Hello and welcome, and as we say here in New Zealand, kia ora koutou.

My name is Dean Sutherland and I'm based in Christchurch. For the past 15 years, I've had the pleasure of supporting both children and adults with ASD. In this short clip, I'd like to share with you some of the reflections and learnings that I've experienced with the particular folks I'm working with - adults with ASD. Adults with ASD share similar needs and dreams to you or I. However, how they perceive the world - that is, the sensory world, through the sights and sounds and also the interpersonal world through communication and relationships with other people - is quite different to how you or I might experience these things.

However, there are many ways that we can support adults with ASD live fulfilling and functional lives. For example, an adult with ASD who may hold down a job in a workplace that has a particularly noisy environment. The provision of a quiet area where that adult can withdraw to when they feel the need is an appropriate way to help ensure that adult can maintain their work. Similarly, coaching employers and workmates into how an adult with ASD may handle communication or conflict in the workplace is another appropriate measure to take to help ensure vocational support for adults with ASD. Similarly with students who attend educational institutions - ensuring those students have support available, ensuring their tutors and fellow students have an awareness and understanding of their needs and the supports that they need to function in those environments are very important.

All the adults with ASD that I know have expressed a desire to gain and maintain friendships. However, they've expressed great frustration about understanding the mechanics of friendships and relationships and maintaining those effectively. So, providing explicit support in relationships is another way to help ensure adults can live meaningful lives.

Just to conclude, I'd like to share some advice I've received from two adults with ASD. One was written by a gentleman by the name of Professor John Elder Robison, who wrote ‘Look Me In The Eye: My Life With Asperger’s’. And he advised anyone who was working or researching the field of
autism or ASD to really get to know the person with ASD. And once you’ve built the relationship with that person, then ask them what it is they need to help them live meaningful and fulfilling lives.

That’s a really important message for professionals and researchers who might often be fixated on finding a cure for or trying to fix a person who has ASD. The second piece of advice comes from a friend of mine who was diagnosed with ASD in his 50s. This diagnosis really helped him understand many of the frustrations that he’d experienced in his life and helped him develop his own sense of identity and sense of belonging in the world. His advice to me was this - "Research and methods are very important "and should be a key element of any toolbox, "but they should never get in the way "of getting to know who that person is with ASD - "who that child is and who that adult is." He also said that "We need time, we need space "and we need empathy and understanding, "but most of all we need reassurance that we are OK just as who we are." I think this is an excellent example of how adults with ASD are able to give us feedback and inform how we could be of support and help them live meaningful and functional lives.

I wish you all the best in your studies and your learning about ASD, and really encourage you to get to know the people you come to meet with ASD and get to know who they are as people. I wish you well. Thank you. All the best.