for 5 minutes, 15 minutes, whatever you need, and so if somebody is struggling to complete their notes on time or something like that, saying, "All right, we'll set a timer for five minutes before you start every note and see if you can get your notes done in that amount of time." That sort of thing can be useful for people. Also offering reminders for deadlines, meetings, things like that. If you have a consultation group that somebody's expected to go to, instead of just putting it on their calendar and expecting that they remember, maybe try to send them like a text, an email, something like that.

That doesn't mean that you have to manually do that, it might mean that you set it up so that meetings are put not just in your EHR that doesn't have a functionality, but maybe in Google Calendar so that there's a software that automatically pushes it out to people. I also think for clinicians, it's really good to allow for non-obtrusive use of fidgets and sensory supports. I like the idea of the clipboard rule of thumb, because

we're all used to clinicians having a clipboard writing notes in session, right? We wouldn't say that that's obtrusive or distracting or whatever.

If somebody, if a clinician wants to use a sensory support that is no more distracting than a clipboard, they should be allowed to. If I have a little fidget cube, if I'm going to wear sunglasses, maybe if I'm going to use some earbuds that still allow me to hear the client, but cut down the noise level a little bit, I think that those things are all no more distracting than writing in a clipboard, and you should probably allow them. I do think it's important to still get informed consent from the clients and be able to say, "Hey, I want to use this thing and it's going to help me focus better on our conversation, is that okay with you?"

If a client's really uncomfortable with it, maybe you skip it for that client, or maybe you refer the client to somebody else. From an organizational level, I don't think that there should be any top-down requirement that says no clinician is ever allowed to use these tools because they're unprofessional. Finally, I think it's really important to provide neurodiversity training to supervisors.

That means that if you're a supervisor, taking it upon yourself to seek out training, which if you're here, well done, you're ahead of the game, but even at the organizational level maybe making those trainings available or providing a stipend for people to attend them, or even potentially making it mandatory so that when somebody is working with a neurodivergent supervisee, they're going to be able to do that in an appropriate way. I think it's also important to have plans for supporting clinicians in their careers more broadly.

Not just in the therapy room, but how can you make sure that clinicians are successful in your practice in general? I'm a believer in providing structured social and networking opportunities. By structured, I don't just mean like, oh, there's a happy hour after work that you can come to if you want, because that can be non-accessible for somebody who struggles socially. Instead, having it be something where it's like, well, it's an event where the rules for how you interact, the opportunities to engage and connect are more explicit, more structured, more accessible for somebody that might not know how to go to a happy hour and just strike up a conversation with a colleague.

I think it's also important to use competency-based hiring rather than interview-based hiring. This is true for other forms of diversity also. We all know that if you just base it off of how does a person feel in an interview, you're going to end up hiring people that are like yourself. I think instead, you want to set up a more objective hiring process where you look at what competencies do we need in this role, and is this person able to demonstrate those competencies? I'm a big believer for clinical positions and offering for a therapy sample with a pseudo client, things like that, and then make a judgment based on how they're doing with the client, rather than if they happen to be fidgeting, or making eye contact, or some other expression of their neurodivergence. I think it's also valuable to offer non-clinical coaching in addition to supervision. What I mean by that is that sometimes neurodivergent clinicians need to take up time in supervision to talk about the professional development aspects caused by their neurodivergence. Like being able to figure out, how do you manage

office politics as an autistic person? How do you handle a sensory sensitivity? How do I manage my workflow as a person with ADHD?

If you have to take 15 minutes out of your supervision hour to attend to that, you're getting less clinical training than somebody else. I think offering other supports outside of supervision. Maybe it's a monthly consultation group, maybe it's just the supervisor being willing to give more time in certain cases. I think that helps ensure that neurodivergent supervisees still get their full hour of clinical training as everybody else does.

Finally, I think it's really important to invite and facilitate seeking accommodations, because again, a lot of times neurodivergent people, we've learned that we should be ashamed of these things, we've learned that we should hide these things. So, to say, "Hey, I would really love it if I could get some noise-canceling headphones, or if I could use that," that can be really hard to do. I think both mentioning it during the hiring and onboarding process, but even if possible, modeling it. If you have any leaders that are neurodivergent, in some way being willing to say, "Hey, this is what I do." Or, "This is an accommodation that I asked for." That can help make it feel safe for other people.

When in doubt, assume good intentions unless proven otherwise. You have a neurodivergent person, they're struggling with a particular part of work, instead of saying, "Oh, they're lazy, they're bad, they're stupid," say, "Well, they're probably doing their best, and there's a reason why they're not successful. What is that?" Then the reason why is always going to be some unmet need. Then you identify the need, you accommodate that unmet need. That's going to solve a lot of problems, and I think that you allow for diversity. You allow for different paths to the same goal.

Obviously, every clinician needs to have a good rapport with a client, but the way that I establish rapport with a client might look different than how a neurotypical person establishes rapport with a client. That's okay. We shouldn't make me be normal in how I interact with the clients if the goal of rapport building is accomplished. A lot of times when I talk about that idea of being normal, it introduces this idea of masking. Because sometimes people say, "Well, what about stuff where you actually, in order for you to achieve your goal, you do need to do something that doesn't come naturally to you?"

A lot of times that can lead to what's called masking, which is where you change your behavior to hide or suppress natural neurodivergent traits. The key thing about masking is that it changes behavior that doesn't hurt anybody, it's just different. For instance, if I don't make eye contact with a client, I'm not hurting that client, it's just different than what that client might be used to. Masking is awful. There's a lot of research out there that shows that it's draining, it's stressful, it creates loneliness. It can even contribute to suicidal ideation, which makes sense, because you're forcing somebody to constantly pretend to be somebody that they're not.

This stacks on top of other systems of oppression. People that have other non-dominant identities and are also neurodivergent have an even harder time. If a Black autistic person has to mask and code-switch to be in white spaces, or an LGBTQ person has to both mask and hide their sexuality, it can really, really take a toll.

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Anytime that you're steering people towards masking, there's a big damage to that. You might say, "Well, I don't want somebody to mask, but I do need my clinician with ADHD to stop interrupting in meetings." Or, "I need my clinician with autism to be able to establish rapport with clients. How do I accomplish that?"

I think that the pathway forward is the idea of being kind without masking, because kindness is where you change your behavior due to awareness of how your actions will affect others. Kindness changes behavior that will cause a negative effect even if somebody understands and accepts you. Like, somebody might get uncomfortable on me not making eye contact with them, but if they understood where I was coming from, it wouldn't cause a problem. If I decide, I don't want to take a shower today, and I make everybody smell my BO, that's going to cause a problem even if somebody loves and accepts me, because it's stinky.

This is something that's not unique to neurodivergent people. Everybody has responsibility to be kind to others. I don't think that it's unfair to ask neurodivergent people, "Okay, well, is there a way that you could solve this by being kind?" We can hash this out by giving examples of how this might work in practice. For instance, it would just be masking if I'm feeling distressed and I have a way to self-soothe, maybe by stimming or something, and I just don't do it, because I'm ashamed of that. I feel like I have to be normal.

If I'm in the middle of a meeting, and me self-soothing, me stimming would be disruptive for the same reason as somebody coughing might be disruptive, I might excuse myself to do that. In the same way, again, that somebody might excuse themselves to cough or sneeze. It would be masking to pretend to like a normal hobby instead of my genuine interest. If I'm really into dinosaurs, but instead I tell everybody I like football, that's just masking.

If I decide to ask questions about somebody else's hobby, even though I don't like it, if I ask you about football, even though I'm interested in dinosaurs, that's okay, because that's an example of being kind. Because again, later on, you might ask me about my hobby, and then I'll talk about dinosaurs. It might be masking to look around how everybody else is arranging their workspace, and make sure that yours looks that same way, even though you don't want it to be that way. It would be kindness to say, "Well, even though I might have a preference for how my desk is arranged, if I'm sharing that space with somebody else, I'm going to collaborate with them and make sure that that fits."

I hope that that gets at the idea that if somebody that has a neurodivergence needs to do something that doesn't come quite naturally to them, they can hopefully still find a way to accomplish it that is still genuine, is an expression of kindness, rather than this shaming, shutting down who they naturally are. I think my final idea that I want to leave you with is that it can be tempting, in a workplace, to create an assembly line where everybody is just a cog in the machine, everybody is in the same, but there's nothing beautiful about an assembly line.

Instead, you want to create an orchestra. You want to create a place where everybody is playing a different instrument, everybody is singing in a different note, but the sum total of all of that is a beautiful experience that you can't get if you just

try to make everybody the same. I also want to encourage you to continue your learning. The Autism Self Advocacy Network, Neurodiversity in the Workplace, those are good organizations that have online resources. The book, *We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation*, is a good introduction to neurodiversity in general, and then how it applies to autism in specific.

You can also stay connected with me, [danielwendler.com](http://danielwendler.com) gives more information about me in general, [improveyoursocialskills.com](http://improveyoursocialskills.com) is a resource I created for folks that want to get better at connection and communication. The contact form on both places goes straight to me. If you've got any follow-up questions after this talk, feel free to reach out.

**Peggy:** Thank you, Dr. Wendler, for your really insightful and personal presentation. We've gotten a lot of questions. Some we got with registration, and we've gotten a flood of them live. We're going to only have time to get through half a dozen, but I'm going to do my best here. Thank you, our audience, for all your questions. Really interesting, very on-point questions. This question, we've gotten a couple of these, how does one disclose or broach that they are neurodivergent, and are there any resources to help individuals make that easier?

**Dr. Wendler:** Yes. It is a tricky thing to do, because there are some spaces that are going to be accommodating, and others that are not. I think it is important to consider, what would happen to me if I were to disclose this and my environment wouldn't be an affirming or accepting environment? I think in that situation, it's ugly, but you might want to wait until you can find yourself with another option or in an organization that's going to be more affirming, because I don't want anybody to run out of this talk and go bring this stuff up with their boss. Then find out that they're going to lose a career or something over that.

I do think that some places are much more affirming than others. When I was looking for grad schools, when I was looking for internships, I chose to disclose, because if somebody said no to me at that time, that was okay, because I wanted the people that said yes to be people that knew who I was and understood that, and were willing to be affirming of that. I think that if you can disclose relatively early in the process, that can sometimes protect you from being locked into an organization and then now it becomes really risky to bring it up.

I also think that I would disclose, but not make it a big deal. I didn't have a separate letter saying, "Hey, I'm autistic, and here's--" It's just that when I was writing my narrative, when I was talking about myself, I included that as part of my story. I think one of the ways that you can maybe accomplish that is if you can get involved in some kind of advocacy related to your area of neurodivergence. That can be an easy way to bring in like, "Oh, yes, by the way, I happen to have leadership in this group for people with ADHD." That's a great way of both showing it as a strength and disclosing that part of your identity.

If you are in a place where you're also really not able to be successful without accommodations, I wouldn't let what I'm saying here scare you away from bringing it up and asking for those accommodations. I think that if it's what you need, then it's what you need, and trying to start that conversation, it's a good idea.

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**Peggy:** Another one is, how does the employer or manager make it easier for others to disclose that they are neurodivergent and might need special accommodations?

**Dr. Wendler:** I do think that having some intentional inviting, having some intentional modeling can be really good. I also think that it might not be a bad idea to include it as a formal policy for like, if you apply to this, this is how we're going to evaluate this, and this is what's going to happen. You can know, if you did in fact bring this up, you're not going to be punished for it, we're not going to look at you suspiciously, but we've written upfront, here's what we're going to do about this. I also think that sometimes being able to talk to somebody who doesn't have the ability to fire you about accommodations can be really useful.

In some cases, that might be a person in HR, but sometimes it might just be a member of the team that has the additional responsibility of being the liaison or the leader for the neurodivergent community, and then being able to talk to that person who, again, isn't going to be writing your performance evaluation, getting them on your side, and then having them advocate on your behalf can make it a lot easier, and organizations that set that sort of thing up can go a long way towards taking away the challenge of, "Oh, I got to go to my boss and bring this up."

**Peggy:** Right. Well, I think that feeds into this next question about suggestions for getting that organizational buy-in for valuing neurodiversity and implementing changes within a company or an organization to support those people.

**Dr. Wendler:** Yes. I guess I would hope that you could make the ethical argument of like, this is just the right thing to do, we want to be an inclusive environment, we want to be a place where everybody can belong, but I know that sometimes decision makers, they want to see it in a spreadsheet, they want to see how it's going to make them more money. I think in those situations, you could make the argument that it's really a competitive advantage to be inclusive, because again, there's a lot of research for how diversity of all kinds makes organizations stronger, leads to new ideas, new thinking, avoids group think, all of that sort of thing.

Also, if you pass on neurodivergent applicants, or you don't give promotion opportunities to neurodivergent people in your organization, whatever, you're missing out on the strengths that they might bring, but if instead you offer that, then you're getting a competitive advantage against all of your competitors that missed that opportunity and passed that person by. I think that making the argument of, there are these hidden strengths, there are these hidden talents that we would be missing if we didn't create this inclusive place.

I think that could make even Ebenezer Scrooge, who doesn't care about anybody, that could make that sort of leader interested in maybe spearheading something and seeing if it could make the organization more effective.

**Peggy:** Another question that we've got was-- This is very pertinent to our online remote world that many of us are in. This person has who they believe are neurodiverse graduate students enrolled in some class, online classes. They wanted to know if you had any suggestions for working with online students. They haven't been able to get much support from the office, from their Student Life Office, and

they're saying something about, they seem to get told that there's issues with privacy laws, so they can't disclose who those people are. Any suggestions you have for working with neurodiverse people in the online remote environment.

**Dr. Wendler:** I think in this specific scenario, it seems like there's ambiguity about exactly what is going on, or what the problems are, but then there's like a little bit of a game of telephone being played. I think that I might, in that particular scenario, try to solve it by finding a way for the people that are neurodivergent to share some of their more specific concerns in a way that's safe and respectful of their privacy. Maybe it's some anonymous feedback form. Maybe it's having a representative that they could talk to, that would then talk to the professor or the organization. Maybe it could be some kind of student advocacy group that could get started up.

I think that if-- You want to be able to have clear communication, because again, all of this stuff is customized. There's no one support that's going to work for everybody, and so you need to have an open line of communication, where you understand what's going wrong before you can figure out, how do we solve that?

**Peggy:** Yes. Okay, let's move on to talk about, so organizations, they're going to provide accommodations. How do they provide the accommodations without stigmatizing or requiring people that people come out and say that they're neurodivergent? How can companies do these things?

**Dr. Wendler:** I think one of the major applications of this idea is, again, that everybody has areas where they need support, and so I think just making that part of the company culture. That like, we don't expect everybody to work the same way, we don't expect everybody to need the same things, and anybody can ask for something that's going to help them work more effectively, and you don't have to bring in a doctor's note, you don't have to bring in a diagnosis, you can just say, "Hey, I'm going to work better if I'm able to wear earplugs, is that okay?" You don't have to justify it.

I think that that might make it a lot easier, and then if somebody wants to say, "Hey, I need earplugs because I have the sensory sensitivity, whatever." Well, they can do that, but I think allowing people to just be able to ask for the accommodation without it being tied to, you have to have a diagnosis, you have to have a condition. I think that that can remove the stigma of it. Again, I think it will make you more effective as an organization, because even people on your team that aren't neurodivergent might have particular things that they might request that'll make them more effective.

**Peggy:** Oh, we have just a few minutes left, but I just want to try and get a few more questions in. What are some ways that we can help neurodivergent people when they are struggling with a core part of their work? You had mentioned note taking. There probably are other examples. I'm sure that our audience would be interested in your thoughts on this.

**Dr. Wendler:** Yes. It is tough because, again, there's a lot of different ways where somebody might struggle with something. I think what I would try to encourage, is as much as possible, a strength-based and a creative approach. Instead of being like, "Oh--" Like for myself, my handwriting is awful, but my typing speed is very good.



Instead of trying to be like, "Let's teach Daniel how to write by hand," it became, "Let's try to give Daniel access to a keyboard as much as possible." Somebody else who is struggling in one area, try to find out what they're really good at, and see if there's a way that those strengths could be brought to bear to solve a problem in a creative way.

**Peggy:** Yes. I just keep thinking of the idea that there are many ways to do the same thing. I think just keeping that in mind is a good way to end this conversation. There are many ways to achieve the goal. Well, we are out of time, and unfortunately, and thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Wendler, and sharing your experience and your knowledge with us. Thank you to all our listeners for your participation. We've got so many great questions, and I know we only got to a few of them, and I know this presentation really just scratches the surface on this subject. We hope that you will use Dr. Wendler's resources to dig in more on this subject. I do know that Dr. Wendler is working on an audible book on this topic. Do you want to say briefly when that is going to come out?

**Dr. Wendler:** Yes, I think it, probably early next year is when it'll be released, and the best way to stay on top of that is if you go to my website and you send me an email. There's a little box that says, "Put me on your mailing list." If you just send me an email, say, hi, but check that box, you'll get out to my mailing list, and then when the book comes out, then you'll hear about it.

**Peggy:** Great. That's great. APA, this is a subject APA cares a lot about, and we're looking at how we can continue to provide these kind of presentations in the future. Please be on the lookout. Okay. Unfortunately, we are out of time. A recording of this presentation, along with the slides, and a lot of you asked about the slides, will be emailed to everyone in two weeks. As soon as the webinar has ended, a short survey will appear on your screen. We hope you'll take just a few minutes to complete the survey, give us feedback on how we did and how we can continue to improve.

Our next presentation in this Supercharge series will focus on building your team's morale. Dr. Kyler Shumway will bust some of the common myths that managers have when it comes to motivating their teams to be productive and stay positive during times of challenge or transition, and cover some of the most effective ways, based on research, which actually work. You can join us, July 27th, at 2:00 PM Eastern for this presentation. Be on the lookout for the registration link. It will be in some follow-up emails that we'll be sending.

Finally, don't miss the APA 2023 Virtual Job Fair on August 10th. If you're interested in pursuing a new job, or interested in new career paths, all registrants can participate in live text and video chats with recruiters looking to hire psychologists, get career coaching, and attend relevant learning sessions. These are really exciting events, and I highly suggest that you sign up. Head to [www.psycCareers.com](http://www.psycCareers.com), to learn more and register. That's all we have for today. We thank you for your attention, and have a great day.

**[01:02:08] [END OF AUDIO]**

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