READY Together

Pre-Employment Skills for Youth Living with Support Needs

Training Manual

Building Accessibility Readiness: A Train-the-Trainer E-Course for Inclusive Frontline Systems

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Trauma-Informed. Evidence-Based. Strengths-Focused.

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This manual is available in alternate formats on request. Contact Supporting Community Together at angelataylorsct@gmail.com or 431-554-6248.

Welcome to the Series: A Note from the Authors

Whether you are a front-line worker, a job coach, a supervisor, or a job seeker navigating your own path, welcome.

We created this manual and training series with one simple belief: **workplaces work best when they are built for real human brains and nervous systems.** Too often, traditional employment training relies on rigid compliance checklists, clinical labels, or one-size-fits-all expectations that leave both staff and workers feeling overwhelmed.

Grounded on **Treaty 1 Territory** and delivered across **Treaties 1–5** and the **National Homeland of the Red River Métis**, this curriculum weaves together lived neurodivergent experience, clinical nursing, and decades of community leadership. Throughout these eight modules, you will find practical tools, like scaffolding, sensory adjustments, and grounding scripts, designed to build relational safety without ever asking anyone to mask, prove a diagnosis, or step outside their role.

Please treat this manual as a **menu, not a checklist**. Take what fits your role, your workplace, and your pace today. You do not have to master everything at once. Small, steady shifts toward curiosity, cultural humility, and calm presence change lives.

Thank you for showing up, learning alongside us, and helping build workplaces where everyone belongs.

Warmly,

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A Note to the Reader

Who This Manual Is For

This manual is for front-line staff, supervisors, and facilitators who support young people with support needs. You do not need a university degree or clinical training to use these tools, you just need to care about the young people you work with.

Support needs include learning, sensory, physical, and mental health needs, whether or not a person has a formal diagnosis. Some sections are written as guides for staff, while others are designed to be taught directly to participants.

How to Use This Guide

- **Keep it simple.** The language in this manual is plain and practical on purpose. If something feels unclear, trust your instincts and ask your supervisor when you are unsure about a situation.
- **Treat it as a menu, not a checklist.** Take what fits your role, your workplace, and your pace. No one is expected to master everything at once.
- **Share it freely.** This manual is free to use and share. Please pass it on to anyone supporting youth and inclusive workplaces.

Manitoba Legal Foundations

This training is grounded in existing legal obligations under Manitoba law. Facilitators and trainers using this curriculum should understand that providing reasonable accommodation for employees and job applicants with disabilities or support needs is a legal requirement, not simply a best practice, under *The Human Rights Code (Manitoba)* and *The Accessibility for Manitobans Act* (specifically the **Accessibility Standard for Employment**).

This duty applies during recruitment, at the point of a job offer, and throughout ongoing employment. The Customer Service Standard under the same Act also requires respectful and effective service to anyone who uses an assistive device, a support person, or a service animal. The practices in this curriculum offer practical ways to meet these legal obligations, though this material is educational and does not constitute legal advice.

What the Accessible Employment Standard Requires

Every Manitoba employer, including small businesses, has duties under the Accessible Employment Standard Regulation. Staff and job coaches can use this list to help youth know what to expect and what they can ask for.

- **Recruitment:** employers must let job applicants know that reasonable accommodation is available during hiring.
- **Workplace emergency response information:** employers must create individual emergency information for any employee whose disability means they may need help in an emergency. With the employee's permission, it is shared with a person who agrees to help.
- **Ongoing employment:** employers must tell employees about their accommodation policies and consider accessibility needs in training, performance reviews, and career development.
- **Return to work:** employers must have a process to support employees who are returning after a disability-related absence and need accommodation.
- **Accessible formats:** employment information must be provided in an accessible format, or with communication supports, on request.

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- Employers with 50 or more employees: must document their accessible employment policies in writing, including how individual accommodation plans are created.

For the full requirements, see the Accessible Employment Standard Regulation Handbook from the Manitoba Accessibility Office at accessibilitymb.ca.

Accessible Information and Communication

The Accessible Information and Communication Standard asks organizations to make information and communication accessible in print, online, and in person. In practice, this means plain language, accessible documents, captions, and alternate formats when someone asks. This manual follows those practices and is available in alternate formats on request.

Our Location & Commitment

We acknowledge that this training was created in **Treaty 1 Territory** and reaches communities across **Treaties 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5**, the ancestral lands of the **Anishinaabeg, Cree (Ininiwak/Nehethowuk), Oji-Cree (Anishininewuk), Dakota, and Dene** peoples, the **National Homeland of the Red River Métis**, and the northern ancestral lands of the **Inuit**.

We honour the enduring care of Indigenous peoples for these lands and waters, including **Shoal Lake 40 First Nation** in Treaty 3 Territory. True accessibility requires truth, reconciliation, and cultural humility. We commit to removing systemic barriers, honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and community care, and building workplaces where every person is treated with dignity.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

Artificial intelligence tools were used to support initial drafting of this manual and the compilation of relevant sources. The synthesis of literature and the resulting frameworks are the original thought of the author. All cited works were independently verified, and the author takes full responsibility for the manual's content.

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Note on Language

Language changes over time, and so do the definitions we use. What one generation calls a disability, another may describe differently, and individuals themselves often experience their own differences in ways that do not match the labels given to them. We may not always know the specific needs of the person in front of us. What we can do is stay open and let the person guide us.

Much of what gets labeled a disability comes from a simple mismatch. The world around us was built with certain bodies and minds in mind, and when a person does not fit that design, the world calls it their problem rather than the design's problem. This is sometimes called the social model of disability. It suggests that when we adapt the environment, the instructions, the pace, or the expectations, everybody gets a real opportunity to succeed.

In this training, we use the language of support needs rather than disabilities. Everybody has support needs. Some people need more support in certain areas, some need less, and that can shift across a lifetime. Using this language keeps our attention on what a person needs to do their best work, rather than on a category we have placed them in. The Accessibility for Manitobans Act uses the word disability. Throughout this manual, support needs includes disability as the Act defines it.

Honouring Indigenous Contexts in Manitoba

This curriculum was developed in Manitoba, on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Red River Métis.

Front-line staff supporting youth with support needs must recognize how colonial history, including residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing systemic inequities, continues to shape intergenerational trauma, distrust of institutions, and barriers to employment.

Cultural humility means listening without assumptions, respecting each person's connection to family, community, and land, and recognizing that healing and workplace success are deeply relational. Support plans should honour cultural values, community definitions of contribution, and Indigenous approaches to interdependence rather than forcing purely Western, individualistic models of work.

Honouring Disability Identity and Pride

While this manual uses the phrase *support needs* to keep the focus on practical barriers and solutions, we deeply respect and affirm **disability pride** and identity-first language (such as *disabled person* or *Autistic person*). Many people rightly view disability as a core, proud part of their identity and culture. Always mirror the language each individual prefers for themselves.

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How to Use This Manual

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now. Each section includes:

- ☐ What the topic is about, in plain language
- ☐ Why it matters for the young people you support
- ☐ What you can say or do
- ☐ Worksheets and tools you can print and use

Go slower than feels necessary. Teach one section at a time, then pause for questions. Take a short break between sections and a longer one between modules. If someone looks overwhelmed, stop and recap before moving on.

You will see boxes like these throughout the manual:

TIP: This is a helpful idea or reminder. It will appear in a teal box like this one.

IMPORTANT: This is something to pay extra attention to. It will appear in an orange box like this one.

> **What to say:**
>
> *"I notice you seem a little different right now. Are you okay?"*
>
> *"Let's slow down together."*

Each module begins with a one-page summary. You can use this as a quick reference card, a training handout, or a reminder for staff who have already read the full module.

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Delivering This Training

This manual is the facilitator guide for Ready Together, a train-the-trainer program. Staff who complete it can teach these skills directly to youth and share them with their teams.

The Ready Together package includes:

- This facilitator manual and its printable worksheets
- Teaching PowerPoints for each module
- The youth facilitation deck, Working Toward Employment When Life is Complex
- Recorded webinars and the Master Classes
- A choose-your-own-adventure book for youth
- The accessible e-course, with a certificate of completion

Running the youth program

The youth deck runs as two full days. Each day splits at lunch, so it can also run as four half days. Breaks happen when the group needs them, not by the clock.

How the regulation tools connect

Staff materials use the Stoplight System. The youth deck uses the Regulation Dial and the Inner Forecast. They describe the same states:

- **Green:** Ready Zone (Dial level 2) and Sunny.
- **Yellow:** Activated (Dial level 3), Partly Cloudy, or Rainy.
- **Red:** Flooded or Survival Mode (Dial levels 4 and 5) and Stormy.
- **Checked Out (Dial level 1):** the freeze or shutdown side. It can look calm, but it calls for the same care as yellow or red.

How this manual was reviewed

People with lived experience of disability reviewed this manual and were offered honorariums for their expertise. Feedback from frontline staff at pilot training sessions in Winnipeg in fall 2026 was integrated into this edition.

Evaluating the training

Trainers complete a short check before and after the course. Rate each from 1 (not confident) to 5 (very confident):

- The duty to accommodate under The Human Rights Code (Manitoba)
- What the Accessible Employment Standard requires of employers
- Offering accessible formats and communication supports
- Using the Stoplight System, RAR, and P.A.U.S.E. with youth
- Supporting youth to ask for accommodations in their own words

Course completions and the number of participating organizations are also tracked.

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Glossary

Accommodation	A change to a task, workspace, or way of explaining something that makes work manageable so a person can do their best.
Executive functioning	The thinking skills used to plan, start, organize, and finish tasks.
Interoception	Noticing what is happening inside your body, such as hunger, tiredness, or needing the bathroom.
Masking	Hiding natural traits, like stimming or avoiding eye contact, to look “typical.” It is tiring and can lead to burnout.
Middle voice	A calm, clear way of speaking that sits between staying quiet (“It’s fine”) and blowing up (“This is ridiculous”).
NAR	Stands for **Neurodivergent-Affirming Repair.** This is a way to repair a relationship after a conflict without blame. Three steps: Name it, Acknowledge it, Rebuild safety.
P.A.U.S.E.	**P**ause, **A**cknowledge, **U**ndo urgency, **S**often, **E**xtend trust. A way to calm a tense moment.
RAR	Stands for **Reflect, Align, Restore.** Reflect on what is behind the behaviour, align support with the person’s needs, restore safety and connection. This is the core definition. Each module applies it to a different moment. In the youth deck: Notice what I feel, Pick a helpful move, Help my body reset.
PEP	Personalized Employment Planning
PDA	Often called Pathological Demand Avoidance in clinical writing. Many people prefer Persistent Drive for Autonomy. Both describe a nervous system that reacts strongly to demands and loss of control.
Regulation bandwidth	How much emotional, sensory, and thinking capacity a person has on a given day to handle stress, change, and demands.
Scaffolding	Giving just enough support that the person can do the task themselves.
Stoplight System	Green is calm and ready. Yellow is tension building. Red is overwhelmed.
Survival responses	Automatic reactions to feeling unsafe: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. They are not choices.

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Introduction: Foundations of Learning, Processing, and Growth

Before teaching employment skills, staff must understand how people learn. This is especially true when working with young people who have support needs or who have had hard life experiences.

The Most Important Things to Remember

People do not learn from someone they do not feel safe with.
People do not learn when they feel ashamed.
People do not learn when they are overwhelmed.
Teaching is about relationship, regulation, clarity, and repetition, not just information.

1. Relationship Before Instruction

Learning begins with relationship. Participants are more likely to engage when they feel seen, respected, not judged, and safe to make mistakes. People cannot learn from someone they do not trust. This does not mean becoming friends. It means being consistent, calm, and predictable.

> **Practical strategies:**
>
> *Greet participants by name*
>
> *Use warm tone and steady pacing*
>
> *Acknowledge effort*
>
> *Avoid sarcasm or public correction*
>
> *Normalize mistakes early and often*

> **Example language:**
>
> *"We are all learning here."*
>
> *"Mistakes are part of the process."*
>
> *"Let's try that again together."*

Safety builds openness. Openness builds learning.

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2. Start With What People Already Know

New learning attaches to something familiar. Before teaching a new concept, reduce overwhelm and increase confidence by connecting it to a real-life situation, using familiar examples from family, school, or past jobs, and keeping language concrete and simple.

> **Asking:**
>
> *"What does this remind you of?"*
>
> *"Have you seen this before?"*
>
> *"What already makes sense?"*

3. Modeling: Showing, Not Just Telling

Explaining is not enough. Many learners need to see the skill demonstrated. Modeling includes demonstrating tone of voice, body posture, acting out scripts, and saying your thoughts out loud.

Modeling reduces guessing. If you want a calm tone, use a calm tone. If you want respectful repair, model repair. Participants learn more from what you do than what you say.

4. Visual, Verbal, and Relational Teaching

Effective teaching uses multiple formats. There is more to communication than words. Tone, facial expression, pacing, and posture all influence learning. If a trainer is rushed or tense, participants feel it.

Visual	Verbal	Relational
Checklists, pictures, diagrams	Short and clear instructions, repeat key points	Warm tone, encouragement, curiosity
Written step-by-step guides	Slow your pacing down	Notice their feelings
Show examples	One step at a time	Repair if things go wrong

Regulated teachers create regulated learners.

5. Regulation Before Redirection

When someone is overwhelmed, they cannot absorb new instruction. Correction without regulation increases shutdown.

> **Signs of overwhelm:**
>
> *Going quiet*
>
> *Talking rapidly*

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Irritability

Confusion

Tearfulness

Instead of correcting immediately:

Pause. Lower your tone. Slow down.

"Let's take a minute."

"We can slow this down."

"We'll try again."

6. Growth Is Not a Straight Line

Learning does not move in a straight line. Progress may include improvement, mistakes, plateaus, and regression during stress. Regression is not failure. It is consolidation. Repetition is required for mastery.

Progress looks like: improvement, then mistakes, then trying again. That cycle IS the learning.

7. Rest and Burnout

Rest is part of learning. Chronic stress reduces working memory, emotional regulation, and task initiation. Autistic and ADHD burnout can present as increased sensory sensitivity, executive functioning decline, withdrawal, and irritability. Structured breaks improve retention.

8. Self-Compassion and Playfulness

When staff model self-compassion, participants internalize resilience. Shame shuts down learning. Playfulness reduces threat — humor lowers cortisol, gentle tone increases openness, curiosity reduces defensiveness.

Model this:

"It's okay to make mistakes."

"We'll try again."

"Growth takes time. I'm still learning too."

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Quick Summary for Trainers

- ☐ Ask how someone prefers to process and actively listen to their response
- ☐ Provide both big-picture and step-by-step explanations
- ☐ Expect regression during stress
- ☐ Normalize rest
- ☐ Repeat scripts frequently
- ☐ Model calm tone
- ☐ Use curiosity instead of correction
- ☐ Celebrate effort over speed

Many neurodiversity-affirming perspectives view learning differences not as deficits. They are variations. Understanding this lens changes how every module is delivered.

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Module 1: Understanding How We Learn

MODULE 1 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff
Behaviour is communication. Asking: what is happening for this person?
Five core reasons behaviour happens: unmet needs, skill developing, nervous system overload, relational rupture, sensory differences
Working memory, processing speed, and thinking style (linear vs. global) all affect learning
Demand sensitivity, monotropic focus, inertia, rejection sensitivity, and justice sensitivity are nervous system patterns, not defiance
Trauma changes the nervous system. Predictability, calm tone, private correction, and repair help
Self-advocacy must be explicitly taught. Provide scripts.
Your role: be consistent, model calm, repair when needed, ask curious questions
Before labeling resistance: is this a skill gap? A nervous system response? A relational rupture? An environmental mismatch?

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

This foundational module introduces staff to learning profiles, including how attention, memory, processing, and behaviour are influenced by different neurotypes. The goal is to move beyond traditional job-readiness checklists and toward a model of support that sees the whole person, values their learning style, and works with, not against, their neurology.

1. Job Readiness Looks Different for Everyone

Someone who appears unmotivated may actually be overwhelmed by executive dysfunction, navigating burnout, stuck in a freeze response, or managing monotropic focus where task-switching is deeply dysregulating.

A neurodiversity-affirming approach to readiness means:
- Trusting relationships come first
- Environments are predictable

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- Instructions are clear and repeated
- You co-regulate before you correct
- You coach, you do not just demand compliance

Common barriers to job readiness include sensory overload, social scripts that feel unsafe or confusing, a history of shame or burnout, fear of making mistakes due to past punitive responses, and inconsistent expectations across supervisors.

2. Why Behaviour Happens: Five Core Reasons

Behaviour is communication. In employment settings, behaviour often signals need, not intent.

Reason	What it looks like	What helps
1. Unmet Needs	Hungry, tired, needing movement or connection	Meet the need before correcting the behaviour
2. Skill Still Developing	Trouble with transitions, strong reactions, difficulty with feedback	Co-regulate first. Teach during calm moments
3. Nervous System Overload	Withdrawal, agitation, emotional flooding	Reduce demand, offer choices, be more predictable
4. Relationship Rupture	Withdrawal after correction, avoiding certain staff	Repair the relationship before revisiting expectations
5. Sensory Differences	Avoiding noise, lights, textures, smells	Adapt the environment. Offer sensory breaks

3. How Neurotype Impacts Learning, Attention, Memory, and Behaviour

Working Memory

Working memory is how we hold information in mind for a short time.

- ☐ ADHD: May forget steps mid-task. Use checklists and repeat often.
- ☐ Autism: Often better with visual memory than verbal. Use visual schedules.
- ☐ Intellectual support needs: Use short, concrete instructions and lots of repetition.

Processing Speed

Processing speed affects how quickly someone understands and responds.

Quick Processors	Slower Processors
Respond rapidly, may move ahead before full clarity	Need extra time to think, may pause before answering

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May interrupt unintentionally	May appear disengaged but are processing deeply
Forget to follow through or complete tasks	Can get overwhelmed in fast or high-information settings
Often skilled in urgent situations	Often give thoughtful, careful responses

Neither is best. In fast environments, slower processors may be misjudged. In reflective environments, quick processors may need support slowing down. Normalize pauses. Allow written processing. Avoid equating speed with intelligence.

Executive Functioning

Executive functioning affects task initiation, organization, and emotional regulation.

- ☐ ADHD: Difficulty starting tasks, time blindness.
- ☐ Autism: Difficulty with flexibility and unexpected change.
- ☐ PDA profiles: Resistance when tasks feel imposed. Autonomy-supportive language increases engagement.

Supporting Intellectual Differences & Support Needs

Differences in how fast or abstractly information is processed, do not measure human worth or capability.

What It Means → Learners may need more time to grasp abstract ideas, generalize skills to new settings, or hold multiple steps in mind.

- Use concrete, plain language. Avoid idioms, sarcasm, or multi-step directions.
- Show rather than just tell. Use visual schedules, modeling, and video prompting.
- Practice in the real setting. Teach skills directly in the work environment to support generalization.
- Keep pacing unhurried. Build in consistent repetition without judgment.

How the Nervous System Responds (Internal & Environmental Factors)

	The Brain's Battery	The Brain's Filter	The Brain's Alarm System	The Brain's Bridge
ADHD	Aligning high-focus tasks with natural peak energy windows rather than forcing steady output across an 8-hour day.	Using noise-cancelling headphones, body doubling, or designated quiet zones to block distracting input.	Pairing constructive feedback with clear, written action steps and reassurance to prevent emotional spirals.	Following up verbal meetings with brief written bullet points and clear deadlines.
Autism	Building in low-social recovery blocks after heavy meetings or collaborative work to prevent masking fatigue.	Controlling lighting, sound, and physical workspace setup (e.g., remote work options, dim lighting, predictable sensory environments).	Giving direct, literal, and predictable feedback rather than vague hints, or "reading between the lines."	Using explicit/clear language (e.g., stating exact priorities instead of saying "whenever you get a chance").

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PDA	Respecting fluctuating capacity by focusing on outcomes over rigid schedules, allowing flexible pacing	Allowing full control over the sensory workspace and movement breaks without requiring permission.	Framing feedback as collaborative problem-solving rather than top-down criticism or authority-driven demands.	Communicating goals and context ("Here's the problem we need to solve") rather than issuing rigid orders.

Different Thinking Styles: Global vs. Linear

Linear Thinkers	Global Thinkers
Process step-by-step	See the whole picture first
Prefer structured sequences	Connect multiple ideas at once
Focus on one detail at a time	Think in webs, not lines
Often strong with procedures	Often strong with pattern recognition and systems

Neither style is better. In team settings, linear thinkers keep tasks organized and global thinkers anticipate patterns and problems. Do not label global thinking as scattered or linear thinking as rigid.

> **Asking:**
>
> *"Do you need the big picture first, or the steps first?"*

Additional strengths common to neurodivergent learners: pattern recognition, creative problem-solving, hyperfocus productivity, systems thinking, justice-based reasoning, and depth of empathy.

4. Recognizing Nervous System Differences in Employment

These are not character flaws. They are regulation differences. Understanding this changes how you support.

Trauma and the Nervous System

Trauma can be big events, ongoing stress, or repeated small invalidations. Trauma changes the nervous system. What feels neutral to one person may feel threatening to another. In employment settings, triggers may include being corrected, being watched, being timed, unexpected change, authority figures, or public feedback.

> **What helps:**
>
> - *Predictability*
> - *Private correction*
> - *Calm tone*

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- *Clear expectations*
- *Repair after tension*
- *Naming relational safety*

Safety increases capacity.

Demand Sensitivity

Some individuals experience nervous system reactions to demands. A demand can be being told what to do, being reminded, being asked directly, being praised with an expectation attached, or even being asked to do something they enjoy. Once something becomes expected, it can feel like loss of control.

This is often misunderstood as defiance, manipulation, or laziness. What may be happening: the nervous system is reacting to pressure, not the task itself.

Instead of saying this...	Try this instead...
"You need to do this now."	"Would you like to start with the first step, or the easiest step?"
"Get moving."	"Would this work better now, or after break?"
"You have to finish this."	"What is one tiny step you could take?"

Autonomy increases engagement.

Special Interest (Deep Focus / Getting Stuck on One Thing)

Some individuals experience deep, focused attention on one area or interest. At work, this might look like talking at length about a topic, getting deeply focused on sorting one type of item, or struggling to move on from one detail. The person feels safest or most regulated in that area. Depth is often a strength. Transitions need support.

What helps:

- *Provide transition warnings*
- *Use visual task sequencing*
- *Set gentle time boundaries*
- *Validate the interest before redirecting*
- *"I love how focused you are. We need to switch tasks in five minutes."*

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Inertia (Being Stuck)

Inertia refers to difficulty starting, stopping, or switching tasks. This is neurological friction, not laziness. Starting is often the hardest part.

What helps:

- *Break tasks into micro-steps*
- *Provide activation prompts*
- *Use language that promotes manageable tasks: "What's the first tiny step?"*
- *Offer body-based activation (stand up, move, reset)*

Task Paralysis

Task paralysis is when a person is overwhelmed by the demand and, at the same time, overwhelmed by the need to act on it. They know the task matters and want to do it, yet cannot begin. From the outside, task paralysis can present as procrastination, avoidance, or lack of motivation. From the inside, it often comes with shame, which deepens the freeze.

What helps:

- *Lower the decision load. Paralysis grows when there are too many choices*
- *Make the first step small - "Open the laptop" is easier than "start the application"*
- *Separate planning as a task that can be a completed on its own*
- *Use body doubling. Sitting nearby while the person starts, without directing*
- *Remove urgency, not the expectation*

Persistent Drive for Autonomy (PDA, also called Pathological Demand Avoidance)

Tasks that feel imposed, can trigger anxiety and shutdown, even tasks the person wants to do. This isn't opposition/fighting; it's a threat response from perceived loss of autonomy.

Mood and Energy Differences

Some individuals experience fluctuations in energy/mood: productivity one week, low energy the next; racing/slowed thoughts; increased irritability under stress. This can be misunderstood as intentional or inconsistent.

What helps:

- *Clear routines*
- *Predictable workload*
- *Flexible pacing when possible*
- *Breaking work into manageable pieces*
- *Reducing shame around capacity shifts*

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Anxiety and Hypervigilance

Anxiety often appears as over-preparing, asking repeated clarification questions, avoiding new tasks, fear of mistakes, or difficulty making decisions. Clarity reduces anxiety.

What helps:

- *Clear written steps*
- *Knowing what done looks like*
- *Rehearsing new tasks*
- *Encouraging try over perfection*
- *Normalizing mistakes*

Rejection Sensitivity

Some individuals experience strong emotional reactions to perceived criticism or exclusion. This may look like withdrawal after feedback, over-apologizing, sudden silence, or visible shame.

There can be a real emotional impact of a job search. A person may apply to many positions and hear nothing back, which unfortunately can be very typical in today's hiring landscape. For someone with rejection sensitivity, that silence often feels like a judgment of their worth. However, this is a systems issue, not a you issue.

What helps:

- *Name relational safety*
- *Set expectations before the search begins*
- *Separate identity from behaviour*
- *Give feedback privately*
- *Track effort, not outcomes*
- *Reinforce strengths*
- *“I'm not upset. We will figure this out together."*

"This is about the task, not you."

Justice Sensitivity

Strong reactions to unfairness may appear as fixating on rule-breaking, escalating when expectations feel unequal, or difficulty tolerating inconsistency. Justice sensitivity is often tied to strong moral reasoning. It must be expressed safely.

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> **What helps:**
>
> *Clarify reasoning*
>
> *Validate fairness concerns calmly*
>
> *Teach respectful advocacy scripts*

5. Foundational Best Practices

Safety before skill
Clarity before correction
Regulation before redirection
Relationship before performance
Repetition before independence

Across all differences: believe the person is trying. Hold expectations without humiliation. Repair when needed. Use warmth and playfulness appropriately.

When unsure, we can ask:
Is this about safety?
Is this about clarity?
Is this about autonomy?
Is this about capacity?
Shift from: "What's wrong?" To: "What support is needed?"

6. Workplace Accommodations and Self-Advocacy

An accommodation is a change to the task, the workspace, or the way something is explained that helps a person have support in order to do their best. It is not a favour or an advantage. Under The Human Rights Code (Manitoba), employees with support needs are entitled to reasonable accommodation.

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The Legal Foundation

Reasonable accommodation is a legal requirement under The Human Rights Code (Manitoba) and The Accessibility for Manitobans Act

- This covers recruitment, offer of employment, and ongoing supervision
- The Customer Service Standard also requires respectful service to anyone who uses an assistive device, a support person, or a service animal
- What this training teaches is one path to meeting that obligation, not an alternative to it

Under The Human Rights Code (Manitoba), employees are entitled to reasonable accommodation to perform job duties. (The Canadian Human Rights Act applies only to federally regulated workplaces, such as banks, airlines, and telecommunications companies.) Accommodations can include:

- Sensory modifications
- Communication preferences
- Flexible scheduling
- Job coaching support
- Adjusted evaluations

Self-advocacy must be taught, not expected. Key Tools:

- Scripts for requesting accommodations
- Role-play practice scenarios
- Visual guides of rights & options
- Reflection tools to name needs
- Supportive, non-shaming environment

> **Teach them to say:**
>
> *"I work best with written instructions."*
>
> *"I need a few minutes to process."*
>
> *"Can we break that into steps?"*

7. The Role of Mentors and Support Staff

You are not expected to be a therapist. But you can be consistent and predictable, model calm behaviour, repair when things go wrong, recognize when a young person is in distress, and ask curious questions instead of making assumptions. Labels and boxes are shortcuts we use to describe patterns. They can help us find support, but they never describe the whole person.

Before labeling behaviour as resistance, ask yourself:
- Is this a skill still developing?
- Is the nervous system overloaded?

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- Is there a relational rupture?
- Is the environment mismatched to this person's needs?

8. Workplace Foundations: Making Unwritten Rules Clear

1. Attendance & Punctuality. Teach clear notification routines (who to text, when to call, and backup transit plans) without shame.
2. Workplace Etiquette & Dress. Explain the why behind safety gear, dress codes, and break times in plain, concrete terms.
3. Customer Service Basics. Practice simple, repeatable scripts for greeting customers, checking prices, and asking a coworker for backup.

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Module 2: Supporting Emotions and Mental Health

MODULE 2 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff
Meltdowns and shutdowns are nervous system crises, not behaviour problems
Stoplight System: intervene at yellow, not red
Five Whys: go deeper than the surface behaviour to find the real need
Avoidance, masking, and fight/flight/freeze/fawn are nervous system adaptations, not defiance
P.A.U.S.E. Protocol: Pause, Acknowledge, Undo urgency, Soften, Extend trust
Hygiene struggles are not laziness — they are often interoception, executive function, or sensory challenges
RAR Model for crisis response: Reflect, Align, Restore
Co-regulation starts with you. Calm is contagious. Shame is contagious. Choose calm.

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

Sensitive individuals often experience intense emotional responses, mental health challenges, and hygiene-related struggles that are commonly misunderstood. This module supports staff in recognizing root causes and responding in ways that are non-shaming, co-regulatory, and sustainable.

1. Big Emotions, Meltdowns, and Shutdowns

Meltdowns and shutdowns are not behaviour problems. They are nervous system crises.

Meltdown	Shutdown
Explosive energy: crying, yelling, pacing	Withdrawn energy: silence, blank staring
Fight or flight response	Freeze response
Often mistaken for aggression	Often mistaken for disrespect or ignoring
Needs: Reduce stimulation, give space	Needs: Reduce pressure, sit nearby calmly
What hurts: Lectures, threats	What hurts: Forcing engagement

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Example: the kitchen is loud, a new order comes in, and the schedule changes. The person shouts and covers their ears.	Example: After a full day of masking, the person cannot answer simple questions.

The Stoplight System

GREEN: Regulated, flexible, ready to connect and learn.

YELLOW: Building tension. Subtle signs of distress. This is your window to help before things escalate.

RED: Crisis zone. Dysregulated. Safety first. No teaching or correcting right now.

Intervene at YELLOW, not RED.

> **After a hard moment, try saying:**
>
> *"Let's figure out what happened together."*
>
> *"That felt like too much. What would help you feel safe now?"*
>
> *“I’m not upset. You are not alone. We will figure this out together."*

2. Understanding Why Behaviour Happens

Why This Matters: traditional interpretations of behaviour often fall short. Labels like “non-compliant,” “manipulative,” or “oppositional” don’t help. In fact, they harm.

Instead of asking: What is wrong with this person?

Asking: What is happening for this person?

The Five Whys

They are yelling

- ☐ Why? They are overwhelmed
- ☐ Why? Too much noise, too fast-paced
- ☐ Why? Sensory and processing differences
- ☐ Why? The environment does not match their needs
- ☐ Why? They are doing their best with what they have

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What you see	What it might mean	What to do
Refusing to engage	Demand sensitivity, executive dysfunction	Offer choices, chunk tasks, use visuals
Yelling or verbal aggression	Nervous system in fight mode, feels unsafe	Lower your voice, give space, validate calmly
Refusing help	History of shame, not ready to be vulnerable	Acknowledge their autonomy, offer support later
Silent and frozen	Shutdown, trauma response	Use non-verbal cues, reduce sensory load, sit nearby quietly
Frequent escalations	Environment may not match needs, or staff responses may be triggering	Review safety plan, adjust expectations, bring in team to co-reflect

Understanding Violence & Physical Escalation

Physical aggression is a nervous system survival response, not a planned attack or character flaw.

- **Why It Happens.** Extreme fear, sensory overload, communication barriers, or past trauma can push the brain into fight mode when a person feels trapped or unheard.
- Vulnerability to Harm. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities also face higher rates of victimization and bullying—making felt safety essential.
- Never meet escalation with force or threats. Power struggles escalate danger.
- De-escalate before problem-solving. A brain in Red cannot process lectures or consequences.

Responding Safely in High-Risk Moments (Stoplight: RED)

Safety and stabilization come first; teaching and repair happen later.

1. Regulate Yourself & Create Space. Step back, lower your voice, keep posture open, and clear onlookers or sensory triggers.
2. Use Minimal, Grounding Language. Stop asking questions. Offer calm reassurance: "You are safe. I am giving you space."
3. Follow Your Safety Plan. Call for team backup or emergency support if there is immediate physical danger, never corner or restrain. Physical intervention is a last resort, used only by trained staff, following your organization's policy, when there is imminent danger.
4. Restore & Repair Later (RAR / NAR). Once everyone is back in Green, debrief without shame to adjust the environment.

All behaviour is communication. It is not personal. It is patterned.
Co-regulation always comes before correction.
The relationship is the best regulation tool.

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Reflection questions for staff: What behaviour have I misunderstood recently? What assumptions am I making about intent? How does my tone, energy, or presence impact the person I am supporting? What could I change in the environment, not just the person?

3. Avoidance, Masking, and Survival Responses

Avoidance

May look like procrastination, withdrawal, irritability, or refusal. Common in ADHD, PDA, and anxiety profiles, especially when tasks feel overwhelming, ambiguous, or externally imposed.

> **What helps:**
>
> - *Break down tasks*
> - *Remove urgency*
> - *Invite collaboration instead of commanding*

Masking

Masking is the conscious or unconscious suppression of neurodivergent traits to appear neurotypical. This includes forced eye contact, hiding stimming, or pretending to understand. Over time, masking has been shown to lead to deep exhaustion, identity confusion, and mental health decline.

> **What helps:**
>
> - *Create environments where authentic expression is safe*
> - *No forced eye contact or social scripts*
> - *Accept stimming*
> - *Use affirming language*

Survival Responses

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn can all be activated in work or learning environments. These are nervous system adaptations, not character flaws.

- ☐ Fight: become oppositional
  - *Example: Snaps at a coworker after a loud, rushed morning.*
- ☐ Flight: leave or run away
  - *Example: Leaves the room, or does not come back from break.*
- ☐ Freeze: go silent and still
  - *Example: Goes quiet and stares at the screen after getting several instructions at once.*
- ☐ Fawn: over-please or agree to avoid conflict
  - *Example: Says “Yes, I understand” to everything to avoid conflict.*

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P.A.U.S.E. Protocol:
P - Pause your response and give space.
A - Acknowledge the emotion without judgment.
U - Undo the urgency, not the expectation.
S - Soften your tone, posture, and pace.
E - Extend trust and return to repair later.

4. Hygiene, Sensory Processing, and Mental Health

Hygiene

Hygiene challenges can look like too little or too much. Neither is a character issue.

Common struggles include brushing teeth, showering, changing clothes, or managing menstruation. These are not signs of neglect or defiance. They often result from interoception challenges, executive functioning overload, sensory issues, or demand avoidance related to bodily autonomy.

Some individuals may feel ‘dirty’ even after washing, cleaning or washing repeatedly, or have a surge of sensory sensitivity just before leaving the house. This matters for employment as the morning routine can use up the energy needed for the workday, contribute to lateness, and send the person to work already in yellow. Supervisors often see only the lateness or the fatigue.

A person may be clean but feel a texture, smell, or residue that the nervous system reads as wrong. Ask what the body is telling them, not whether they are clean. It can be helpful to offer sensory-friendly options: unscented products, preferred textures, and a set order of steps.

Give routines a clear end point. A visual checklist with a final step such as "Done. Time to go." helps the brain register that the routine is complete.

What helps:

- *Visual checklists*
- *Scaffolded routines*
- *Non-shaming approach*

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- *Sensory friendly options and products*
- *Never punish for hygiene gaps, build trust and consistency instead*
- *Suggested Language:*
  - *"I want to help you feel comfortable at work. What would make this routine easier?"*
  - *"Some people feel like they are never quite clean enough. That is a real experience, and it can make mornings hard."*
  - *"Would it help to look at the checklist together, or to pick one step to shorten?"*

Sensory Processing

Everyone has a sensory profile. Neurodivergent individuals may experience hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to sounds, textures, light, movement, or smells. Sensory overload can lead to shutdowns, aggression, refusal, anxiety or physical symptoms such as migraines.

What helps:

- *Noise-canceling headphones*
- *Sensory-friendly workspaces*
- *Movement breaks*
- *Fidget tools*
- *Soft clothing options*
- *Respect individual sensory needs as non-negotiable*

Mental Health

Neurodivergent individuals are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, trauma, and burnout, often due to chronic invalidation, exclusion, or misunderstanding.

- ☐ Normalize mental health support
- ☐ Do not pathologize emotional expressions
- ☐ Build regular informal check-ins into your day
- ☐ Allow low-demand recovery time when possible

Additional Learning: Autistic and ADHD Burnout

Chronic masking and overcompensation can result in skill regression, increased shutdowns, reduced executive functioning, and depression symptoms. Burnout generally responds more effectively to recovery and reduced demands than to increased disciplinary pressure.

Additional Learning: Interoception and Emotional Awareness

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Many neurodivergent individuals struggle to recognize hunger or thirst, identify early emotional shifts, or notice escalation cues. Teaching body literacy is foundational.

5. Safety Planning and Crisis Response

RAR: Reflect. Align. Restore.
Reflect: What is this behaviour communicating?
Align: What need can we meet? How can we respond from a calm place?
Restore: What relationship or nervous system repair is needed now?

When completing a safety or support plan, do not just list triggers. Identify the needs behind escalation. Ask what the person needs to feel safe again. Include sensory needs, relationship ruptures, and co-regulation tools, not just behaviours to avoid.

> Offer post-crisis support with phrases like:
>
> *“Let’s figure out what happened together.”*
>
> *“I see that felt like too much- what would help you feel safe now?”*
>
> *“You’re not in trouble. You’re not alone.”*

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Module 3: Active Support and Task Breakdown

MODULE 3 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

The goal is to remove barriers, reduce cognitive load, and set up environments for success

Visual supports: schedules, checklists, visual timers, First/Then boards

Verbal prompts: clear, calm, one step at a time, wait for green zone before prompting

Environmental prompts: colour-coded bins, minimal clutter, movement supports, calm zones

Executive functioning is teachable. Time management, routines, and task initiation can all be built

RAR in practice: Reflect the barrier, Align support to neurology, Restore safety

Accommodations are meaningful when created together, not imposed

Confidence grows when success happens without shame and accommodations are treated as normal

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

This module teaches staff how to support neurodivergent individuals in learning, task completion, and self-regulation by removing barriers, reducing cognitive load, and adapting environments for success.

There is a difference between *doing for* and *scaffolding.* Doing for means you complete the task e.g. “I’ll fill out this form for you”.

Scaffolding means you give just enough support, like a checklist, a first step together, or a reminder, so the person completes it e.g. “Let’s read the first question together, then you write your answer”.

1. Using Prompts to Support Learning

Many individuals learn more easily with adaptations:

- benefiting from visual learning,
- predictable structure,
- low-pressure prompts to reduce overwhelm and increase success

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Visual Supports

Visual supports reduce memory demands, lower anxiety by showing what comes next, and build independence. Types include:

- ☐ Schedules and checklists
- ☐ Flowcharts and step-by-step guides
- ☐ Visual timers
- ☐ First/Then boards (First we do this, then we do that)
- ☐ Emotion scales and illustrated instructions

Verbal Prompts

Verbal prompts should be clear, calm, and supportive, not rushed or demanding. Wait until the young person is calm (green zone) before prompting.

> **Try saying:**
>
> *"Would it help to do the first step together?"*
>
> *"Let's take a look at the checklist."*
>
> *"What part feels hardest right now?"*

Environmental Supports

The setup of the space either helps or hurts. Small changes make a big difference.

- ☐ Use colour-coded bins for task materials
- ☐ Organize workspaces with minimal clutter
- ☐ Provide movement or sensory supports nearby
- ☐ Set up stations to guide step-by-step flow

2. Teaching Executive Functioning Skills

Executive functioning is a set of teachable skills, not something we should expect individuals to simply have.

Time Management

- ☐ Use visual timers and time chunking
- ☐ Break large tasks into time blocks with movement between them
- ☐ Practice estimating time together: "How long do you think this will take?"
- ☐ Make time visible and tangible

Routines and Predictability

- ☐ Create visual or step-based routines for regular activities

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- ☐ Build in buffer time. Transitions take longer for neurodivergent brains.
- ☐ Use routines as regulation anchors, not rigid rules

Task Initiation and Completion

- ☐ Start with an easy or enjoyable step
- ☐ Break tasks into micro-steps: "Step 1: Get out your notebook."
- ☐ Celebrate showing up and trying, not just finishing

RAR in practice:
Reflect: What is the barrier?
Align: What support honours their neurology?
Restore: How do we help them feel safe and successful again?

3. Supporting Autonomy and Meaningful Accommodations

Autonomy is essential for dignity, motivation, and long-term growth. Neurodivergent individuals often feel done to rather than done with. When accommodations are tailored to their needs and preferences, they are more likely to stay engaged.

What Makes an Accommodation Meaningful?

- ☐ It is created together, not imposed
- ☐ It considers sensory, executive functioning, and emotional regulation needs
- ☐ It removes barriers rather than trying to fix the person
- ☐ It invites voice and choice at every step

> **Examples:**
>
> *Offer choices between task formats (writing vs. speaking, solo vs. partner work)*
>
> *Use interests or passions as part of the task*
>
> *Allow flexible pacing with built-in breaks*
>
> *Provide a non-verbal way to ask for help or opt out (a visual 'need a break' card)*

4. Adapting the Environment

Environments either support regulation and success or they become a barrier to learning. Staff can increase independence by making small, intentional adjustments.

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Environmental Change	Why It Helps
Natural lighting instead of fluorescent	Reduces sensory overload
Noise-reduction options (headphones)	Allows focus in loud spaces
Labelled bins and clear visual steps	Reduces working memory demands
A designated calm/reset area	Allows regulation without shame
Same layout and supplies each day	Builds predictability and safety

Fading Support: Stepping Back as Confidence Grows

1. Full Support: Model the skill and complete it together step-by-step.
2. Partial Support: Offer visual or verbal prompts while they do most of the work.
3. Minimal Support: Check in afterward; prompt only if stuck.
4. Independence: Monitor from a distance and celebrate success.

Gradually reduce support as skills become comfortable—fading too fast causes frustration, while fading too slowly creates dependence.

> Confidence grows when individuals experience success without shame, and when accommodations are treated as normal, not something to be hidden. Progress is measured relationally and individually, not against unrealistic norms.

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Module 4: Neurodiversity-Affirming Professionalism and Relational Safety

MODULE 4 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

Professionalism is about reliability, respect, and honesty — not conformity to neurotypical norms

Relational safety means: predictable feedback, permission to clarify, emotional attunement, vulnerability without social penalty

Attunement is the ability to notice and respond to someone's internal state with accuracy and care

Masking increases burnout, anxiety, depression, and shutdown frequency — inclusive professionalism reduces the need for it

RAR: Reflect (what is beneath the surface?) — Align (meet the need without abandoning expectations) — Restore (repair relationship and nervous system)

Stoplight System builds shared nervous system literacy: normalize saying 'I am in yellow'

P.A.U.S.E.: Pause, Acknowledge, Undo urgency, Soften, Extend trust

Validation is not agreement — you can validate a feeling while holding a boundary

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

This module redefines what professionalism means through a neurodivergent lens and introduces key tools for building relational safety, responding to tension, and creating environments where authenticity is possible.

1. What Professionalism Really Means

Traditional professionalism often relies on neurotypical norms: eye contact, small talk, regulated affect, linear communication, and masking of emotional states. These expectations can exclude or invalidate neurodivergent individuals whose natural expressions differ.

Traditional Professionalism	Neurodiversity-Affirming Professionalism
Eye contact at all times	Eye contact when comfortable
Emotional restraint	Authentic emotional expression with respect
Small talk	Direct, clear communication

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Uniform style	Adaptable to individual needs
Compliance-based	Collaboration-based
Speed over depth	Integrity over impression

“Professionalism” is not neutral. Traditional workplace norms often reflect neurotypical preferences rather than actual job competence.
Equity is not sameness. Treating everyone identically creates barriers; true fairness means giving people the specific tools they need to succeed.
Authenticity is a protective factor. Reducing the pressure to mask prevents burnout and protects long-term mental health.

Best Practice

- Redefine professionalism. Anchor standards in collaboration, clear communication, and adaptability rather than rigid social rules.
- Shift from performance to values. Measure success by meaningful outcomes and work quality, not how "neurotypical" someone appears.
- Build a safe foundation. Root workplace culture in clarity, co-regulation, mutual respect, and psychological safety.

2. Building Relational Safety at Work

Relational safety is more than being nice. For neurodivergent individuals, it includes predictability of tone and feedback, permission to clarify or slow down, emotional and sensory attunement, and the ability to be vulnerable without social penalty.

The Good Fit Principle suggests that trust isn't built by forcing neurodivergent people to conform - it grows through mutual attunement, where both sides adapt to understand how the other works best.

- ➔ Move beyond "being nice." Surface politeness still leaves people guessing; explicit clarity builds real security.
- ➔ Practice mutual attunement. Replace one-sided masking with shared curiosity about each person's communication style.
- ➔ Anchor trust in consistency. When people know how you will respond, nervous systems settle and collaboration thrives.

Without safety, there is no sustainable performance.

What Is Attunement?

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Attunement means noticing, interpreting, and responding to another person's internal state with accuracy and care. Attunement requires regulation. You cannot attune when you are escalated.

In workplaces, attunement looks like:

- slowing down when someone appears overwhelmed,
- asking clarifying questions instead of assuming intent,
- adjusting pace when processing differences are present,
- and naming tension gently before it escalates.

> You cannot attune when you are escalated. Regulate yourself first.

Sometimes, asking someone how you can help, despite being well-intentioned, can be received as a strong demand because it hands them the work of figuring out what they need, organizing it, and putting it into words (often at the moment they have the least capacity to do so).

Offer two concrete options instead of an open question
Accept "not right now" as a full answer, and let the person know the offer stands.

> **Suggested script framework:**
>
> *"How can I support you? I could take the front counter for ten minutes, or I could stay nearby while you finish this."*
>
> *"No pressure either way. I'm here if that changes."*

When a Relationship is a “Good Fit”

- No need to pretend/”mask” to be included
- Their needs are met without constant self-advocacy
- Miscommunications are opportunities for Neurodivergent-Affirming Repair (NAR)

3. Recognizing Nervous System Cues

Nervous system cues are early signals that a person is shifting out of regulation. They often appear before behaviour changes. They are not personality traits, not intentional, and not manipulation. **They are protective signals.**

Zone	Signs to watch for
GREEN (Regulated)	Steady tone, flexible thinking, curious questions, engaged posture

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YELLOW (Escalating)	Shortened responses, fidgeting, sharpened or flat tone, repetitive questions, withdrawal, rigid language, 'always' or 'never' language
RED (Dysregulated)	Yelling, crying, shutdown or silence, leaving abruptly, refusal, blank staring

> The goal is not to control behaviour. The goal is to respond during YELLOW.

4. Why Internal Experiences Must Be Validated

Many neurodivergent individuals have lived experiences of being told they are overreacting, being corrected for tone, being dismissed when overwhelmed, or being punished for nervous system responses. Invalidation increases shame, masking, shutdown, escalation, and burnout.

Validation does not mean agreement. It means acknowledging that the experience is real for the person. Validation lowers threat.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
"You are overthinking this."	"I can see this feels big for you."
"That is not what I meant."	"I want to understand how that landed for you."
"Calm down."	"Let's slow this down together."
"You are too sensitive."	"Something here feels unsafe or overwhelming."

You can validate emotional experience while still holding boundaries. Example: "It makes sense that you are frustrated. The expectation still stands. Let's figure out how to make it manageable."

5. Masking in Professional Spaces

Masking at work can look like hiding stimming, forcing eye contact, mimicking tone, overworking to compensate, over-apologizing, or hiding sensory needs. Long-term masking has been associated with increased burnout, anxiety, depression, and shutdown frequency.

> Inclusive professionalism reduces the need for masking.

There is a difference between masking and chosen adjustment.

Masking	Chosen Adjustment
Can be driven by fear of rejection or consequence.	Can be driven by care for the relationship and one's values.

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Can feel like suppression and hiding who I am.	Can feel like generosity and choosing how I show up.
Can lead to exhaustion, burnout, and identity confusion	Can feel manageable, and that there is room for recovery.
Can feel required to stay safe.	Can feel freely chosen and can be paused.

> **Suggested script framework:**
>
> *"Your X (insert personalized trait) is a real strength. When do you notice it lands well with people, and when do you choose to turn it down a little?"*
>
> *"Does adjusting here feel like a choice you're making, or like something you have to do to be safe?"*

6. Selective Self-Disclosure and Authenticity

Selective self-disclosure means sharing personal information with purpose and clear limits. It builds trust, models safety, and is a tool of agency. Teach staff to attune, not assume. Consent and clarity are more important than constant openness. We acknowledge trust can be challenging in some workplaces. You do not have to share a diagnosis or explain why. Asking for what you need to do the job well is part of doing the job well.

> **Suggested script framework:**
>
> *"There is something I do differently that helps me work best..."*
>
> *"I would like to share a need, not a problem, just a preference."*
>
> *“I work best with written steps. Could you send that by message?”*
>
> *"Sometimes I use [tool or strategy] to stay regulated. It is just part of how I work well."*

7. The Three Core Tools

RAR: Reflect, Align, Restore

RAR prevents power struggles and protects psychological safety.
Reflect: What is happening beneath the surface? Asking: "What do you think was going on for you at that moment?"
Align: Respond in a way that meets the need without abandoning expectations. "The deadline still stands. Let's break it into smaller milestones so it feels manageable."

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Restore: Repair the relationship and nervous system after tension. "I value working with you. I do not want tension to sit between us."

What Do We Mean by Psychological Safety?

PEOPLE CAN	IT DOES NOT MEAN	IT MEANS
Ask questions without humiliation Admit mistakes without fear Request accommodations Express needs	No accountability No expectations No boundaries	Boundaries are predictable Expectations are clear Corrections are respectful Repair is prioritized

The Stoplight System

Normalize saying 'I am in yellow today.' This builds shared nervous system literacy across teams and gives language to internal states without overexplaining. The exact wording matters less than the skill of noticing where you are and saying it clearly. Use language that fits for you and your workplace.

Normalize statements like:

"I am in yellow. I may need written instructions."

“I’m running low. Can this wait until after break?”

"I am trending toward red. Can we pause this conversation?"

"I am green and ready to take this on."

Yellow is not a weakness. Yellow is information.

P.A.U.S.E.

P - Pause. Interrupt your automatic reaction.
A - Acknowledge. Name the emotion without judgment. "I can feel this is charged."
U - Undo the urgency (not the expectation). "We do not have to solve this in five minutes."
S - Soften. Lower your tone, posture, speed, and word intensity.
E - Extend trust. Assume good intent. Return to repair later.

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How These Tools Work Together

RAR is structural, it guides conversations. Stoplight is relational, it builds shared language. P.A.U.S.E. is moment-to-moment, it regulates intensity. When integrated consistently: conflict decreases, burnout reduces, masking lessens, repair becomes normalized, and accountability remains intact.

8. Relational Safety and Rupture Repair

Creating Safety Through Relational Attunement and Communication

- Notice nervous system cues, validating experiences, and responding without judgment. This looks like:
- Checking in, not checking out
- Listening without defensiveness
- Using co-regulatory scripts: “I can see this feels off—how can we reset together?”

Attunement becomes especially important during misunderstandings, sensory overload, or perceived criticism. Ruptures are inevitable in human systems. Relational safety is not the absence of conflict. It is the presence of repair. Repair builds trust faster than perfection ever could.

Repair includes:

- Naming impact
- Asking responsibility
- Clarifying misunderstandings
- Restoring dignity.

Avoid:

- Minimizing concerns
- Gaslighting
- Silent punishment
- Escalating control

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Module 5: Foundational Communication and Conflict Skills

MODULE 5 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff
Communication skills must be explicitly taught — they do not develop through correction alone
Not everyone communicates the same way. Processing delays, literal thinking, and anxiety are not disrespectful.
Use one instruction at a time. Urgency increases anxiety. Anxiety reduces thinking.
Clear and calm workplace language: slow voice, short sentences, no sarcasm, pause before responding
I-statements reduce blame: I noticed... / I feel... / I need...
Asking for help is responsible behaviour — model it yourself
NAR Model for conflict repair: Name it, Acknowledge it, Rebuild safety
Guided role-play builds safe practice — repetition is required for mastery
Never punish appropriate break requests. Breaks prevent escalation.

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

Communication is one of the most important skills for employment success. Many individuals entering pre-employment programs have been corrected harshly in the past, feel anxious about mistakes, shut down when confused, react quickly when embarrassed, or avoid asking for help. Communication skills must be explicitly taught. They do not develop through correction alone.

1. Understanding Communication Differences

Not everyone communicates the same way. Some young people speak very directly, need extra time to answer, repeat questions, go quiet when overwhelmed, or sound sharp when anxious. These are not signs of disrespect. They may reflect processing delay, nervous system overload, fear of mistakes, literal thinking, or anxiety.

Instead of assuming...	Try asking or saying...
"Why are you ignoring me?"	"I noticed you got quiet. Are you thinking?"

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"Watch your tone."	"Let's slow that down together."
"Be more professional."	"Can you tell me more about what you need?"

> **After some processing time:**
>
> *“Thanks for taking the time. Do you want me to go over anything again?” OR*
>
> *“Thanks for giving me time. Could you check in later in case I need anything repeated?”*

Build Trust Before Redirection
Normalize Processing Time & Reduce Urgency
Clarify the “Why” Without Using Shame
Scripts that Invite Collaboration, Not Compliance
Integrate Core Values to Reframe the Task

2. Normalizing Processing Time and Reducing Urgency

Some individuals need instructions broken into steps, extra time to respond, repetition, or visual support. Urgency increases anxiety. Anxiety reduces thinking.

> **Avoid stacking — instead of:**
>
> *"Put these away, sweep the floor, then check the back room."*

> **Use stepwise delivery:**
>
> *"Step 1: Put these boxes on this shelf." (wait) "Step 2: Now sweep this area."*
>
> *One instruction at a time prevents shutdown.*

Another useful tool is invitational communication with a clear outcome as it increases safety in the relationship and keeps the expectation clear.

> **Best practice:**
>
> - *State the request, the timeframe, and the reason.*

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- *Name the natural impact on the team or the work, not a punishment. The purpose is information, not guilt.*
- *Leave room for the person to say they cannot do it, so problem-solving happens before the deadline instead of after.*
- *Follow through consistently. Invitational language only builds trust when what you say will happen actually happens.*

Suggested language:

"I'd really appreciate it if the boxes could be unpacked by the end of shift. If that's not going to work today, let me know, so I can plan to stay and finish them."

"Would it work better to do it before break, or after?"

3. Clear and Calm Workplace Language

Teach simple tone rules: slow voice, medium volume, short sentences, no sarcasm, pause before responding. Teach replacements, and practice scripts out loud.

Instead of...	Teach them to say...
"That is not what you said!"	"I am confused. Can you explain again?"
"That is not fair!"	"I did not understand the change. Can you help me?"
"You are wrong."	"I see it differently. Can we talk about it?"

Practice scripts out loud. Repeat many times. It can take hundreds of repetitions before a new way of speaking feels natural.

4. Clarifying the Why - Without Shame

Avoid vague language like 'that's disrespectful' or 'be more professional.' These are unclear and may feel confusing. Instead, explain the reason in simple terms.

Avoid...	Instead, explain clearly...
"Watch your tone."	"When we speak calmly, customers feel safe."
"That is not respectful."	"When we use calm words, people trust us."

Clear reasons increase cooperation. Shame increases resistance.

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5. Identifying Wants vs. Needs

A want is a preference. A need is required for safety or functioning. Teaching this reduces escalation.

> **Example:**
>
> *Situation: Supervisor changes the schedule without notice.*
>
> *Want: "I want consistent scheduling."*
>
> *Need: "I need advance notice so I can plan and manage my anxiety."*
>
> *Reframe: "This is not about control. It is about predictability."*

6. Using I-Statements

I-statements reduce blame and increase clarity.

I noticed... (describe what happened)
I feel... (name the emotion)
I need... (make the request)

> **Example:**
>
> *Instead of: "You always change things at the last minute."*
>
> *Try: "I noticed the schedule changed without notice. I feel overwhelmed when plans shift suddenly. I need earlier communication when possible."*

7. Asking for Help

Many young people avoid asking for help because they fear embarrassment. Teach them that asking for help is responsible behaviour. When trainers model vulnerability, shame decreases.

> **Scripts to practice:**
>
> *"I am not sure what to do next."*
>
> *"Can you show me again?"*
>
> *"I need one step at a time."*
>
> *"I do not understand yet."*

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> *"Can you write that down?"*

Trainer requirement: model asking for help during training. Example: "Can someone remind me what step we are on?"

8. Receiving Feedback Without Shame

Correction can trigger defensiveness, shutdown, argument, or withdrawal. Teach clearly: feedback is about the task, not about your worth.

> **Response scripts to practice:**
>
> *"Okay."*
>
> *"I will try again."*
>
> *"Can you show me?"*
>
> *"Thank you."*

Instead of...	Try...
"You did that wrong."	"You are working hard. Let's adjust this part."
Public correction	Correct privately when possible
Vague labels like 'disrespectful'	Explain clearly what happened and what to do differently

9. Recognizing Frustration and Taking Breaks

Frustration starts in the body. Teach young people to notice: tight chest, faster breathing, clenched jaw, heat in the face, wanting to leave, talking faster, or going quiet.

> **Break scripts to practice:**
>
> *"I am in yellow."*
>
> *"I need a short break."*
>
> *"I am feeling overwhelmed."*
>
> *"Can we slow down?"*

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Never punish appropriate break requests. Breaks prevent escalation.

10. Conflict Repair: The NAR Model

NAR: Neurodivergent-Affirming Repair
N - Name it: "That felt tense."
A - Acknowledge: "I was frustrated."
R - Rebuild: "Can we try again?"
Keep repair short. No lectures. No shame.
Model repair out loud: "I raised my voice earlier. Let's reset."

11. Other Models Reminders

P.A.U.S.E. Protocol:
P - Interrupt automatic reactions
A - Acknowledge the emotion without judgment.
U - Undo the urgency, not the expectation.
S - Soften your tone, posture, and pace.
E - Extend trust and return to repair later.

RAR in Practice
Reflect: What is their experience? What is mine?
Align: How can we come together? How can I come back to my own regulation
Restore: How can we repair? between us, and to myself.

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12. Guided Role-Play Scenarios

Each scenario follows the same steps: (1) notice body cue, (2) pause, (3) use a script, (4) repair if needed, (5) debrief.

Scenario 1: Unexpected Schedule Change

Situation: Supervisor says your shift changed.

(1) Body cue check: Tight chest? Fast breathing?
(2) Say: "I am in yellow."

> **(3) Practice saying:**
>
> *"I did not know about the change. Can we talk about it?"*

(4) If escalation happens: "I got frustrated. Can we try again?"
(5) Debrief: What did your body feel? What did you need? What would help next time?

Scenario 2: Public Correction

Situation: Supervisor corrects you in front of others.

(1) Body cue check: Hot face? Urge to defend yourself right away?
(2) Say: "I am in yellow."

> **Practice saying:**
>
> *"Okay. Can you show me what I missed?"*

(4) If escalation happens: "That landed harder than I expected. Can you give me a second?"
(5) Debrief: What did your body feel? What did you need? What would help next time?

→ *Teaching point: Correction is about the task, not your identity.*

Scenario 3: Misunderstood Tone

Situation: A coworker says you sounded rude.

(1) Body cue check: Jaw tight? Wanting to explain everything at once?
(2) Say: "I am in yellow."

> **Practice saying:**
>
> *"Thank you for telling me. I did not mean to sound that way."*
>
> *"What part sounded sharp?"*

(4) If escalation happens: "I am getting defensive. Give me a minute to think about that."
(5) Debrief: What did your body feel? What did you need? What would help next time?

→ *Teaching point: Intent and impact can be different things.*

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Scenario 4: Too Many Instructions at Once

Situation: You are given three tasks at once.

(1) Body cue check: Mind going blank? Stomach dropping?
(2) Say: "I am in yellow."

> **Practice saying:**
>
> *"I need one step at a time."*
>
> *"Can we slow down?"*

(4) If escalation happens: "I lost track. Can we start from the last step?"
(5) Debrief: What did your body feel? What did you need? What would help next time?

→ *Teaching point: Asking for help prevents mistakes.*

Scenario 5: Difficult Customer

Situation: A customer says "You are too slow."

(1) Body cue check: Racing heart? Wanting to rush and freeze at once?
(2) Say: "I am in yellow."

> **Practice saying:**
>
> *"I am doing my best. Thank you for your patience."*

(4) If escalation happens: "I need a moment before I respond to that."
(5) Debrief: What did your body feel? What did you need? What would help next time?

→ *Teaching point: Calm protects employment.*

Scenario 6: Receiving a Rejection

Situation: You get an email saying the company has chosen another candidate.

(3) Body cue check: Sinking stomach? Urge to give up?
(4) Say: "I am in yellow."

> **Practice saying:**
>
> *"Thank you for letting me know. I would welcome any feedback for next time."*

(6) If escalation happens: "I need a moment before I respond to that."
(7) Debrief: Ask what helps the person recover after disappointment (ideally a recovery plan would be written into the PEP before the first rejection arrives so that can be referred to).

→ *Teaching point: A rejection is about one position at one moment, not about your value.*

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Module 6: Advanced Soft Skills for Teamwork and Self-Advocacy

MODULE 6 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

Most job losses are not due to lack of skill - they are due to unresolved tension, tone, and unclear expectations

Teamwork is a learned skill that must be modeled, practiced, and repeated. Do not assume participants know how.

Advocacy is not aggression - it is clear, calm communication inside systems

Three levels: self-advocacy, peer advocacy, system advocacy

Rejection sensitivity and justice sensitivity are patterns to understand and work with, not against

The Middle Voice Formula: I noticed... / I feel... / I need... / Can we...?

Manitoba rights: employers must provide reasonable accommodation under The Human Rights Code (Manitoba). Support needs include mental health.

Advocacy is taught, modeled, practiced, repaired, and repeated.

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

Advocacy is one of the most difficult employment skills to teach. Not because individuals lack intelligence or awareness, but because advocacy requires emotional regulation, clear communication, understanding systems, confidence with authority, tolerating discomfort, and staying balanced under stress. Advocacy must be taught as a regulated, structured skill. Even when done well, self-advocacy takes significant energy, so it's important to build in time for rest and self-care afterward.

1. Teaching Teamwork Explicitly

In employment settings, most job losses are not due to lack of skill. They are due to misunderstanding, tone, unclear expectations, and unresolved group tension. Teamwork is a learned skill. It must be modeled, practiced, and repeated. Do not assume participants know how to share tasks, disagree respectfully, ask for clarification, manage frustration, or recover after conflict.

Participants may struggle in teams because roles are unclear, instructions change quickly, tone is misinterpreted, processing speeds differ, justice sensitivity is triggered, rejection sensitivity causes withdrawal, or public correction creates shame. These are regulation and clarity issues, not character issues.

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How to Teach Teamwork Step by Step

Step 1: Define Roles Clearly

Say: "This is your role. This is my role. This is the shared goal." Write it down if possible.

Step 2: Teach Strength-Based Roles

Ask who prefers organizing, finishing, or detailed work. Match tasks to strengths when possible. This builds confidence and reduces friction.

Step 3: Teach a Simple Conflict Template

1. What is the goal?
2. What happened?
3. What does each person need?
4. What is one solution we can try?

> **Scripts to practice:**
>
> *"I am not clear on my role. Can you explain?"*
>
> *"I have a different idea. Can I share it?"*
>
> *"I need a minute before we decide."*
>
> *"Can you explain how that decision was made?"*
>
> *"I got overwhelmed. Can we try again?"*

Do not say this...	Say this instead...
"You are being difficult."	"Let's clarify roles."
"Just work it out."	"Let's slow this down."
"That is not a big deal."	"What part feels confusing?"
"Be more professional."	"What would make this clearer?"

2. Understanding Systems

A system is any organized structure with rules and decision-making authority. Examples include healthcare, education, employment, social services, and the legal system. Systems often assume strong executive functioning, high literacy, familiarity with policies, and comfort with authority. Not everyone has had access to those skills.

3. What Is Advocacy?

Advocacy means speaking up for your needs/someone else's needs in a calm and clear way. It is not yelling, arguing, shutting down, complaining, or people-pleasing. Advocacy is naming what happened, naming what you need, asking for clarification, requesting adjustment, and staying regulated.

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Level	What it means	Example
Self-advocacy	Speaking up for your own rights and supports	"I work best with written instructions."
Peer advocacy	Supporting a colleague in expressing their needs	"They may need more processing time."
System advocacy	Working to improve policies or structures	"Could we create a clearer schedule system?"

Advocacy is not aggression. It is communication with clarity and respect.

4. Internal Barriers to Advocacy

Rejection Sensitivity at Work

This may look like: feeling hurt when not chosen, assuming criticism means failure, ruminating after feedback, avoiding asking questions, or withdrawing after correction.

> **Cognitive reframe to teach:**
>
> *"This feels personal, but I do not have the full picture yet."*
>
> *"Let me check before I assume."*

Justice Sensitivity at Work

This may look like strong reactions to unfair scheduling, anger when rules are not followed, rigidity about policies, or difficulty tolerating inconsistency. Justice sensitivity is often tied to strong moral reasoning and is often a strength. It must be expressed safely.

> **Regulated advocacy script:**
>
> *"I have noticed shift times vary. Can we clarify expectations?"*

One area this may come up is break requests and perceived fairness. For example, one person needs a break, and a colleague says it isn't fair that they get one now when others want one too, which can lead to conflict or discomfort between coworkers. The supervisor has an important role in setting the norm in the workplace culture.

Best practices:

- Use a prevention lens. Set a team-wide norm in advance that anyone may take a short break before they reach overwhelm. When breaks are open to everyone, they stop looking like special treatment.
- Protect privacy. Supervisors should never explain or justify another employee's accommodation to coworkers. Accommodations are confidential.

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- Respond to the fairness concern without making it about the other person. Acknowledge the concern and redirect to the colleague's own needs.
- Revisit coverage if break requests regularly leave gaps. That is a question of staffing and structure, not behaviour.

Suggested language:

Team norm: "Everyone is welcome to take a short break before things build up. Just let someone know so we have coverage."

Responding to a fairness concern: "That's a fair question. Breaks are available to everyone here. Would you like to take one now, or after this rush?"

5. The Middle Voice/I Statements

Many young people move between people-pleasing ('It's fine. It doesn't matter.') and escalation ('This is ridiculous!'). The middle voice is a calm, clear way of speaking that sits between staying quiet and blowing up. Teach the middle voice: calm tone, clear statement, specific request, no accusation.

The Middle Voice Formula:
"I noticed _____."
"I feel _____."
"I need _____."
"Can we _____?"

Scenario scripts:

Schedule confusion: "I noticed the schedule changed and I was not aware. I need clearer notice. Can we talk?"

Feeling ignored: "Hey, I said good morning earlier. Just wanted to make sure you heard me."

Perceived unfairness: "I am interested in that shift. What do I need to do to qualify?"

Feedback feels personal: "Thank you for the feedback. Can you show me what to adjust?"

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Communication Style	What It Sounds Like	What Happens Next
1. Blame (Pointing Out)	*"You never told me what to do!"* or *"You messed this up."*	Puts people on the defensive and creates conflict.
2. Self-Blame (Turning Inward)	*"I'm terrible at this."* or *"Everything is my fault."*	Causes shame, overwhelm, and shutting down.
3. Balance Problem-Solving	*"The instructions got missed. Let's check the list together."*	Stays calm, focuses on what happened, and finds a fix.

6. Rights and Responsibilities in Manitoba

Unfortunately, some workplaces still treat accommodations as a favour. They are a legal right. Knowing that can help you stay calm when you ask, and practicing the request first helps too.

- ☐ Employers must provide reasonable accommodations
- ☐ Support needs includes mental health and invisible disabilities
- ☐ You cannot be punished for requesting accommodation
- ☐ Accommodation is required unless it causes undue hardship

> Rights plus calm communication equals effective advocacy.

Navigating Employer Pushback

- **The Legal Standard (Undue Hardship).** Employers must accommodate up to the point of undue hardship. This is a high bar. Cost, health, and safety are all weighed, and cost alone rarely meets it.
- **Proof Over Assumptions.** Businesses cannot simply claim a tight budget. They must show real financial evidence, accounting for business size and grants.
- **Many Supports Are Free or Low-Cost.** Written checklists, clear expectations, headphones, and flexible breaks cost little or nothing.
- **The Duty to Offer Alternatives.** If one option is too costly, employers must still work together to find a lower-cost solution.

What to Do If Self-Advocacy Meets Pushback or Retaliation

Because employers cannot legally punish an employee for requesting a reasonable accommodation, teach youth and job coaches these four steps if pushback happens:

1. **Document what happened.** Write down the date, time, what was requested, and how the supervisor responded.
2. **Follow up in writing.** Send a brief, polite email summarizing the conversation (*"Thank you for talking with me today about receiving written checklists..."*).
3. **Connect with your support team.** Share the notes with your job coach, mentor, or employment specialist right away.

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4. **Know external supports.** If an employer refuses reasonable accommodation or retaliates, contact the Manitoba Human Rights Commission for guidance. If the job is federally regulated (for example, a bank, airline, or telecommunications company), contact the Canadian Human Rights Commission. To learn more about the Accessibility for Manitobans Act, contact the Manitoba Accessibility Office at accessibilitymb.ca.

Barriers Professionals May Face

Newcomers to Canada may experience:

- Language barriers
- Different cultural norms
- Fear of “causing trouble”
- Limited understanding of rights
- Confusion about disability protections

New professionals may experience:

- Fear of saying wrong thing
- Lack of knowledge about accommodation law
- Confusion about confidentiality
- Uncertainty about role boundaries

7. Community Integration

Employment is not only income. It is **belonging, identity, confidence, and social participation.** Advocacy builds long-term integration. Silencing yourself leads to burnout. Escalation leads to conflict. Balanced advocacy builds sustainability.

> Silencing yourself leads to burnout.
> Escalation leads to conflict.
> Balanced advocacy builds sustainability.

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Module 7: Personalized Employment Planning (PEP)

MODULE 7 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

PEP is a living process, not a one-time document — it evolves with growth, stress, and self-awareness

Employment readiness is about understanding how someone thinks, feels, and functions - not fixing deficits

A strong PEP includes: strengths profile, known stressors, sensory needs, executive functioning supports, energy patterns, burnout history

Plan for regulation before performance - identify non-negotiables (lighting, noise, break frequency)

Neurodivergent-affirming SMART goals: flexible time, tried rather than finished, regulation bandwidth instead of standard

RAR (Reflect, Align, Restore) is executive functioning scaffolding, not extra emotional support - build it into every session

PEP sessions: 30-45 minutes, scheduled at times of highest energy, visual summaries, one clear next step

Sustainable progress matters more than speed

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

This module introduces the PEP process: Personalized Employment Planning. PEP supports young people with neurodivergent profiles in creating employment pathways that are realistic, sustainable, and self-directed. It is not a one-time document. It is a living process that evolves with growth, stress, experience, and self-awareness.

PEP is not just about filling out a plan. It is about how you guide the conversation. Your pace, tone, and clarity matter as much as the content.

1. Creating a Personalized Employment Plan

Employment readiness is not about fixing deficits. It is about understanding how the individual thinks, feels, functions, and thrives.

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A strong PEP plan includes:

- ☐ Strength-based learning profile
- ☐ Known stressors and early warning signs
- ☐ Sensory and environmental considerations
- ☐ Executive functioning scaffolds
- ☐ Communication preferences
- ☐ Relational needs (supervision style, feedback delivery)
- ☐ Energy patterns (time of day capacity)
- ☐ Burnout history and recovery needs
- ☐ Motivation rooted in values and interests, not compliance
- ☐ Realistic pacing

Additional best practice considerations:

- ☐ Plan for regulation before performance
- ☐ Identify non-negotiables (lighting, noise, break frequency)
- ☐ Clarify what support looks like when dysregulated
- ☐ Distinguish between skill gap and capacity gap
- ☐ Include contingency planning (what happens if energy drops?)

Best Practice: Use structured conversation, visuals, and body-based check-ins to help the person describe what environments help them thrive, what environments overwhelm them, how their brain processes tasks, what helps them restart when stuck, and what restores them after stress.

Case Study

A young person with PDA traits creates a plan that includes: flexible task choice, clear reasons behind each task, one trusted support person, a predictable start with a self-selected anchor task, and pre-planned language for declining tasks respectfully.

Result: Increased engagement and reduced shutdown.

2. SMART Goals for Success

Traditional SMART goals can feel rigid, performance-driven, or overwhelming. Goals may need to be adjusted to your regulation bandwidth which is the amount of emotional, sensory, and thinking capacity a person has on a given day to manage stress, change, and demands. This can change with sleep, noise, stress, and masking. Goals should be set to fit today's bandwidth, not a fixed standard. Adjust them like this:

Traditional SMART	Neurodiversity-Affirming SMART
Specific: complete X tasks	Specific: break into concrete micro-steps

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Measurable: did you finish?	Measurable: "Did I try it?"
Achievable: by the standard	Achievable: within their current regulation bandwidth
Relevant: to the job	Relevant: to their intrinsic motivation and values
Time-bound: by Tuesday	Time-bound: "sometime this week"

> **Reframe goals like this:**
>
> *Instead of: "Apply to 5 jobs." Try: "Explore 2 places where I might want to work, even if I do not apply."*
>
> *Instead of: "Complete resume today." Try: "Write 3 bullet points about my strengths."*
>
> *Frame goals with 'success regardless of outcome.'*

3. Using RAR in Planning Sessions

RAR is not extra emotional support or an extra task. Use it in place of your usual check-in. It is executive functioning scaffolding. Build it into every planning session.

RAR in PEP Planning:
Reflect: What is feeling hard? What is happening in my body?
Align: What do I need to feel steady enough to move forward? More time? Clearer instructions? A sensory break?
Restore: What will help me return to this plan? A support person? A micro-step? Reduced demand?

If a young person becomes overwhelmed during planning:

- ☐ Pause planning
- ☐ Name what is happening
- ☐ Adjust the goal or pace
- ☐ Rebuild safety before continuing

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4. Facilitator Best Practices for PEP Sessions

PEP at a glance: 1. Map strengths, 2. Check environmental fit, 3. Break goals into micro-steps, 4. Write flexible SMART goals, 5. Check in weekly, 6. Use RAR when things get hard.

PEP sessions should be:
- Scheduled at times of highest energy
- 30-45 minutes for most people
- Include breaks
- Use visual summaries
- End with one clear next step
- Reinforce strengths consistently

Avoiding:
- Overloading with too many goals at once
- Using shame to increase urgency
- Comparing participants to peers
- Pushing through dysregulation

When to Pause Planning

Pause if you notice: the person goes quiet, seems confused, says "I don't know" repeatedly, or looks tense or shut down.

> **Try saying:**
>
> *"Let's slow down."*
>
> *"We do not need to decide this right now."*
>
> *"This feels like a lot. Let's break it down."*

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When the Plan Feels Too Much

If goals are never started, the person avoids sessions, or self-criticism increases, cut the goal in half, reduce expectations, add more support, and focus on effort, not outcome.

What to Do If Shame Emerges

Shame might sound like: 'I am bad at this', 'I will never get a job', or 'I can't do anything right.' When this happens: pause planning, validate the feeling, remind them of strengths, and make the goal smaller.

> **You can say:**
>
> *"This is hard, not a reflection of you."*
>
> *"We can make this easier."*
>
> *"You do not have to do this alone."*

Sustainable progress matters more than speed.

Navigating Tension Between Participant Pacing and System Timelines

External programs (such as EIA, EI, or training funders) often impose strict deadlines that clash with trauma-informed, bandwidth-based pacing. When those pressures collide:

- Be transparent without shaming. Separate system rules from the youth's worth (*"Our program has a 6-week reporting check-in, so let's pick one tiny, low-stress step we can show together"*).
- Protect the PEP. Keep the youth's personal PEP focused on sustainable, micro-step goals, while the job coach handles administrative translations for funders.

Measuring Success in PEP

- Increased self-awareness
- Reduced shutdown during planning
- Clear articulation of strengths
- Increased willingness to explore
- Improved regulation during setbacks
- Advocacy confidence

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Module 8: Tracking Progress and Long-Term Success

MODULE 8 AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff
Traditional metrics (speed, compliance, attendance) are often irrelevant or harmful for neurodivergent learners
Meaningful markers: initiation, self-advocacy, emotional recovery, engagement, relational trust, confidence shifts
Use narrative-based tracking (observation notes, journals) rather than fixed checklists
Sustainability is the primary metric — not volume of applications
Struggling after success is NOT regression — use RAR to explore what has changed
Too much support can become a barrier; too little leads to burnout — adjust through co-created, flexible dialogue
Long-term sustainability: natural workplace supports, quarterly RAR reviews, reconnection and repair protocol
The goal is capacity, dignity, and long-term wellbeing — not compliance

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Overview

This final module supports staff and facilitators in tracking progress meaningfully and adjusting support systems based on an individual's growth, regulation, and readiness. Unlike traditional evaluations that focus on productivity or compliance, this module honours relational, emotional, and neurodivergent-informed definitions of success.

1. Meaningful Markers of Growth

Traditional metrics - attendance, speed, compliance - are often irrelevant or harmful in neurodivergent employment planning. Instead, observe and track:

Area of Growth	What it looks like
Initiation	Increased ability to start tasks, with or without prompts
Self-advocacy	Requesting support, expressing needs, setting limits
Emotional recovery	Using RAR or P.A.U.S.E. after distress
Engagement	Willingness to show up, even in low-energy states

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Relational trust	Signs of openness, reduced masking, shared humour
Confidence shifts	More risk-taking, flexibility, or experimentation
Daily routines	Sleep, waking, and morning routines that make a job possible

Best Practice:
- Use narrative-based tracking (observation notes, journals, check-ins) rather than fixed checklists
- Evaluate progress over perfection
- Include self-assessment using the Stoplight System and RAR reflections
- Sustainability is the primary metric, not volume of applications

2. Adjusting Support Over Time

Support should never be one and done. As individuals grow, too much support can become a barrier, while too little leads to burnout or isolation. Adjustments should be co-created, flexible, and based on regulation, not arbitrary timelines.

> If a young person who was doing well starts to struggle, this is NOT regression. Use RAR to explore what has changed, and adjust the plan.

Example scenarios: (1) a participant begins refusing tasks they used to do well; (2) a participant who was confident in group settings begins withdrawing; (3) a participant who managed transitions well suddenly struggles.

You notice this...	Try this...
Goals are never started	Cut the goal in half. Add more support.
Person avoids planning sessions	Reduce expectations. Focus on effort.
Self-criticism increases	Reinforce strengths. Make goals smaller.
Previously confident person withdraws	Reflect on changes in environment or relationships

What does good fit support look like? It is not a one-time guess. It means talking openly and working together to figure out what actually helps - and adjusting as things change.

Key Strategies → fade prompts intentionally, check for masking, rebuilding plans using RAR

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Example:

A participant begins refusing tasks they used to do well. (e.g. confident, managing transitions, handling feedback).

Rather than labeling this as regression:

- Use Reflect to explore internal or external stress
- Align with new needs (e.g., more choice, schedule change, different mentor)
- Restore with a plan that matches their current nervous system capacity

3. Building Long-Term Sustainability

Many employment programs end with the job placement. This approach promotes relational continuity and adaptive planning that lasts beyond the initial support. Sustainability means the individual knows how to request changes, the environment is prepared to respond to neurodivergent needs, mentors understand the person, not just their task list, and regulation tools are internalized or accessible.

Planning for Sustainability

- ☐ Find built-in workplace buddies. Pair the person with helpful coworkers, like a peer who recently went through onboarding, who can explain unwritten rules, help problem-solve, or offer a steady presence.
- ☐ Schedule regular check-ins. Meet every few months to ask three simple questions: "What's working? What's not? What's next?"
- ☐ Have a reset plan ready (Reconnection & Repair / NAR). Agree ahead of time on calm, judgment-free steps to reconnect after a tough day, misunderstanding, shutdown, or burnout.

Integrated Tools

- Growth Reflection Tracker: Measures observable and felt shifts over time
- PEP Adjustment Log: To track changes in goals, environment, or support needs
- Stoplight Progress Map: Visual tool for individuals to rate readiness, confidence, and emotional states over time
- RAR Check-In Sheet: Regular evaluation tool for individual and facilitator reflection

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4. Pre and Post Evaluation Template

Pre-Evaluation

Name: _____ Date: _____

Employment Goal:	
Strengths:	
Challenges:	
Key areas for improvement:	

Rate from 1 (not confident) to 5 (very confident):

Communication: ____ Teamwork: ____ Time Management: ____ Problem-Solving: ____

Resume Writing: ____ Job Applications: ____ Interviewing Skills: ____

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Post-Evaluation

Name: _____ Date: _____

Progress on employment goal:	
Achievements:	
Areas still needing improvement:	

Rate from 1 (not confident) to 5 (very confident):

Communication: ____ Teamwork: ____ Time Management: ____ Problem-Solving: ____

Resume Writing: ____ Job Applications: ____ Interviewing Skills: ____

What further support does the young person need?

_____

_____

Next steps in their employment journey:

_____

_____

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Closing Reflection for Staff

Inclusive employment is not about lowering expectations.
It is about aligning expectations with nervous systems, strengths, and sustainable pacing.
Safety comes before productivity.
Clarity replaces assumption.
Autonomy replaces control.
Repair replaces punishment.
Interdependence replaces isolation.
When environments shift, performance follows.
The goal is not compliance. The goal is capacity, dignity, and long-term wellbeing.

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Master Class 1: Understanding Dissociation and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)

Before you read: This section covers topics that can be heavy, including trauma. Take breaks as you need. If something connects to your own experience, it is okay to step away and talk with someone you trust. This material helps you recognize and respond with care. It is not for diagnosing.

Developed for Heartwood, Winnipeg. This module is for awareness, clinical education purposes and safety planning only. Assessment, diagnosis and treatment belong to qualified mental health professionals. This section is intended for staff who may work with individuals who have a history of trauma-related dissociation.

DISSOCIATION AND DID AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

Dissociation is a normal protective response, not a character flaw. It is learned and can gradually lessen with safety.

Prevalence estimates DID affects approximately 1-3% of people. Diagnosis is often delayed 6-12 years.

All parts have protective intent. Never pit parts against each other.

Recognize: blank staring, voice/posture shifts, referring to self in third person, temporal disorientation, abrupt emotional changes

Language: use the person's own words. Invite, never demand. Match tone to the part present.

Switching is not an emergency. Stay calm, re-orient, do not rush.

Phase 1 (Safety and Stabilization) is where most people spend extended time. Never rush to trauma processing.

Assess safety separately for each part. Risk levels differ. Protector and caretaker parts can help stabilize in crisis.

Vicarious trauma is real. Supervision is not optional.

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

None of us can be experts in everything. And every one of us is good at something.

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This module is not about becoming a specialist in dissociation. It is about having enough awareness to recognize what you might be seeing, respond in a way that does not cause harm, and know when and how to bring in additional support.

The most important thing you bring is your steady, consistent presence.

What Is Dissociation?

Dissociation is a normal response to overwhelming experiences. When being present feels dangerous, the brain learns to go somewhere else to survive. It is not a character flaw or a choice. It is a protection strategy.

Dissociation is learned over time, which means it can also be gradually unlearned as safety increases. The goal of support is to expand the person's window of tolerance, not to eliminate dissociation. You cannot push someone out of it. You can only make the present moment feel safe enough that it becomes less necessary.

Dissociation exists on a spectrum. On the mild end is everyday daydreaming. In the middle is OSDD (Other Specified Dissociative Disorder). On the severe end is DID, which involves full structural dissociation.

The goal is not to eliminate dissociation. It is to help the person feel safe enough that dissociation is needed less over time.

Connecting to the Window of Tolerance

- Hyperarousal (Fight / Flight): Racing heart, agitation, overwhelm, hypervigilance.
- Window of Tolerance (Safe & Grounded): Able to focus, communicate, learn, and complete tasks on shift.
- Hypoarousal (Freeze / Shutdown): Numbness, brain fog, zoning out, and dissociation.
- Our front-line role: Notice when someone dips into hypoarousal and use calm presence and environmental adjustments to help them feel safe again.

DID: Key Facts

- ☐ DID involves two or more distinct personality states that recurrently take control (DSM-5)
- ☐ Prevalence estimates vary across studies, with some research suggesting 1–3% of people have DID, and rates are higher in trauma-exposed populations
- ☐ Parts differ in identity, emotions, memory, and behaviour
- ☐ Memory gaps between parts are common. A person may not know what another part disclosed.
- ☐ Average delay to diagnosis is 6-12 years, with frequent prior misdiagnoses
- ☐ DID is highly co-occurring with PTSD, depression, self-harm, and somatic symptoms

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Recognizing Dissociation

What you might see	What it may mean
Blank staring or glazed gaze	Person may be dissociating
Sudden voice, posture, or language shift	A different part may be present
Refers to self in third person	Another part may be speaking
Temporal disorientation	Person may not know the date or location
Memory gaps for what was just said	Dissociative amnesia between states
Abrupt emotional flatness or escalation	Part shift occurring

Dissociation Types

Everyday	Mild-Moderate	Significant	OSDD/Partial	DID
Daydreaming, zoning out, flow states	Stress-related, brief derealization/ depersonalization	Trauma-linked, frequent, functionally impairing	Alter-like states, less amnesic barriers	Distinct identity states, amnesia
E.g. Getting lost in a good book or movie	E.g. Zoning out during a stressful conflict	E.g. Feeling like you are watching yourself from outside your body	E.g. Feeling shifts in identity while retaining memory of what happens.	E.g. Switching between distinct self-states from severe childhood trauma

Language That Builds Safety

Follow the person's own language. If they say 'parts,' 'voices,' 'others inside,' or something else entirely, use their words. Invite, never demand. Match your tone to the part that is present: calm, slow, accessible.

- ☐ Use the person's own words for their experience
- ☐ Invite, never demand: 'Is there a part who would like to join us?'
- ☐ Match your tone to the part that is present: calm, slow, accessible
- ☐ Never pit parts against each other. All parts have protective intent.

> **Helpful phrases:**
>
> *"Who am I speaking with right now?"*
>
> *"I am talking to everyone who can hear me."*
>
> *"Is there someone else here who needs some space?"*

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> *"It sounds like part of you steps away when things feel overwhelming. Does that fit?"*
>
> *"This was your mind's way of protecting you. You are not broken. This is a response, not a flaw."*

Grounding and Stabilization

Practice grounding tools when calm, not only in crisis. Grounding is most effective when it is already familiar.

- ☐ 5-4-3-2-1 sensory: name 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste
- ☐ Physical orientation: feet on floor, back against chair, feel body weight
- ☐ Temperature: hold something cold or warm, slow breath over hands
- ☐ Safe place visualization, installed early in the relationship
- ☐ Container exercise: set aside hard things between sessions

Environmental Adjustments

- Bridge memory gaps. Use written task cards, visual schedules, or shared shift logs instead of relying solely on memory.
- Keep routines predictable. Give advance notice before changing tasks, workspaces, or supervisors.
- Reduce sensory overload. Offer noise-reducing headphones, softer lighting, or a pre-arranged quiet break area.
- Start shifts simply. Review the top two priorities together rather than giving a long list of verbal instructions at once.

Meeting the Person in the Moment

When you notice someone drifting or disconnecting, use warm, grounded language. There is no rush.

> **When you notice someone drifting:**
>
> *"I notice you might have drifted a little just now. That is okay. Let's slow down together."*
>
> *"You do not have to say anything right now. Just feel your feet on the floor, and I am right here."*

> **Gently naming what you see:**
>
> *"It looks like part of you might have needed to step back for a moment. That makes a lot of sense."*
>
> *"Sometimes when things feel overwhelming, our mind goes somewhere else. It is a way of protecting ourselves. I want you to know that is okay here."*

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Inviting them back, without pressure:

"Whenever you are ready to come back, I am here. There is no rush."

"Can you feel where your body is touching the chair? Just notice that for a moment."

After they return:

"Welcome back. We do not have to go back to what we were talking about."

"How are you doing right now? Not before. Just right now, at this moment."

"Is there one thing in this room that feels okay to look at? Just rest your eyes there for a second."

Ready-to-Use Language: Additional Scripts

These phrases can be used directly, adapted to fit your voice and the person's language.

Orienting: Who Is Present?

Use at session start, or any time you notice a shift in voice, posture, or presence:

"Who am I speaking with right now?"

Speaking to the Whole System

Use when you are unsure which part is present — includes all parts listening internally:

"I am talking to everyone who can hear me."

Noticing a Shift

Warm and non-alarming. Always follow with genuine waiting. Do not rush to fill the silence:

"I notice you seem a little different right now. Is there someone else here who needs some space?"

Naming and Normalizing Dissociation

Introducing the concept:

"It sounds like part of you steps away when things feel overwhelming. Does that fit?"

Follow the person's own language.

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Normalizing the experience:

"This was your mind's way of protecting you. It worked. You are not broken. This is a response, not a flaw."

Offer slowly. Pause and allow it to land before moving on.

Explaining the spectrum:

"Dissociation happens on a wide spectrum. A lot of people experience something like this. What you are describing is something your brain learned to do to survive."

Grounding and Returning to Safety

Re-orienting after a switch:

"Hi. I am glad you are here. I am [your name]. We are in my office in [location], and you are safe."

Slow, steady, warm. Pause between each phrase. Let it register before continuing.

Slowing the session:

"Let's slow down for a moment. You do not have to say anything. Just feel your feet on the floor."

Use when you notice dissociation escalating. Silence is okay. Presence is the intervention.

Checking in:

"Are you still with me? It is okay if part of you needs to step back."

Non-shaming, open. Signals safety to the whole system regardless of who is present.

Inviting Parts

Inviting a part into session:

"Is there a part who might like to join us today?"

Never a demand. A genuine invitation with space to decline, and genuine patience if the answer is no.

Honouring protective parts:

"It sounds like this part has been working really hard to keep you safe. I am wondering what it needs to feel safe enough to rest a little."

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> *For persecutory or protective parts. Lead with curiosity. Never confrontation or dismissal.*

> **Closing a session:**
>
> *"Before we finish today, I would like to check in with everyone inside. Is there anything that needs to be said, or set aside, before you head out?"*
>
> *Ensures no vulnerable part is activated at departure. A critical step. Do not skip it.*

When Switching Happens

Stay calm. Switching is not an emergency.
Re-orient: "Hi, I am [name]. We are in my office. You are safe."
Slow down. Do not rush. Let the transition settle.
No touch without explicit consent.
If a child part is present: use accessible language. Do not play along as though they are a child.
Before ending the session: ensure a functional adult part is present.

Phase-Based Support: The Gold Standard

This describes clinical treatment so staff understand the path a person may be on. Frontline staff support Phase 1 by offering safety and predictability. Trauma processing belongs to qualified therapists.

Phase	What it involves
Phase 1: Safety and Stabilization	Alliance building, psychoeducation, coping skills, daily functioning. Most people spend extended time here.
Phase 2: Trauma Processing	Only when stable functioning and internal cooperation are established. Never rush to this phase.
Phase 3: Integration	Grieving losses, identity consolidation, building life beyond trauma. Goal: co-consciousness, not elimination of parts.

Workplace Safety & When to Escalate

Use a pre-agreed support plan. Know the person's preferred quiet space, grounding tools, and emergency contact before hard moments.

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Stay within your role. Your job is calm presence and environmental support, not assessment or trauma processing.
Protect privacy. Never disclose someone's experience of dissociation to co-workers; frame needs around sensory breaks or written instructions.
When to escalate: Loop in a supervisor immediately if disorientation /unsafe to leave, or expresses thoughts of self-harm.

Staff and Team Considerations

- ☐ Vicarious trauma risk is real. Supervision is not optional.
- ☐ Maintain consistent structure: same time, room, and approach.
- ☐ Build a calm wind-down before the person leaves, with time for grounding and orienting.
- ☐ One primary support person. Multiple relationships can destabilize the system.
- ☐ All team members, including administrative staff, need basic DID awareness.

Ready-to-Use Scripts: Honouring Parts & Safe Closing

- Honouring protective parts: *"It sounds like part of you has been working really hard to keep you safe today. What would help you feel steady right now?"*
- Normalizing protection: *"Checking out is your mind's way of protecting you when things get loud or overwhelming. That is okay here."*
- Closing a shift safely: *"Before you head out today, let's take a quick breath and review what is lined up for your next shift so nothing gets lost."*

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Master Class 2: Brain Injury Awareness for Front-Line Staff

Before you read: This section covers topics that can be heavy, including trauma. Take breaks as you need. If something connects to your own experience, it is okay to step away and talk with someone you trust. This material helps you recognize and respond with care. It is not for diagnosing.

BRAIN INJURY AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

Many young people in care or employment programs have a history of brain injury that was never formally identified

Brain injury can look exactly like behaviour - unmotivated, reactive, forgetful, or struggling to follow instructions

Red flags requiring immediate medical attention: loss of consciousness, seizures, weakness or numbness, slurred speech, worsening headache, increasing drowsiness

Best practices: one instruction at a time, written when possible, reduce cognitive and sensory load, build for fatigue

Build behaviour plans around antecedents (what comes before), not just reactions

Involve family and support people early - they offer context and continuity

The relationship is the therapeutic tool - consistent, familiar staff reduce demand on an already-working nervous system

Variability in performance is a feature of brain injury, not inconsistency - adjust without judgment

Measure participation and quality of life, not just task completion

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

This section provides plain-language guidance on supporting someone with a brain injury. It is not a medical document. Always follow your organization's protocols and refer to medical professionals when needed.

Many young people in care or employment programs have a history of brain injury that was never formally identified. When we understand how brain injury affects the nervous system, we can stop misreading its effects as behaviour problems.

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Adults with brain injury do best with consistent, coordinated support, tailored communication, and behaviour plans built around understanding what triggers are present.
The strongest evidence points to: starting rehabilitation once the person is medically stable, keeping support steady and meaningful, and continuing follow-up in the community after discharge.

What Is a Brain Injury?

A brain injury happens when the brain is damaged by a blow, jolt, or penetrating injury. Brain injuries range from mild (concussion) to severe. Acquired brain injury can also result from stroke, illness, or oxygen deprivation.

Brain injuries affect different people in different ways. No two injuries are alike. What you observe in the person in front of you matters more than any general rule.

Scaffolding = Offering temporary, adaptable support (like a visual guide, prompt, or doing the first step together) so a person can succeed on their own terms, without taking over the task for them.

Supporting Traumatic Brain Injury on Shift

- **An invisible injury.** A person may appear fine while managing hidden challenges with memory, focus, or processing speed.
- **Trauma & TBI often overlap.** Past trauma increases the risk of undiagnosed concussions. Brain fog, zoning out, and sudden fatigue look similar across both.
- **Externalize memory.** Use written task cards, visual guides, and shift logs instead of relying on verbal instructions.
- **Pace the brain**. Give one instruction at a time, allow extra seconds to respond, and build in short sensory breaks before fatigue hits.
- **Support without a diagnosis.** If you suspect a secondary TBI, offer written guides and quieter spaces right away.
- **Know when to loop in support.** Involve a supervisor if memory gaps or dizziness affect safety, or share community resources like the Manitoba Brain Injury Association with permission.

Red Flags: Seek Medical Help Right Away

Loss of consciousness, even briefly
Seizures
Weakness or numbness in arms or legs
Slurred speech
Increasing drowsiness

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A headache that gets worse over time, not better
Vomiting that will not stop
Confusion that is getting worse

Mild Brain Injury (Concussion): What to Expect

Concussion is the most common type of brain injury. Symptoms can affect the whole person.

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional and Behavioural
Headache, dizziness	Trouble concentrating	Irritability
Light or noise sensitivity	Memory gaps	Anxiety or mood swings
Sleep changes	Feeling slowed down	Low frustration tolerance
Fatigue	Processing difficulties	Emotional flooding

After a Mild Injury: What Staff Can Do
Monitor for red flags and changes in symptoms.
Follow the return-to-activity plan from the person's health care provider.
If the person takes blood thinners, seek medical care right away, even after a minor bump to the head.
If mild symptoms do not improve in two to four weeks, refer to a professional.

When It Is More Than a Concussion: Moderate and Severe TBI

When injury is moderate or severe, the priorities shift completely. This is a medical emergency. Your role is to get the person to care, not to manage the situation yourself.

Call emergency services immediately if you observe any red flag signs.
Keep the person still and calm. Do not move the head or neck unless there is immediate danger.
If the person is unconscious: check for breathing. Do not leave them alone.
Do not give food, water, or medication while waiting for help.

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Tell emergency responders: when the injury happened, what happened, whether the person lost consciousness, and any medications they take.

How Brain Injury Can Look Like Behaviour

A young person with an undiagnosed or misunderstood brain injury may appear to be unmotivated, refusing tasks, emotionally reactive, or struggling to follow instructions. These may be neurological effects of the injury, not choices.

What you might see	What may actually be happening
Forgetting instructions repeatedly	Working memory impairment
Seeming unmotivated or flat	Fatigue or processing slowdowns
Irritability or emotional outbursts	Reduced impulse control from frontal lobe injury
Difficulty starting or finishing tasks	Executive functioning impairment
Confused or slowed responses	Processing speed differences
Distress in noisy environments	Heightened sensory sensitivity

Always Asking: could this behaviour have a neurological explanation? If in doubt, document what you are seeing and bring it to your supervisor or a medical professional.

Best Practices for Supporting Someone with a Brain Injury

The communication research in this area is unusually clear. Staff who use a collaborative, acknowledging, and supportive approach make interactions easier. Context-sensitive support works better than narrowly focused impairment-based approaches.

Keep Language Simple and Confirm Understanding

- ☐ Give one instruction at a time
- ☐ Write instructions down when possible
- ☐ Ask the person to repeat back in their own words
- ☐ Avoid long or abstract explanations
- ☐ Pause and check in frequently

Reduce Cognitive and Sensory Load

- ☐ Quieter spaces reduce overwhelm
- ☐ Reduce background noise and visual clutter when possible
- ☐ Allow extra time for processing. Do not mistake slowness for disengagement.
- ☐ Break tasks into very small steps
- ☐ Avoid scheduling demanding tasks when the person is fatigued

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Understand and Plan Around Triggers

Effective behaviour support after brain injury is built around antecedents, what comes before a difficult moment, not just responses to it. The Canadian Clinical Practice Guideline for Rehabilitation of Adults with Moderate to Severe TBI (MacKenzie et al., 2024) includes 21 recommendations for managing post-TBI behavioural difficulties, and points to positive behaviour support as the framework of choice.

Asking: What tends to happen before this person becomes distressed?
Track patterns: time of day, tasks, noise levels, transitions, interactions.
Build the environment to reduce antecedents where possible.
Use reinforcement and encouragement, not consequences/correction, as the primary tool.

Set Concrete, Functional Goals

- ☐ Focus on what the person needs to do in daily life, not abstract skill building
- ☐ Goals should be specific, achievable, and meaningful to the person
- ☐ Measure participation and quality of life, not just task completion
- ☐ Celebrate small, real progress

Involve Family and Support People Early

Research consistently shows that involving family and caregivers improves outcomes after brain injury (Turner-Stokes et al., 2015). Family members can help implement support plans, provide context about what works, and offer continuity across settings.

Train family members and support people, not just clinical staff.
Share information about the person's patterns, triggers, and strategies in plain language.
Support people need support too. Caregiver education and respite matter.

Build for Fatigue

- ☐ Fatigue after brain injury is real and often invisible
- ☐ Plan demanding tasks earlier in the day or shift when energy is higher
- ☐ Build in rest breaks as a standard part of the plan, not an exception
- ☐ Reduce expectations on high-fatigue days without judgment

Approach the Relationship as a Therapeutic Tool

Occupational therapy guidelines support goal-focused interventions, education, and caregiver involvement (Wheeler and Acord-Vira, 2016). The quality of the relationship between the person and

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their support staff consistently shapes outcomes. Consistent, familiar staff reduce demand on a nervous system that may already be working harder than it looks.

> **What this looks like in practice:**
>
> *Greet the person the same way each time. Familiarity is regulating.*
>
> *Follow their lead in pacing. Rushing increases confusion and distress.*
>
> *Name what you are about to do before doing it.*
>
> *Repair when things go wrong. Do not leave tension unaddressed.*

Telerehabilitation and Access

When in-person support is hard to reach, telerehabilitation may be a reasonable access route. Research suggests it can improve cognitive function and quality of life for people with TBI (Betts et al., 2018). If the person you support has limited access to in-person services, explore remote options.

Measuring What Matters

Research emphasizes participation and community integration as the meaningful outcomes after brain injury, not just impairment reduction (Brasure et al., 2013). Ask not only 'Can they do the task?' but 'Are they participating in their community? Are they living a life that feels meaningful to them?'

What Not to Do

Do not assume a behaviour is intentional until you have considered neurological causes.
Do not expect the same performance every day. Variability is a feature of brain injury, not inconsistency.
Do not overload with information or decisions at once.

A Note on Expertise

You do not need to be a brain injury specialist. You need to be consistent, curious, and willing to adjust. The research points clearly toward relationships, communication, and structure as the tools that make the biggest difference in everyday support.

Every person with a brain injury is an individual. Learn about this specific person.
What works today may not work tomorrow. Stay flexible.
When in doubt, slow down, simplify, and ask.

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Master Class 3: Building Independence in Young Adults with Autism

INDEPENDENCE AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

Young adults with autism can develop greater independence with the right support

Most effective methods: video modeling, video self-modeling, video prompting, behavioral prompting, activity schedules, social skills groups, cognitive aid training

Technology is the most common delivery tool

There is no single best practice — the best method depends on the individual

Fading: gradually step back as the young person steps forward

Plan explicitly for generalization (multiple settings) and maintenance (revisit skills after stress)

Fading too quickly causes frustration. Fading too slowly creates learned helplessness.

Each module covers one topic area. You do not have to go in order or read it all at once. Start with the module that is most useful to you right now.

Based on a systematic review of the evidence. Written in plain language for front-line staff.

What the Research Shows

Research shows that young adults with autism can develop greater independence with the right support. The most effective methods are:

Method	What it involves
Video Modeling	Watching a video of someone else doing the skill, then practicing
Video Self-Modeling	Watching a video of yourself doing the skill successfully
Video Prompting	Watching step-by-step video instructions while doing the task
Behavioral Prompting	Staff provides verbal, visual, or physical prompts to guide the task
Activity Schedules	Visual or written sequences of tasks to follow independently
Social Skills Groups	Structured group practice of social and workplace skills
Cognitive Aid Training	Using checklists, apps, or external tools to support memory and organization

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Technology is the most common delivery tool.
Prompting and video modeling are the most frequently supported methods.
There is no single best practice. The best method depends on the individual.
Research gaps remain around skill generalization, maintenance, and long-term outcomes.

What This Means for Your Work

- ☐ Choose methods that match the person's learning style and preferences
- ☐ Use video when possible. It is concrete, repeatable, and non-judgmental.
- ☐ Use visual activity schedules to reduce reliance on staff prompting over time
- ☐ Fade prompts gradually. The goal is independence, not dependence on you.
- ☐ Plan explicitly for generalization: practice the skill in multiple settings
- ☐ Plan explicitly for maintenance: revisit skills over time, especially after stress

Staff Role in Building Independence

Your role is to gradually step back as the young person steps forward. This is called fading.

Stage	What staff does
Full support	Model the skill. Do it together step by step.
Partial support	Give verbal or visual prompts. Let them do most of the work.
Minimal support	Check in after the fact. Prompt only if stuck.
Independence	Monitor from a distance. Celebrate success.

Making Skills Stick

- Plan for generalization. Practice the skill across multiple rooms, shifts, or supervisors rather than just one training space.
- Plan for maintenance. Revisit and refresh skills over time, especially after stressful events, schedule changes, or time off.
- Use video as a judgment-free anchor. Video modeling and video self-modeling let learners review steps at their own pace without feeling watched.

Fading support too quickly can cause frustration. Fading too slowly can create learned helplessness. Check in often and adjust based on how the person is actually doing

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Master Class 4: Build Trusting Relationships

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS AT A GLANCE — Quick Reference for Staff

Young people build trust with staff who genuinely invest time, show care and respect, make them feel valued, are available, are non-judgmental, know their background, and are competent and proactive

Three core components: trust and confidentiality, supportive rapport, collaborative approaches

Trust develops through time spent together, consistency over time, and repair after rupture

Staff need sufficient time with young people - this is the mechanism through which everything else works

High staff turnover, task-focused interactions, power imbalances, and inconsistency all break trust

The relationship is the intervention

Based on qualitative research with young people in care. Their voices shaped these findings.

What Young People Say They Need

Research consistently shows that young people in care or supported employment build trust with staff who demonstrate certain qualities. The list below comes directly from their words.

What they say builds trust	What this looks like in practice
Staff genuinely invest their time	Checking in without an agenda. Just being present.
Staff show care and respect	Remembering things that matter to them. Using their name.
Staff make them feel valued	Celebrating effort. Expressing genuine belief in them.
Staff are available when needed	Following through. Showing up consistently.
Staff are non-judgmental	Responding to hard moments with curiosity, not criticism.
Staff know their background	Learning what matters to them. Not starting from zero every time.
Staff are competent and proactive	Knowing what they are doing. Taking initiative to help.

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The Three Core Components of a Trusting Relationship

1. Trust and confidentiality: Young people need to know that what they share is safe.
2. Supportive rapport: The relationship must feel warm, genuine, and consistent.
3. Collaborative approaches: Young people need to be involved in decisions about their own lives.

What Builds Trust in Practice

- Invest genuine time. Check in without an agenda and be fully present.
- Show care and respect. Use their name and remember what matters to them.
- Make them feel valued. Celebrate effort and express belief in their strengths.
- Be reliable. Show up consistently and follow through on promises.
- Stay non-judgmental. Respond to hard moments with curiosity, not criticism.
- Know their context. Remember their preferences so they never start from zero.
- Be prepared and proactive. Know your role and offer practical help early.

Building Trust When the Topic Is Employment

Employment can feel high-pressure. It is tied to money, independence, and a sense of worth. Young people may fear failing or disappointing you.

How to build trust here:

- Start with strengths before barriers.
- Separate the person from the outcome: “Whether or not you get this job, I am in your corner.”
- Be honest about what you can and cannot promise.
- Follow through on small things.
- Check in after setbacks

Conversation starters: “What would make this conversation easier?” / “What feels like the most pressure right now?”

Time Is the Tool

Trust develops through time spent together outside formal sessions, consistency over time, and repair after rupture. Coming back after a hard moment and reconnecting is one of the most powerful things you can do.

Staff need sufficient time with young people to develop meaningful relationships. This is not a luxury. It is the mechanism through which everything else works.

People do not learn from someone they do not trust. The relationship is the intervention.

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What Gets in the Way

- ☐ High staff turnover breaks trust and forces young people to start over repeatedly
- ☐ Overly task-focused interactions leave little room for genuine connection
- ☐ Power imbalances can prevent young people from expressing their real needs
- ☐ Inconsistency in tone, rules, or follow-through erodes trust over time

Staff Self-Reflection

Ask yourself regularly:

- ☐ Have I built relational safety with this young person before asking them to perform?
- ☐ Am I solving a behaviour or understanding a person?
- ☐ Have I reduced demands before increasing expectations?
- ☐ Am I honouring their autonomy?
- ☐ What assumptions do I hold about their readiness or motivation?
- ☐ Can I sit with discomfort and uncertainty without escalating?

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- ☐ Kids Help Phone - Call: 1-800-668-6868 - Text CONNECT to 686868 - www.kidshelpphone.ca
- ☐ The Link Youth Crisis Line (Winnipeg, 21 and under, 24/7): 204-949-4777 or 1-888-383-2776
- ☐ Manitoba Suicide Prevention and Support Line (24/7): 1-877-435-7170
- ☐ Hope for Wellness Help Line (First Nations and Inuit, 24/7): 1-855-242-3310
- ☐ In an emergency, call 911.

Trauma-Informed. Evidence-Based. Strengths-Focused.

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About the Lead Author

Angela Taylor, PhD Candidate, MA, PBDE
Founder & CEO, Supporting Community Together

Angela is a multiply neurodivergent therapist, educator, artist, author, and the Founder and CEO of **Supporting Community Together (SCT)**, a Winnipeg-based consultancy grounded on Treaty 1 Territory. Bringing nearly **25 years of leadership** across mental health, social services, and disability inclusion, Angela partners with organizations, front-line teams, educators, and employers to transform systems into neuro-affirming, trauma-informed, and genuinely accessible spaces.

Angela's approach is rooted in the belief that effective support begins where clinical research meets lived reality. As a person living with **AuDHD (Autism and ADHD), PTSD, and learning disabilities**, as well as a parent to six children, Angela brings deep personal insight to the intersection of complex neurobiology, nervous system regulation, and workplace accessibility. Having navigated systems that often misinterpret neurodivergent and trauma responses, and having seen firsthand how meaningful scaffolding changes lives, she teaches practical, dignity-centred strategies that honour how every brain works.

Academically, Angela holds a BA in Psychology, a Post-Baccalaureate Diploma in Education (focusing on inclusion and counselling), and a MA in Disability Studies. She is currently completing her **PhD in Education at the University of Manitoba**, where her doctoral research focuses on defining effective, affirming care as articulated by neurodivergent people themselves. Prior to founding Supporting Community Together, she founded and led the national charity Inspire Community Outreach for over a decade, building community-led programming for families and youth with diverse neurological and mental health needs. Through this manual and training series, Angela invites front-line workers, supervisors, and learners to replace compliance checklists with curiosity, cultural humility, and relational safety, building workplaces where everyone can thrive on their own terms.

About the Co-Author

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Lauren is a Registered Nurse, public health specialist, and community leader who brings clinical calm, trauma-informed care, and systems-level thinking to workplace accessibility. Collaborating with **Supporting Community Together**, Lauren translates complex clinical and public health concepts into clear, practical tools that front-line staff, job coaches, and employers can use with confidence on shift.

From Lauren's clinical nursing experience in emergency departments alongside health emergency management and disaster response, she understands firsthand how stress, sensory overload, and trauma affect both the nervous system and everyday functioning. Having previously served as Special Projects Director for Inspire Community Outreach, Lauren has dedicated years to supporting youth, families, and adults with neurological differences and mental health needs, ensuring support systems remain safe, accessible, and deeply respectful of lived experience.

Academically, she holds a BA in Public Health and Policy, a BSc in Nursing (BScN) from the University of British Columbia, and an **MSc in Public Health Promotion and Disease Prevention** from the Karolinska Institute. Her research and project management background spans mental health, healthcare services, and equitable community programming. Through this manual/training series, she is committed to helping non-clinical teams recognize protective stress responses without fear, maintain clear boundaries, and build steady, compassionate workplaces where every person is met with dignity.

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Organization & Funding Acknowledgment Block

About Supporting Community Together (SCT)

Supporting Community Together is a Winnipeg-based consultancy and training organization dedicated to bridging lived neurodivergent expertise with practical, evidence-informed practice. Partnering with employers, educators, healthcare teams, and community organizations across Manitoba and beyond, SCT creates accessible resources, workshops, and systems-level strategies rooted in Disability Pride, cultural humility, and trauma-informed care.

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