

MODULE 1

Foundations of Neurodiversity

Case Study Pack

Understanding Neurodiversity · An Educational Initiative of God's Diamonds
Version v1-1.0.0

© 2026 God's Diamonds. All rights reserved. Free to share with attribution.

USING THESE CASES

The following case studies are designed for practice and discussion, not assessment. There are no perfect answers. The objective is to apply the foundational concepts of this module—neurodiversity, the strengths-and-supports model, and the distinction between accommodation and belonging—to complex, realistic scenarios.

As your cohort discusses these cases, focus on moving beyond a deficit-based analysis of the individuals involved. Instead, practice using a strengths-and-supports lens to examine the interplay between a person's cognitive profile and their environment. The goal is to build a shared language for identifying barriers and designing more inclusive systems in the workplace, the family, and the community.

CASE 1: WORKPLACE

Anya is a mid-level data analyst at a rapidly growing tech firm known for its innovative culture. For two years, while the company was fully remote, she was a star performer. Her ability to find subtle patterns in massive datasets generated critical insights for the business. Her reports were meticulous, and her project completion rates were among the highest in her department. Her manager, David, considered her one of his most valuable team members.

Six months ago, the company mandated a full return to the office three days a week to foster "spontaneous collaboration." The office is a modern open-plan design with shared workstations, frequent background noise, and bright, fluorescent lighting. Since the transition, David has noticed a marked change in Anya. Her productivity has dropped, and she missed a key deadline for the first time. In team meetings, which are often unstructured, Anya is quiet and sometimes appears disengaged. She has started wearing large, noise-canceling headphones at her desk for most of the day, which a few colleagues have mentioned to David seems "antisocial."

Last week, a senior vice president observed a team discussion and later told David that Anya seemed "disengaged" and "not like a team player." The VP suggested David "coach her on her professional presence and communication skills." David is now in a difficult position. He knows Anya's work is exceptional under the right conditions, but he is facing pressure from leadership to enforce a behavioral standard that seems to be the source of the problem. Anya does not have a formal diagnosis and has never requested an accommodation through the company's ADA process. David suspects she may be hesitant to be singled out or formally labeled.

Discussion Questions

1. Using a strengths-and-supports model, describe Anya's apparent cognitive profile. What are her clear strengths, and what specific supports, previously present in her remote work environment, are now missing in the office?
2. How does the distinction between formal accommodation and a culture of belonging apply to David's dilemma? What would a compliance-focused, accommodation-only solution look like in this scenario, versus a solution designed to foster genuine belonging?

3. Without requiring Anya to seek a diagnosis or disclose a disability, what are three concrete, environmental changes David could advocate for or pilot with his team that might restore Anya's performance and simultaneously benefit others?

Debrief Notes

This case illustrates the critical role of the environment in either enabling strengths or magnifying challenges. Anya's profile appears to include a capacity for deep focus, pattern recognition, and methodical work. These are significant strengths in her role. Her challenges seem to lie in sensory processing (sensitivity to noise and light) and navigating unstructured social communication.

In the remote work environment, the environmental conditions supported her strengths. She could control her sensory inputs and engage with colleagues in structured, predictable ways (e.g., scheduled video calls, written chat). The open-plan office, designed to promote a specific type of neurotypical collaboration, created a high-sensory, low-predictability environment that actively undermines her ability to focus. The result is not a failure of her skills, but a failure of the environment to support them.

A compliance-focused solution would place the burden entirely on Anya. David would tell her about the company's ADA process and wait for her to produce medical documentation to request accommodations, such as permission to wear headphones or work in a separate space. This approach is legally sound but does little to foster psychological safety or belonging. It singles Anya out and forces her into a medicalized, deficit-based process.

A belonging-focused solution, as suggested by research on neuroinclusion from sources like Harvard Business Review, involves the leader proactively shaping the team's environment. David could reframe the conversation with his own leadership, focusing on retaining top talent by creating an environment where a variety of work styles can flourish. Instead of "coaching" Anya to change, he could coach the team on inclusive practices.

Tangible environmental shifts could include: establishing "quiet zones" or "library rules" in certain sections of the office; instituting "core collaboration hours" from 10 am to 2 pm, with the rest of the day reserved for focused, heads-down work; and normalizing the use of noise-canceling headphones as a tool for focus, not a sign of withdrawal. These are principles of universal design—they benefit not only Anya but also anyone who finds the open office distracting, thereby improving productivity and well-being for a broader group of employees.

CASE 2: FAMILY

Leo is a 17-year-old high school junior with a diagnosis of ADHD. He is highly intelligent and exceptionally creative, spending hours designing intricate worlds for an online game he is building with friends. When engaged in a topic that interests him, his focus is intense. However, he struggles significantly with the executive functions required for school. He frequently loses track of assignments, struggles to initiate non-preferred tasks, misplaces belongings, and has poor time awareness.

His parents, Maria and Ben, are in constant conflict over how to support him. Maria, seeing his distress and struggles, has adopted a strategy of intensive scaffolding. She emails his teachers for missing assignments, sits with him to break down every step of a project, and sends him multiple text reminders about his commitments. She is exhausted and feels like she is managing two full-time jobs.

Ben believes Maria's approach is enabling Leo's "irresponsibility." He argues that at 17, Leo needs to face the "natural consequences" of his actions. He believes that failing an assignment or being benched from the soccer team for being late to practice are the only things that will teach him to be more organized. He often frames Leo's behavior in terms of choice, using words like "lazy" or "unmotivated."

The situation comes to a head on a Sunday night. Leo has a major, multi-week research paper due Monday morning that he has not yet started. He admits he forgot about it until a friend mentioned it, and now the task feels so enormous that he is paralyzed with anxiety. Maria is preparing to stay up all night with him, mapping out an outline and demanding he write. Ben is furious, declaring this is the last time she should "bail him out." Leo, overwhelmed by the task and the parental conflict, has retreated to his room and shut down.

Discussion Questions

1. Ben frames Leo's inaction as "laziness." Using a strengths-and-supports model informed by what we know about ADHD, how would you reframe the challenge Leo is facing? What specific executive function supports are missing?
2. This family system is stuck in a cycle of crisis, rescue, and resentment. Where do you see a deficit-based mindset at play on the part of both parents? How does this mindset contribute to the conflict and to Leo's feelings of shame?
3. Beyond "rescuing" him on this specific paper, what is one strategy Maria and Ben could collaboratively adopt to move from a reactive posture to a proactive one that builds Leo's skills while reducing parental burnout?

Debrief Notes

This case highlights the profound misunderstanding that can arise when neurodivergence is viewed through a purely behavioral or moral lens. Ben's deficit-based framing of Leo's behavior as "laziness" or a character flaw is a common but counterproductive response to the challenges of ADHD. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), ADHD is not a deficit of attention but a developmental impairment of the brain's self-management system, a.k.a. executive functions. Leo's challenge is not a "won't" (a choice) but a "can't without the right support" (a skill gap). His ability to hyperfocus on game design demonstrates that his brain can pay attention; the challenge is in regulating and directing that attention, particularly toward tasks that are not intrinsically motivating.

The missing supports for Leo are external structures to compensate for his internal executive function challenges. These include systems for task initiation, time management, and breaking

down large projects. While Maria's impulse to provide support is appropriate, her method—becoming the external executive function herself—is unsustainable and fosters dependence rather than skill-building. Ben's "natural consequences" approach fails to recognize that for a person with ADHD, the consequence (a failing grade) is often too far removed from the point of error (not starting the project weeks ago) to teach the intended lesson. Instead, it often reinforces a sense of personal failure and shame.

Both parents are operating from a deficit mindset. Maria sees Leo's deficits and tries to fill them herself. Ben sees the same deficits and believes they must be punished out of him. A strengths-and-supports posture would involve both parents acknowledging the neurological reality of ADHD. They would see Leo's creativity and passion as strengths to be celebrated, and his executive function challenges as an area needing systematic, non-judgmental support.

A collaborative, proactive strategy would involve them working with Leo to co-design systems that work for his brain. This could involve using technology (apps for task management), visual aids (a large whiteboard breaking down the project into tiny, concrete steps), and time-based tools (using the Pomodoro Technique of 25-minute work intervals). The goal is not to eliminate the need for support but to shift the support from a frantic, last-minute human intervention to a predictable, external system that Leo can learn to operate more independently over time. This approach reduces parental burnout, minimizes conflict, and teaches Leo practical skills for managing his neurotype.

CASE 3: FAITH COMMUNITY

Chloe is a new mother in her late twenties who recently started attending a vibrant, mid-sized church with her husband and baby. She is eager to connect with other young families. Chloe is dyslexic and also has significant sensory sensitivity, particularly to loud, overlapping noises and crowded spaces.

The church's culture relies heavily on fast-paced, text-dense, and socially chaotic systems. The weekly program is a folded sheet of paper with small, serif font. During the service, sermon points and scripture are displayed on a screen, often with decorative backgrounds that reduce contrast. Immediately after the service, there is a loud, crowded "coffee hour" in the lobby. This is the primary time for connection and information. To join a small group, such as the "Moms' Group" Chloe is interested in, one must find the right table in the loud lobby and sign up on a clipboard being passed around.

Chloe has tried to participate. During coffee hour, the noise is so overwhelming she feels physically ill. She cannot locate the sign-up table in the crush of people. On the one occasion she found it, the handwritten clipboard was difficult for her to read quickly, and she felt too self-conscious and flustered to ask for help. After several weeks of trying and failing to connect, Chloe has started slipping out a side door a few minutes before the service ends. She feels isolated and invisible, a profound disconnect from the church's stated mission of "being a community where everyone belongs."

Discussion Questions

1. Applying the module's definition of belonging, explain the gap between this church's intention to be a welcoming community and Chloe's actual experience. Identify at least three specific environmental barriers to her participation.
2. The church leadership likely believes their systems are effective because they work for the majority of people. What unexamined belief about "normal" ways of processing information and tolerating social environments does this scenario reveal?
3. As a leader in this community, what are two low-cost, high-impact environmental changes you could implement that would not only help Chloe but would also expand the sense of belonging for a wider range of people?

Debrief Notes

This scenario powerfully illustrates the difference between an open door and a genuine welcome. The church's intention is to foster community, but its environmental design creates significant barriers for anyone whose neuroprofile deviates from the implicit norm. Belonging, as defined in our founding principles, is what happens when a community is intentionally designed so that diverse profiles can thrive without masking or burning out. Chloe is doing both: trying to appear "normal" in the overwhelming environment and then burning out, leading her to withdraw.

The primary environmental barriers for Chloe are:

1. Information Format: An over-reliance on a single mode of dense, low-contrast written communication that is inaccessible for someone with dyslexia.
2. Sensory Overload: The loud, crowded, and chaotic nature of the primary social gathering space, which is intolerable for someone with sensory sensitivities.
3. System of Engagement: A sign-up process that requires navigating a high-stress environment and processing visual information under time pressure.

The unexamined belief is that "normal" people can easily parse dense text, are energized by loud and crowded social settings, and can comfortably navigate high-pressure social logistics. This default setting caters to a specific neurotype—likely an extroverted neurotypical who has no sensory or reading-based challenges—and inadvertently excludes others.

A leader applying a neuroinclusive lens would recognize these as design flaws, not personal failings on Chloe's part. Two high-impact changes could be:

1. Diversify Communication Channels: Create a "single source of truth" for information on the church website with clear, high-contrast, resizable font. Use QR codes in the physical program and on screens that link directly to this website and to simple online sign-up forms. This benefits people with dyslexia, low vision, or anyone who simply missed the announcement. It allows people to engage with information at their own pace in a low-pressure environment.
2. Create Tiered Sensory Environments: Recognize that not everyone thrives in chaos. A leader could designate an adjacent classroom or outdoor patio as a "Quiet Connect" space during coffee hour. This provides an alternative for people who, for any reason (sensory sensitivity, anxiety, hearing loss, or simple preference), connect better in calmer settings.

These are not "special accommodations for Chloe." They are examples of universal design. They expand the welcome of the community by acknowledging that human brains vary, and a truly inclusive community offers multiple ways to receive information and to connect with others.

CROSS-CASE THEMES

An analysis of these three cases reveals several recurring themes that are central to the foundations of neurodiversity. These patterns demonstrate how a strengths-and-supports framework can be applied across different life domains.

The Environment as the Deciding Factor: In all three scenarios, the individual's distress or performance issues were directly attributable to a mismatch between their neurotype and their environment. Anya thrived while remote but struggled in an open-plan office. Leo could build complex worlds but was paralyzed by a poorly scaffolded school project. Chloe wanted community but was shut out by sensory overload and inaccessible information. The most effective point of intervention in each case was not to "fix" the person, but to modify the environment.

The Gulf Between Intention and Impact: The leaders in each case—David the manager, Maria and Ben the parents, and the church leadership—had positive intentions. They wanted their employee to succeed, their son to thrive, and their congregant to belong. However, their actions, or the default systems they were operating within, produced the opposite effect. This highlights the need for leaders to move beyond assuming good intent and to critically examine the actual impact of their structures and practices on people with different neuroprofiles.

The Transformative Power of Reframing: Moving from deficit language ("disengaged," "lazy," "antisocial") to a neutral, descriptive language of strengths and supports is the first step toward finding effective solutions. Reframing Anya as needing a low-distraction environment, Leo as needing executive function support, and Chloe as needing information in a different format changes the problem from a character flaw into a solvable design challenge.

Universal Benefits of Inclusive Design: The solutions proposed for each individual case have benefits that extend far beyond them. Quiet zones in an office help anyone who needs to focus. Breaking down large projects helps all students manage their work. Providing information in multiple formats helps visitors, seniors, and non-native speakers in a church. Proactively designing for the margins creates a better, more functional environment for everyone in the center. This makes a powerful business and community case for neuroinclusion: it is not about niche accommodation, but about better design for all humans.

Psychological Safety and Disclosure: The hesitation of Anya and Chloe to disclose their needs points to a lack of psychological safety. They feared being stigmatized, judged, or treated differently. A truly inclusive environment is one where the need for formal disclosure is minimized because the environment is already flexible and supportive. Belonging is the goal, and formal accommodation is the floor. When systems are designed inclusively from the start, fewer people will need to fight for the floor.