Let me perhaps share with you now an experience that...a working experience that I’ve had with a gentleman some time ago who was struggling in the workplace. And I think that often a question that gets raised by adults particularly is, ‘Should I share with the workplace my diagnosis or should I keep it secret?’ Let me say that’s a very personal question and one that each individual will need to answer for themselves.

It would be my view that you need to ask yourself firstly, ‘In my workplace, if I’m going to declare this, what will I be looking as an outcome from that to be the result?’ So, simply telling somebody that you have an autism spectrum disorder means nothing if, in fact, the workplace has no real interest or no capacity to understand what that means for you as an individual. But also what could that mean for you, in terms of being supported in the workplace?

Let me give you an example, perhaps, that might help a little bit. I worked with a gentleman who was in his mid 40s. He worked for a very big company and was...originally started off in Melbourne but was then given an opportunity to work in Queensland. He rang me one day and said, "Look, I think I’m going to be in trouble at work. I’ve had a bit of a meltdown and I yelled at my boss," and so on and so on.

And so, you know, the answer for me was, "Well, look, if the workplace is willing to have me come over, I’m happy to come and meet with the workplace and we can have a bit of a chat about this."

And so I asked him what had happened, and he said, "Well, we were at a...I was up working and they called a staff meeting and everybody came together and I got a little bit uncomfortable because I don’t like being in crowds."

And he said, "And then... person told us what was going on. I went then to try and get clarity and the person that I spoke to said, ‘Oh, you'll have to speak to this person over here,’ so I went and spoke to him. And then as I spoke to him, the next thing I know, I’m getting...my boss is coming and telling me
something different, and then I just... I went completely... I lost it and just yelled at him, and I think I’m going to be sacked."

So, anyway, we ended up meeting with the company. And in fairness and in... I won’t mention the company’s name, but what I can say is they were incredibly supportive. As it turns out, the head of HR in the company had a child on the autism spectrum and therefore was quite sympathetic to what it means.

However, what was interesting was although this man had told the workplace that he had Asperger’s, or, you know, autism, the reality is the workplace did not understand what that meant and unfortunately the staff member had not been able to explain to the workplace how he would prefer things to happen in the future to make his world a little bit more understandable and a little bit more manageable. And so we spoke about the nature of autism and what that means for people and what that means in group settings, etc. etc. and it was agreed at the end of it that a number of very simple steps would now be undertaken to try and avoid the conflict that had happened in the past.

In the first instance, it was agreed that this gentleman wouldn’t need to attend group staff meetings where there would be many, many people together, because he found that overwhelming. But instead of that, the person who was running the meeting would meet with him afterwards and would share with him what the meeting was about and what discussions had taken place, and invite him to comment at that point in time.

The second part to it, though - and just as critical - was the notion of the chain of command, if you like, when giving instructions and giving advice and information and instructions to staff members. And one of the things that we came across and what we realised as we were talking through this discussion was that he was getting messages... mixed messages, if you like, from both his direct supervisor but also the supervisor’s supervisor. And he struggled with, ‘Well, who do I now listen to - my supervisor or the senior supervisor?’

And the second part to that struggle was that everyone was giving their instructions to him verbally, and for many people on the spectrum, the ability to take in or receive information, or receptive skills, are often quite flawed. And so for him to get the information in verbal language was really quite confusing and quite challenging for him, and if he had too much of this, it became a bit of an overload. And so the answer was really quite simple.

We ended up saying, “OK. He no longer has to attend the major meetings. The person running the meeting will brief him and give him an opportunity to comment.” Where, in fact, it came to instructions, all instruction would come through one person in the organisation. So, anybody else in the organisation would have to pass their instructions through that individual. But just as importantly, that individual would then put down on paper what the instruction was.

Now, it was fairly simple. It was fairly straightforward. It ended up resolving all of the issues, and as a consequence, this young fellow... Sorry. I wouldn’t say young fellow - he’s in his mid 40s. He’s now working happily, the organisation’s delighted with his workload, and everybody won out of that exercise.
So, the question then becomes if you're going to declare in the workplace, you need to ask yourself, 'What do I expect to be the outcome from that?' And it's no good simply declaring and then sitting back and making an assumption that the workplace will now go out and spend time to understand what autism means, to understand what it means for an employee, and then what are the strategies that you put in place. So my advice again would be, when these situations come up, have... and you want to share the information with the workplace, don't just share the information about what you have - you need to then share what it means and then, just as importantly, if not more so, 'And how then can the workplace be more supportive of me?'

And by doing that, you can end up then resolving many of those conflicts that exist between staff, who then sit and look at this person who can often be quite difficult. But, just as importantly, that staff member becomes much, much more productive.

Let me share with you very quickly another example of what we're talking about. A young man came to me some time ago saying he'd just been dismissed from his workplace.

I asked him what had actually happened and he said, "Well, I don't know."

And I said, "Well, share with me what was happening the day before or the day of your dismissal."

And he said, "Oh, look, it was really simple. I came to work in the morning. There was a...I'd booked a meeting room. Time came for my meeting. I stuck my head in and just told everybody that their meeting time was up and the room was booked and could they please leave and clean the room."

And I said, "Oh, that's interesting. Who was it that was in the meeting?"

He said, "Oh, it was the board and the chair."

Now, at one level, that's quite a funny story, but at another level, it's indicative of some of the challenges some of these young people and some other people have when they come into the workplace.

That those social rules or those rules about the board and the CEO - you don't interrupt at a meeting because they're the board and the CEO - had never been shared with this young man. And so this young man lost his job not because really he'd done anything wrong, but because he didn't understand the rules, if you like, the unwritten rules of a workplace.

So, again, think about, 'If I'm going to share this, what does it mean?' And, 'Do I need a mentor? Do I need somebody...' Or, 'Does this person need somebody that they can check in with to make sure that what they're doing is going to fit?' Because often if it doesn't, the reality is that that person can make an incredible error of judgement.

Thank you.