

Building Empathy Bridges

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Double empathy bridges, neurodiversity, autism awareness, inclusion, educational system, neurotypical, neurodivergent, self-awareness, masking mechanisms, Tangram puzzle, double empathy problem, mutual acceptance, neurodiversity cards, teaching method.

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Hello. Good afternoon. My name is Hilra, and today I will be talking to you about how we can build double empathy bridges.

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I will be talking to you about my books.

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While I talk, I will have an animation running on this screen. I will not be following it. Hopefully it will follow me.

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And if you find my talk too wordy,

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please feel free to turn the sound off and just watch the animation, because the whole content will build that will be there with fewer words.

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I will turn the animation on now.

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So who am I?

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You may be wondering, well, I am from Brazil, and this explains my accent. I'm a mother, I'm a wife. I work in a college and I write books. But when I was growing up, I was mainly known for being my brother's sister, and my brother was known for having a learning disability and for being autistic. From a young age, I became his advocate, and that came from the experience of attending my own mainstream school and visiting my brother's especially school very often, I took part in the school trips,

family events, sports days, and that experience gave me a type of perspective that most children at the time didn't have, mainly of the contrasting educational options that we had, even the adults, most people around me at the time had never met a disabled person because of that, it was very often that people would see me with my brother playing outside the house, and would ask Me questions that I found very hurtful. Also some people laugh at my brother because of his mannerisms, because of him flapping his hands in joy, or because he made funny sounds. Sometimes also the way he walked and the way he tried to run, and his mispronunciations of words and whatever else they found laughable. My mom was told me that I should not get angry at people when they asked me those questions or when they laughed at my brother. She told me that the reason why they asked those questions was because they didn't know anyone like him, and people were genuinely ignorant about disability.

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They didn't realise they were being mean,

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and that was why they laughed.

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My mom used to say, you have to be compassionate to these people and teach them, explain your brother's ways to them, share his actual funny side, and allow them to laugh with him.

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So I started doing that,

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but I also started feeling sorry for people's lack of knowledge. I felt sorry for their ignorance, and I felt motivated to educate them. Maybe this is not only the explanation as to how I became an advocate, but also why I turned out to be a teacher.

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As a teacher,

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my way of seeing everything through my brother's lens, determined the type of teacher I became. I'm confident. I was compassionate, and I always valued all types of learning, all types of intelligence, all types of creativity. I also treasured small wins, small progress, and I saw hope in all of them. At one point in my teaching career, I found out about inclusion, which seemed to be happening more outside Brazil, and I ended up leaving to study abroad, cutting a very long story short, I did a PhD in education at the University of Southampton study inclusion in education. And up to that point, I was still believing in an educational system which would perfectly embrace and accommodate all learners of all abilities. But not long after,

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I started working in a secondary school

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and saw the complex reality of learners who have special needs in a mainstream school, their stories told me that inclusion wasn't working as perfectly as I had dreamed it when I left my country, many years before, in that secondary school, I worked closely with autistic young people, and that was when I learned much more about autism. I developed what I called Autism Awareness sessions through my conversations with my young people, and that that I supported at the time the I later, I changed jobs and started working in a further education college, and soon enough, I restarted doing those sessions with young people. I continued to develop my method, always trying to improve it and adapt it. Every time I started supporting a new learner, I

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I continue to develop my method, always trying to improve it and adapting it every time I started supporting a new learner, it was at this point that I developed the neurodiversity card game to help them understand their traits. In my first book, I systematized my approach trying to respond to a few questions I used to hear from young people and their parents as to why I was the first person to see them. Some would say why no one helped us in this way before. And so many times they would say, I wish there was someone like you earlier in our lives. And often people asked me to tell others about how I did things and explain my reasoning to other people. This is why I wrote the first book. I decided that I was going to share in my book these actions, which I believe are simple and uncomplicated. Well, da Vinha said that Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. So there you go. Some people need to be shown how simple and how easy most adjustments are. In this book, I tried to describe those simple actions so they could guide or inspire other people to try them. I tried to show how I listened to young people, how I engaged in conversation with them, and how I took stock of our conversations to plan the reasonable adjustments and to make life possible for them within the school or college.

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In the book, I do that through storytelling.

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I turned my real young people into fictional characters, and as the matter that is inspired by the Tangram puzzle, which has seven pieces, I created seven characters too much. I introduced my seven characters in this first book who are all neurodivergent, all autistic, some have also other neurodivergences. Through their stories, I explained how I did those awareness sessions and how they helped young people to go from not fully understanding their autism to having high levels of self-awareness and being able to identify their masking mechanisms and finding ways to unmask and move on. Many of the young people I support read my book before I published it, one particular young person came to me and said she liked my book very much and wished her teachers had read it. But what she really wanted was a book that would explain to her how neurotypical people worked. She wanted a book that would help her understand her neurotypical friends and family. And from that point, I took it as a mission. I wrote flipping the Tangram method to respond to that young person's quest.

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I created seven new characters

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always sticking to the seven because of the Tangram,

and they are all neurotypical and using the same method and the seven principles of the method, which I talk about in the book, I try to help neurodivergent people to understand their neurotypical friends and family,

and I try To explain how they do certain things.

Why do neurotypical people like smoke talk so much? Why do they use metaphors and idioms, and why do most people tell white lies?

My second book, Flipping the Engram Method is an attempt to address what is known as the double empathy problem. While I think that my first book was already trying to do that, the second book is more explicit, because by the time of writing it, I had found Miss Milton's article about the double empathy problem, and I had thought, oh, that's the name of it.

I always knew the problem was that most people do not understand autistic people, but now I had a name for it, and that inspired me to carry on writing the book that that student had asked me. And it did help me also to better frame what I was trying to say,

the double empathy problem exists thanks to the mentality that there are two separate worlds.

On one side, neurotypical people on the other side, neurodivergent people

and the majority being neurotypical makes them the dominant portion of society. As a result, society is neuro-normative, most social rules are neurotypical-friendly and neurodivergent people end up struggling to have their own space and fighting for their right to be who they are.

Those two worlds tend to collide in a very unfair way, which is heavier on one side than the other.

So my second book is about building bridges between the so called two worlds.

It's about listening to each other and making compromises together. It's not about one type dominating how the other type behaves or telling how the other type should be. It's not about only neurotypical people making adjustments for the neurodivergent people either. Nor it is to suggest neurodivergent people act neurotypical and mask.

It is about building bridges.

It's about all neurotypes having conversations and understanding each other and seeing things in each other's ways. It's about mutually adapting to each other. It's about mutual acceptance. It's about celebrating the diverse world we live in.

The purpose of my books – and the handbook and manual that support the method – is to build double empathy bridges. I hope you are already working on building bridges!

In my books I include the neurodiversity cards I created as part of my method of supporting self-awareness. Today you can have a glimpse of them by reading the user manual, as I have a few copies here for you.

I also have those mini-book business cards with my contact details.

I also have an easy read handout of this animation. If you'd like a copy. Thank you very much for listening to me. Please come and collect any materials that you may want from me. And if you'd like to talk to me today, please visit me at stand E20.

Thank you again, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the show.