

My name is Hilra, and today I will be talking to you about the Tangram method and how we can build double empathy bridges. I will be talking about my books.

So, who am I? You may be asking. Well, I am from Brazil, and this explains my accent. I am a mother, I'm a wife, and I work in a college, and I write books. But when growing up, I was mainly known for being my brother's sister. My brother has a learning disability, and he also is autistic.

From a very young age, I became an advocate, and that came from attending my own mainstream school, but also visiting my brother's special school very often. I took part in their school trips, family events, sports days, and that experience gave me a type of perspective that most children at the time didn't have. Most people around me at that time had never met a disabled person.

Because of that, it was very often that people would see me and ask me questions that I found very hurtful. Also, some people would laugh at my brother, at his mannerisms, at him flapping his hands with joy, the way he walked, the way he ran, his mispronunciations of the words, whatever it was that they found funny.

My mom once 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 they were genuinely ignorant about disability. They didn't intend to be mean, and that was also the reason why they laughed. My mum used to say, "You have to be compassionate to these people and teach them, explain things to them."

I learned to feel sorry for people's lack of understanding. I felt sorry for their ignorance, and I felt motivated to educate them. Maybe this is an explanation why I later became a teacher as well. So this is how I became an early advocate.

And when later in life, I became a teacher, my way of seeing the world and seeing people through my brother's lens determined the type of teacher I became. I think I was compassionate and always valued all types of learning, all types of intelligence, all types of creativity.

At one point in my teaching career, I found out about inclusion, which was something happening more outside Brazil, not so much in Brazil. And for that reason, I ended up leaving Brazil to study abroad, and I did a PhD in education at the University of Southampton, studying inclusion in education. But up to that point, I was still believing in a system that would perfectly accommodate everyone.

But a few years later, when I worked in a secondary school, I saw the hard reality of having special needs and being placed in a mainstream school. Inclusion wasn't as perfect as I dreamed it would be.

As part of my job in that secondary school, I worked closely with autistic young people, and that's how I learned so much more about autism. I developed something that I called Autism

Awareness sessions, and developed those sessions in collaboration with those young people that I was supporting at the time, and also with significant input from their parents.

Later, I changed jobs and went to work in a further education college, but continued doing those sessions with young people, and also I continued to develop my method, trying to improve it, and carried on adapting it to the people that I was supporting at the time.

In my first book, I try to systematize my approach, trying to respond to a few questions I used to hear from young people and parents as to why I was the first person who saw them. Some parents 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 my life." And constantly people asked me to tell others about these things and explain to other people, and this is why I wrote the first book.

I decided that I was going to share the way I do things, which I believe is simple and uncomplicated, but also da Vinci said that simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. Some people need to be shown how simple and how easy certain things are. In this book I tried to describe those simple actions so they could guide or inspire other people to try them.

~~So in the book~~, I tried to show how I listened to young people, how I listened to parents, how I engaged in conversation with them, how I used our conversations to plan the adaptations and to make life possible for them within the school or college.

I do that through story telling. I turned my real young people into fictional characters. As the method is inspired by the tangram puzzle, which has seven pieces, I created seven characters to match. I introduce my seven characters in the first book, who are all neurodivergent, all autistic and some also had other neurodivergences. Through their stories, I explained how I did those awareness sessions, and how they helped young people go from not fully understanding their autism to having high levels of self-awareness, being able to identify their masking mechanisms and finding ways to unmask and moving on.

Many of the young people I support read my book before I published it. One particular young person came to me and said that 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 work. 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 must write that book. So I did. I wrote *Flipping the Tangram Method* to respond to that young person. I created seven new characters, always sticking to the seven because of the Tangram, and they are all neurotypical. And using the same method with the seven principles that 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 they like small talk? Why do they use metaphors and idioms, and why do people tell white lies?

My second book, *Flipping*, 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 that time, I had found out Milton's article about the double empathy problem, and had thought, "Oh, that's the name of it." I always knew that there was a problem of people not understanding autistic people, but now I knew the name, and that inspired me to carry on writing the book that that student had asked, and it did help me to frame what I was trying to say.

The double empathy problem exists thanks to this mentality that there are two separate worlds: on one side, neurotypical people; on the other side, neurodivergent people. And neurotypical people being the majority, they are the dominant portion of society. So they are neuro-normative. They choose the rules, and neurodivergent people end up having to fight for their own space, for their own right to be who they are. Causing these two worlds to collide in a very unfair way, heavier on one side than on the other.

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 behaves. It's not about neurotypical people making adjustments for the neurodivergent people all the time, nor it is for neurodivergent people trying to mask and act neurotypical. It's about all types 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 two books (and the handbook and manual that support the method), **is to build double empathy bridges**.

I hope that you'll be able to have a look at a few things that I put online that you can have free access to. I also created some neurodiversity cards as part of my method of building self-awareness. You can have a glimpse of them by reading the user manual which I have a few copies here for you. And I also have business cards with me, and if you'd like to talk to me, please visit my stand E20, I also have a handout of the animation, if you'd like a copy. Thank you very much for listening.