

Studying when you think differently

(Neurodiverse Community) - 21st March 2024

ISABELLA HENMAN: Good morning and welcome. Welcome to the Student Hub Live broadcast, one of the ones that I look forward to the most in the year, which is for our neurodiverse community, studying when you think differently. Do you feel that your brain works in a little bit of a different way to other people, do you feel that you are different, or do you actually feel, you know what, I'm not that different. I am the same as other people, but I do things in different ways. So this broadcast is for you.

I've got some wonderful guests with me today who are going to be talking through their experiences, giving some ideas about what works for them, what hasn't worked for them. We very much appreciate honesty within Student Hub Live, which is why we've got lots of different ideas. And hopefully, we'll have lots of ideas from the people at home. So my guests today are going to be Melanie, John, and Kate. And I've also - in the chat, I've got Elaine, Laura, and Heidi. And I'm going to go to Heidi first, because I know that people have been very excitable and sharing all sorts of things already. So Heidi, what kind of things have been going on, and can you explain a little bit about the basics about how these sessions work, please?

HEIDI: Absolutely. Hello and good morning to everyone. So as Isabella said, my name is Heidi. I studied with the OU for six years. I started in 2009 and I did my undergrad in literature. And I now work at the Open University. I've just finished up a role as alumni engagement manager, and I'm now working in the vice chancellor's office. So it's a real pleasure to come to Student Hub Live and share some of my own insights with you, because I do understand what it's like to study with the OU and juggle everything that you're juggling on a daily basis.

So you might find that this is a new format for you. If you've joined us at other events and it's been an Adobe Connect, this one looks slightly different. So you've got a couple of options. You can either just focus on the video and not worry at all about the chat, and that is absolutely fine. But if you do want to engage in the chat, as lots of people have been already this morning, then please do. It's lovely to get your questions, to be able to put them to the panel, and I'll be saying hello to a few of you in the chat in a moment.

We've got some widgets, as well, which you can engage with. So we'd love to know where you're joining us from this morning. So you can play around with the widgets and see how you get on with those. But as I said, if you'd rather just sit back and just watch, then that is absolutely fine.

The other thing to note is that these events are made available again afterwards. We record them. And so you can watch them back. So if you miss anything, if you need to go away, if you need to come back, you can just watch this again in your own time. And if you do want to engage in the chat, you might find that it goes quite fast. I certainly find that when I've tried to pull out everybody's messages.

And we've got lots and lots of people in the chat today. So there is a little pin button on the side just next to the chat. If you click on that, it will slow the chat down for you, and you've essentially got control of being able to look through it. And I find that that's really useful. So hopefully you find that a useful function too.

Now, in terms of hellos, we have got lots and lots of students joining us from Scotland this morning, which is great. So I want to say hello to some of our students in Scotland. We've got Carrie, who says that it's

freezing. And Carrie has got her big warm hoodie on. I've got the same. I've actually got my OU hoodie. My hair always covers the logo, but I've got my OU hoodie on, I've got my OU mug, so I'm all branded up. So I'm keeping warm as well today. I've got my pot of peppermint tea to last me the hour and a half. We've got Caroline, who's in Edinburgh, and then David and Deborah are both in Glasgow this morning. So hello to you. Livia is in Angus, Scotland. We've got Elizabeth in Kinross, Scotland, and says it's actually Baltic there, so very, very chilly up in Scotland.

I'd like to say Hello to a couple of our international students who are joining us. So we've got Sylvie, who's in Luxembourg this morning, and we've also got Rebecca who is in Switzerland. Melissa is in Devon. Melissa's got a work meeting at 11:30, so is only going to be staying for a short while. As I mentioned earlier, that's no problem at all. If you need to pop out and come back, or if you need to leave, you can watch this again in a couple of days. We've got two other Melissas in the chat. So Melissa is a really popular name for our students.

So we've got Melissa from London as well, and we've got Melissa in Lincolnshire. So lovely to have you with us. And then finally, we've got Heather in Reading, who's going for a nice walk after the show, and I'm going to be doing exactly the same, Heather. And we've also got Valerie in Chelmsford. Says it's lovely and sunny here today, and Valerie has already been out and doing some gardening this morning, which is really nice to hear. So it's great to have you with us, and I really hope that you enjoy today's show.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Brilliant. Thank you, Heidi. And that's wonderful we've got so many people from Scotland. And I'm going to get this in, because those people who've ever heard me talk before know I have a bit of a liking for Strongman, and Tom Stoltman and Luke Stoltman are both from Scotland. And Tom Stoltman, who won world's strongest man twice and is an exceptionally good Strongman - Luke, his brother, is also very good, and he won Europe's Strongest Man, but Tom is autistic and has been very open about his struggles and how he's managed and how he's managed to achieve, but when he doesn't achieve as well. And it's quite an interesting thing.

So I know Amy's already said, I've been having troubles knowing what to say and knowing what to put information is. And Arabella also says, I'm very different but I like that about me. And I think that's a really good thing to begin with. I just realised, I didn't even introduce myself. My name is Isabella Henman. I'm one of the hosts of Student Hub Live. I've been involved in these events since we started the online workshops many years ago. I'm a tutor. I'm an access tutor, level 1, level 2, and do various different things within the University.

And supporting students is a massive passion of mine, and helping recognise that there's lots of different ways. And one of the things that we're going to be talking about today is that we all have different views. Some of us may have the same different views. Others will have different different views, if that makes sense. But one of the things that is important is there is a quote - now, I'm just going to make sure we get this quote right, because I'm very clumsy sometimes.

And it is, "When you have met one person who is neurodiverse, you have met one person who is neurodiverse." Or "when you've met one person who's neurodivergent, you've met one person who's neurodivergent." Now, we've actually got a couple of different things. And I think that's a very important one to start thinking about. So Jon, I've just used two pieces of terminology there. Some people might like one. Some people might like another. Can you explain a little bit to us about what that means and what those terms mean?

JON RAINFORD: Yeah. Thanks so much, Isabella. So I suppose it's really interesting how language and terminology changes over time. Neurodivergent is how I would identify as a person, because a person has a brain that works in lots of different ways. So that "divergent," different to the general population. Neurodiverse is talking about a group of people who all think in slightly different ways. So there's slightly different terms. You will see them being used differently. Different people have opinions on them. And that's absolutely fine. And our language evolves as we understand and develop understanding about different areas.

So don't worry if the language doesn't quite resonate with you, I suppose is what I'm saying. Use the language that works for you and think through it. And it's OK to get it wrong occasionally. Me and Isabella have had this conversation before, that because language changes so often, you may use the wrong terms occasionally, and that's OK as long as people are learning and thinking about it.

But what does that statement mean to me, about when you've met one person that's neurodivergent, you've met one person that's neurodivergent? I suppose what it means for me is that every single neurodivergent person is slightly different. So I identify as being dyslexic and having ADHD. They are my two characteristics. But the way they intersect and manifest in how I experience the world is specific to me. I didn't find out I had ADHD until last year. I'm 42 now. So you can see that I went through most of my life not knowing I had ADHD. I developed coping strategies which are specific to me.

Somebody who might find out that they've got ADHD at the age of six might develop their lives very, very differently. That doesn't mean I don't have things in common with those people that also have ADHD. But how I experience the world is slightly different.

And I think that's really important, that whilst labels can be really helpful, actually, our individual ways of being in the world are specific to us. And sometimes, what might represent one person's experience is absolutely not their experience. And I know we've got Melanie and Kate with us today who probably have very different experiences of being neurodivergent to me. And that's great, because that diversity is really important.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Thank you, Jon. That's really helpful. And in fact, you were mentioning having an adult diagnosis. And Kate, I know you also had an adult diagnosis, didn't you? So could you tell us a little bit about your terminology and how having an adult diagnosis did or didn't impact you, Kate?

KATE SKINNER: Well, let's see. So hi, everyone. I have got five neurodevelopmental disorders. It's quite a lot. So I've had them all diagnosed as an adult, which is also quite a lot. That's a lot to deal with all of a sudden. So I've got ADHD, got some autism, got dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia. It sort of goes on like that. And the thing with all of those is getting them diagnosed later in life, obviously, it does help to illuminate that which has happened over the course of your life.

You can look back. You can reflect. And it's allowed me, I think, to finally somewhat take charge of - I never lived up to my academic potential. I never did particularly well at school. I didn't do college at all. I dropped out, like, four times or something in total. But I'm able to focus a bit more now. I'm able to puzzle it out, finally. I'm able to get there and go through the processes and trying to learn and all this kind of stuff, probably, basically, for the first time, really. Because it's just sort of never quite worked for me. So I'm not quite sure what the question was. I just went off on a tangent.

ISABELLA HENMAN: No, that's fine. And actually, that's a really good thing. I'm always doing that with the "I don't remember what the question is," but you talk, and that's absolutely fine. For the people that are watching, I've prepared - I've spoken to Kate, I've spoken to Jon, and I've spoken to Melanie. We've

got all sorts of ideas that we want to share about our own experiences, experiences as individuals, experiences as adults, experiences as students, experience as people who work.

But we're going to be talking about quite a lot of different things along the way. Now, some of you might actually find that works really well with you, because sometimes, the ADHD brain goes, oh, here, there, and everywhere, quite like that. And other people might not like that because they might prefer things slightly linear. But yes, Kate, you did give me some brilliant answers there. And actually, I want to, before we move on to the next topic, I want to come to Melanie as well, because am I right in thinking that, Melanie, you also had an adult diagnosis? Was that correct or not?

MELANIE RIMMER: That's right. I was almost 50 when I got my diagnosis of ADHD, and then subsequently self-diagnosed as autistic, because all three of my children have autism diagnoses, and I started to recognise that that described me as well.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. Thank you. And actually, I can see that [INAUDIBLE] said she was eight - sorry, I can't read - 48 diagnosed with ASD in December. It's weird getting a late diagnosis. Maybe, Melanie, we can talk a little bit about late diagnosis in the middle. And Arabella said, I found it a relief. It made sense of the whole of my life. I just wish my parents had known, but I doubt my dad would have taken it seriously. That's a shame, Arabella, but hopefully, you've got people who take you seriously now. So Melanie, Kate was saying that actually, it made sense of things, but she wished she didn't know. What kind of things did you find it helped to actually have a diagnosis at the age that you got it?

MELANIE RIMMER: It completely changed my internal script, because all my life, for nearly 50 years, there were a variety of things that I repeatedly struggled with, repeatedly failed at. I identify with what Kate was saying about dropping out of college several times, about losing jobs and getting fired and messing up all kinds of stuff in my life. And my script had always been to blame myself, because other people blamed me and said, you didn't try hard enough. Why couldn't you just focus? What is the matter with you? And I repeatedly told myself off and told myself to try harder.

And after my diagnosis, I was able to start working on - it didn't happen overnight - to start working on changing that script, and instead of going, you're useless, you've messed up, try harder, I was able, instead, to say to myself, you've got ADHD. This was difficult for you. Try a different way. And that just made all the difference in the world.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Brilliant. I think that's that thing - and I know I was going to talk to Kate about this later. So we'll probably come back to it. But this idea of, you just said, you have ADHD - try a different way. It's actually recognising, actually, you know what? There is something wrong. I'm going to use that terminology. And there is a disability, because it is - it is, technically, a disability. It's a diagnosed disability. And if you want support, you need the diagnosis for the disability. And I think that is something we'll come back to.

One of the things I wanted to do, just so people know, is we've been talking about individual at the moment, but Student Hub Live is about community. And we're going to come on and talk about the neurodiverse community. We subtly mentioned it earlier. And you've got a widget about, what does community mean to you?

So we're mainly thinking about the neurodiverse community here, but maybe you could add things. So there should be some information there. Hopefully, that will be showing on screen so you can add your thoughts. But I guess, Melanie, if I come back to you, did you find that you - you said about, you knew

that there was something then, and you could change the script. Did you feel that there was any kind of neurodiverse community? Did that mean anything to you as a terminology?

MELANIE RIMMER: Yeah. Weirdly, most of my life has been spent being involved in disability studies and disability activism, although I didn't think I was part of that community. I was particularly interested in - and still am - learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities. I don't have an intellectual disability, but lots of people who have intellectual disabilities also have autism. So I thought I was very well-versed in autism and Asperger's syndrome and all kinds of topics like that, and then all of a sudden discovered, oh, that's me. And there was a whole new set of things to find out about it.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And I think that's quite an interesting thing, isn't it? It's the - some people - that quote that we had earlier. One person, but actually, oh, it's me. And there are other people that are similar. And Jon, I know that you have some feelings about that. How do you feel that this idea of the neurodiverse community works for you, Jon?

JON RAINFORD: Yeah. I suppose it's really interesting, isn't it, because I think we build our own neurodiverse community, sometimes, without realising it. The reason I went for a diagnosis last year is because one of my friends got diagnosed, and I realised I'm really similar to them. And actually, when I started talking to friends about my diagnosis - oh, yeah, that's me too.

And actually, it's really interesting how your group of friends seem to be neurodiverse people because we all think in these crazy ways. If I ever open a WhatsApp with my best friend, it's full of conversations that start, stop, go into sidebars, go into side conversations. How I didn't know before then that my brain worked a lot differently, who knows.

But I think that's really important that we do find our own community. And I think there's something for me that's really important about finding your community, your group of people, that get it, because actually, that then gives you permission to be you. So I know if I go to my friend who has very similar neurodivergences to me and I go, I just can't cope today. Everything's falling apart. I just can't focus on anything.

She won't try and go, oh, try and work harder. Try and do something differently. She'll just say, yes, I know, it sucks, doesn't it? And actually, just having someone else that gets it from a first-person point of view, I think, is really important, because it gives you permission to feel the way you do rather than - I'm sure this will resonate with Kate and Melanie as well - rather than masking for what society expects you to do in a certain situation.

We're expected to get on with it. We're expected to work our 9:00 to 5:00 and be productive the whole day. And that's not how an ADHD brain works. So actually, giving permission to go, do you know what? Just go out for a walk. Just go to the gym, because actually, you'll be more productive later. And having people around you that can reaffirm that rather than make you feel like you're the one in the wrong.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. I think that reaffirming, being able to say to somebody, yeah, it sucks, and recognising - obviously, you're not just going to say, oh, it sucks all the time, and you're not going to do anything. And I know, Kate, you feel very strongly about this as well, don't you, in terms of getting this idea of recognising - I'm going to use the word "wrong" again - the disability. There is a disability and you need to work with it. Can you tell me a little bit about what you mean by that before we then we'll come to the community widget in a minute, because I know that it's almost ready?

KATE SKINNER: Yeah. So I think it comes down to, there's a process I think a lot of people go through upon getting a diagnosis, especially, I've noticed, later in life, in that there appears to be almost a sort of a

phenomenon of grief that a lot of people can experience. There's a sense of - there can be a bit of mourning of what they thought, like - what could have been tends to be like a sentiment I encounter a lot. Like, what could have happened if I got diagnosed earlier? And honestly, a lot could have happened, both positive and negative.

And part of moving through that process, I think, is understanding and coming to terms and finding peace with the fact that you do have a disability of some kind, be it ADHD or another neurodevelopmental condition. And finding a way to accept that and working with that and incorporating it into yourself is, I think, probably one of the better paths to finding - kind of redefining your function abilities, I suppose, finding some emotional peace, finding some function. And so yeah, so I'm very much a fan of trying to - even if reality is uncomfortable, finding a way to accept it and come to peace with it. That's important to me.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. Thank you, Kate. That's really, really helpful. And I knew you would be able to explain it well. Since we spoke about that, I've tried to bring that out as number of people in conversations. And I was like, I wish I could use Kate's words, because they worked so well and expressed it. Thank you. That's really helpful.

So hopefully, we can show the widget now, the word cloud of community, of what it means. So let's have a look what people have been talking about. So community's about support. It's about understanding. It's about acceptance, togetherness, belonging, friends - those ones that you can say "it sucks" to, Jon - the connection, the comfort, the friendship, and the shared experience.

And I think that's a really, really useful thing there, because all of these things, they're positive things. Actually, I'm really happy that people have been able to bring out those positive things there. Now, I know that there have been a number of things that have been coming in. So Heidi, I think it's a very good time to come to you. So what kind of things have people been sharing? Has there been - I'm sure we've had some lovely ideas and suggestions from people.

HEIDI: We really have, Isabella. Yeah, it's been incredibly busy in the chat. So I'm going to do my best. I've been trying to kind of group some of the themes together, because it's so interesting hearing people's different experiences. But something that lots of people have experienced is either extremely long waiting lists when it comes to being diagnosed and lots of hurdles in the way in that process, or those that haven't been able to be diagnosed at all but feel within themselves that there's something perhaps a bit different, a bit unique about them.

So I just wanted to share some examples that have come through in the chat, because I think that it's really important to create that sense of community and to remind people that they're really not alone. So in terms of a late diagnosis, we were talking about that there. So Croix had a late diagnosis of autism, dyslexia, and ADHD. And Croix says, I wish my past college tutors were watching this.

Livia says, I was diagnosed in my early 30s with autism and dyscalculia. I do hope that I pronounced that correctly. Emma was diagnosed with ADHD last October. Catherine says, I've only recently been diagnosed with autism, and I'm still finding it difficult to get support, and I just turned 50 last year.

Charlene. I was diagnosed with high-functioning autism and dyslexia when I was 34.

Sarah, I haven't got a diagnosis, but I've spent years thinking I was odd and weird and there was something wrong with me until I had my kids. Only one has been given a diagnosis. My girls have struggled. But it's been a huge eye-opener fighting for my child, and actually it's helped Sarah realise that she's not, in her words, weird or odd at all.

We've got Rebecca from Edinburgh. She was diagnosed with autism last December at the age of 41. Rebecca says, there's so many mixed emotions around this. The person who delivered my diagnosis described it as a grieving process when you find out later in life.

And Rebecca says, I think that's a really great way to phrase it. So lots of people sharing their thoughts here. Kaylee says, it's reassuring that there are other people here without a formal diagnosis. I feel so lost and in limbo with all of this sometimes. And hopefully, Kaylee, you're really getting that sense that you are absolutely not alone in that. And so many of our students are experiencing similar emotions.

I've got a couple of questions, Isabella that have come in. And I think it would be great if we could put these to the panel. So the first one is from Natalie. Natalie says, I'm struggling with imposter syndrome, as I know that I'm neurodivergent, but I'm still trying to get a formal diagnosis and I feel really lost. And I thought, that's a really nice way of - that question captures so many of the thoughts that other people are having.

So for those individuals that are feeling lost and they don't have a diagnosis, what advice can we give them in terms of that first step?

ISABELLA HENMAN: OK, great. Jon, I think you've got some ideas here. So perhaps, Jon, you could say what your thoughts are about that. What would you like to say to that person?

JON RAINFORD: Yeah, I suppose I'd like to start off by saying self-diagnosis is valid. And I think that's a really important point to start with, actually. The former diagnosis is really important, and it will give you access to support and all sorts of other things that come with it. But actually knowing something about yourself sometimes is enough to start you on that process.

It's worth kind of just giving a little bit of history. I don't want to kind go into the background of neurodiversity - neurodivergence here. But actually, historically, you could only be either diagnosed with ADHD or autism, many years ago. It would be one or the other. You couldn't be diagnosed with both. So there's a lot of people with one of those conditions that were diagnosed as children that may have both, but the system didn't allow them to be diagnosed. So the way things have changed means that just because you have a diagnosis, a label, doesn't necessarily capture everything.

I got diagnosed with dyslexia back in 2009, and I thought, ooh, that's the answer to all of my problems. I'm dyslexic. And then last year, find out there's actually ADHD in there as well. So that self-diagnosis process is really valid, I suppose.

In terms of being an imposter, though, we are all individuals. And actually being able to understand that we think differently and we may have different needs and starting to articulate those is just as important as that bit of paper that says, this is what we think that need is in my mind.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Great. Thank you, Jon. And I think that whole diagnosis thing, whether you get a diagnosis or not, is something that's often resonant with people. And I've spoken to a number of students who say, well, I think this is, but I don't have a diagnosis, or I don't feel that I can declare to the University that I've got a disability because I haven't got that piece of paper.

And I also know - and I don't have who it was there. But I know that there was somebody who's been really struggling with trying to get a diagnosis and they've been on the waiting list. I've spoken to a couple of colleagues who have been on these waiting lists. And I know it's really challenging at the moment, because there's resources - there's all sorts of other issues. And we're not even going to go down that line.

But as Jon was saying, if you feel this applies to you, feel free to say to the University - contact your student support team or say, I need to say to the disability support team - this is me. I don't have a diagnosis, but this is me. Perhaps somebody could help me. And part of what the University does is we try to provide help. We can't provide everything. We're not first-line medical support and that kind of thing. But we can showcase resources and things that are available.

And I think that's something quite important, because there's this balance, isn't there, about, we're all unique, but we're part of a community. We have to find the way that works for us and we have to consider students at the University - as it happens all of us here. I'm a student. Jon's a student. Melanie and Kate is. We're all students is the long side of things.

And studying requires effort. It requires you to think about what you're doing. I have to put myself into my study brain. I try to study on a Friday, so I don't agree to meetings on a Friday. I still deal with emails and things like that, but I don't do meetings. And I'm I try to make sure that day is focused on trying to study. But actually, my emails are my little bit of a relief. And I think some of my guests might actually identify this. This is just a me thing. It's not anything. But it's, sometimes, you have different things that are treats to help you.

And now, I think maybe this is something that resonates from - maybe from the ADHD perspective, from what people have told me - is that you have different things. And I believe it was Melanie, you said to me about, you do something for a while and then it doesn't work anymore, so you have to move on to the next thing. Perhaps, could you tell us a little bit about that, Melanie? I think I've remembered that it was you that said that to me.

MELANIE RIMMER: Yeah, definitely. So people quite often ask me, so what helps? What's the answer? What do you do to fix your ADHD? And I haven't. I don't know. But I do have lots of tools that work for a bit. So for example, does anybody bullet journal? I might get into bullet journaling for a while. And I'm really good at keeping the bullet journal, and it just helps organise everything. And then after a few weeks, it kind of wears off.

And I've got a shelf at home with lots of part-filled in bullet journals that then get abandoned. And after that, I start using an app. Maybe Trello is a nice app that I like, and I use that, and that organises my life and helps me get my to-do list in control. And after a bit, that just stops seeming to work. It becomes overwhelming or I stop remembering to check it.

I'll move on to something else and I make a sticker chart on my wall with puffy sparkly stickers, and that stops working, so I go back to the bullet journals. And I've got a whole list of tools. And none of them work forever, but all of them will work for a bit, and I'm always on the lookout for another one. I firmly believe in my soul that somewhere, in WHSmith's, probably, is a piece of stationery that's going to fix my life, and I'm on the quest to find that piece of stationery.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yes. Other brands are available, but WHSmith does have some really good stationery. And this is while I search around. And I know I've got all sorts of - they're somewhere on the mess that is my desk, down there. But yes, different Post-Its, different coloured Post-Its for different purposes. We love that kind of thing. Yes, I'm sure you can get them other places, but yes, they're good. But I think this is a good idea to think about some of these practical ideas of things that help. So Melanie, you went through - so you mentioned Trello, you mentioned apps, you mentioned bullet journaling. Could you tell us, actually, a little bit more about what each of those are? Because I'm sure there might be some

people listening going, actually, you know what? I'm not sure what that is and I'd like to know a little bit more. So maybe could you start with bullet journaling and explain what that is?

MELANIE RIMMER: Bullet journaling is quite a tricky one to look up, because there are lots of people who put bullet journals, and basically, it's an art project, and there's lots of colouring in and stickers and making it look very beautiful. And I found that that was unhelpful to me because I will happily spend all my day colouring in and putting stickers and glitter on stuff, and it doesn't actually get anything achieved. But as it was originally conceived of, it's a very simplistic way of keeping a note every day of, what are the priority things that you need to do that day and what things are further down the line, and what you have done and what you wish to do. And it's very simple. You just need - any old notebook will do, and any pencil or pen. So it's very streamlined. And that's good. It kind of focuses on the essentials.

Trello is an online version of a Japanese system called a kanban board. So behind me is a whiteboard, and I could turn that into a kanban. Kanban is simply the Japanese word, I think, for whiteboard. And you divide that into three categories of To Do, Doing, and Done. And there's also a subcategory of things that you're waiting for. So you send an email to somebody and you're waiting for the reply. I usually put things on Post-It notes. You mentioned Post-It notes. I've got a massive collection of all kinds of amazing Post-It notes.

You write on Post-It notes and stick it on your kanban board and move it from To Do to Doing to Done. And then at the end of the month, you can take a photograph of all your done things and keep that as a record. And Trello is an electronic version of that. I think I like systems where there's something quite concrete, where you're physically moving a sticker about or actually putting stickers on a chart. That sort of concrete operation is helpful to me.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And that's quite a good word, that concrete operation that - I often talk to people about pinning things down and finding ideas. Now, not everybody likes that idea. Not everybody likes having something. But actually, this is building up some different suggestions. Now, I will come back to practical suggestions in a minute. But I understand there's some quite a bit of disagreement or different viewpoints about terminology at the moment. So I think it might be a good point to go to Heidi. So perhaps, Heidi, can you tell us about some of the things that have been discussed in the chat, and maybe we could bring them out?

HEIDI: Yeah, absolutely. As I said, because the chat is moving so, so quickly, I'm doing my best to keep up with everything. So if I don't ask your question or if we're not responding individually, please, we are doing our very best to keep up with the chat, so please continue to engage, because it is so fantastic to see everybody's points.

I wanted to just draw out one of the comments that Megan made, and then we do have a couple of other questions. So Megan says, I don't have a diagnosis, but I do declare that I'm disabled in my OU profile, and my tutors always message at the beginning of the year as to whether I require any additional support. They're always so lovely about it.

But then we had somebody else in the chat saying that they didn't have a particularly good experience with that. So I didn't know if you wanted to pick up on that in terms of for those that don't have a diagnosis notifying the OU, and then just drawing in with that, Rachel has said, I'm still really struggling to get to the "it makes sense" part.

So Rachel says that she has a lot of guilt and a lot of self-blame about the things that she deems that she has messed up. So I wondered if that was something that we could perhaps pick up on a little bit, just in terms of OU support and also supporting those that are being really hard on themselves.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. OK, so what I'll do is I'll just explain a bit. But then I think Kate's probably going to be the good one to talk to about some of those words and not beating yourself up. So I'll come to you in a moment, Kate. But in terms of the profile aspect, absolutely. So when we do the Freshers events, we say, about declaring information, it's up to the individual, at the end of the day, how much they want to declare.

Anything that's mentioned in a disability profile is never to the detriment of the student. Often, it's to try and give tutors and the University a bit more information about you. And there's also certain things - it's almost like there's trigger words. So if there's particular words that are mentioned, then there's sort of links that you will be provided or you'll get access to different things, because for instance, if you say I've got mental health problems or I've got mental health challenges, it won't be clear what they are. They could be anxiety, there could be depression, or some people refer to neurodivergence as their mental health condition.

So that's why giving as much information as you can helps, and also, saying how it could potentially impact you as a learner. Now, sometimes, you might not know. But if, for example, so some of the things like Melanie was saying about knowing things don't work and changing, or knowing that you - like Jon was saying, that sometimes, the days just don't work, and you have to do something else.

So maybe recognising that, sometimes, you might need to do things in a different way. And you may have, for instance, been booked on to a tutorial. And if that's the point where you are feeling really rotten and your brain is not playing ball, you won't be able to turn that tutorial. So you might have to watch the recording. And as an Open University, there's lots of flexibility. There are certain things that are pinpointed in time, but there's others - so hopefully, that gives a bit of an idea.

Now, I know there's been a lot of discussion in the chat - and I'm going to come to Kate about this - about different terms. And some people refer to themselves as neurospicy. Some people refer to themselves as neurosparkly. Some people don't know how to refer to themselves and struggle with those ideas. So, Kate, could you perhaps tell us a little bit more about some of your views about that, and how, if people are sort of beating themselves up or struggling to come to terms with things, what kind of advice would you give? So lots of questions for you there.

KATE SKINNER: That's all right. Sorry for coughing. My asthma is playing up, guys. So effectively, I'd like to start off with people who, as you are saying, are describing beating themselves up, and also the person or people who feel the imposter syndrome thing, as well, because it ties into this.

I have seen a lot of people - because I've basically been a community manager for an ADHD support group for a while now. And I see an awful lot of people go through this process of doubting themselves, of wondering, am I faking? Listening to media narratives as well, oh, is it because it's a trend? Getting accused of stuff by people they know, sometimes, especially if a programme has maybe just aired that wasn't particularly good about the situation that they think they might be in, like, say, ADHD or something like that.

It's so common to feel like that it should probably be a part of the diagnostic process at this point, in my personal opinion. I see so many people struggling with this all the time. It is completely normal. It is absolutely, completely normal for you to be sat there doubting yourself, because you don't know until you

get the assessment. All you're asking for, from the medical world at large, is for an opportunity to discover if this is actually the case.

You're not out there just going, oh, yeah, I'm just going around saying whatever you want to say. You just want to go for a process and see if you meet the criteria, at the end of the day. And that's fine. That's completely fine.

When it comes to beating yourself up and things, I just want to say that everybody here has made a conscious decision that they're going to come in and they're going to learn something. And some people are going to become researchers, and other people are going to write lots of books, probably. And I am happy to be around my future neurodiverse colleagues, basically.

And it's like, that's a really good thing. That is - when you're having moments where you're feeling like you've messed up, or you can't do things, or like you're having that sort of really negative internal debate with yourself, I think remembering that you have chosen to make a difference in your own life - you, of your own free will, have decided you're doing this now - that's actually really, really cool. And that's something I think that you could maybe try to focus on a little bit more sometimes, and actually recognise, no, even though it is really, really difficult for you, you're still doing the thing, and that's really, really cool. So yeah.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And in fact, it fits really nicely as one of the things that we actually wanted to ask people at home. Tell us some positives about being a neurodivergent student. Because Kate was saying that fact that she's sitting there - you've made this positive decision. You've made this active decision. You're going to do something.

OK, yeah, some of the time, it's hard. It's hard for everybody. Some of you will find it going - you're shouting at me going, but it's harder for me. Yeah. Absolutely. Some people are harder. There's some people that there are more challenges. But you have made the decision to be an OU student. You're amazing. I mean, come on, you're doing everything alongside everything else. Sometimes you forget. And I say this to my students. And there are certain people, if they're here - Mira Soler, I don't know whether you're here today.

But you need to hear this. You're great. You're doing this. You were so cross with yourself, you beat yourself so much up when I was talking to you the other day - and several other students who may or may not be listening - and I'm getting really emotional, now, about this. But please hear it. Please hear, you are brilliant. You are doing this. So I'm going to cry. So, Heidi, I'm going to come to you while I just get a grip can you tell us some of the things that people have been saying at home.

HEIDI: Oh, god, you start crying - I immediately start crying when anyone starts crying around me, so we're not the best two to have on this. Maybe they need to rethink the co-presenter next time.

In terms of conversations going on in the chat, something that's been really interesting is that, Lee asked the question in the chat, is there anyone here who is anti-routine? Do you absolutely hate routine and feel repelled by it? And I thought, you know what, Lee, I've never thought of that before. I've always thought that everybody is striving to have this more specific routine, and that's the way that we can tackle the day. But actually, there are so many people in the chat that are saying, I hate routine. It doesn't work for me. Chrissy says, I hate routine. Kelly says, yes, Lee, I can't follow routine for the life of me. Rachel says, Lee, my ADHD hates it and my autism needs it. It's hellish. And then Deanne says, routine gives me the ick. And Olivia says, routine feels like an extra demand on me, and I struggle with demands. So I thought that was really interesting.

And obviously, when you're studying for TMAs and you've got deadlines, you've got all of that additional pressure on you. So it's really interesting to see people sharing about how those that don't cope very well with routine or don't like routine are coping with their studies. So thanks to everyone that's sharing everything in the chat. Like I said, it is so busy today, which is wonderful. So I'm going to pick up as many of your questions as I can.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Thank you, Heidi. And I've got a grip of myself now. Whilst I was off camera, I got a grip of myself. And I know, Kate, you wanted to actually come in on that routine thing. What would you say? I think Jon, possibly, is somebody that would mention routine as well. So if I come to Kate first, what do you want to say about the routine idea?

KATE SKINNER: So a lot of people live, I think, in a sort of state of paradox, where you've got - as you say, you've got, maybe, something on the one hand whereby - maybe it's an obligation. You're obligated to do the reading for your TMA or something like that. That's where I'm at at the moment. [LAUGHS] And then there was another part of you, if you're this way as well, where, yeah, as you say, the idea of sticking to a routine is this awful, horrible thing.

It's something that can be navigated. For example, I know a lot of people will suggest, at the OU, to block in time to study and things like that. So they'd be like - block out time in order to study. I don't do that. I just study when I want to study. And what I do instead is I just try to cultivate opportunities to feel like I might want to study.

If that sounds a bit complicated, it's more about getting things right for me to be able to feel like I can study without having to commit to, at 11:00 AM on a Tuesday, on the dot, I am there with my book open, because I'm not, actually. I'm actually very much not. Sometimes, I study at 3:00 in the morning because I've got - can't sleep, or something. So I'm like, I may as well try and read a bit of a book or something like that.

So yeah, you've just got to try and go with the flow in that sense, and try and make it work for you, and make the opportunity available for you in your own head, in a way. Try and - if you can, sort out your immediate study environment. If you don't do anything else in your whole house, just the immediate study environment. All those big things where you can get a lot done because you've already taken away the physical mental clutter and just stuff like that.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Right. Lovely, thank you, Kate. And Jon, I know that when we were talking through - actually, Melanie, I think, has got something first. So sorry, Jon, I keep saying I'm going to come to you, but if I come to Melanie, what did you want to add here?

MELANIE RIMMER: Sorry, Jon. Yeah. I wanted to say that we're often bombarded with these messages that there is a right way to do various things in your life. So for example, studying. And yeah, this idea that you need to block out the time, and you need to be sat down at your desk at a certain time and do the work.

And one that caught me out was the "eat the frog" advice. Have you ever seen that one? There's a saying that if you - somebody said that if you eat a live frog first thing in the morning, then nothing worse will happen to you all day long. Oh, I'm in a room where the lights go off if I don't move, so I'm just going to wave and make the lights come on. There they are. Right.

And so this "eat the frog" idea is often turned into advice that you should do the nastiest task, whatever on your to-do list is the most horrible thing that you're most averse to, you should do that first in the day and get it out of the way. And that will make you feel like the rest of the day is easier. It's a downhill ski slope.

And I tried to do that. I actually got a postcard of a frog and I blue-tacked it near my desk to remind me to eat the frog.

And I lost so many days where I did nothing whatsoever because I could not eat that frog, so I never got past the first thing on the to-do list and I never did anything at all. And in the end, I tore up the stupid frog and decided that that didn't work for me at all, and I was going to do something different, and I would maybe start the day with an easy task, with a fun task, and get in the mood. And sooner or later, I might tackle the frog.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. I think that's important. And I think whenever I'm giving students advice about doing exams, I often have different viewpoints from some of my colleagues, but some of them say, oh, do the worst thing first. And I say, no, no, no. You ease into things. You do the things that are easiest. That's my way. If I had to do the nastiest thing - personally, the getting up in the morning is sometimes the nastiest thing for me. I don't want to do that. So no, I'm not doing anything else to make me feel worse.

MELANIE RIMMER: Or eat the frog first if that works for you. This what we're talking about today, is diversity, divergence. And what that means is what works for one person might not work for you. So don't listen to what everybody else is telling you, you ought to be doing it this way. Instead, play with your own life. Experiment. Try things out. And then hang on to what works. And embrace the fact that your life is going to be unique, and it might be messy compared to somebody else's, but if you have put into place the strategies that work for you, you will get to the finish line.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Absolutely. Thank you, Melanie, that's very apt. And Jon, I've been promising I was going to come to you. You've been patiently waiting. But now, we're expecting some brilliant pearls of wisdom because you've been preparing them in your brain now.

JON RAINFORD: I was going to say I've got so much of both what Kate and Melanie have said there. I think I challenge this idea of not liking routine, and maybe it being not liking other people's routines or expected routines, because actually, if you can develop a routine that works for you - that may change from day to day. It might not be the same routine. But that's a routine. And actually, for me, it's about having that novelty in my routine.

So as Isabella knows, I take on lots and lots of different projects and say yes to everything, but that works for me, because actually, being busier gives me a whole range of different tasks to do, you know what? I don't want to do that thing today, but I really want to do that thing, so I can do something, whereas if someone gives me one project to do and I don't want to do that frog project, then like Melanie said, I will do nothing all day.

So actually, sometimes, it seems counterintuitive to take on more stuff when you're struggling to do anything, but actually, that novelty, for me, is really important. And I think the other thing that's been really important for me for study is creating my own deadlines. So there is a study calendar. I cannot keep to a study calendar because someone else is telling me that's what I should be doing. And there's almost like this block in my brain that goes, someone else has told me to do this, so I'm not going to do it.

So I will have all sorts of deadlines that nobody else knows other than myself. But they exist in my head. And they really help keep me on task, because I know that although it says my TMA's due on the 21st of the month, in my head, I want that thing done on the ninth of the month, which means if things all go wrong, I can play around with it. But that's my deadline. And because I've created it, there's almost like this dopamine thing of, I want to hit my deadline because I've told myself I'm going to do that, not someone else has told me I'm going to do it. I've told myself I'm going to do it. So sometimes it's about

gaming that system to work out how your brain works and how you can make your brain work in someone else's system.

ISABELLA HENMAN: I think that's a really apt - and it reminds me of Deborah, who was one of my guests on one of the online workshops. And she said she was always told, you won't be told. And what she meant by that is exactly what you were just saying, Jon. If somebody else told her to do something, nope, I won't do this. And sometimes, it fits in - and I know we've had a number of people share in other workshops about this. So saying, yeah, if somebody else tells me to do it, or somebody else says this, no, I'm not going to do it, because it's them.

But it's when you tell yourself - or it's, as you say, nobody else knows those deadlines, but it's what works for me. And actually going, yeah, that's my thing. And that's how it helps me. That's really helpful, Jon.

Thank you. Hopefully, some people at home will go, you know what? That might work for me.

Now, we asked you a little while ago, before we did the "Melanie for prime minister" bit, what kind of things - what are the positives of the neurodiversities? And I know Leah says, I really enjoy hyperfocus and my problem-solving skills, and Croix says, my neurodiversities are my superpower and have opened many doors for me.

I know not everybody likes the superpower thing. If it works for you, if you like the idea of your superpower, that's great. That's fine. Heidi, I'm going to come to you. So what kind of other things, what kind of other positives, have people been sharing?

HEIDI: There's not all that many, to be honest, in the chat. So it'd be great if people could put more in the chat about some of those positives about their experiences. Actually, what's so lovely to see, Isabella, is that there's so many conversations going on, and really, really supportive engagement going on, which is just really lovely.

So just when we're talking there about the real positives, so Elizabeth said, I got told that I couldn't do a degree, and here I am almost in my last year of university. That makes me proud. Even though I hate my results, I'm still doing it. Elizabeth, exactly. You're still doing it. You're so hard on yourself to say you hate your results. You're almost there. You've almost got your Open University degree.

It is so hard to do this, to do the study. As I said in my introduction, I studied with the OU for six years. I know how difficult it is to study for an OU degree. But it is so rewarding and there is so much support there. Natalie put a lovely comment in the chat. Studying with the OU has made such a difference to my life and given me a purpose in life when I felt I no longer had one, and it's helped me to understand myself so much, and I have more confidence in being my authentic self as well as the pride in getting this far.

So we're really getting that sense that people are feeling proud of themselves, which is wonderful. And we really want to draw that out more in everyone. So we hope that you come away from this session feeling really proud. And it's like what Kate said. It's the fact that you're here, you've made that decision, you're doing it.

So Lisa said, I just got my first TMA back and it was a terrible score. It's kind of made me feel I shouldn't be doing this. I should have spoken to my tutor, but as per usual, with me, I struggled on not understanding what part B was asking, and by the look of the mark, I failed myself.

First of all, Lisa, you didn't fail yourself at all. Remember what Kate said. And Rachel responded to this, saying, my first tutor told me, for the first two years, we are learning to learn at university level. So please don't be too hard on yourself, Lisa. It gets easier, I promise. And I thought that was lovely. So lots of

really, really supportive conversations going on in the chat, which I'm struggling to keep up with, but I'm doing my absolute best.

ISABELLA HENMAN: That's fine. So Jon, I know that you've got something that you wanted to bring in there. I'm not quite sure what it is, Jon, but perhaps you could share, please.

JON RAINFORD: Yes. So it's just to share with the students some findings we found with some research we did with students. And this question of having marks and what's a good mark and a bad mark is something that's really common across neurodivergent students. The expectations we create for ourselves may be not matched with the expectations that a university has. And quite often, what we might think is a bad mark is actually a really good mark.

And I think that's really important to - I know students that we talk to, it's like, I didn't get 100, so I can't do it. And actually, no one hardly ever gets a 100 in any assignment, ever. So to put that barrier on yourself - because I didn't get 100, I didn't do as well as I could do, is a problem. Actually, if you're getting a mark for your assignment, you've demonstrated something. You've learned something. If your next mark can go up slightly more, you're making progress.

That's what you need to worry about. Actually, the number, especially at level one, where it doesn't count to your degree, is really irrelevant. As long as you're making some progress, that's what really needs to matter. Which kind of takes me to a wider conversation about actually talking to your tutors about these sorts of things.

Tutors are humans, and think this is really difficult when you first start as an OU student, even further into your study, to realise that it's not like the relationships you had with your teachers at school, which, lots of neurodivergent students will have very, very negative past experiences of education. We are all humans. I'm a tutor. Melanie's a tutor. Isabella's a tutor. We're coming here and sharing our authentic selves today and talking to you about what it's like.

That is my experience of the majority of tutors that I've worked with at the Open University. And actually, by saying to them, do you know what? I really don't - I'm struggling with this mark. I feel like I'm not understanding it. Enables you to have that conversation with your tutor. So rather than festering away worrying about it, actually trying to start that dialogue with your tutor, I think, is really, really important, because then they can understand what you're struggling with. And that can be really helpful.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And before you carry on, Jon, I just wanted to say, we've opened a widget for people at home which actually relates to what we're talking about, which is whether you feel different or not. Because this relates into what John was saying about having this relationship and knowing - and knowing what's a perfect mark or not. So you'll see that there's that widget about how different do you feel. We'll come to that in a little bit.

But sorry, I just wanted to make sure people knew that was there, Jon. But yes, so bringing that out, and this idea, then, of - I just want to go back to the marks and some of your research. So what kind of other things - other than the mark, what kind of other things did your research show?

JON RAINFORD: So I suppose around the marks, but also around the language. There's so much complex terminology we use on Open University modules that's sometimes not explained. And actually, sometimes, that feels impenetrable. It feels like you can't do it because you don't understand those words. And you almost feel like you're the only person that doesn't understand those words.

But until you've verbalise that, then you realise that other people don't understand as well. And this is what I mean about having that conversation with your tutors on tutor group forums. And that's a really

scary thing to do. You don't want to say, I don't understand something. But I can guarantee every single student, you are not the only person that doesn't understand it. And also, if other people don't know what you're struggling with or understanding, they can't support you, which I think is really important.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. That bit. And actually, we'll show the widget, because it really, really resonates with what you're saying. So if we have a look at the widget, so this is - obviously, this is self-selecting the people here. But look how many people actually feel they're very different. So where you were talking about, Jon, in terms of that terminology, at the end of the day, everybody that's learning is on a learning journey and needs to learn the terminology.

But if you feel very different from your peers, maybe that terminology works in a different way from you. Did you actually find anything about - did you have any sort of whys in your research and your results, Jon?

JON RAINFORD: Yeah, I think it's that - if give the example of referencing, because I think it's a really good example here, is that a lot of the students we spoke to said, I still can't reference because there's always something corrected by my tutor on the referencing. And there's two very different things for me there - the fact that we can always improve on our referencing. I write academic papers. I can still improve on my referencing and still get things corrected. But I also can reference. And I understand those two truths can be true together.

Whereas I think a lot of students see the corrections on the reference and go, it's still not right. I can't do this. And I think there's that difference, isn't there, of when you're feeling in somewhat of a negative mindset, anything negative reinforces the fact, well, I knew I couldn't do this, and here's some reasons why I can't do it.

So than actually going, no, it's better than it was last time and I'm making some progress, we focus, sometimes, on the negative, because we already feel like we're that imposter that someone talked about before. If you are feeling like you're an imposter, any negativity will just, in your brain, go, well, see? I told you, I couldn't do it. There's proof that I couldn't do it.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, it's that categorical. Melanie was talking about these concrete things earlier. It's almost like it's an either/or. Either it is absolutely perfect and I've got every single thing right or I'm rubbish and I can't do it at all. But actually, there's somewhere in the middle. It is actually a continuum. So as a tutor, I give lots of feedback.

And not all of it is saying, you have to change this. Some of it is going, have you thought about this? This is something you might like to do moving forward, as well. It's not necessarily impacted your marks now, but do you think maybe, Jon - I don't know. This is a question. Do you think that, for students who have got neurodiversities, that there is a difference with understanding that, or is it a student thing?

JON RAINFORD: I think it depends on the neurodivergent condition. So there is something specific about ADHD called rejection sensitivity dysphoria. Lots of long words there, but essentially, it means that we can feel the rejection a lot more emotively than someone else might do. So when you get that feedback, that emotional reaction to negative comments on the feedback is felt more strongly. And lots of neurodivergent people will feel emotions more strongly.

And that can be a, really, barrier to us actually seeing the positives in that feedback because we are hyperfixated on that negative language. And think that's the point. Neurotypical people are very good at sometimes separating the positives and the negatives and seeing all those different shoulds, coulds,

might like to, must. But actually, sometimes, it's really hard to see those things if you're coming with a neurodivergent brain.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And Melanie, what would you like to add here? I know that - I'm sure, from our conversations, you will have lots of useful things that you wanted to say as well.

MELANIE RIMMER: So going back to the idea that a lot of neurodivergent students might have had some very negative and painful experiences of being at school - and I want to couple that with the idea that Jon brought up about rejection sensitivity dysphoria, which is contested by the medical community about whether that's really a thing or not.

And it may be that it's part and parcel of being ADHD and something about how our brains are wired, or it may actually be a carryover from the trauma that we've experienced from a lifetime of being told that we're bad and lazy and inadequate and wrong, and that actually, if we could treat children with ADHD in a different way from a young age and stop giving them all those negative messages, that they might grow up without RSD. And we won't know until we try.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And I know when we were talking - I'll come to you. I'll come to, Kate, I'll come straight to you. You're very keen. OK, please add.

KATE SKINNER: Hi. Sorry. Sorry. I've just been enjoying listening to the discussion. And I guess one of the things I wanted to bring up is, sometimes, when I get, say, a bit of feedback that I don't particularly like, let's say - I did not approve of this feedback. I'm not happy. What I'll do is I'll adopt what I like to call a supervillain mindset.

So to deal with the brunt of being told, you really did that wrong, I like to go, you - effectively, you say this to me now. You laugh at me now, kind of thing, and go down a little tangent like that, because I found that it helps to get you over that initial thing, and it kind of motivates you going forwards to go, actually, no, I know what I'm doing. I am going to achieve my goals and you cannot stop me. And just that kind of stuff. It's like, yeah, supervillain mindset. It can kind of help, weirdly.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. That's really helpful. And I think it links in one of the questions we want to ask people at home, is how you've changed the task to fit your brain. Now, I'm going to get Melanie to explain a little bit about what we mean here. You were sort of hinting at it a little bit. But Melanie, could you explain what you mean about changing the task to fit your brain so that people know?

MELANIE RIMMER: Yeah. So back to this idea that we get all these messages that there's a right way of doing studying, so for example, that you need to dedicate a whole day or a whole evening, and you're meant to sit down and focus really hard and be very concentrating.

But you might find that, actually, if you try to focus on writing an essay and dedicate a whole day to it, maybe you've taken some time off work and made big sacrifices to do it, but actually, your brain just can't focus for more than about 10 minutes at a stretch, then instead of beating yourself up and reiterating these negative things that you've heard throughout your life, that there's something wrong with you, that you can't do this, you might try and see, well, can I write an essay in 10-minute bursts?

What happens if I spend 10 minutes now, and then I go off and I water my plants in my garden, and I come back and I do another 10 minutes of essay writing, and then I go to the shops, and then I come back and I do another 10 minutes? Can I make it work that way so that the task fits what my brain can do instead of trying to force your brain to do a task in a particular way that you've been told is the right way when that simply doesn't work for you?

I was thinking a while ago about the parable of the tortoise and the hare. And the message that we get from this story, that we're told from a tiny age, is that you're supposed to be the tortoise. You're supposed to be, slow and steady wins the race. Do a little bit of work every single day. And I realised just a couple of years ago that I am not a tortoise. I am a hare. I can do massive amounts of work in a short space of time, and people will look at me with astonishment at how much I've written in a tiny little - in an hour, and I've written 1,000 words.

But I can't write 1,000 words the next hour and the hour after that, and I can't tell when I'm going to get a 1,000-word hour. It just comes out of the blue, and I've got to jump on that wave and write my 1,000 words, and then my motivation will abandon me and I'll be able to write nothing else for ages. And I'll be like the hare that's curled up underneath a tree and fell asleep.

But then another 1,000-word hour will come along, and I'll jump on it, and I'll do it. And after all, the hare crossed the finish line not very far behind the tortoise. In my experience, the hare crosses the finish line ahead of the tortoise.

ISABELLA HENMAN: And it's OK to be a hare. Yeah. I think that's really important.

MELANIE RIMMER: It's OK to be a hare.

ISABELLA HENMAN: And Rachel has said - Rachel really, really agrees with you. And said, yes, I'll do two weeks' worth of work in a weekend and then I'll stare at the wall for the next three weeks. And Livia says, it's the flexibility rather than a brick university that worked. And Chrissy also says, I see problems differently to others, so I can solve things in different ways.

Now, when I was talking to you, Melanie, I was thinking about some of the things that Kate has got. So Kate has got something called zettelkasten, which is something that sort of fits in some ways to this idea of doing things in different ways. And could you explain a bit about this, Kate, and we can hopefully show a couple of images to help people? So what is zettelkasten, for starters?

KATE SKINNER: Yeah. So basically, feel free to show the image. It started because I was thinking about, essentially, the idea of metacognition, where you're trying to understand how you work, and think about thinking, basically. And I realised that when my current methods I was using weren't working, I needed to change something.

So I was looking around online for different sorts of study skills. What could I use to out my notes? My notes were massively disorganised. I'm sure a lot of people can relate to that. I'd write things, lose them, all that kind of stuff. And I work digitally as well. So that's kind of impressive. So it's just too many notes, basically.

And I came across something that you might have heard of if you, likewise, go online and look for study skills stuff. But I found something called a zettelkasten. So it's a note-taking system, and what it allows you to do is it allows you to effectively build a database of your thoughts and your notes and link them together and create connections as though you're writing a Wikipedia.

You can link it by hashtags, even, all this sort of stuff. This particular one is my current module-wide one. So that's just all of my notes for everything right there. That's been done in a programme called Obsidian, which is free, which I mention because it's specifically - it's got all of its features while being free. There are other ones available that do have things that you have to maybe pay for if you want them, like Notion and one called Roam.

And they're all basically the same sort of thing. They're just a way of organising notes. It's quite complicated to learn, sometimes. However, it's probably not something to do if you're in the middle of an

assignment right now. Now is not the time to do it. But if you were looking for a new way to organise notes, I found that it can help you see what's connected to what from a very top-down view, so you can be looking at like - you can make a little zettel.

It's basically box. It's like a German word for box because of what it is based on. But you can make a little zettel, effectively, of an assignment. So I've just made one for TMA 03 - currently doing that in like psychology at the minute - of just trying to link all of these different theories together, link the themes together, link - is it a social thing or is it a developmental thing?

And all this kind of stuff. And try and just make all these little links that when I go to write my essay, I can visually see and access all of those links, and it will take me to a page that just has like a write-up of the study on it that maybe I've done. And yeah, it's all grouped by hashtag, stuff like that. So something that, yeah, you might not know exists. And it might interest you or it might not work for you. It's kind of complicated, but it is also quite good.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah, it looks very interesting. I have to say, my brain looks at that and goes, whoa, that looks really confusing.

KATE SKINNER: It's fun. Yeah, it takes a little bit of work to set up, but it does work once it's going. It's kind of like that.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. So what we've been saying all along is, there's different suggestions. Different things work for different people. This works for Kate. Maybe some of you will go, you know what? I like the idea of making links and making associations. That's great. So Heidi, I'm going to come to you, back to this idea. But so what kind of things have people been sharing? Are there many things that people have been able to come up with how they've changed the task, or is it one of those things where you go, it's that terminology, we don't really know what you mean?

HEIDI: Yeah. Loads and loads of conversations. So I just wanted to pick up on - something that a lot of people are talking about is to do with kind of those energy bursts when they're studying that we were just talking about. So Wendy says, I'm doing a creative writing TMA right now, and quite a few people have said they can't come up with any ideas, but as soon as I saw the stimulus I wrote down about 100 really different ideas and then I went for a nap. So I thought that was good.

Andrea says - Andrea asked the question, has anybody got any advice about how we can snap out of these freeze modes? Or the other issue is sometimes just having no interest or no energy to do studies. And there's lots of people that were kind of reflecting on that in the chat. And Emma says that she regularly gets up for dance breaks and then put "wiggle, wiggle" and says that that helps with that situation.

And then another thing that's come up in the chat - and it was Rachel that brought it up - who said the mix of ND and menopause brings up a whole new condition. We have a hard time. My hormone nutritionist treated me for this with supplements. And then Zoe came back saying, Rachel, I think that I'm perimenopause. And really struggling more than ever before. My filters aren't as good as they were previously.

And then a lovely comment in the chat from Lee. I don't know about anyone else, but I've got a real boost of confidence seeing all you guys on the chat room and knowing you're all ND and taking the steps towards study. I just hope there's opportunities to keep in contact throughout our studies, and then asked the question, does the OU have an ND chat room that's perhaps available?

And then Rachel said, Lee, it's really reassuring to have this chat. And yeah, having a chat room would be fantastic. So I think one of the questions that I'd ask - and Isabella, you're probably best placed to respond - is how people can stay in touch? Do we have an OOSA group? How can people stay in contact? Because the sense of community that we're building this morning is really strong and people seem to be really enjoying it, which is great.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Thank you, Heidi. So in terms of that, there are some of - there was an Open University Students Association ND Group. I believe, at the moment, it is on hiatus because they needed somebody to help run it. I believe there was a Facebook group. It might be available on some other channels. There could be a Discord one. We will attempt to find out and add them to the links to the page there. But I know that there's a couple of them.

Now, in terms of the Student Hub Live community ND, this is our live broadcast. We also have workshops. There's one coming up in a couple of weeks - I think about three weeks' time - where we'll be talking about planning to complete EMAs and coming up with practical advice. And in all of those online workshops, I have a guest each time who discusses some of their experiences, and everybody gets the chance to discuss as well.

Now, one of the things you'll see is, telling us about any apps or strategies that help you, because there was these - people are asking for ideas. Now, we can give you ideas. And I'm going to come on to Kate in a minute for some of hers. But what other ideas of anything help?

Because as Jon was saying earlier, everybody is different. Everybody has their own ideas. So if you've got some to share, please feel free to share, and hopefully, Heidi will be able to crawl some examples. So Kate, what kind of strategies - is there anything that you want to add here? I think there probably was.

KATE SKINNER: Yeah, sure. One of the things I think that's really important to managing your study and your wellbeing is to become aware of the idea of burnout and how it can sometimes impact people quite differently depending on the condition that you may or may not have.

And what it can do is it can sometimes, in some people, almost take a chunk out of your cognitive abilities. I'm basically in burnout right now. My current assignment is really hard for me. It's so complicated, and there's so much to get through, and I was already overwhelmed by the last one. And I'm just sat there looking at this thing going, oh, no, I have to write how many words on this really complicated subject? Oh, OK.

So part of my strategy is just trying to manage that bit of it, because someone mentioned there was an inertia or something along those lines, where they felt like they couldn't complete tasks or interact with tasks. That's quite common in things like burnout. And I think managing - it's really difficult, because obviously, you have all these deadlines. But one of the only real ways to get through it is to give yourself time to rest, especially cognitively.

You need to have a way of having a mental break, else you will just burn out. I think it's really, really common. And yeah, so basically, just make people aware that's a thing. And it's a thing that, very often, needs to be managed. But it's also not necessarily a thing they'll tell you when you're having an assessment, or even after you're diagnosed. I don't think I ever had anyone talk to me about what it's like to actually push yourself really, really hard when you have these sorts of issues.

ISABELLA HENMAN: I think that's an important one. Yeah, and it does help. And we're asking people at home lots of questions. There's also this idea of, how do you build confidence in yourself? How do you

have faith in yourself? Kate was just saying about the recognising, she said, about the burnout. And it's really sad to hear that. And I completely identify with that.

Sometimes, when I've been working on something so much, I just want to go, you know what? No. And I think it would be really good to get some ideas from my guests as well. So Melanie, what kind of things have you got? Have you got any ideas about having faith, having confidence in yourself? How can you boost your wellbeing as a neurodivergent individual?

MELANIE RIMMER: I wanted to come back to what Kate was saying about what happens when you push yourself really hard and you can burn out. And I think that is particularly a risk for neurodivergent people, because I think there is a massive gap between what it feels like to have a neurodivergent condition and what it looks like from the outside.

So for example, I think, quite commonly, people who look from the outside might see me, when I've got deadlines coming out my ears, and I am sat on the couch all day eating Pringles and watching television, and they might look at me and think I'm lazy. Looks like I'm lazy. I'm not doing anything. But actually, if I was lazy, if I was having a nice time, I would be sitting there thinking, oh, I don't care about all those deadlines. I'm just going to eat Pringles and watch television.

But actually, what's going on inside is that my brain is screaming at me the entire time, you've got all these deadlines! Why don't you get up and go and do the work? You are so lazy. Get up and do the work. And the more it screams at me, the less I am able to. I'm not lazy. I'm actually frozen.

But if you internalise the messages that people are telling you - they're constantly telling you that you're lazy and you're not trying hard enough - then you will tell yourself, try harder.

Another analogy that I sometimes use is that it's as if I'm in a car and the gas pedal isn't working. So I'm putting my foot right down the gas is as far as it will go, and my car is just going along very, very, very slowly. And all the other cars driving past me will go, why are you going so slow? Put your foot on the gas. You should be putting your foot more on the gas.

And they don't know, actually, that my foot is all the way down. But if I believe them, then I will be thinking, I need to put this gas down even harder. So I might already be giving 100% of all of the resources that I've got, and I'm trying to give even more, because I'm not getting the output that people would expect from the amount of inputs I'm putting.

But if I am then got my foot to the floor for week after week, month after month, year after year, that is a surefire recipe for burnout. It's because people are telling me I'm not trying hard enough when, actually, I'm trying 10 times harder than anybody else and have been for years.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. So in terms of that, so going back to this - so does the eating Pringles and sitting on the television, does that actually - sitting on the television. What am I talking about? Sitting watching the television. Do you find that actually gives your brain that little bit of a - I know you said it was screaming at you. But were you, at the same time, actually almost doing a, I'm stepping back a little bit, and actually, I'm doing a bit of a relax, ready for when I can do the next one? Does that work that way?

MELANIE RIMMER: Well, I think that's what you've got to do. And I think that's usually what I'm not doing when I'm eating Pringles in front of the television, is that I am constantly telling myself to do more. And actually giving myself permission to stop, because if I had a day off, I probably wouldn't spend it on the sofa eating Pringles. I'd probably go and do something fun. I might leave the house and go out for a walk. I might play a video game that I enjoy much more than just vegetating, and do something.

So I think that, sometimes, the solution to that burnout and freeze is to stop screaming at yourself, give yourself permission to absolutely stop, that you're having a day off, so do something nice.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And I think that's really important. And, Kate, what kind of things would you like to add here? Because you mentioned that you help with the support group, so I'm sure you have these conversations with people. What kind of things -

KATE SKINNER: Yeah, really, really common. I just wanted to mention that it has to be recognised, I think, that getting through things like states of burnout is a process. It's not something that just sort of happens, really. It takes time to work - that's why it's so awful when you have deadlines, basically, because it takes time to work through it. It is something you can work through. It's just unfortunate, really. One of the things I find that is useful for me in my studies when trying to manage burnout is I will often remind myself of, effectively, it's kind of like why I'm here, plus it's like, I kind of feel like I have this internal belief that I feel like I've got the answer to a question that I feel hasn't been asked yet, and I would really, really, really like to ask and answer the question, but it's going to take me a while to get to the point where I'm able to ask and answer that question, and I have to then accept that, yeah, this is now a process of time I have to go through. I have to manage and I have to look after myself through it so I can get to the point where I'm asking that question.

And things like that, the sort of - it's not just that people are here because they want to improve themselves. There's often, then, a higher goal still for a lot of people. And I think that focusing on that higher goal - still, aspects of it - is a way of managing your well-being and stuff, especially when times are really hard. So you have to start, really.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. That's really helpful. And I think bringing that out, it reminds me, when I first started university - I did go to a Brit university first time round, and I was doing all the days and all the time. And my dad said to me at the time, maybe you should have a day off. And I was like, I can't possibly have a day off because I've got this - like Melanie was saying, I'm just shouting at himself.

It wasn't - it wasn't neurodivergent, but it was just me going, I have to keep doing it. I have to keep doing it, because if I don't do it, I might miss something. I couldn't miss any lectures.

And I think it was when I was revising for my second-year exams where I just went, you know what? I'm not going to work on Sundays anymore. I am going to take Sundays off. So I'm not going to study on a Sunday. And I'll do something else. And initially, it was like, it's one-seventh of the week. Oh, my goodness me, how can I possibly do that, because that's all that time? But I have kept that ever since. So I don't work on a Sunday. I don't study on a Sunday. The only time I have worked on a Sunday is when I worked in a care home, because you can't really say to people, sorry, I'm not going to come and look after you on Sunday.

But I don't do that. And as Melanie was saying, it allows you to have a bit of brain space. It allows you to do something else. Yeah, OK, it might be doing the shopping. It might be doing the cleaning. It might be doing the gardening. It might be doing jobs. But it's a different way because your brain is doing something different on that day. But actually, you know what? Often, you get to have fun and you get to do something else.

And for me, as a worker and as a student, it is time that doesn't exist for working and studying. So it's not there. So I'm not not doing it, if that makes sense. And I think, Jon, I'd like to come to you now for some of your insight, because I know, from the research and from other things, is there anything else that you can

think of that might help people here? We can't give answers, but have you got any insights from your own experience?

JON RAINFORD: Yeah. I suppose it comes back, to me, to the question we said - or the statement we said right at the beginning, of when you've met one neurodivergent person, you've met one neurodivergent person, because I think it's really important to find out what works for you and what makes your brain work better, and how to optimise that.

And this also brings me really nicely to people asking questions about diagnoses. So I developed all these strategies before I even knew I had ADHD, while I was doing my own PhD. And I know that I can read academic papers in the morning. I cannot edit anything I've written first thing in the morning. My brain just doesn't work that way. Likewise, I can't read in the evening, but I can edit in the evening. So I work my days around when my brain works optimally in those different ways. I also know, if I stop thinking when I'm at a computer - as other people have said, I've just kind of glitched and can't do anything at all - going out for a run or a walk actually gets my brain going again.

And I'll suddenly realise that thing I was worrying about thinking about at the computer will suddenly work four miles from my house while I'm out on a run, and because I know those strategies and I've developed those strategies, I then have to remember to use them at the time that's most appropriate. But other people that's not going to work for. Running will not work for everyone. I'm absolutely -

ISABELLA HENMAN: Too right.

JON RAINFORD: I talk to lots of neurodivergent people who find things like knitting and crochet - and for me, it's the same process. It's an activity that's repetitive that you don't actually necessarily have to think. About because once you're doing it, if you're good at running, if you're good at doing crochet or knitting, it just becomes a motor skill, and that actually allows your brain to drift off to other places, which sometimes gives it that mental rest you were talking about before without actually resting.

Because I think, same as Melanie was saying about the Pringles, if I'm overwhelmed, the last thing I want to do is let myself rest, because I feel like I'm getting more overwhelmed because those tasks are sitting there and still not being done, whereas if I'm doing something like going for a run, yes, I'm not doing what I was meant to do, but I'm still doing something. And I think that's, for me, one of the really key things, is find out - someone called it to me, the other day, productive procrastination. And I think that's a really nice term.

ISABELLA HENMAN: And I'm glad you said that rather than me. In fact, it reminds me of something, Melanie, we were talking about and you explained to me about optimal stimulation. Have I got that right? Because, actually, that fits in. Can you just - I know I'm going to come to Heidi in a moment. But can you explain what optimal stimulation is first, Melanie, please?

MELANIE RIMMER: One of the things that people often struggle with is a task that is important to do but that isn't very stimulating, and so you get bored and your brain zones out. So for example, during the COVID lockdowns, I spent a lot of time in Zoom meetings. And while I found today to be absolutely fascinating and stimulating, I usually find being in Zoom meetings to be understimulating, and it's hard to focus, and I zone out.

And then somebody will go, Melanie, what do you think we should do about that? And I'll go, I haven't heard a word that's been said for the past 10 minutes. But if you can pair the understimulating activity that you have to do with another activity that just fills up that little stimulation gap, then you can focus. So Jon was talking about knitting and crochet. I love fibre arts. And I've recently discovered spinning. I don't know

why I never tried - literally spinning yarn on a spindle. Don't know why I've never tried it before. It's stimmy. All the autistic people here, it's really stimmy. You should try spinning. I'm a huge fan.

But what I did during the Zoom lockdowns was - I've always wanted nice handwriting, and I have horrible handwriting. But the way to get nice handwriting is to fill in those pages of handwriting sheets where you write an entire page full of beautiful, perfect letter A's and then another page of beautiful, perfect letter B's until you build up the muscle memory. And that is far too understimulating. I was never able to do that. Love the look of calligraphy, but couldn't learn it because it's boring.

But I discovered that if, in a Zoom meeting, I'm also filling in one of these little sheets, then, now, my brain is stimulated enough that I can listen to the meeting, and also, I've got the most gorgeous handwriting you've ever seen. You might have perfected your banana bread or your sourdough, but I was doing calligraphy all during lockdown.

ISABELLA HENMAN: Banana bread, no. Bananas, lovely. Bread, lovely. Banana bread together, no. Not happening. Sorry. I know some people like it. No. The only time I'll ever have banana in something is - I'll have a lovely friend who made me - it had a name and I can't remember what it was. But it was, essentially, a chocolatey-type cake because - oh, this is the first time I've mentioned chocolate. Wow, how long through and I haven't mentioned chocolate yet. And it had banana on the top. And that was lovely, because I can eat the pieces of banana and then eat the chocolate cake.

Right, OK, I am conscious that we are coming towards the end of our time, and we've asked lots of questions of people at home. So Heidi, you've got the gargantuan task of summarising all of these conversations that have been going on. Heidi, over to you.

HEIDI: Yes, good luck to me. No, honestly, it's been so wonderful. This has been one of the busiest chats I think that we've ever had. It was certainly one that I've managed within a Student Hub Live session, and I have really, really enjoyed it. So I do just want to thank everybody for sharing their experiences and their thoughts and responding to our questions. It is so wonderful to have such a busy and engaging chat. So let's make a start, then.

Let's talk about strategies. So strategies to help people when they're struggling. So our first one from Emma - body doubling can help. Have a neurodivergent friend online who will sit with you whilst you do your studies or something else online that you need to get done, and they can do the things that they have been avoiding too.

Theresa said, I used to FaceTime my cousins. So I'd read aloud my books while they cleaned, then they helped me with any words that I struggled with. So we body doubled each other. And then because it was over the phone, Theresa didn't find it stressful.

So a nice comment from Nicholas which I wanted to draw out - my tutors have always been really good at extending deadlines when I've had extended brain freeze. So again, just as a reminder of all the support that's available and to talk to your tutor and to explain what's going on so that they can offer you support and guidance.

Declan says, I have a pre-arranged gaming session on a Wednesday evening with a friend which I try to stick to as a way to force myself to have a break from studies, and then it gives us both a chance to vent about stuff. And Rachel liked that idea. Rachel said, Declan, that's a great idea. My youngest sister and I have a standing appointment for a FaceTime call once a week to watch our favourite show together, and it helps so much. So carving out these key points within the week where you can do something you really enjoy and just switch off from everything else.

Lee recommends power naps. I tend to push through until I simply can't do it anymore and will literally crash into a power nap, which kind of works because that's when everything gets mentally processed. Rebecca says, to get out of an ADHD paralysis, remember it's about momentum, not motivation. So tell yourself, I'll go and get my favourite pen, but I don't have to do anything with it. And then once you get going, it can be - then that just helps you to get going on your journey, whether it's opening a book and then starting to read or tackling your TMA.

So for Emma, transitions, giving yourself a countdown can help. So like they do with naughty kids - this was the example that Emma gave - so I will get up in 20 seconds. And then finally, Nicholas says, lots of biscuits help my burnout. And then we've also got people talking about different apps and different techniques that they use - the Pomodoro Technique, for example. Lots of people talking in the chat about that, Belinda saying it really helps them.

Megan says that it really helps her. You have a productive time, then a break time, and then you repeat it. But Catherine says, can't do the Pomodoro Technique. Danny Lee says, same. I've tried the Pomodoro Technique, but it doesn't work for me. Carrie says, I need accountability, but then I fight against it. I bought the Pomodoro timers, but it's still sitting in the box. So I thought that was a nice one to close on. ISABELLA HENMAN: Yeah. And I think body doubling is something - body doubling, accountability, co-working is something that was new to me before I started talking to people within the neurodiverse community. And it sounds - it's very helpful. I've had a number of students who said they do it without even realising it's what they call it. So whether that's you're on a live Twitch stream, whether you're on a Facebook Time, whether you're - Facebook Time. I'll just combine all the possible words together into one there.

And I understand that there are some very specific ones that you can sign up to with other people that might not even be part of the University. There are some places within the University that do things. On one of my modules, we trialled this. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work, but having a set time - we call them group study times. So look out for that, because your modules might like it.

If you actually think, you know what, you'd like it, ask. What Jon was saying earlier is that, as tutors, we want to support you. We can't do everything. We can't answer all the questions. We can't solve everything for you. But we can give ideas. And the University is responsive to ideas. This whole neurodiverse community thing it's because we had lots of students asking us. And I was also finding out more, and I was saying, you know what? I think this is really important. We need to start talking about this. We need to start coming up with ideas. We need to share ideas. We need to build this community.

So if you like it, if you think it's useful, ask. Ask us here at Student Hub Live. Contact your tutor. Contact the University and say, these are things I've heard about. Can you tell me more? Can you help? So hopefully, you've given we've given so many different ideas for you today, and hopefully, you're not going to go away going, you know what, I'm going to sit on the settee eating Pringles just the time. Hopefully, you're going to be slightly more like the Jon, going running. But I'm not, because yeah, I'm not the runner. I'm the nice, gently walking person. I can walk fast at times. I'm the eating chocolate and then walking bit. But I really want to thank Melanie, I really want to thank Jon, and I want to thank Kate for all your fantastic ideas today, because there's been so many things to take away. I think it's one of those ones where you're going to have to revisit it. We always appreciate feedback. You'll see that there's a feedback link that will go in the chat, and we do genuinely - we act on the feedback. As I said, one of the reasons we do these sessions is because we had lots of people asking. And I thought it was going to be very beneficial

as well. We have other links attached to the event page. We'll try and add some more if we can find some.

But hopefully, we've given you lots of things to think about today. Hopefully, you're now lovely and energised. If you've got a TMA, maybe go off and start writing it, think about it. If you've got a topic that you hadn't started, go and have a look at it. Go and share with your friends.

Remember what Jon was saying. Sometimes, it sucks. Be open. Discuss these things. All of us are different. Neurodivergencies have even more differences, we have different terminologies. But hopefully, we've given you loads to think about. It's been an absolute privilege today. I've learned so much. Hopefully, you have a wonderful rest of your day.