

'A powerful and much-needed contribution to the conversation on neurodiversity.'

Marcia Brissett-Bailey, multi-award-winning dyslexia advocate
and author of *Black, Brilliant and Dyslexic*



WIRED DIFFERENTLY UNDERSTOOD TOGETHER

**Creating neuroinclusive environments
at work and in life**

Dr Joan van den Brink

Joan van den Brink masterfully cuts through the jargon around neuroinclusion by using a series of characters to present neurodiverse traits and experiences in different situations. This allows her to weave in a number of frameworks and models for creating more inclusive environments without leaving the reader feeling that they just have more things to remember. Accessible, clear and personable, as well as a joy to read.

– Dr Jan Peters MBE, coach and consultant

Joan van den Brink's rich coaching experience supporting neurodivergent individuals shines through every page, offering an honest and compassionate exploration of late diagnosis, love and belonging. What resonated most with me is her call for authentic neuroinclusion – creating spaces where neurodivergent people are not forced to shrink or fit in, but are empowered to thrive as their full selves. A powerful and much-needed contribution to the conversation on neurodiversity.

– Marcia Brissett-Bailey, multi-award-winning dyslexia advocate and author of *Black, Brilliant and Dyslexic*

With clarity and compassion, Joan van den Brink shares how *agape* – unconditional love rooted in acceptance, patience and grace – can transform relationships, systems and communities. As a neurotypical cisgender woman, this book has sparked my curiosity about the social identity cues related to neurodiversity that I may be missing. A timely and necessary read for anyone interested in understanding neurodivergence and its many faces.

– Sukari Pinnock Fitts, MSOD, PCC and co-founder, Fifth Domain Coaching

This thoughtful and encouraging book shows how we can better understand and engage with neurodivergent individuals, offering valuable insights into inclusion, workplace practice and self-advocacy. It is a genuine invitation to meet people as they are and create spaces where everyone can thrive.

– Nathan Whitbread, coach and founder of the Neurodivergent Coach

Work can be one of the toughest places for neurodivergent people to show up as themselves, which leads to significant, negative impacts on both individuals and organisations. With this book, Joan van den Brink offers something that goes beyond the impossible quick fix: a framework for neuroinclusion that makes sense in the messy, unpredictable reality of the workplace. A powerful call to action to ensure that every person, regardless of neurotype, can feel valued as they are.

– Morgana Clementine, neurodivergent (AuDHD) author and advocate

An exploration of the beauty and burden of being different in a world that demands sameness that offers a toolkit for connection. This book invites you to see, seize and share the untapped promise of neuroinclusion. If more people could truly grasp this potential and how to unlock it, our businesses – and our world – would be so much richer for it.

– Toby Moore, CTO and founder turned executive coach to start-up leaders

A heartfelt exploration of neuroinclusion that offers a creative approach for coaches and coach supervisors seeking to deepen their awareness. Joan van den Brink encourages you to better understand the subtle dynamics that can either exclude or empower neurodivergent people by pausing and listening deeply, so that we can hold a more neuroinclusive space for everyone.

– Will Medd, coach, supervisor and meditation teacher

Sometimes we are blind to things around us, not because our eyes are closed, but because no one has helped us understand what we are seeing. Joan van den Brink helps us explore our potential blind spots in regard to neurodiversity, providing stories, definitions, explanations and suggestions that will elevate your awareness of and aptitude for engaging with people in your life who differ from you in ways you may never fully understand.

– Dan Newby, founder, Dignity Inc and author

If you're an HR professional or a business leader wanting to build a workplace where everyone is free to be themselves, this book is your secret weapon. It gives you a practical roadmap for not just understanding neurodiversity, but also making it a core part of your company's culture. Joan van den Brink's powerful and compassionate framework based on love, safety, social identity and dialogue is your answer to building spaces that are truly neuroinclusive.

– Kathy de Gouviea-Smith, HR director, FMCG industry



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Dr Joan van den Brink

Wired Differently, Understood Together

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Foreword

Joan and I met by way of my own writing, which focuses on my experience of being a late-diagnosed, multiply neurodivergent person. As well as a writer, I'm an educator, neuro-affirming trainer and a qualified coach who specialises in supporting neurodivergent folks.

I've worked in UK higher education for 15 years and have spent the past five years exploring what inclusive leadership looks like through my work leading and championing a majority-neurodivergent team of academics and careers professionals.

I've also experienced a lifetime of judgement, oppression and discrimination simply by showing up in the world as I am. So I know, first hand, how painful it is to walk through life out of sync with the majority of people, and how much extra effort I'm required to put in to succeed at things most take for granted.

Yet to build towards a future that is more welcoming of neurodivergent people and our differences, we need to move beyond relying on the resilience of the very people who are oppressed by current dominant norms. What is needed is

wholesale, sustainable, systemic change. Yet change at this scale is only possible once we reach a critical mass of people actively engaged in this work. And this is where Joan – and this wonderful book – come in. Joan is an incredible ally to the neurodivergent community, sensitively seeking greater understanding of our experiences and looking at them through an intersectional lens.

I've lost count of the number of books I've read, written by my neurodivergent peers, which weave their own lived experiences into guides for living more authentic and nourishing lives. And these have been powerful narratives. Yet in writing sensitively and compassionately from the perspective of an ally, Joan is using her neurotypical privilege to amplify the needs of neurodivergent people and set out practical considerations for how we can all become neuroinclusive.

From the outset Joan describes how a single experience of receiving feedback that a training session she co-facilitated had not been neuroinclusive set her on the path to writing this book. Many neurodivergent people will know that our feedback and unexpected distress is frequently dismissed, so for this incident to be the catalyst for Joan to set forth on this journey speaks volumes of her own courage, compassion and wisdom. Indeed it is these Three Companions of courage, compassion and wisdom that provide the foundation for the powerful neuroinclusive framework Joan sets out in this book.

Joan has also been quick to recognise that the onus is on neurotypical people to make the overtures to create inclusive spaces. In setting out her framework so clearly and describing

what the different elements look like in practice, she is equipping everyone with the tools to do so. The thought that this might be possible and that Joan, as someone who is not neurodivergent, might recognise the role neurotypical people must play in creating neuroinclusive environments gives me so much hope for the future – one in which we move beyond awareness towards truly embracing neurodevelopmental differences.

At a time when the wider rhetoric around neurodiversity too often centres around supposed over-diagnosis and efforts to ‘cure’ us of our differences, we need allies like Joan now more than ever. The scale of change that is needed is also not lost on Joan, and for this reason this book should act as a clarion call for us to come together and find the collective courage, compassion and wisdom required to create a world that is truly neuroinclusive.

Hannah Breslin, neuro-affirming coach, consultant and trainer

Prologue

I was feeling apprehensive. I was co-leading a workshop for a group of people who wanted to become coaches. This was day one of the programme and I was meeting the group for the first time. I felt a slight tension before the participants started to arrive, wondering how they would be, as individuals and as a group. *Would they come together? Would they gel with me? Would they recognise my expertise and authority for facilitating their learning?* All these thoughts passed through my mind as I checked the room set-up, got the materials ready and ran through the agenda... again.

I greeted my co-facilitator. We rehearsed the day and how we would engage with the group. My tension eased. 'It will be a great day,' I thought. 'We are experienced and know our stuff. We have carefully considered how we want to start so that we create a good learning environment. It's going to go well today.' I took three deep breaths and went out to the coffee station. I found some early comers and warmly greeted them. The day had started...

At 17:15, after the last participant had left for the day, I relaxed and let go of the leadership role I had held all day. I

checked in with my co-facilitator to see how she was faring. We debriefed about the day and felt satisfied that we had attended to the group's needs as best we could. We had spent a lot of time in the morning working with the group to establish our learning agreement. This outlined our commitments to each other and how we would show up during those first two days. We dwelt on each point made so that the group had a shared understanding of the intent and meaning and how that translated to how we needed to behave. These included: participants speaking up if they were unsure what they should be doing or didn't understand a point; being patient with each other; taking care of their own needs, such as taking comfort breaks when required, getting themselves a drink. The participants had seemed interested and engaged during the day. Some members of the group spoke a lot, and others were quiet, particularly when the whole group were together. This felt like a routine start to a programme.

Day two progressed much like many others, with participants asking questions about the content, sharing their knowledge and experiences and taking part in the exercises. My colleague and I checked in with some of the quieter participants during the breaks and at lunchtime to see how they were doing. Nothing seemed amiss. Everyone appeared to be gaining new awareness, learning and insights.

I went home at the end of day two, pleased with how the first module had gone. Imagine my shock, a week or so later, at seeing that a complaint had been made about how that module had been run. I read the details with an increasing

sense of shame. I had not realised that one of the participants, who is neurodivergent, had left feeling despair. I pride myself on my ability to show empathy and compassion for others and to create a safe space for them. I was horrified to learn that we had not done this for at least one person on the programme. I don't like negative situations hanging over me and wanted to put things right immediately. My inner critic had a field day. *How can you say that safety is your superpower when that participant didn't feel safe with you? You need to show courage and own up to your error at the next module. Use this as a teaching moment. You need to step down from delivering the rest of this programme because you've lost credibility.* And on and on.

Soon after, my co-facilitator and I were briefed by the head of faculty about the details of the complaint. I was relieved that most of the points related to the course design but still felt remorse that some of my behaviours had come across very differently to what I had intended.

I went on to facilitate the rest of the programme as planned, and to build trust and safety with the participant who had been so distraught. Receiving the complaint had been a tough and painful lesson that jolted me out of my complacency.

This experience propelled me on a journey to discover more about neurodiversity and how neurodivergence impacts the lives of those who identify as such. When I was studying for my inclusion coaching certificate, I had learnt about social identities and wanted to do more to foster inclusion. I made a pledge to bring coaching to individuals who would

not ordinarily be able to access it. They could be disqualified for a variety of reasons, including belonging to marginalised communities. People who identify as neurodivergent are often ostracised by virtue of being different.

The two questions that I wanted to address were:

1. How can we create more inclusive spaces in which neurodivergent people feel safe to be themselves and celebrate who they are?
2. And how can we ensure that we all pay sufficient attention to this while not forgetting the needs of neurotypical people?

As a Nichiren Buddhist,¹ I strongly believe that we all have the innate qualities of courage, compassion and wisdom. I call these the Three Companions (van den Brink 2021). Our Three Companions enable us to be with others in a way that allows us to be a supportive presence when they are suffering and act in a way that helps to lessen their distress. I started an exploration to see how courage, compassion and wisdom could be used to create more neuroinclusive environments.

1 Nichiren Buddhism is a Japanese branch of Buddhism in the Mahāyāna tradition that is based on the teachings of the monk Nichiren Daishonin (1222-1282). The fundamental belief is that the Lotus Sutra contains the ultimate truth and that anyone can attain enlightenment in their lifetime through chanting 'Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō'. The emphasis of this practice is living fully in the present and doing the inner work to be the best we can be. We each have the power to positively impact our present and future through our thoughts, words and deeds. And by doing so we positively impact others and our environment. To learn more you can visit the following webpages: bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/nichiren_1.shtml and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nichiren_Buddhism

Introduction

I'm fortunate that my work has enabled me to learn a lot about people. I'm passionate about creating intimate environments so that people thrive. To do this, I need to connect with them in ways that see them while at the same time honouring who I am. When I achieve this, I'm able to form profound connections in which they feel safe to reveal who they are and what experiences have contributed to this.

Over the past three years, as I've encountered individuals who have been late-diagnosed as neurodivergent, I have become more aware of their difficulties in being themselves in a society not designed for them. I was shocked to hear about the implicit and explicit negative messages from neurotypical people like me, who either didn't understand or didn't care to learn about the beauty that lies in who they are, as they are. Neurodivergent people are accustomed to being thought of as weird, not feeling valued for who they are, being told to think or act in a certain way, having difficulty in picking up on social cues, and neurotypical people trying to mould them into clones of themselves. The implication is that neurodivergent people need to study and adapt to how neurotypical people

behave and interact. But this is a one-way street with few neurotypical people taking the time to ascertain how to best engage with neurodivergent individuals. The result is that neurodivergent people spend most of their time masking who they are so that they appear to fit in. This comes with a huge emotional, psychological and mental cost to them.

The more that I learnt about the experiences of neurodivergent people, the more strongly I felt compelled to act. I can be impatient and feel frustrated when I think that someone is 'going all over the place' when they are speaking. It takes all my reserves to stay with them. This is akin to the effort that neurodivergent people have to make to fit in with conventions. So, it is no surprise that they become exhausted, overwhelmed and burnt out. I have naively believed that I can connect with anyone in a way that allows them to be themselves and that they will trust and confide in me. It was a shock and rude awakening to realise that people still masked with me because what I was saying and doing made them feel that they couldn't be themselves. When I grasped this I wanted to make amends.

There are many great people who are experts in this field who are advocating for change for neurodivergent individuals. I wanted to add my voice to theirs in a way that is unique to me and, I hope, helpful and empowering. My voice is narrating another side to the story. This standpoint examines the relational dynamic that exists between neurodivergent and neurotypical people and how to create equality in that interplay. Let me illustrate. I am working with someone who has time agnosia. This means that they find it hard to

determine how long a task will take. As a result, this individual has missed or been late for appointments. When they have been on time, it has been because they have made a supreme effort to put in place numerous reminders. I understand that and have empathy for this person and I wonder, if they are late, how long do I wait before abandoning the meeting? What will that do to their self-esteem? Is it legitimate to still end our meeting at the original time planned? Dear reader, you may feel that there are straightforward answers to these questions and maybe you're right. These are not so clear cut for me because my actions may inadvertently harm the individual in some way. As with all dilemmas, there is no definitive answer.

While this book may speak to many, I am primarily focused on how to foster neuroinclusion in organisations. This is because neurodivergent people have less choice and agency regarding how they demonstrate that they can contribute in valuable ways in the workplace than they do in other settings. They are expected to fit into the culture, observe norms, operate within rules and behave in specific ways. For example, I have heard countless examples of neurodivergent employees getting into trouble because they have spoken in a direct way or they have been vocal about something that seems unjust. Neurotypical people communicate in a way that is different to many neurodivergent individuals – there are social niceties to observe – but these are assumed and unspoken. When neurodivergent individuals do not comply, they are labelled as difficult, unsociable and uncaring. This can lead to neurodivergent people being wrong-footed

numerous times a day. Having to constantly second-guess whether what they are saying and doing fits the social norms is demanding and leads to overwhelm and burnout over time. Outside work, neurodivergent people can choose who they hang out with, virtually or in person. Unsurprisingly, they gravitate towards other neurodivergent individuals who understand them without having to explain.

Working for an organisation means that you belong to some form of team, whether that is an intact team (a group of people reporting into the same person), a project team, a cross-functional team (comprising individuals from different functions within the organisation), a department, division, and so forth. The ideas in this book are designed to enable teams to be places in which everyone feels that they can fully be themselves. Each person is seen, heard and valued for who they are and what they contribute to the team.

I am hoping that if you are neurotypical, by reading this book you will increase your awareness of the types of experiences and journeys that your neurodivergent colleagues may have had and become more curious about what makes each person in an organisation special and unique. If you are neurodivergent, I wish for you to feel encouraged that there are allies who want to make the workplace somewhere that you can thrive and that you see that you play a significant part in making that happen.

If you are a leader of teams, whether you are neurodivergent or neurotypical, my aim is that you will ponder how you can create the conditions in which *everyone* in your teams can flourish and do their best work.

This is a complex topic that requires a momentous change in the attitudes and mindsets of millions of people. As a Buddhist, I believe that our environment reflects us and what we put into it. When we throw a stone into water, there is a ripple effect. I see this book as a small stone in the water that is life. I hope that the stories and messages that are contained here will move you to either strengthen or develop neuroinclusive practices. And by doing so, you touch and inspire others to do the same.

The Three Companions, courage, compassion and wisdom, can help us to see our trials as a normal part of life that enable us to grow as individuals. If we embrace them as learning opportunities and take the time to reflect on our experiences, we can build the resources and resilience to face future challenges with increasing equanimity.

As with my first book, *The Three Companions: Courage, Compassion & Wisdom*, I wanted to base this story on accounts that I heard first hand from people whose lives have been touched by neurodivergence. My aspiration was to uncover some keys to creating more inclusive spaces for neurodivergent *and* neurotypical people. I chose to speak with individuals who are neurodivergent or in relation with at least one person who is neurodivergent to hear about their experiences.

Being mindful of the ordeals that most neurodivergent people have had, I wanted to ensure that they felt in control of their narrative. I invited my interviewees to choose the stories that they wanted to share with me. I had no preconceived ideas and was curious about what was meaningful to them

in their life experiences. My desire to learn about and from them meant that I gave them my respectful attention, listened deeply and responded to what they were saying.

The conversations that resulted were deeply moving and rich. Creating this space for them was important to them too. I was delighted to hear them use 'enjoyable', 'healing', 'revealing', 'cathartic' to describe how they felt at the end of the conversation. For me it was a privilege to witness these stories, which were told with such candour. It fortified my commitment to write this book. I feel compelled to use my voice to reveal the common humanity in our experiences with neurodivergence.

A note about language

I think it's useful for me to explain some of the less familiar terms that I am using and what they signify to me.

Neurotype

This is a term used to refer to classes of differently wired brains, ie neurocognitive ability. It describes the way that a person's brain processes sensory information and interacts with the environment. Neurotypes include autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, ADD and Tourette's syndrome.

Neurodivergent

Being neurodivergent is often described as having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal'. However, 'neuro' refers to nerves or the nervous system, so being neurodivergent is a whole-body experience. For example, rejection can be felt as intense physical pain in individuals who have rejection sensitivity dysphoria.

Neurodivergent individuals tend to have a 'spiky'² profile when it comes to their strengths and struggles when compared to neurotypical people. For example, they may be musically gifted, learning to play to a high standard quickly and being confident to perform on stage either solo or as part of a band, while simultaneously hating being in crowded spaces such as parties; or they may be able to solve complex problems with creative solutions but not able to structure their ideas and convey these either verbally or on paper in a way that makes sense to others.

Because I have spoken with individuals of various neurotypes, I want to think broadly about creating safe spaces for neurodivergent people in general. I have identified some common themes among these individuals that lead me to believe that this is a legitimate way of looking at this.

I am not saying that all neurodivergent people should be treated in the same way. Each person, neurotypical or neurodivergent, is unique and deserves to be treated as such. What I am advocating for is an approach that I believe will allow the neurotypical people among us to act in ways that allow neurodivergent individuals to feel respected and valued for who they are and not how the neurotypical world wants them to be. I single out neurotypical people here because neurodivergent people tend to 'get' each other. They are 'neurokin'. Neurokins share neurotypes and so tend to speak

2 A spiky profile is a term used to describe the strongly contrasting strengths and limitations in a neurodivergent individual's cognitive abilities. For example, high creative skills and low planning and organisation abilities. See geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity for a graphic representation of this.

the same language. There is no need to try to follow social niceties or apologise for information dumping about their special interest, for instance.

Neuroinclusion

What I mean by neuroinclusion is that we think and act in ways that are inclusive of all, ie how we think about and respond to each other in each moment. The trouble is that neurotypical and neurodivergent people often struggle to empathise with each other. There is often misunderstanding or misinterpretation about what one party is saying to the other because of their different experiences, ways of processing information and communication styles. This phenomenon is known as 'double empathy' (Milton 2018).

If we are being inclusive, when someone says something that, on the surface, seems weird, inappropriate or even hurtful, we pause to reflect on what might be behind their comment. When we arrange meetings we consider the needs of each person who will attend. This includes the space in which the meeting is being held, how the meeting is designed (see more later in Part 2, Bringing it all together; and Part 3, Generating neuroinclusion in work environments), finding various ways

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to share how information is conveyed and consumed.

Neuroinclusion requires both neurodivergent and neurotypical people to be aware of the impact that we have on each other, curious rather than knowing, empathetic and compassionate instead of judgemental of each other.

Structure of the book

I have interviewed 34 people specifically for this book. In addition, I have encountered neurodivergence in various aspects of my personal life and work. I have educated myself through courses, reading, listening to podcasts, radio programmes and watching documentaries.

I have structured the book into three parts. First, I chronicle the knowledge that I have gained through my conversations and experiences in **Part 1**. I build on this foundation to describe the building blocks for **Creating neuroinclusive spaces** in any context in **Part 2** and look at how to apply these to **Generating neuroinclusion in work environments** in **Part 3**.

My approach has been to create a fictional cast of characters who represent composites of the many stories that I have heard. Different aspects of neurodivergence are illustrated through these stories.

In Part 1, I illustrate various aspects of neurodivergence in **Tales of difference (Chapter 1)** by voicing the journeys and happenings of the main cast:

- ◆ Limbani, a mother's story
- ◆ Nathan, a father's story
- ◆ Xavier, son of Limbani and Nathan
- ◆ Phoebe, a partner's story
- ◆ Myles, partner to Phoebe
- ◆ Kala, a growing-up story
- ◆ Amelia, an HR story.

At first glance, you may be wondering why I am presenting these stories (Limbani, Nathan, Phoebe and Kala) because they are not wholly set in a workplace context. I believe that to create neuroinclusion you need to understand the entirety of someone's experience. Our home life, school encounters, relationships, friendships (or lack of) shape us consciously and unconsciously. It's important not to assume anything when engaging with others at work because neurodivergent people may be masking heavily to fit in and neurotypical people may have grown up or be living with neurodivergent people in their home.

Therefore, I have taken the time to elaborate the personal lives of these main characters so that you can relate to them as people and think about the possible happenings in people's lives and what they might be bringing to their work

Following on from these journeys, in **The common threads (Chapter 2)** I pull out recurrent themes across all the stories and journeys that I have written about with examples of how these might manifest.

Next, in Part 2, in **Creating neuroinclusive spaces (Chapter 3)**, I propose a framework that provides the foundation for building neuroinclusion. In this chapter, I

explore the four elements that make up this framework in some detail to give you an appreciation of each.

Then, in **Bringing it all together (Chapter 4)**, I return to our cast and introduce a few more characters to show how we can foster neuroinclusion by looking at a series of events in which they gather to have a dialogue.

In Part 3, in **Generating neuroinclusion in work environments (Chapter 5)**, I provide some practical tips for developing neuroinclusion in organisations.

About the author

Joan van den Brink is a management consultant, executive coach, coach supervisor and coach trainer. She believes that her life experiences and eclectic career have given her real insights into how to create environments where people can thrive. She is ardent about providing spaces in which individuals feel safe to be themselves and explore what lies beneath the surface so that they can better understand their actions and behaviours.

Joan graduated from the University of Cambridge with a PhD in Chemistry. She previously worked in marketing before moving into operations management. She became a management consultant specialising in leadership and organisational development, executive assessment and coaching in 2001, and led the HR and communications functions of a speciality chemicals company before setting up her own consultancy in 2014.

As an author, she engages with individuals who strongly connect with her chosen topics in mutually enriching conversations, which provide her with different perspectives and generate insights that inform her work. Her passion lies in supporting organisations to generate more inclusive environments.

Find out more about Joan's work at arabaconsulting.com.

A kinder, more inclusive world starts with understanding.

Neurodivergence affects us all, whether we are neurodivergent ourselves or in relationships with those who are: as a parent, sibling, friend, partner, colleague or team leader.

In the workplace, neurodivergent people often work hard to understand the neurotypical perspective, while being made to feel they are somehow built wrong or unable to express themselves fully. At the same time, teams are under pressure to deliver results, and it can be difficult to balance individual needs with group performance, especially without a clear understanding of the unique challenges that each person, neurotypical and neurodivergent alike, faces at work.

We all have needs that deserve to be met. But by listening with empathy and acting with compassion, we can create environments where everyone feels safe, seen and heard.

Through a cast of fictional characters, Dr Joan van den Brink illustrates a range of neurodivergent journeys and offers space for thoughtful reflection on the similarities and differences between neurodivergent and neurotypical experiences.

As you read, you'll be invited to:

- Reflect on how your beliefs and assumptions shape your relationships and expectations of others
- Be curious about the people in your life and how you can support them to thrive
- Explore practical ways to generate safe, supportive and inclusive environments

Creating neuroinclusive spaces at work and in life is an essential step toward a future that truly celebrates difference. This book will help you play your part.

'An invitation to see, seize and share the untapped promise of neuroinclusion.'

Toby Moore, CTO and founder turned executive coach

'Offers something that goes beyond the impossible quick fix: a framework for neuroinclusion that makes sense in the messy, unpredictable reality of organisations.'

Morgana Clementine, neurodivergent [AuDHD]
author and advocate

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