ERC WHITE PAPER

Championing neurodiversity and Emotional Intelligence in the workplace

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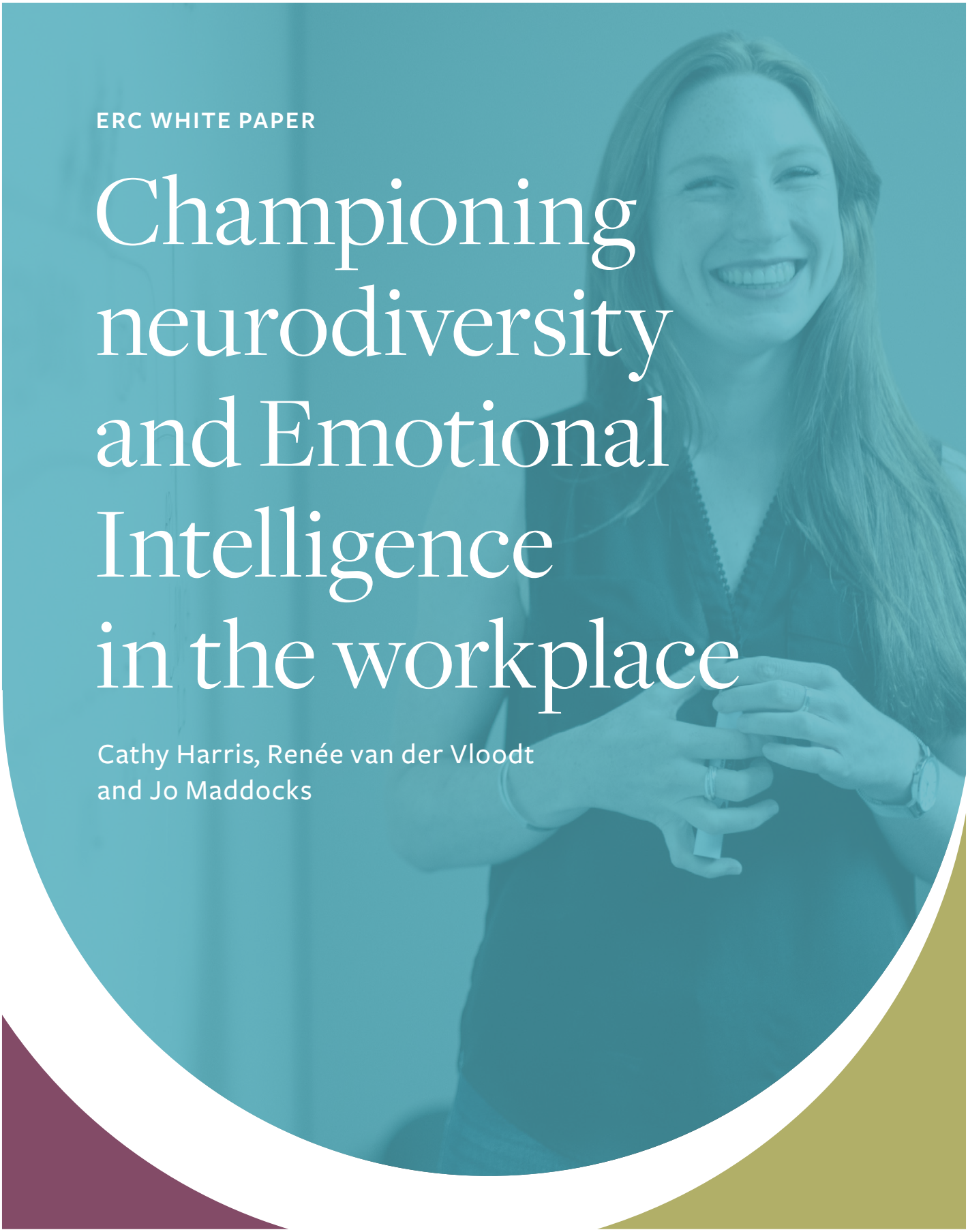

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“What is neurodiversity, and why is an understanding of how to nurture the broad spectrum of talents associated with non-typical thinking styles, so crucial for organisational effectiveness?”

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Neurodiversity is a term that many of us in the corporate world are becoming familiar with. But what is neurodiversity, and why is an understanding of how to nurture the broad spectrum of talents associated with non-typical thinking styles, so crucial for organisational effectiveness? In this paper, we aim to shed light on these questions, by bringing together two different, but complementary perspectives on supporting the development of those who fall within this grouping.

Renée van der Vloodt and **Cathy Harris** of **Executive Resilience Coaching (ERC)** describe the challenges neuro-divergent employees may face in organisational life and how these can negatively impact on people's mental health. They highlight the importance of creating a workplace climate which allows those with different gifts to flourish and the cultivation of skills in emotional self-regulation and healthy coping strategies.

Jo Maddocks, Chief Psychologist at **PSI,** shares a case study on how an Emotional Intelligence-based development programme deployed within the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) sector, with a high representation of neurodivergent participants, resulted in significant improvements in participants' perceptions of their own personal and interpersonal intelligence and capabilities.

Valuing difference

Broadly speaking, neurodiversity is an umbrella term used to describe those of us who have brains and thinking styles which work in a slightly different way to the norm.

ACAS guidelines (2016)[1] on neurodiversity suggest that we all have distinctive ways of processing information, which lead us to be terrific in certain domains, and less effective in others. So, doesn't that make all of us, neurodivergent? Arguably, yes, when neurodiversity is used to describe the infinite range of human thinking styles. More specifically however, those of us who might be considered neurotypical, tend towards thinking, communicating, and behaving in ways which fall within the bounds of accepted social norms and conventional behaviours, to which many businesses attach not only a high value, but also assess and reward people against.

Let's pause to consider that civilisation would not have developed and advanced to the extraordinary degree and richness that we see today in countless expressions – in the arts, sciences, technology, spirituality, sports, commerce, communication, pioneering travel – without people whose talents and drive fall outside the parameters of 'normal'. Until about 50 years ago, we would likely have accommodated such 'eccentrics' in family, work or community settings, accepting them as part of the richer fabric of life. A modern tendency to medicalise the messiness and range of human functioning, means that today, neurodiversity describes those who are likely to have received a diagnosis of one of four principal conditions: Dyslexia, Autism (including Asperger's), ADHD, or Dyspraxia. There's an inherent risk of perceiving a diagnosis as evidence of deficiency. But the new neurodiversity paradigm turns this on its head. Once we can recognise specific patterns in capabilities and the patterns in difficulties that go hand-in-hand with these, we can help people to work to their strengths. In doing so, we reduce the risk of burnout that often follows when a person's potential is unrecognised, or their contributions marginalised.

Two sides of a coin

The capabilities of these out-of-the-box thinkers span a wide arc, ranging from data crunchers with a myopic eye for detail to big picture thinkers with an eye for pattern and connection. We can all bring to mind successful leaders with these qualities.

The spectrum includes extraordinary innovators in diverse fields and storytellers, able to inspire and inject meaning into the mundane. Who would not want such talent in their teams? Importantly however, the strengths of the neurodivergent can be accompanied by specific difficulties; in other words, two sides of the same coin.

For example, a highly sensitive perfectionist, able to tune into the feelings of others in a heartbeat, may take things too personally, hit emotional overload, and find themselves unable to make eye contact. Another, with the capacity to process vast amounts of complex data, may rapidly feel overwhelmed by too much talk, too many ideas or demands. A person able to lock their attention to a task and remain hyper-focused for hours on end, can present as disengaged and distractible when asked to pay attention to something they find meaningless. A passionate monologue which unwittingly halts the usual reciprocity of communication can serve to alienate others, whilst mystifying the speaker. The team member who presents as detached and lacking empathy, may be masking powerful feelings and struggling to work out how to engage with others. The highly articulate ideas-generator, able to 'think on their feet' may be unable to commit ideas to paper or keep on top of their inbox. It's not surprising that the maverick who feels out of sync with their colleagues may start to feel stressed or isolated. Procrastination (often confused with laziness), lack of organisation and the inability to prioritise, often manifest when people are struggling to cope.

Toxic environments

The workplace environment itself, can prove toxic to the neurodivergent. Open-plan offices, designed to foster collaborative working can be distracting and unproductive for the sound-sensitive who struggle to filter foreground from background noise, making following a single conversation very challenging (a cocktail party nightmare).

Perhaps most challenging is the ubiquitous performance management process, which in measuring employees against a set of generic, desired behaviours, sounds a death knell for the neurodivergent (not to mention the neurotypicals!). Many assessment tools are based on deficit models and are driven by the expectation that we need to be good at *everything* in order to land in the top-right quadrant of the talent matrix. These serve as a false proxy for competence. Value is attached to 'sameness' and this inherently devalues difference and diversity, leaving little room for, or overlooking, 'spiky' talent. Not untypically, those on the autistic spectrum who might struggle to pick up on social cues, prefer solitary working and find socialising at work stressful, can be rated as under-performing against behavioural competencies. Any performance measures which punish a minority for failing to 'intuit' the type of social engagement strategies which are unconscious and intuitive for the majority, or fail to respect individual preferences, are profoundly flawed.

Sadly, it's often the neurodivergent person who unwittingly serves as the modern-day 'canary in the coalmine', being the first to experience and signal the danger of practices that are potentially toxic. A failure to value and respect diversity in working-style preferences can have serious knock-on effects in terms of communication, relationships, and people's wellbeing. This extends to ***everyone*** in the workforce.

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A paradigm shift

Fortunately, guidelines published by both ACAS (2016)[1] and the CIPD (2018)[2] offer rich, detailed information designed to educate and create understanding about the symptoms, needs, and support mechanisms which may help those with a range of different conditions.

These herald a clarion call for the redesign of practices and habits that are likely to help everyone within the organisation. At ERC, here are a few we recommend:

- **Validate people's experience – their struggles and stresses – and acknowledge people's efforts and intentions.** Genuine respect and empathy calms everyone, as it fosters a sense of safety. A calmer brain will always be more intelligent, connected, communicative, and creative. Start by asking people what they need in order to be able to work at their best.
- **Slow down when communicating,** and check for understanding. Find out how an individual prefers to receive feedback – perhaps in writing first – to allow time for reflection and to manage their emotional response.
- **Encourage people to identify and articulate their strengths,** resources, and preferred learning styles. This can open up discussions about how to mobilise these effectively whilst managing time, energy, and organisational skills.
- **Allow people as much autonomy as possible, to find their own way of doing things.** This unlocks motivation. Clear targets are vital but handing over responsibility for how things are achieved can be very empowering.
- **Always keep in mind that for everyone, strengths and difficulties appear synchronously.** Critically, both employers and employees will benefit from acknowledging this and recognising that no one approach fits all.

We believe it's time for a paradigm shift in HR practice, one which focuses on the relationship between people's emotional state and their effectiveness. At ERC, our specialist solution-focused coaching (in both one-to-one or group settings) focuses on the emotional needs of the individuals. We have found that by targeting specific emotional issues such as developing the skills of self-awareness and attention-regulation, managing energy levels, finding ways to align work to personal values and addressing compulsive self-criticism, depressive moods, anxiety or panic episodes, we get better results. Ultimately, we're looking to help people find ways to get their individual needs met in a healthy way at work and home, enabling them to capitalise on, and not squander, their talents.

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Debunking stereotypes

A cautionary note: whilst diagnostic labels can be helpful in allowing the neurodivergent to validate and make sense of their preferences and experiences, they can also serve to stereotype and blindfold us.

In the August edition of *The Psychologist* (2019),[3] Eloise Stark writes eloquently about the widespread misunderstanding and misdiagnosis of autism in women, largely due to differences in female presentations. Diagnosed with autism at 27, she reports that like many autistic women, whilst struggling with some social difficulties, she has a strong appetite for friendships. Stark argues that social motivation in autistic girls may lead them to seek out experiences where they learn to mimic and practice those social skills instinctive to others, and to develop social cognition – thus 'camouflaging' their autistic traits. The pressure of *having* to do this, however, can take a heavy emotional toll – and whilst women typically become more adept at 'masking' than their male counterparts, it can prove exhausting for both genders. Stark also cites research from Bird and Viding (2014)[4] which challenges an ingrained perception that autistic people struggle to empathise. Writing in the same edition of *The Psychologist,*[5] Fergus Murray (a self-described socially skilled autist) further debunks stereotypical assumptions about autism and reminds us of the rich variation to be found at an individual level. In other words, if you've met one autistic person, you've met *one* autistic person.

An individualised approach

It follows then, that a blanket assumption that the neurodivergent population will benefit from training in Emotional Intelligence, serves to both stereotype and over-simplify.

At PSI, we find that 'EI' is often used as shorthand for having good 'people skills', which denies both the range and richness of the aptitudes, habits, and practices which sit beneath this umbrella term, all of which we believe can be developed. Our approach in workshop development is individualised, recognising that workforce training and coaching in the skills of Emotional Intelligence can reap benefits for both the neurotypical and neurodivergent when tailored to the context and specific needs of each participant.

Ultimately, our goal is to help people to leverage strengths, protect vulnerabilities, and unlock motivation to make small, but meaningful shifts in their daily practice.

For example, our sensitive perfectionist may benefit from learning to label and manage the expression of their feelings, and our analytical scientist may benefit from experimenting with ways of connecting with others, which feel appropriate and manageable.

A final thought. The fast-changing world we inhabit puts continued pressure on businesses to maintain their edge. With innovation a top priority, the importance of recognising, respecting, and leveraging diverse talents within the workforce has never been more important. The richer the diversity of thinking styles, the greater the contributions and the more extraordinary the results. Everyone wins.

How Emotional Intelligence can support neurodiversity: a case study

Emotional Intelligence (EI) was popularised in the 1990's by Daniel Goleman in his bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ.*[6] The premise of his argument being that cognitive intelligence will only take you so far, thereafter it is Emotional Intelligence or 'EI' that makes the biggest difference. This is often demonstrated by neurodiverse individuals working in the STEM sector (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) who have high cognitive intellect but may struggle with the emotional and social aspects of their work.[a]

The following case study provides an illustration of how EI may be improved for individuals working within the STEM sector.

Data was analysed on 324 individuals from a public sector organisation attending an EI self-development programme. Cohorts ran with between 10-18 participants per workshop and two facilitators. Participants were all working in STEM sector job roles and many were described as 'deep scientists'. The EI programme included a two-and-a-half day experiential workshop, followed up three months later by a one-day workshop to help consolidate their learning. Between these events participants completed a 21-day habit change activity and recorded their experience in a journal (later updated to an app). Participants were also invited to complete the *Emotional Intelligence Profile (EIP)*,[8] a self-report measure of their EI, at the start and end of the three-month programme. The EIP results were analysed to provide a benchmark of their progress between both completions, the results of which are summarised below.

Table 1: **Relative change in EIP scores pre and post an EI development programme with STEM sector employees**

LEVEL	EIP SCALE	% IMPROVEMENT* T1-T2	TIME 1	TIME 2
Attitude	Self Regard	+21%	🔴	🟡
	Regard for Others	+10%	🔴	🟢
Feeling	Self Awareness	+13%	🔴	🟡
	Awareness of Others	+13%	🔴	🔴
Behaviour: Self Management	Emotional Resilience	+14%	🔴	🔴
	Personal Power	+13%	🔴	🟡
	Goal Directedness	+15%	🔴	🟡
	Flexibility	+6%	🔴	🟡
	Authenticity	+10%	🔴	🟢
	Balanced Outlook	+8%	🔴	🟡
Behaviour: Relationship Management	Connecting with Others	+13%	🔴	🔴
	Trust	+6%	🔴	🟢
	Emotional Expression and Control	+11%	🔴	🔴
	Conflict Handling	+11%	🔴	🔴
	Interdependence	+7%	🔴	🔴
	Reflective Learning	+18%	🔴	🟡
Overall average		+12%	🔴	🟡

"% Improvement" shows the overall percentage difference in raw scores from Time 1 to Time 2 (three month gap)
Study sample N = 324 Comparison group N = 3564 middle managers
🔴 Below the comparison group 🟡 Same as comparison group 🟢 Above the comparison group
*Percentage changes are all significant at the p<0.01 level

a A study on half a million people found that individuals working in STEM careers scored significantly higher than non-STEM careers on the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ).[7]

Interpretation of the results

Table 1 shows the overall percentage improvement in the 16 scales measured by the EIP. As can be seen from these results, participants improved significantly in all aspects of EI, with an overall average improvement of 12%.

As indicated by the red markers, participants scored lower than the comparison group (middle managers) in all 16 aspects of EI on Time 1. This compares with Time 2 (post workshop) when they scored lower than the comparison group in only six areas and higher in three areas. The lower scores on Time 1 across all 16 EIP scales may reflect a generalised negative self-perception held within the STEM sector that pervades across all aspects of EI (i.e. lower **Self Regard**). Lower **Self Regard** may mean that individuals under-rate themselves in areas of EI that are potential strengths. A key benefit of the self-development programme was to help individuals recognise and utilise their likely strengths, which are indicated by the amber and green markers on Time 2.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, within the STEM sector, five of the six red markers on Time 2 were 'interpersonal' aspects of EI: **Awareness of Others, Connecting with others, Conflict Handling** (Passive), **Emotional Expression and Control** (being emotionally Over Controlled), and **Interdependence** (over Dependent on others). Three of the red markers, **Emotional Resilience, Conflict Handling,** and **Emotional Expression and Control** also relate to poor emotion management. This would suggest that STEM sector employees rate themselves lower in social and emotional aspects of EI. Despite these aspects of EI having red markers they did improve by an average of 12%, indicating EI is developable, even in those aspects of EI that some individuals (e.g. the neurodiverse) find particularly challenging.

It was encouraging to see that the STEM sector had green markers in three areas of EI on Time 2; **Regard for Others, Authenticity** and **Trust.** These scales indicate that STEM sector individuals have a positive attitude towards others, are trustworthy, and sincere. This is further endorsed by their higher score on **Regard for Others** (green) than **Self Regard** (amber), indicating they have a tendency towards self-criticism, and putting others ahead of themselves. This contrasts with their lower scores on many of the interpersonal scales, which suggests these scores are due to a lack of social skills rather than negative underlying attitudes towards others. Unfortunately, people are often judged by their interactions with others, so those with fewer social skills may automatically be perceived more negatively by others.

The remaining seven EIP scales improved from red on Time 1 to amber on Time 2. Some of these scale increases were particularly high, such as **Self Regard** (21%) and **Reflective Learning** (18%), indicating a strong improvement in wellbeing and self-development. The majority of these scale increases were in the area of Self Management such as **Personal Power, Goal Directedness,** and **Flexibility.** These scales demonstrate robust capacity for self-responsibility, delivering on objectives, and adapting to circumstances. Given that STEM sector individuals are often systematic thinkers (procedural, methodical, and detailed), it is perhaps surprising that **Flexibility** was amber rather than red. This may reflect a willingness to adapt to the needs of others driven by their higher **Regard for Others.**

The overall pattern from these results is that the STEM sector employees made significant improvements in all aspects of their EI. They still fell behind the comparison group (middle managers) on Relationship Management aspects of EI, but this is partly compensated for by their higher scores on Self Management. A closer inspection on some of the improvements in EI and how these were achieved on the programme is discussed within the following pages.

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Developing Emotional Intelligence

The programme was not designed specifically for neurodiversity but aimed at improving the interpersonal and emotional capabilities within the STEM sector.

In this case study, the biggest increase in EI scores by some margin (21%) was **Self Regard.** This is the primary aspect of EI and underpins all other EIP scales. It is of overriding importance that individuals who attend self-development programmes will ultimately feel more positive about themselves. This does not mean they ignore or are unaware of their development needs, but that they gain greater acceptance of themselves, 'warts and all'. Many neurodivergent people report feeling different, excluded, and under-valued. A key principle of EI is a recognition that 'people are different' and individual differences should be valued, i.e. **Regard for Others.** For example, the workshop is undertaken in groups so that people regularly give and receive feedback (both positive and constructive) throughout the day. It is also designed so that all group members feel included and accepted. For example, at the start and end of each day every individual is encouraged to 'check-in' to share their thoughts and feelings with the group. This creates greater openness and trust and is reciprocated with support, encouragement, and advice from fellow participants.

A closely related scale to **Self Regard,** that also saw an increase (14%), is **Emotional Resilience** ('the degree to which you bounce back from adversity'). **Emotional Resilience** is largely dependent on feeling we have the capacity and resources to cope with uncertainty and change. For many neurodiverse individuals who see the world differently, the daily interactions of life may feel unpredictable and frightening. We are taught how to read and write at school but there is an unwritten assumption that people will learn emotional and social skills from life experience. For those on the neurodiverse spectrum this can be a painful way to learn, and with persistent failure, may result in defensive and protective behaviour, such as withdrawing from colleagues and resisting change. Neurodiverse individuals may also struggle with change, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Creating a work environment that is more structured and predictable is one way of accommodating for such preferences, but a more immediate and sustainable approach is to equip individuals with the resources and strategies to deal with these events.

The EI self-development programme gives individuals the knowledge, skills, and resources to understand and cope better with life's challenges and increase their **Flexibility.** Such as practical models for understanding human differences, explanations for how emotions are processed in the brain and body, techniques for managing difficult relationships, and tools for self-development. The provision of these resources helps meet the basic human emotional needs for control, which then improves both **Flexibility** and **Emotional Resilience.**

Another high increase (15%) was **Goal Directedness** (the degree to which your behaviour is related to your long-term goals). As described earlier, a challenge facing many neurodiverse individuals is keeping a balance between narrow focus and wider perspective. All too often individuals will be easily distracted and fail to complete what they start or become obsessed with a specific task that misses the wider objective. Emotional Intelligence is not just about becoming aware of what you want to develop but also having the focus and discipline to put this into practice. At the end of the workshop individuals are encouraged to define a clear objective and a specific behaviour they will practice with the intention of creating a well-formed habit. This is something they will practice every day over several weeks before the follow-up workshop.

More recently, this and other activities have been supported using a personal app that provides a daily reminder to keep them on track. The purpose of this is two-fold, firstly to develop a new and useful habit of EI, and secondly to acquire a technique on how to learn and develop new habits. It is not only important that individuals know how to develop, but also that they put this into practice. How many of us are fully aware of what we *should* do but fail to embed this as something we *actually* apply in our daily lives?

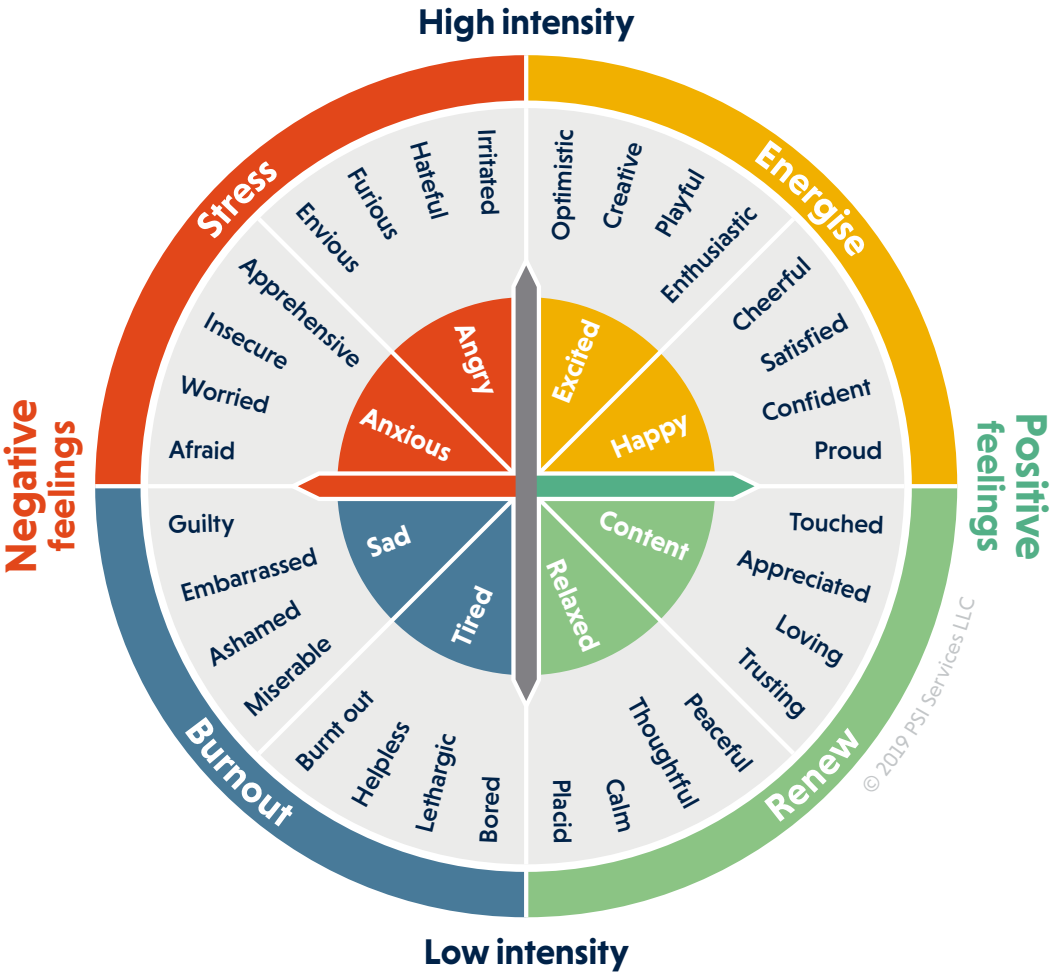
It is encouraging to see that both of the Feeling scales (**Self Awareness** and **Awareness of Others**) increased by 13%. Awareness of feelings is at the heart of EI and is core to its development. Neurodiversity is often associated with poor emotional awareness and difficulty in reading the emotional 'cues' in others, so this is an area that the EI self-development programme places a lot of emphasis upon. Firstly, by giving users a model and vocabulary to understand and describe emotions during the workshop. This is in the form of a 'feelings wheel' which includes two dimensions; intensity (high or low) and valence (positive or negative), shown in Figure 1.

Participants are encouraged to practice noticing their feelings early before they grow stronger and more difficult to manage. Then to consider how emotions affect their behaviour so they can learn how to manage their emotional state, such as creating feelings of enthusiasm for a presentation, remaining calm during confrontation, or expressing their emotions rather than bottling them up until they burst out uncontrollably.

Working in pairs and in a group also helps participants to practice sharing emotions as well as become more aware of others and their feelings. Finally, in order to maintain their emotional learning, they are provided with a feelings app so they can monitor their emotional patterns over time.

A theme that runs throughout the programme is of choice and self-responsibility, i.e. **Personal Power.** Participants can choose to participate in or sit-out any activities, to be as open or closed as they wish, and to accept, challenge, or disregard feedback they receive.

Figure 1: **The EI Feelings Wheel**



> Participants are encouraged to practice noticing their feelings early before they grow stronger and more difficult to manage.

A key role of the programme facilitator is to create a climate where participants feel safe to disclose and openly explore new perspectives. This helps reduce individuals' anxieties and creates a more open and non-judgmental atmosphere. During the programme participants often express feelings of anger and frustration, blaming themselves, others, their employers, and so forth. We encourage them to focus their attention and energy on what they can influence, and to consider the possibility that they have more choice than they think they do. This change in mindset often results in them feeling more empowered and self-determined which in turn gives individuals the confidence to move outside of their comfort zones and make changes in their work, personal lives, and relationships.

The above case study provides an illustration of how EI may be used to facilitate personal development within a STEM sector community. An initial challenge for us within this community is overcoming scepticism or defensive resistance to working with material participants find uncomfortable, i.e. emotions and interpersonal relations. This challenge is magnified when working with groups, but group work is essential for an experiential workshop that improves diversity, inclusion, and social interaction. Our experience is that short interventions of less than a day are unlikely to work. We have found it takes a while to gain a group's trust and for them to feel open enough to experiment with unfamiliar activities. Once the inevitable resistance has been overcome, and there is recognition that this material makes intellectual sense and works in practice, participants typically become highly committed and persevering in their efforts to develop their EI. This is demonstrated by the dramatic improvement in EI shown in the case study above, and these improvements being sustained over a three-month period.

Although the focus of the EI self-development programme is on personal development, many of the delegates will also have line management or team leadership responsibilities. With this in mind they are invited to consider the impact of their behaviour on others, how others are feeling, and how their colleagues may like to be led by them. The emphasis again is on applying many of the EI attributes they have developed, such as appreciating individual differences (**Awareness of Others**), adapting their style to the needs of others (**Flexibility**), and being a genuine and caring leader (**Authenticity**). Of course, the wider aim of the programme is not only to develop the EI of individuals and teams, but for this to cascade throughout the organisation to create an emotionally intelligent climate that embraces the gifts and potential of all individuals.

Conclusion

There is a growing recognition in organisations that to compete for the best talent, they should embrace neurodiversity within their workforce, and in so doing provide the appropriate adjustment and support to utilise the best of individual differences.

As with most human strengths, there is a corresponding Achilles' heel, and for neurodiversity this may include specific aspects of emotional and social functioning. Training and development in this domain does not claim to be a panacea but can help the individual learn to manage their emotions and their relationships more effectively, becoming happier and more effective individuals, team members and leaders.

“Group work is essential for an experiential workshop that improves diversity, inclusion, and social interaction.”

The authors

Renée van der Vloodt and **Cathy Harris** are the directors of **Executive Resilience Coaching (ERC).** They have over 20 years' experience in working with the neuro-divergent population. Experts in mental health, they offer specialist, one-to-one coaching for executives struggling with anxiety and advise on workplace wellbeing.

Dr Jo Maddocks is Chief Psychologist at **PSI Services, Talent Management.** He is the author of the **Emotional Intelligence Profile** and has published an accompanying book: *Emotional Intelligence at work: How to make change stick* (2018).

psionline.com/talent

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