Neurodiversity in the Workplace  
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Presented by Metropolitan New York Library Council  
With Stephanie “Cole” Adams, Lauren Comito, Halley Eacker, and Tim Furgal  
Moderated by Davis Erin Anderson  

*The following transcript has been edited for clarity.*  

Davis Erin Anderson: Welcome to Neurodiversity in the Workplace. We are joined today by Stephanie Cole Adams, Lauren Comito, Halley Eacker, and Tim Furgal.  

Thank you all so much for joining me today. If you could let us know your name, who you're representing today, and where you're calling in from, anything you want to share as we get started. Let's go in alphabetical order, so Stephanie or Cole, whichever you prefer, let us know. I'll start with you.  

Stephanie (Cole) Adams: Hello everybody. I do prefer Cole, that's my nickname, I use she or they pronouns and I'm coming to you from my not-quite-a-bunker in Buffalo, New York, which is my law office. I started as a library page in high school, I worked for my college and then my law school libraries, and then eventually ended up doing library law and, throughout my academic and professional life, I have lived with ADHD and that's why I'm here. I'm looking forward to talking and learning from my fellow panelists and contributing.  

Davis: Thanks for being here. It's so good to talk to you. Lauren, what's up?  

Lauren Comito: Hi, I'm Lauren. I work at the Brooklyn Public Library as a neighborhood library supervisor and I'm also one of the founders of Urban Librarians Unite. Let's see, I'll do a thing that's bringing me joy. I just got an iPad with an Apple pencil and I have a note-taking thing on there where I can write in it with an Apple pencil and I can just add pages and so that's my notebook now and it's been the most fun notebook I've ever had. I'm basically using an iPad as a glorified notebook, but that's okay, it's still fun. My pronouns are she/her, I just put them in my name, and I live in Brooklyn.  

Davis: I want to also just note that this is a production that Lauren and I came up with together through conversations that we were having. So Lauren, thank you so much for helping me plan.  

Lauren: Oh, yes. I also have ADHD, as can be evidenced by the extreme speed with which I just talked about this ridiculous iPad.  

Davis: Got you loud and clear. Halley?
Halley Eacker: Hello, everyone my name is Halley Eacker. I'm a former special ed teacher with a master’s degree in special ed. I'm pursuing a PhD in special ed and I do research on students with autism and their literacy development. So, how we best teach kids with autism how to read and write. And outside in the real world, I work with schools across the state on school climate and creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all students and, personally, I have obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD. So thank you for having me here today.

Davis: Thanks for being here. Tim, hello.

Tim Furgal: Hello, welcome everyone, happy to be here. My name is Tim Furgal. I am the e-rate and procurement consultant for the Southern Tier Library System. I'm coming to you live from Corning, New York. I'm not unhappy with the weather here in the Finger Lakes recently, so that's a good thing, and something that's bringing me joy is my nephew recently celebrated his first birthday. So, little things. A lot to be thankful for amidst all of this, whatever this is, for sure. My pronouns are he/his and I live with bipolar disorder.

Davis: Gotcha. Thank you all so much. I wanted to hand things over briefly to Lauren before we get to my prepared questions. Lauren was doing some research this weekend, I understand.

Lauren: I don't have any eloquent way to talk about this or say this but, as you can see from looking at the gallery view, we have an entirely white panel for this program on neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is one of those things that is hard for everyone, but gets really complex and messy at the intersection of race, gender, and neurodiversity, particularly around diagnosis. Kids' diagnosis of adults, being a person of color, particularly being a black person, makes getting diagnosed with ADHD difficult more as an adult. And, alternately, while studies show that fewer young black children with ADHD are diagnosed in school, sometimes people who don't have it diagnosed just because of cultural expectations of behavior of children that are unreasonable for their age, because of how people view them based on their race.

I'm going to share a couple links in the chat. One's a YouTube video. And then one is a blog from someone in that video “Black Girl Lost Keys,” which I've been reading and finding some stuff that I hadn't considered. And so if somebody needs that, hopefully that will be helpful.

Davis: Thank you, Lauren, so much for acknowledging that. There's a lot to be said for intersectionality, I think, in this issue in particular. And it's a tricky one, so I'm glad that you raised that.

Lauren: It just makes it even harder, like everything else.

Davis: Yeah, for sure. So, let's get definitional here. For the sake of those in the audience who would like to hear from us and what it means for you all and in general: How might we on this panel define neurodiversity? What should our participants know about neurodiversity as we spend the next 50ish minutes together?
Lauren: For me, neurodiversity means acknowledging that everybody's brain works in a different way. [It means] making sure that when we're talking to people, we understand that maybe they don't think the same way we do. Literally, maybe the synapses in their brains do not connect the same way ours do. That's my case with ADHD: the synapses in my brain do not connect the same way a neurotypical person's do. So when you're talking to me I might accidentally interrupt. I don't mean to; my brain just does it and then I realize afterwards and then I feel like garbage about it. But it just kind of happens. And having everybody be different is actually kind of a good thing in the long run, because we wouldn't want to all think exactly the same way.

Davis: It'd be really boring if it did work that way. Halley, what do you think?

Halley: I think a lot of the same things. I like that we began today with a discussion around other types of diversity and intersecting identities. I believe the same thing: that we're all built differently and that there's a lot of different ways in which our brains can function in terms of how we learn, how we communicate, how we attend, even how we process sensory information. This idea that there is one normal or right type of way of thinking or doing any of that: it's just not necessarily true. And I think, for me, neurodiversity is the idea that there are certain systemic elements that sometimes highlight the ways in which we are different, and sometimes that can have a negative impact or lead to any qualities like we've talked about today. But when you embrace those things, this can be a source of creative potential.

Davis: Thank you. Tim, what do you think?

Tim: I spend a lot of time thinking about how systems overlap in the world. So when Lauren talks about race and gender issues, there's also the economic / socio-political factors that go into mental health systems, and how that plays out in the library. I think acknowledging that there are different ways of how we think and exist in the world together is part of it. Neurodiversity asks that you be able to listen attentively to the person who's sharing their experiences with you, and to sit in that shared humanity for a while. And when there are bridges or gaps in conversation, you have to be willing to do the work to find out what that is going to be. It's going to look different for every individual, as mentioned.

With my condition, the first time that a person has a manic disorder, it rewires the circuitry in their brain, so thinking becomes an associative flowing of ideas. I will often joke that my thoughts are strung together like constellations and I have to make meaning and parse them out after the fact. So I think it's important to realize that, no matter what that shows up like, it doesn't diminish the value of the person sitting in front of you.

Davis: That's really interesting. I didn't know that about manic depression. Cole, what do you think?
Cole: Participating in this panel and in discussions like this is a really valuable process for me because, in my world, the legal world, many times neurodiverse states of being just get characterized as either disability, or not. Or as failure to adhere to policy and procedure, or not. Or a disciplinary concern, or not. Developing the skills to recognize and have less binary discussions about that is an ongoing process for me. I think a lot of people out there like to just put people in boxes. “Oh, she’s got ADHD. That must be why she’s not respecting what I’m saying.” Well, no actually, I might not be respecting what you’re saying because it isn't worthy of respect. (None of you guys, by the way.)

In just one little example, because we're going to be talking about the workplace: to me, what everybody was saying resonated. If I don't have things come to me in chart form, I need to create a chart immediately, or immediately the entire world starts looking like this wall behind me, which -- by the way -- if it's bothering anyone I apologize. Lots of lots of color, lots of everything. I have a person who I love working with in my office who when I say to her, “I will send you a chart so we can break this down.” She hears “chart” and it's like “you're denying my creativity, you're trying to wall me off, you're trying to compartmentalize me.” So, for me, neurodiversity is having the language to parse all of those things and also understand the power dynamic that comes with a lot of this.

Davis: What has been your personal experience with neurodiversity? What would you like us on the call here to know about your experience?

Halley: I feel like this is really important, as a person who thinks differently. I have lived experiences that influence what I think and what I say. I also have some background in teaching, so I come from a growth perspective, that idea that it's not that binary discussion of it's there / it's not. Things are in a continuum.

A lot of my experience comes with working with students with autism. There's a continuum there in many dimensions, and a lot of uniqueness. I come from that perspective, and I move along that continuum when I talk about neurodiversity. I think that's important, to really understand those dimensions.

The second thing is that neurodiversity means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and it is part of a movement. There's this idea of neurodiversity, we're all different. There's also a movement behind it that is important to the hearts of people who may be experiencing inequalities. I like to keep that in mind whenever I'm talking about it.

Davis: Tim, what would you say?

Tim: Thank you. My personal experience with neurodiversity: I'm six foot five, I'm a tall cis-gendered, heteronormative, white male, so I have infinite amounts of privilege to be able to talk so openly and so freely about my mental health without really facing many severe consequences for it. I’m the President of the Leadership and Management Section of the New
York Library Association, I've been a library director in the past, I have a great job working as a consultant for a public library system. {Meanwhile} the unemployment rate for people with mental illnesses is over 80 percent, typically. There were periods of my life where I was on food stamps, where I really had to depend a lot on the support networks that I had in my life. When I was working frontline services in an urban library and would see somebody who was suffering from homelessness come in, the thing that separated my life from theirs is that people were willing to take a chance on me, whether that be because I'm a tall, cisgender-passing, white male, or it's something intrinsic within me. I think too often what separates the people who succeed and the people who do get stuck in systems of oppression is the chances that we are willing to take on them. So I want people to walk away with the understanding that my situation is not unique, that there are hundreds and thousands of people like me that they could be hiring in libraries. Your community is made up of neurodiverse people, and they are such a gift to all the services that you are providing for your community.

Davis: Thank you. That was really beautifully stated.

Cole: I think my personal experience of living with ADHD for my entire life but not getting diagnosed until I was in my twenties, if there was a theme or a lesson I've taken from it, it would be -- I just wrote down this phrase -- “recalibrate to capability” or “recalibrate to dignity.”

I mentioned that I was diagnosed in my twenties because so many young girls of my generation were underdiagnosed. Going back over my report cards over the years, anybody who read like a Newsweek article about ADHD could just be like “oh, this kid has ADHD.” The impact on self-esteem, on self-image… the reason I mentioned “recalibrate” is because, what I've observed living with something like this, I've always had to gain some self-awareness, do the hard work, refuse to admit that I was lazy, stupid, disrespectful, a troublemaker. Maybe sometimes I was a troublemaker, but there were some underlying things going on with me as well that I needed to have the perspective of additional awareness. And as I get older -- I just turned 47 last week -- one of the things that I'm valuing is that I refuse to give up on other people when they are presenting when I think -- like Tim was saying -- does this person need to recalibrate? Do we need to understand where they're coming from? And if we can't do that as an educational institution, or as law enforcement, or whatever it is, then shame on us. We need to work harder on that. The onus is on the system to help a person actualize themselves and be their best self. And when I see people in the midst of that journey, sometimes they have to be very combative to get what they need. So the parents of kids who live with disabilities, this is a skill that we learn. It's this notion of using the self-awareness that neurodiversity exists and it's something that once you have awareness of, you recalibrate your notion of self and others at all times with a default to capability and dignity,

Davis: Thank you. Lauren, what do you think?

Lauren: I've been lucky in my career as an adult. Cole said she wasn't diagnosed until she was in her twenties. I was diagnosed at seven after a fight from my mother to get the right diagnosis,
and not the one that would have had me not doing well. So I spent my childhood actually being medicated for ADHD, which is really helpful, still am. If you break your leg you're going to use crutches. Why not? But because nobody really understood it, I was still called lazy and told that I wasn't trying hard enough and “gosh, you're so gifted, Lauren, why don't you just try harder? If you could focus, you'd be on the honor roll every year.” Well, no. And then to grow up having had those sort of semi-abusive experiences in school, where like a teacher once asked me if I had taken my Ritalin in front of the entire sixth-grade class, to now be like “oh screw this, everybody can know I have it.” Why on earth would I be quiet about it? You're gonna deal with it. To get to a point in my career where I am now, where I've somehow written two books and [was named] Librarian of the Year, I don't even understand how any of that happened given all of the other stuff. It’s why I'm talking about it so much, so loudly, now, is that I can. I have all of this privilege and all of this experience where I can talk about it and be someone that somebody can call up and ask, “what the heck do I do?” Because I had to deal with the bosses that didn't get it and thought that I was lazy and disorganized and bad at spreadsheets. And now all my experience with that makes me more understanding of other people, even people who are neurotypical who just work in different ways. Even if you don't have a diagnosis, that doesn't mean that you're gonna work the way that people expect you to based on whatever policy or Excel spreadsheet they have setup, or paperwork. That doesn't mean you're gonna be good at that, just because you're neurotypical.

Davis: That's very true. Case in point, Listening to you talk, I think maybe I need to rethink my own concept of being neurotypical. I feel comfortable this moment sharing that I have trauma and my background, and I'm fairly certain it rerouted in a significant way of my thought processes. I'm gonna have to go away from this and research after we're done. This is great and I'm so glad that we're talking.

Here’s the next question. On an interpersonal level, how can workplaces give voice to multiple modalities of thinking and interacting, and how might we adjust our current approach to be more inclusive?

Halley: I feel like I could talk about this forever. When I think about interacting and interpersonal relationships, I think about those like big social emotional competencies, like my own awareness of self, what I think about myself, what I think about my social self, my social awareness, then my relationship skills, communication, and things like that. When we attend to different things in the environment, what is going on inside our head is not necessarily easy to interpret in our behavior. The way it's interpreted by others might not necessarily be connected to what is actually happening in my head. I think that that's something I experience a lot, this idea that like I am seeing things differently or feeling things differently in the environment. Sometimes I'm living in a dual reality of sorts.

Things that I personally appreciate are a direct explicit conversation. I've done this either with my students and people I've supervised: how do we want to communicate? What are our goals here? Always putting time and effort into the collaborative relationships we have, and not
necessarily the task that we have to get done. Sometimes, especially in my career with teaching and training, I do a lot of talking and a lot of listening. I think those two things are really important.

One thing that I want to like go back to, just because I saw it come up in the chat, and it made me really pause and think to myself that even my own patterns of behavior, things that I'm accustomed to in my job sometimes preclude me from really thinking about what might be preferred by other people. One thing that came up in that chat that I wanted to bring up: earlier I was using person-first language ("students with autism") and sometimes the preference “I'm an autistic person.” Even on that basic interpersonal level, knowing what people's preferences are and knowing how they perceive themselves, and what forms their identity is really crucial. Then you'll be able to do these things that Tim and Cole were talking about: erring on the side of dignity, erring on the side of giving somebody the benefit of the doubt, and trying to understand them and having that be okay, not wrong, or less, or things like that.

Bringing it back: on an interpersonal level, like I said, being direct. Even things like charts. I communicate in charts. Everything I do is in a chart, because I have to be organized and I have to see it. The chart is like a manifestation of the way my brain is working. If somebody that I'm working with would understand that that's how my brain is working, they'd probably be able to interpret the products of my work more authentically, and just really highlight my strengths as opposed to “man, this is a lot to handle” or “man, this is confusing” or things like that.

Davis: Thank you. Cole?

Cole: All of that. Not to take your words, but that was great, thank you.

I guess I want to speak to a couple personal examples because, on any given day, I'm working with clients who are young kids, and their parents, or colleagues who are lawyers, or professionals who are librarians. I'm communicating with a lot of different people. One of the things I try to do, especially because I have a diverse array of clients, is to find out what are the key communication styles that work for them. One of the things that I benefit from, from ADHD, is this ability to go faster than normal many times is finding out, “okay, is this person a phone person?” Is a phone call to them an act of mercy on my part? Is an email going to be interpreted as a hostile act? Back to the chart thing: to me a chart is like, you might as well put a bow on it.

Lauren: Charts are amazing.

Cole: They are, except when they are considered an act of aggression. There was a lot of discussion, when we were first adapting to the mode we're in now, which is “why do we all feel like we've been meeting with a psychic vampire” after being on a Zoom conference? Because there's ways that, for those of us especially, like when my fellow panelists here are talking, I'm very carefully looking at their faces. I need to see. I notice I talk with my hands a lot. I need to see what their physical presence is doing, but that takes a lot of energy. How can you give
voice, especially once you are in charge of the environment? That's one thing I think all of the folks on the panel have in common. We walk in and we set the tone of where we're at a lot of times. One of the things I'd say to people who are listening who are managing environments -- that's a loaded word, "managing" -- or hope to at some point, thinking about in advance: what are the different communication needs of the people and how can we do that? And if that means we set up two different meanings, that's what I'll do. Or we'll have the big meeting where everybody needs to talk about not only what we're going to do but how they feel about it, and then later on, the person who can't bear to talk about feelings, and maybe that might even be for health reasons, they get the summary and then they get to respond to that. It's thinking "how can we get everyone in a place where they can be their most generative and feel the most respect?" And, by the way, doing that means you have to be willing to get it wrong sometimes. Just apologize and move on. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you don't want a phone call." And that's it. Just own it and move on. Thank you.

Davis: Yeah, we're all learning from one another as we go for sure. Lauren what do you think?

Lauren: Oh, I think it will be really great, particularly in libraries, if we could let go of the idea that things have to happen in a specific way, and start looking more at what the outcome is at the end. Everybody's gonna have a different way of getting to that outcome, and it might be better than the way that it's been done before. It might be faster, it might be easier, it might be harder, but they still get there. I'm a manager so, as a manager, I try to make sure that people know where we want to go, and then see what it is that they need to get there. I'm not nitpicking and micromanaging, unless they need it, because that's what they need. And then I'll do it. I hate doing it, but if that's what's helpful, sure. As long as we get there at the end, then which way we go just doesn't matter. I think if we could let go of that, where the workplace would just be more pleasant. Everyone would get to be creative and thoughtful. Or not, if that's not what they want. Some people just want to go to work and do the thing the way they're supposed to do it and then move on. That's also fine because you still get there.

Davis: Yeah, I've been thinking about perfectionism, and how we sort of transmute that upon other people. So, definitely a thing to work on for many of us. Tim, what do you think?

Tim: The nice thing about answering your question last with such talented panelists is that you can just say “also that,” but I’m going to break down my response into three parts. The first is going to be about psychological safety, the second is going to be about communication, giving voice like everybody's already kind of touched on, and then the third is about like specifically --

Lauren: Oh no! Did he freeze?

Tim: … that pulled together all the high-performing teams was this factor of psychological safety...

Lauren: Hey, Tim you froze a little bit and we missed part three.
Tim: Part three was going to be how we give and provide feedback. The key takeaway is psychological safety, and I think, like Lauren said, often in libraries we design really rigid, inflexible systems internally to communicate with staff. I think libraries are doing a better job of communicating with the public, but as far as internal communication, we are not always the best. Priya Parker has a book called *The Art of Gathering* that focuses on the intentionality which we craft in designing spaces and how that affects us. I know Halley's research touches a lot on how the environments that we create affect our behavior. And if you want to change a behavior, you will change an environment a number of times. I think that we need to do a better job holding the mirror to ourselves and taking a very deep, uncomfortable look, and think about how the systems we have may have been serving their purpose at one point and are no longer. But whether it is focusing on racial inequity whether it is focusing on neurodiversity and creating more inclusive spaces, I think libraries can be doing a much better job. The second part of my response, like Cole had already mentioned, I think giving voice is such a big thing. Early in my career I worked in an academic library, and my manager brought all of the new hires in individually and he would ask them how they would like to receive praise, how they would like to see received feedback, and what could he do as the manager to directly support them? And I was always really so touched by that approach to it. It was a really human-focused way of management that emphasized what the individual needs. And I think as an administrator, when you start to talk about neurodiversity and disabilities and the American with Disabilities Act, I think we can get too stuck on the legal implications instead of doing the right and humane thing and really listening to people and trusting them to be diagnostic and to understand what their needs are. I'll end with that.

Davis: Thank you. I liked that packaging of the three-part answer there. I'm glad you came back and filled the suspense for what number three was. So in the name of looking at my own rigidity, I really love ending things right on time at five. However, I have so many more questions for you that I think have value, if you don't mind me saying so. I want to just ask you if it's okay if we go a little bit over five, by five or ten minutes maybe.

Lauren: I'm fine with that.

Davis: Great. So, folks who are listening, if you have a hard out at five, I'm keeping as much an eye on chat as I can. It's hard to multitask here, but I am reading that folks would like to see a transcript, so I will talk to our panelists offline and see if that's okay. That's something that I think we would have to do by hand. I'm happy to work on that this week into next and run it by the panelists so that you can see what was missed. So if you need to go at five, look out for that. We will make sure at least a written summary of our conversation is out in the world, so you won't be in the dark with what those ten minutes held. Fair enough? Everyone good? Okay.

On a physical and social level how can we design environments to support neurodiversity? How can we design libraries to support neurodiversity with patrons and staff? That's two big
questions, so you're welcome to take them apart or reassemble or however you'd like to go forward with this.

Tim: This is a little bit outside of my area of expertise, so again, I will keep my comments short. And I mention some of the things about intentionality and incorporating design thinking into how we interact interpersonally, and then how we look at the space that we are in in libraries. And this can show up in a lot of different ways. Are we providing staff with off desk time? Are we making environments physically accessible? Are our websites accessible to low vision users? Things like that. One of the things that I don't have an answer for and I would really love people that talk about this in the chat is, libraries themselves can be high stress environments and we are often underfunded, understaffed at times. I think there is a great psychological impact to working in libraries, especially now as libraries start to reopen during the middle of the global health crisis. We don't really know what the long-term effect of that is on the mental health of frontline staff. I think we are asking a lot to be in that position. This is certainly a unique environment that we are in, and I don't have the answers for that. But I am interested in what the rest of the panel has to say.

Davis: Thank you. Cole?

Cole: I have one thing I'm kind of passionate about that I'm going to say and then I'm going to talk a little bit about design and personal observations.

I'll put a disclaimer on this: I work with many, many architects that I respect highly in this profession. But I'm gonna tell you when it comes to how you design environments to support neurodiversity, do not defer to your architect. Challenge them at every turn. Demand design charrettes where you are pushing the type of environment that Tim was talking about, and I'm sure everyone else is going to mention. Architects… I think I've said enough. I think you take my point. And if you transcribe this put it in capital letters. This is about procurement. Don't be dazzled by projects they've done. They need to design something that meets the functions that your organization demands and, to Tim’s point, those functions are going to be evolving rapidly over the next few years. I'm all about respect for judges, engineers, architects, everybody is a licensed professional. They worked hard for it, they've got the mental practice insurance to cover it, but demand the best from them and be relentless. Honestly, that's probably the most useful thing I could have said to this group, but I will say also: when you have the chance, have fun with your paint job, but then design the next conference room to have nothing on the walls, and then design the next conference rooms you just have neutral earth tones, and let people, to the extent you can right, pick and choose. I made sure in this office -- it's not a library but we do a lot of group work that it is very academic in nature, and we have our own archive here people need to be able to lay on the floor if that's how they work. They need to be able to bust out different seating, and they need to have different auditory environments. I work in front of a big plate glass window because, frankly, when I know strangers are walking by, it stops me from checking Facebook. For them to see me hard at work, I need to be stimulated that way. To the extent that you can be creative, do that, too.
Davis: Roger that. Lauren what do you think?

Lauren: One of the things that I think we should do is be really flexible with people about how they work at their desks. I know I'll often have one of my bosses come in and have me tell someone who works for me to clean their desk off. But as long as it's not in someone else's space and they can get their work done well, and it's not a fire hazard (which I've actually seen, so in that case I would say something), we should just let people work the way they work well. I saw someone in the chat say that open spaces can be really distracting for someone with ADHD, and I actually need the big open space in order to be able to focus. I need the extra stimulus. There has to be noise. If I'm stuck in a room by myself, it can be really hard for me to focus. Every time I've had to write something, I've written it in a coffee shop, not a library, because then I answer people's questions even if I don't work there because I have no boundaries and that's a problem. But in a coffee shop, that is where I work. That's where I get things done. This whole situation where I have to work from home is a nightmare. There's dishes. I have stuff on the floor I have to pick up, I can't focus until it's all picked up. I can't focus until I've vacuumed and I can't sit and do a thing. It's impossible. I think one of the things to do is talk to people about what their needs are. I recognize that we're at least now in the workplace, we're all adults. We can think about what our needs are and we can talk about it and figure it out. We know how we work best. Once we once somebody says “how do you work best? what sort of environment do you need?” then you start to think about it, and you're like oh, yeah, no this is how I work best. And then just try to facilitate that.

Davis: A lot of food for thought with that, Lauren, for me personally. Halley, what do you think?

Halley: I think that there are some common elements, like task flow and the physical arrangement of the space, and the organization and storage, and not only just like the physical manifestation, but the logic behind it, if you're going to require that people find things or put things away, or things like that. The sensory environment is huge for me, personally. Quiet environments are important for me, but if there are small noises in them, it will drive me insane. I become very stressed out and very angry. I think finding ways, what makes people tick in the environment and what they need in order to do their best work. What I've seen a lot is “that's not fair” or “that person needs too much” or “that's not something that we can do.” Sometimes the environment is built for a certain type of person.

I think we are in a time when that needs to go out the window. If we're doing routine tasks, then going for a standard need or type of thinking might be helpful. But the types of collaborating and communicating and working and creating that we need to do now in 2020 requires us to really value, and not just face value -- “we're gonna let you use headphones” and “we're gonna let you sit on a ball instead of a chair” -- but that we really do value [individual needs] down to our core. There are people in leadership positions with neuro-diverse characteristics and we talk about it. It's visible and it's in our values, and I think that's what I would really like to see on a
physical and social level: those environmental modifications, but also the beliefs that underlie them. I can't emphasize this enough.

We talked about psychological safety earlier, and I think there is a time and place. We've been talking about behavior in the chat, and I think there's a time and place for thinking about the environment, but there's also a time and place for thinking about our social emotional competencies as adults, and coming at that from a transformative lens. We're not just like, "I'm a grown-up now and so I have all the skills I need to think and learn and interact and relate to people." I'm ever-growing. I think that if we value adult self-care truly, we'll give people the time and space they need to take care of their mental health in the way that is right for them. We'll create environments where self-regulation and self-management are possible. That's the type of environment that I'm hoping to see.

Lauren: That just gave me something I wanted to bring up. We're all working from home now, right? In public libraries, we have now proven that we can indeed work from outside the building. So if I have to write a report and I need to focus I should be able to leave the building. We know that this is possible now. I can schedule it, I can get away and think and write, and then come back and do the rest of my work. We've proven that this is possible, and so now as we move forward, we have this great opportunity to see like, okay, well, this is a thing. We've proved that it's possible. How can we integrate it into our environments, not being in the environment together to get our work done in more flexible ways?

Davis: Yeah, it's a beautiful idea to take what's working during this time and move forward and leave this stuff that didn't behind in the before times. Lauren, to that point I have one final question for the four of you and then we have a bunch of stuff in our Q&A. The last question for the panelists from me for now is: what advice can you share for staying on task when everything feels urgent and important?

Lauren: I keep a notebook, which was a notebook notebook until like two days ago, and now it's this [holds up iPad], which is exciting. I just write everything down. If I don't write it down, it's not going to happen. It just disappears. I've actually recently been reading a little bit about ADHD and object permanence. Say you're storing your craft supplies and you put something in a closed box, it's like it's gone. You forget that it's there, and then you buy the same thing over and over again because you just don't remember that you have it. Having everything in my notebook makes it there all the time. The only problem is when I lose my notebook. Hopefully, I will not lose the iPad.

And then, make priorities. I used to have a supervisor where I would go with a list of things I was doing and say can you just put numbers on these. Then she would number them, and then I would go and do them in that order. Make deadlines, particularly if you have ADHD. Make deadlines for yourself so that you have to do it by that time or it will not happen. Or ask the person asking you to do the thing to make a deadline for you so that you have to do the thing.
Otherwise you'll forget, because there's no urgency. We need urgency to complete tasks. When everything's urgent, you just have to figure out what's less urgent.

Davis: Understood. Halley what do you say to that question?

Halley: I cannot survive without lists. Ever since I was like a little kid, I just loved making lists. I would list all the names of my stuffed animals and all the characters in a book, and now I just make lists of all the things that I have to do. I make little check boxes and I check them off because that's something that satisfies a need for me. One need I have is to check things off. It's a pattern or a behavior that is reinforcing to me. Sometimes I meet that need in ways that are just not helpful to me; I'll sit and perseverate on something for a really long time. I have a multitude of ways in which they're vices. I try to take my vices and figure out replacement things I can do that make me feel comfortable and get me into a mental space where I'm able to do my best work. I also would say, sleep. For the love of God, we need more sleep. And drink water. I don't know how many times I can tell that to everyone I know, but everyone needs to know it, so everyone listening here: I hope that you sleep and drink water. Take care of your health and know your limits. One thing that's really big for me is I have horrible anxiety if I know I've done something wrong, or if I anticipate that there is the slightest possibility that something I could have done has been wrong. Sometimes that leads me to create a situation that is not good. And so I think you have to dig into your patterns of behavior and really see, “what is this need that I have and how do I meet it? And what is a healthy way for me to meet it?” So that's what I do.

Davis: That is great advice all the way through there. Tim?

Tim: I again will structure my answer as a reply in three parts. I would encourage people to seek out acceptance, establishing a routine, and then timeboxing.

I think understanding right now that we are in the midst of global upheaval and the systemic inequalities that have been driving so much of our day-to-day lives have been laid bare and exposed for what they are, and that's resulted in massive shifts to our way of life. The world is going to look very different, I hope. Be kind to yourself and understand that even on your best days, you might not be as productive. Your ability to do work is not limitless. You will need to reach out to your friends for support. Understand your limits, like Halley said.

To my second point about establishing a routine: there are a lot of strategies that we've implicitly discussed that are directly from cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavioral therapy. There is a book related to bipolar disorder that is a graphic novel. It's written by Ellen Fournier, I believe. It's called Rock Steady: Brilliant Advice for My Bipolar Life. It was written with a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to talk about bipolar disorder, so it goes over various coping strategies like the diving reflex. Since the pandemic has started, I will get out of my apartment and go for a five-minute walk and then come back into my apartment and sit down at my office to do my work so that way my brain psychologically divides up the space. Like “Okay, you are in work mode. This is your new coffee shop.” I try to be as consistent with that as
possible. Now, I don't have children in my life, so that makes it a little bit easier. Reaching out and finding different strategies that work for you is something I would really encourage people to do.

A third thing that I had mentioned was timeboxing. I personally live and die by my Google Calendar. I will demark every single part of my day of the amount of time that I go to sleep, the amount of time I schedule for eating breakfast, and I get periodic alerts on my phone throughout the day that say "Hey, here is your morning check-in. Have you had water? Do you need to go for a walk?" and it helps keep me on task. It allows me to disconnect when I need to disconnect, because I think too often now working remotely, I mean, I really struggle to divide my day in a way that really puts me first. With my condition, I know that stress is the biggest enemy, and when I am feeling overworked that my executive function will diminish significantly. It's important for me to have a physical reminder, to have an alert on my phone that will take me out of my head and allow me to breathe and do what I need to do to take care of myself.

Davis: Cole?

Cole: In a very concrete sense, identify what works for you and acknowledge that it will evolve, or sometimes simply be taken from you. In my environment, balancing being a parent, and being in court, and meeting clients' needs, and all this kind of stuff, and running the office, too, because I'm in charge and I have that responsibility. Before the pandemic started, I had a team who I would bring in to make sure they would set deadlines for me, or help me create a sense of urgency. I had yoga and longsword to drain off all of my extra energy. I had my office with a lot of external stimuli. Within two weeks all of my carefully wrought things that I had built over the course of 20 years of practicing as an attorney had just been stripped from me, and I was wandering around in my lawyer cave, and I had to admit that, even though I hadn't used it in over years, it was time to go back on medication. I made that sound really easy, but the self-realization and the mourning, and it felt like I had to admit some kind of failure. To Lauren's point, my leg is broken, I need crutches, right? And the crutches are right here, I can call and get them, why am I down on myself? And at this point, again, because just being a woman my age and where I live and all these things, I pretty much know that I have reached a place of peace for now, and that within another month or two things will change and I will need something else.

I have created, at this stage of my life, an environment where I am in control of my environment. And I think a lot of my needs led me to make those decisions, but not everybody's in that position. As I'm learning those lessons again, I'm trying to internalize that and be able to say, well, what about this person who can't say "I'm gonna do this or I'm gonna do that" or have the time to reflect about what they need? To tie it in, because we talked about intersectionality and the moment that the pandemic has created, and the way these skills require constant self-aware awareness, listening to others, respecting, giving the benefit of the doubt, being open to new things, saying “why do we do it this way?” And being willing to deconstruct, to maybe not do things the way we always did.
We are in professions that love their traditions. Libraries and lawyers, they do not like change, in my observation. I'm not speaking for everybody, this is just what I noticed where people have words and perfectionism. Using this awareness to say, either for your own personal needs or the needs of others that you are trying to acknowledge and honor, “where do we want to go? What's the end result and how can we help empower people to get there in a way that really really works for them?” Acknowledging that what worked for them six months ago, they might now need something different. It’s being on our toes and caring about each other, which sounds easy and is very hard.

Davis: Like all mantras. There's a pretty seriously big and weighty question that's coming up a couple ways in the Q&A and the chat. I'm going to do my best to put this forward to you in a way that makes sense. I'll combine this idea of managing or supporting the behavior of others. First of all, there's the way that we're managing human beings who may be neurodiverse. There're also the people in our lives and the public who may be neurodiverse who might be acting in ways that require intervention. I know this is a really big conversation, so I think we're going to focus on this until the end.

Lauren: I have a lot of thoughts on managing patron behavior. So many. I've tried over the last several years to take the time to do several trainings, one certified in mental health first aid. I've also been lucky enough to be trained as a trainer in the Crisis Prevention Institute, and I've spent a lot of time thinking and talking about how we interact with our patrons when they have more needs. I think the main thing that it comes down to is that we treat everyone with respect and we ask them to follow the behavior. We ask them to help us maintain the community that we're building in the library. When someone is pacing in front of you, and you have been told previously that the man had a knife, telling that person, “dude, you've got to get out” is an unsafe thing to have to do. I've been in that position. You have to treat it very carefully, and you have to have the training to treat that situation very carefully. Without the mental health first aid training, I don't know that I would have known what to do. But because I had it, I did.

The first thing that I would say is: mental health first aid training is an immensely important aspect of managing the space in the environment the library is in. I see somebody talking about not being cool with language that talks about managing other people's behaviors, but at the same time we can provide services, but we also have to manage the space that we're in and make sure that everyone's getting their needs met in a way that is safe for everyone else. When I've been in positions where it has not been safe, at that point, you have to interact with people in a way that helps them behave in a way that is safe. And that comes from having respect for them as people and talking to them and asking them what they need. County health departments provide mental health first aid training, since I've seen that question in the chat.

Tim: And I'll just jump in and go off of what Lauren was saying. Before the call, we had been discussing the Denver Public Library having had a virtual conference the other day on equity, diversity, and inclusion. I think a lot of words Lauren is saying rings true, that you have to have
these conflict de-escalation skills, that you have to have mental health first aid training. I think we can be working together to identify staff trainings, creating peer navigator programs in libraries to support those seeking help.

I think there was another question earlier on about why I kept referring to hiring neurodiverse staff as a gift. And I think, after I had worked in a very poor community in an urban library, there were people dying, there was always turmoil surrounding mental health in these larger systemic issues associated with poverty and violence. At the point of conflict that you have to lean on the credibility that you have built up with patrons through the library. Libraries are places of great social capital and people have great trust in us, they believe in us, and they really expect -- I think I want to be delicate when I phrase this, because as we've talked about in the webinar our language is one of the only tools we really have to interact with the world, so it shouldn't be coming from a place that is deficit-based. We want it to be aspirational. I think that by employing people from your community who are neurodiverse, by having people on staff with more diverse backgrounds, you are able to empathize and relate with patrons in a very humane way that lets them know they are being seen, that they are being heard, and they are being respected while they are in the building. That's kind of my two cents I guess.

Cole: Maybe I'll go so that the lawyer doesn't have the last word, because that would be not cool. I do want to say something from the legal perspective, which is that I worked with libraries that have either been the victim of theft or some type of crime or their staff has been stalked. Sometimes [these situations] can be impacted by a mental health concern and sometimes not; sometimes all we know is the behavior.

I think that the training piece and the piece of getting to know people is so important because sometimes behavior can be interpreted in a way that seems that the people witnessing it are taking it as an act of hostility, and it's not. And you can meet with behavior that might seem out of the norm from a place of awareness and competence and compassion, and not fear. I'm not going to mention all the many videos that we've all been watching over the last particularly five, six months of people having instances of acting out of a place of fear, and then getting filmed and calling police and all that.

At the same time, sometimes there really are people who, for whatever reason, are genuinely being predatory. And that is where I would say for people in a position to honestly look at the behavior and note it, and then work on collaborative solutions. This is where the buddy system is so critical, because one of the people on your staff may say, "I know that person. They may have a destabilizing situation going on right now and we really need to be thinking about their well-being." But at the same time, maybe an objective outsider would say "oh, this person, it's moving into a predation." And so, as you are working on this, we're bringing in the training and people who know and not going to that place of assumption, especially if your brain is having a fear reaction. Don't go with that. Call in the expert to come up with a genuine assessment of what's going on. I appreciate that these things take time and resources, so maybe Halley can speak to my pie in the sky vision of how to do this.
Halley: [Laughing] I’m always that person. I’m really happy that you went before me, Cole, because I feel like there’s been this thread of thinking that has been going through my head, and I feel like you brought it all together for me. So I’m gonna try and do that for everyone too.

We’ve been talking a lot about behavior as an observable thing that we can see. Cole, what you just said is that there’s bias in all of our interpretations of behavior, particularly when fear is invoked in your brain. You can’t really access your prefrontal cortex. In my job, I work with schools, and a lot of what I do is, I help them with their discipline practices. If anything about school discipline, it’s just heavily weighted on suspensions and expulsions, a lot of exclusionary procedures. And it disproportionately affects black students, pretty much all students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are English language learners, who are sometimes three or four times more likely to get suspended. What we do is focus on that training, but that training is, like Lauren said, about de-escalation. It’s not about power, it’s not about authority. It’s about de-escalating and moving away from this idea that our role as managers is to punish and deal out this justice. [These ideas are] influenced by our experiences and not by these more generic decision rules like you would have in law and even education. As we move forward, we can come at it, like Tim said, from a community aspect and, like Lauren said, like “you’re part of this community and I need you to help me make this a safe place for everybody.”

I think back to my classroom. I used to teach kids who had a lot of aggressive behaviors and really struggled a lot. It was never the case to just call them out for that behavior really publicly, really harshly. It was always trying to err on the side of “you’re really good at this, could you help me with this” or “you’re so important for us to do this right, can you help me out with this right now.” When people feel that sense of belonging, that is so crucial to the manifestation of a lot of these behaviors that we’re trying to manage or fuse out of the environment. I think that that’s what I want to leave it with: you can come at behavior from a punitive sense, but it is better for the community when you come at it from a restorative sense. You really focus on that healing, which you can’t do if you’re too busy punishing people. So that’s where I’m at with that.

Davis: Thank you all so much. It’s my total honor to speak with you today.