

Voice Study Centre  
Module 3 – MA in Voice Pedagogy

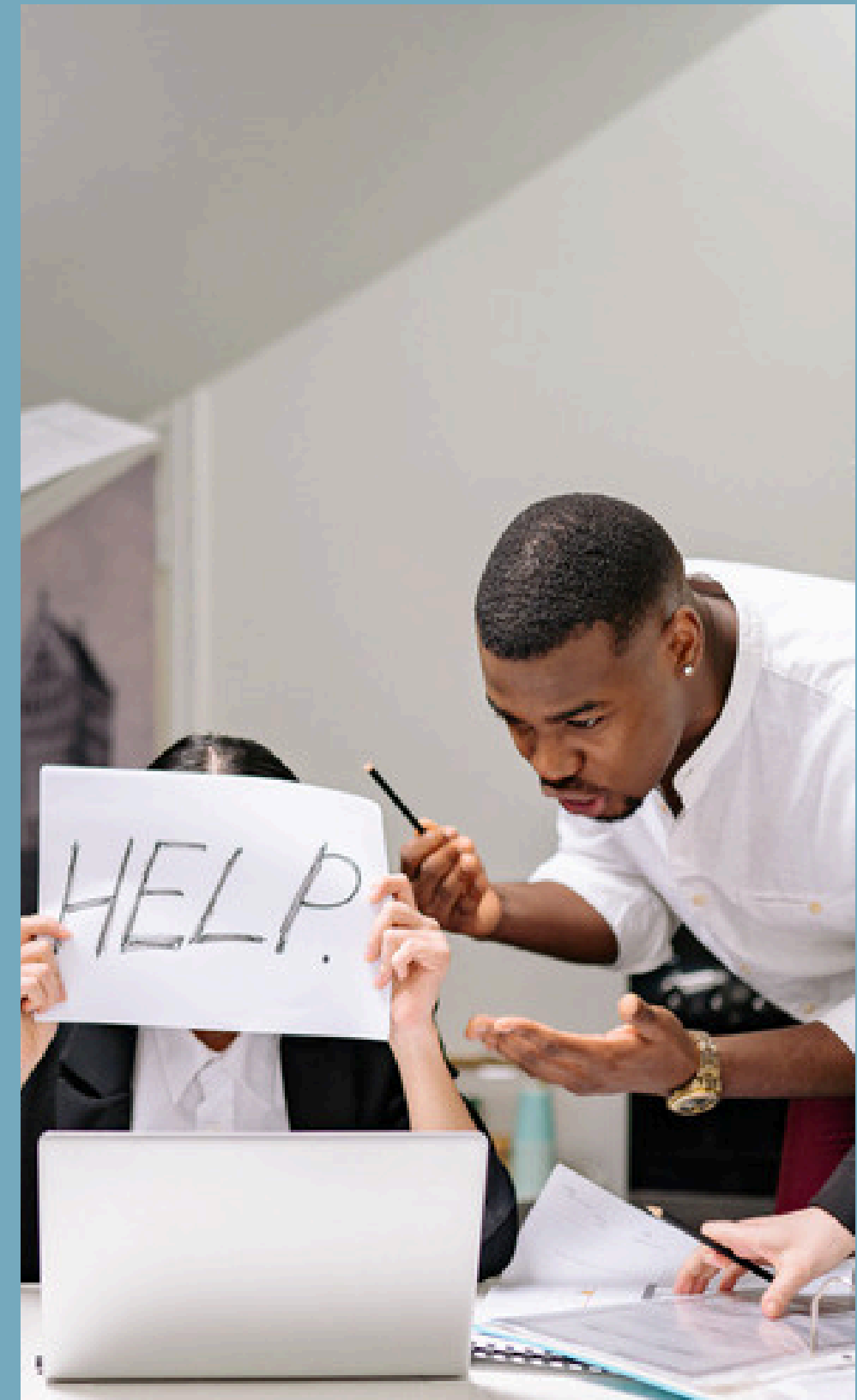
# Vocal Masking in the Workplace

**Voice, neurodivergent masking, and  
workplace communication norms**

Presentation by **Alex Owen-Hill**  
March 19, 2026

# Context

How do neurodivergent people alter their voice to fit workplace communication norms?



# **Aim:** Combine 3 Research Areas





# Why?

## ***Why me?***

- Neurodivergent (AuDHD)
- Neurodivergence advocate
- Teach voice for business

## ***Why this?***

- I've seen the impact intuitively but never verified experimentally
- Desire for more inclusive communication norms in business

**Insider-outsider**  
(Neville, 2022)

Neurodivergent lived  
experience

**but**  
outsider to business

**Reflexive phronesis**

Potential repercussions  
from businesses

**Anonymised data**  
(McAreavey & Das, 2013)

Potentially distressing  
topics

**Pre-interview  
meetings**

# Insider Research

## *Why me?*

- Neurodivergent (AuDHD)
- Neurodivergence advocate
- Teach voice for business

# Ethics

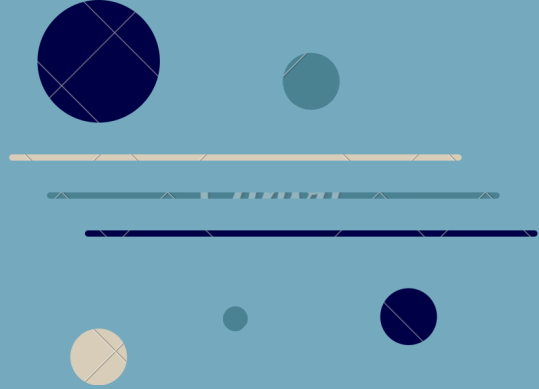
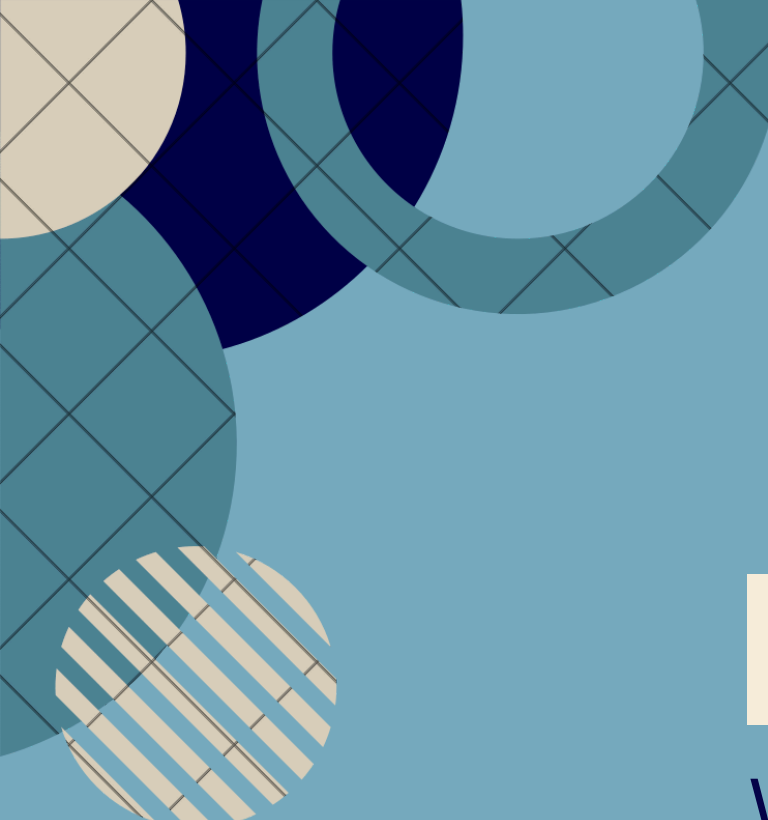
## *Why this?*

- I've seen the impact intuitively but  
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communication norms in business

# Objectives

What am I trying to achieve?





# Research Questions

## Question 1

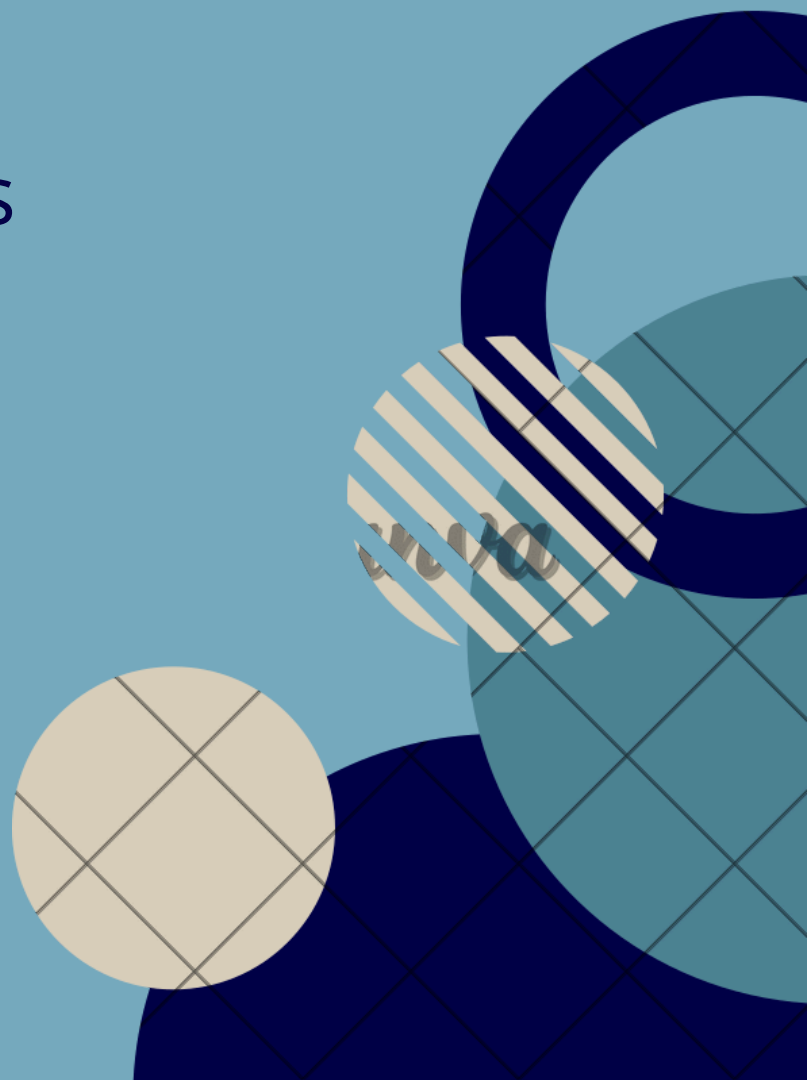
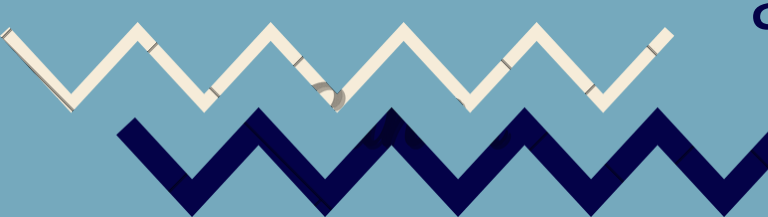
What implicit or explicit communication standards affect neurodivergent people in their workplaces?

## Question 2

What specific vocal strategies do neurodivergent individuals use to alter their vocal presentation to conform to these standards?

## Question 3

What is the impact of these alterations on the individual's authenticity as felt by themselves and emotional labour?



# Literature Review

**01**

## **Neurodivergent Masking**

Hiding behaviours associated with a stigmatized identity.

Reduces mental health, job satisfaction, and felt authenticity.

(Cook et al., 2020)

**02**

## **Workplace authenticity**

Employees often make strategic adjustments to their social identities.

More common among marginalized individuals.

(Cha et al., 2019)

**03**

## **Neurodivergent vocal differences**

Many studies into autistic vocal differences, fewer for others (e.g. ADHD or dyslexia).

Little research into felt experiences.

(Shriberg et al., 2001)

**Gap**

## **Lack of informed vocal research**

Little research from vocal practitioners into vocal masking.

Limited awareness of voice among researchers and participants.

# Methodology

## Constructivist

Knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants.

## Interpretive

How participants interpret and make meaning from their complex lived realities.

## Neurodiversity paradigm

Centres on neurodivergent perspectives to challenge deficit-based models of difference.



# Methods

## **Narrative literature review**

Integrate research on workplace communication, neurodivergent masking, and vocal pedagogy.

(Winter, 2023)

## **Semi-structured interviews**

Explore neurodivergent professionals' experiences of their own voice use in the workplace.

(McGrath et al., 2019)

## **Participant observation**

Voice-informed observations of vocal qualities and communication patterns during interviews.

(De Fina, 2019)

## **Reflexive thematic analysis**

Identify recurring patterns and themes across participant narratives.

(Naeem et al., 2023)

# Research Participants

- 5 Participants
- Recruited through snowballing sampling and LinkedIn post
- Assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms
- Due to time-constraints, only 3 were fully analysed

**Taylor**

ADHD, autistic,  
dyslexic

**Sawyer**

Suspected  
autistic

**Ash**

ADHD, autistic

**Harper**

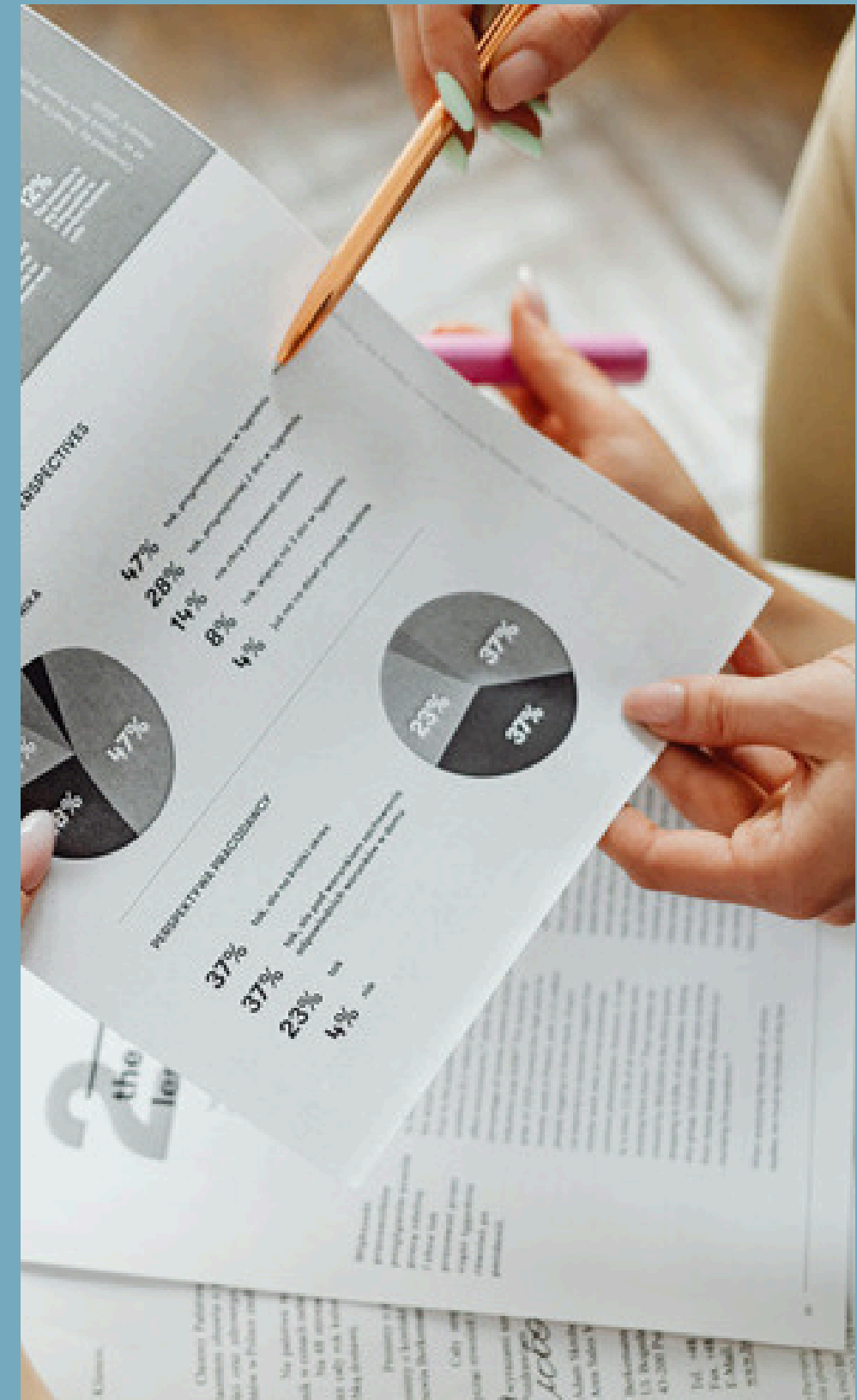
ADHD

**Santana**

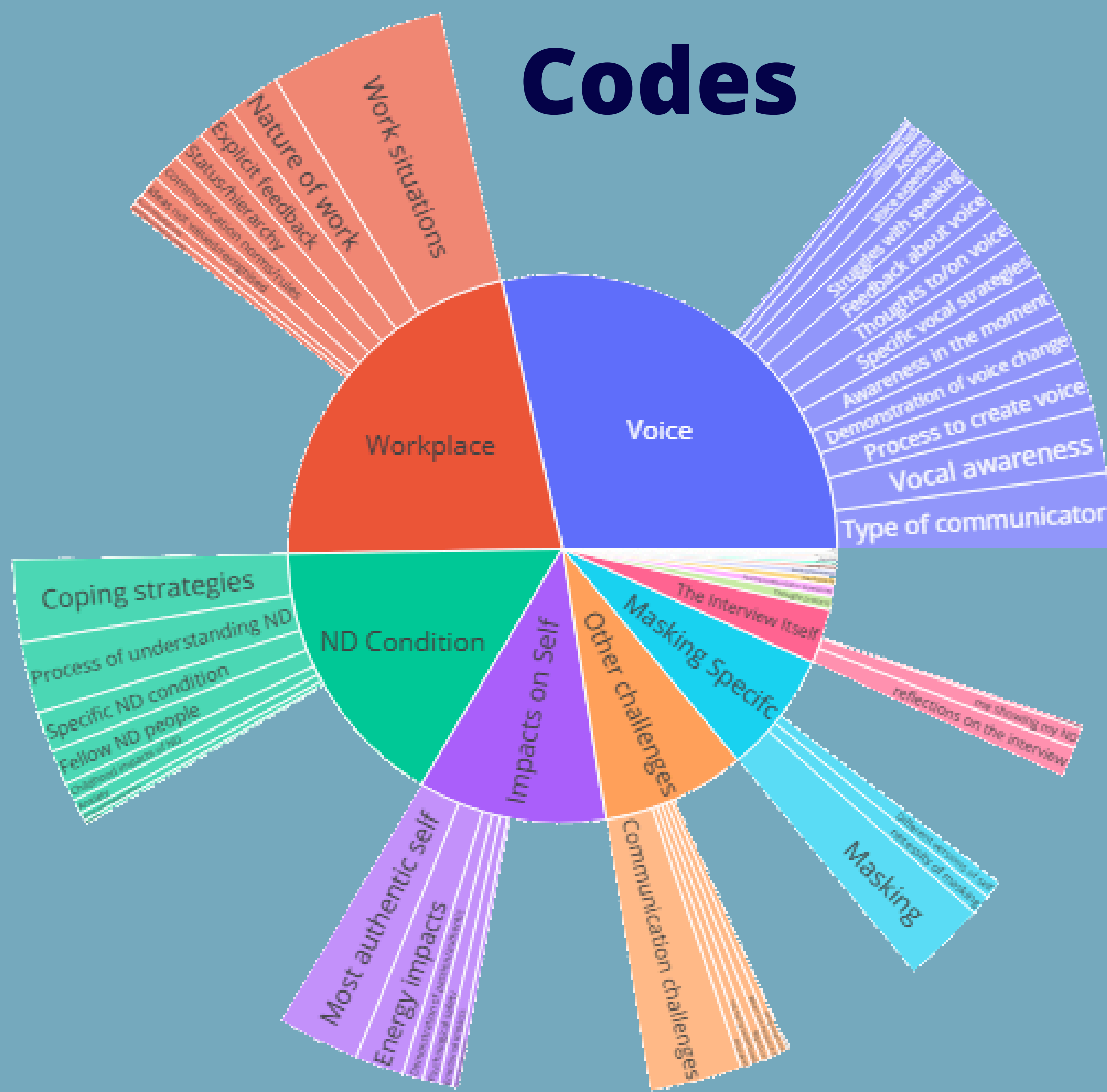
Autistic

# Findings

What did I find?



# Codes



# Themes

| Participant quote                                                                                                                | Code                          | Theme                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>"I don't think anyone ever has passed them on... that's all implied. It's all guesswork."</i> (Ash)                           | Communication norms / rules   | <b>Professional communication norms are often implicit</b>     |
| <i>"One of my previous managers when I used to speak up in meetings, would... tell me how I'd... embarrassed them."</i> (Taylor) | Explicit feedback             |                                                                |
| <i>"I've trained myself... not consciously... to be quieter, to listen, to speak last."</i> (Taylor)                             | Necessity of masking          |                                                                |
| <i>"Most people were just coming in and sitting down... and ignoring everyone else."</i> (Ash)                                   | Workplace communication norms |                                                                |
| <i>"When I'm comfortable it feels like my brain's going at the same pace as my voice."</i> (Ash)                                 | Psychological safety          | <b>Psychological safety affects vocal awareness</b>            |
| <i>"If you feel safe you take that mask off and you are yourself."</i> (Taylor)                                                  | Most authentic self           |                                                                |
| <i>"There's an inflection point... when the conversation isn't going well."</i> (Sawyer)                                         | Awareness in the moment       |                                                                |
| <i>"That's when I went into the high voice."</i> (Sawyer)                                                                        | Vocal awareness               |                                                                |
| <i>"I come away from interactions exhausted."</i> (Ash)                                                                          | Energy impacts                | <b>Workplace communication is often energetically draining</b> |
| <i>"It's very tiring... I have to consciously mask."</i> (Taylor)                                                                | Emotional impacts             |                                                                |
| <i>"Constantly thinking about how I present... it's exhausting."</i> (Sawyer)                                                    | Communication challenges      |                                                                |
| <i>"Not knowing which neurodiverse state will show up that day."</i> (Taylor)                                                    | When low resourced            |                                                                |

# Themes

## Question 1

What implicit or explicit communication standards affect neurodivergent people in their workplaces?

## Question 2

What specific vocal strategies do neurodivergent individuals use to alter their vocal presentation to conform to these standards?

## Question 3

What is the impact of these alterations on the individual's authenticity as felt by themselves and emotional labour?

### Theme

Professional communication norms are often implicit

Psychological safety affects vocal awareness

Workplace communication is often energetically draining

# Themes

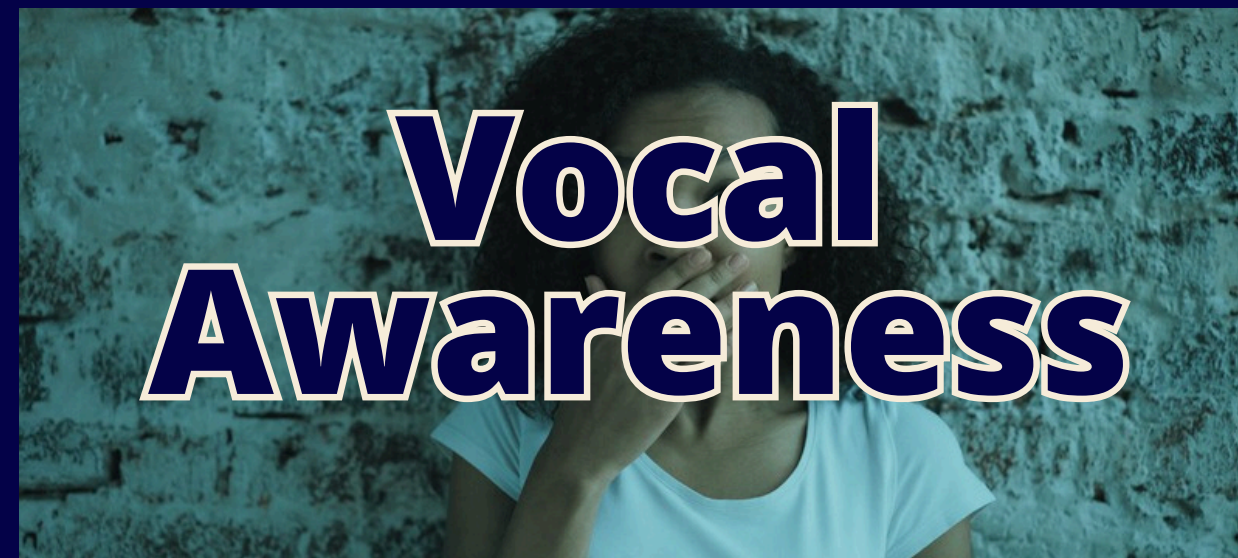
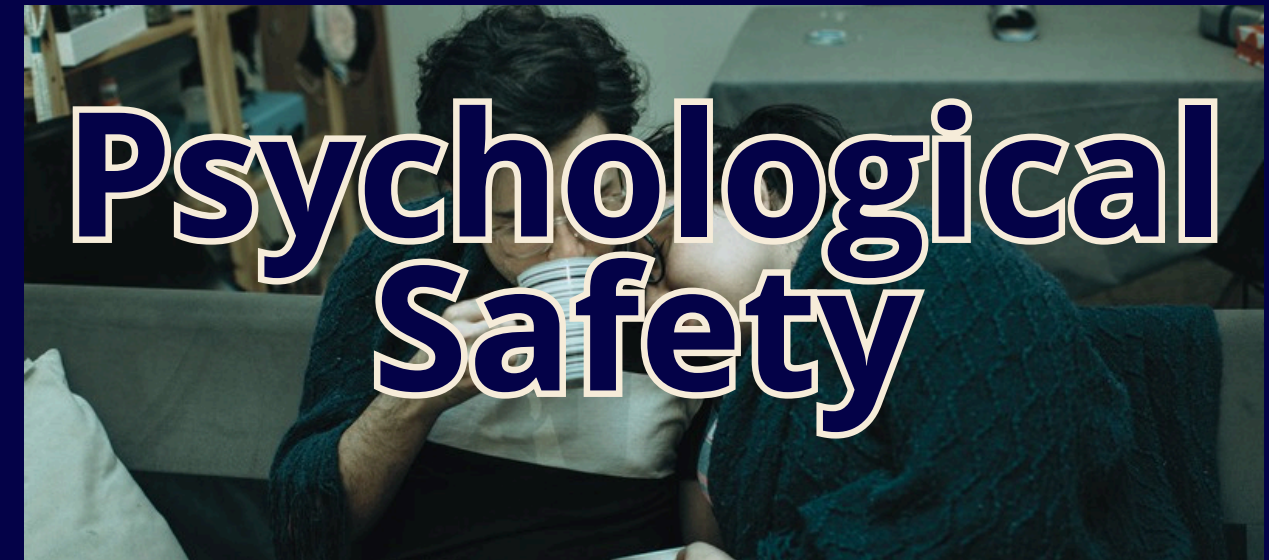
**Professional communication norms  
are often implicit**

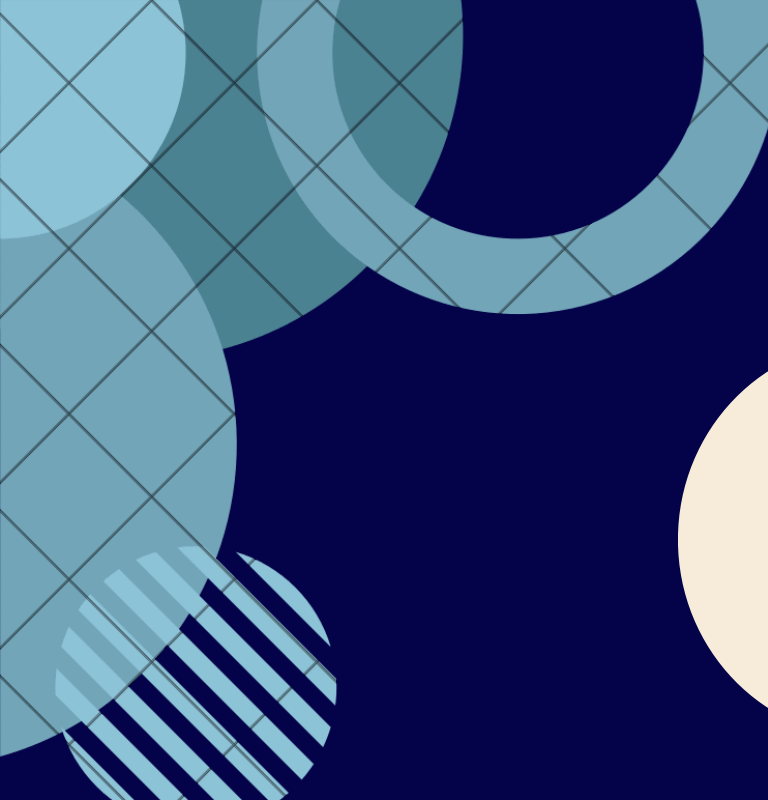
**Psychological safety modifies  
vocal awareness**

**Workplace communication is  
often energetically draining**

# Theme 2

Psychological safety modulates  
vocal awareness



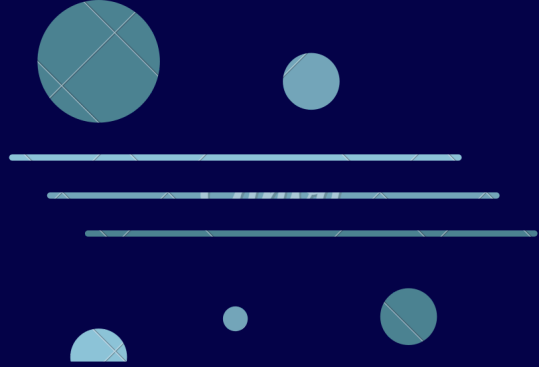


Ash

"... it is **like almost being on a...** I don't know, on a... **precipice?** [...] like "**Oh... what's happened there?** What, what's that face mean?"  
[...]  
in that moment you're getting on the precipice of "Okay. How do I get back onto an even keel here?" or "**How do I get off this precipice?**"



# The Precipice



"It's almost like... there's, there's a, there's a... **inflection point.** Any conversation, if it's not, **if it's going... South,** and it's not going well, there's an inflection point.

Which is like an **internal voice** in your head that says "This isn't... **this isn't good, it doesn't feel good.**"



Sawyer





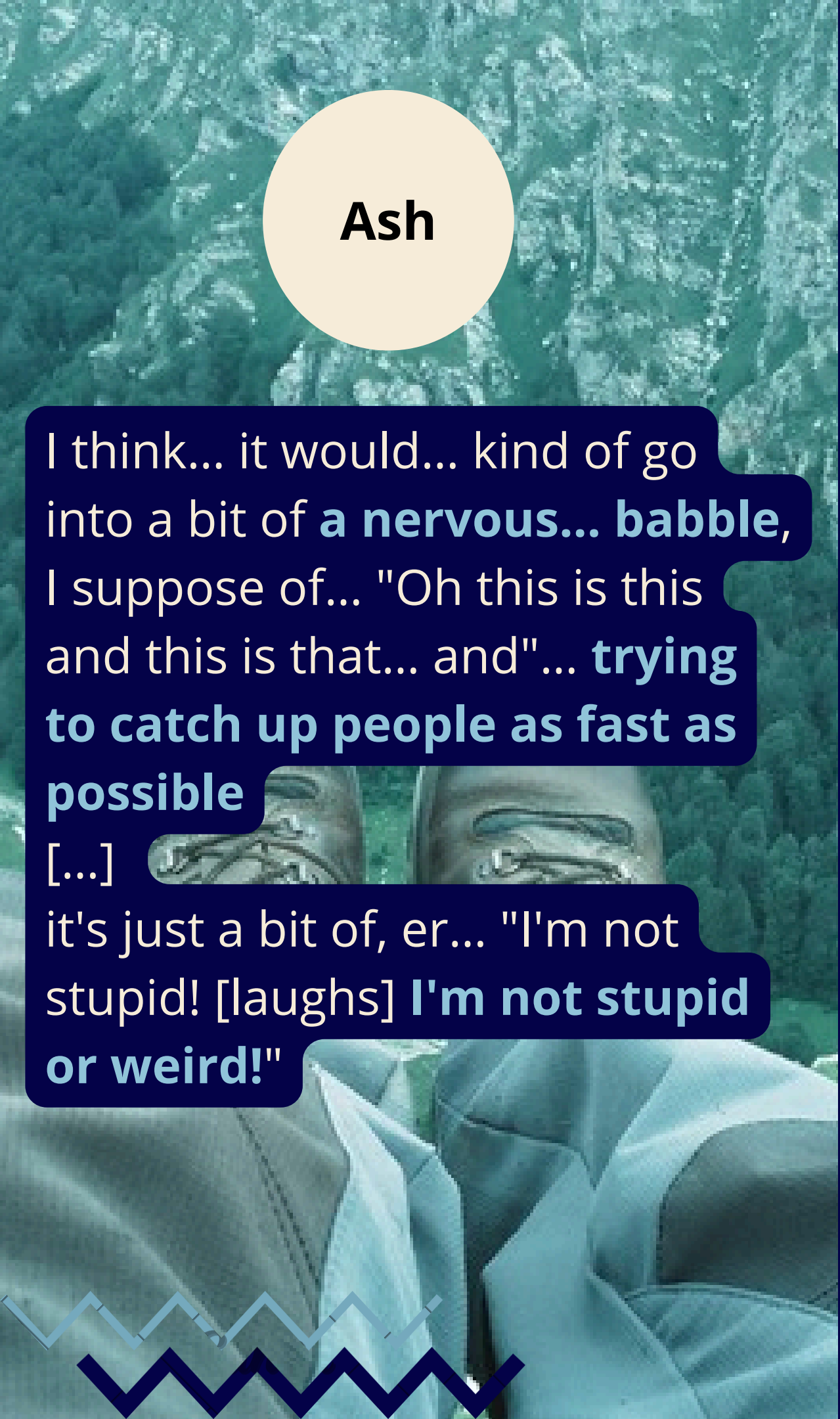
# Psychological Safety

**modulates vocal awareness**

And I think there's **different masks [...]** for different people? [...]  
and the psychological safety as well. **For those who if you feel safe you,** you kind of take that mask off and **you are yourself.**

**Taylor**





Ash

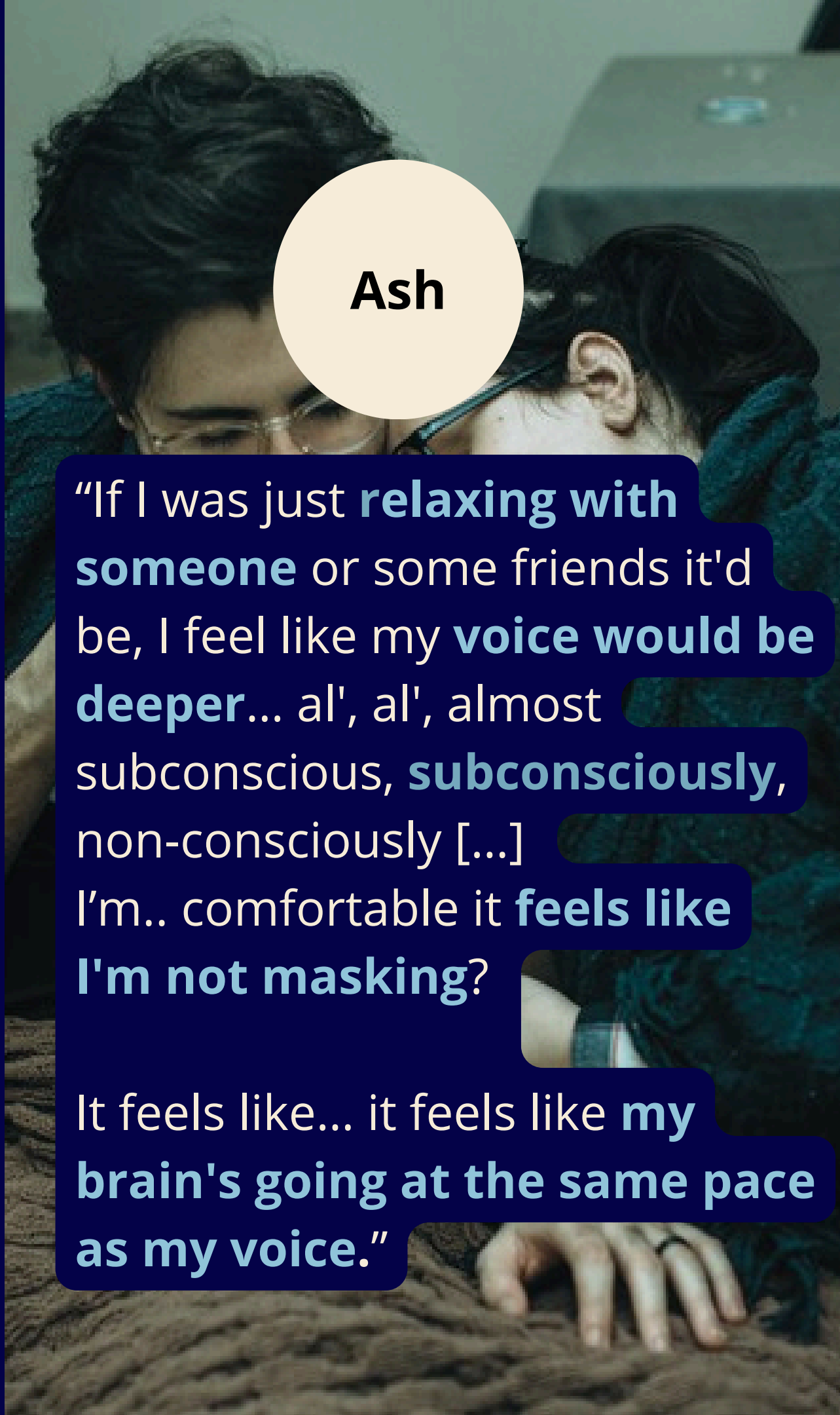
I think... it would... kind of go into a bit of a **nervous... babble**, I suppose of... "Oh this is this and this is that... and"... **trying to catch up people as fast as possible**

[...]

it's just a bit of, er... "I'm not stupid! [laughs] **I'm not stupid or weird!**"

# Psychological Safety

**modulates vocal awareness**



Ash

"If I was just **relaxing with someone** or some friends it'd be, I feel like my **voice would be deeper**... al', al', almost subconscious, **subconsciously**, non-consciously [...]  
I'm.. comfortable it **feels like I'm not masking?**

It feels like... it feels like **my brain's going at the same pace as my voice.**"

# Vocal Awareness

Sawyer

Asked to demonstrate

"My **anxious voice** is... um... it... it **wavers, it stutters**... um... it, um... yeah, it just doesn't, it, and it, and it... huh... kind, kind of doing it now, um... It kind of... erm... it's very indecisive... when I'm in that anxious mode... um... **I feel stuck.**"  
[...]

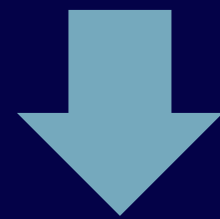
And I can't decide and... um... it feels... **fluttery and, and high up in the voice** [indicates throat]

"Yeah, I, well... It sort... that, **that moment ago** just there, I thought "Oh, crikey. I'm not, I'm not getting my words out here."  
[...]

there's a part of me which, which now... starts to think "**Oh, I wonder if Alex is thinking I'm...** sort of, trying to... um... **make it up, or, or tell a lie**"



"My anxious voice is... um... **it... it wavers, it stutters...** um... **it**, um... yeah, **it just doesn't, it, and it, and it...** huh... **kind, kind of doing** it now, um... **It kind of...** erm... **it's very** indecisive... when I'm in that anxious mode... um... I feel stuck."



## Linguistic Mazes

Verbal disfluency that is higher in autistic and ADHD individuals

(e.g. filled pauses, repetitions, revisions, abandoned utterances)

Sawyer

(Bangert and Finestack 2020; MacFarlane et al. 2017)



# Conclusion

What does this mean for voice in business?



# Reflection

Neurodivergent individuals put a significant amount of energy into adapting their voice and communication style at work.

**This study is a first step to exploring the specifics of what that means vocally.**



# Future Plans

What's next?



# What's Next?

- Continue thematic analysis
- Research linguistic mazes
- Perform conversation analysis
- Guidelines for businesses
- Voice teaching strategies



How *do* neurodivergent individuals

communicate when psychologically safe?

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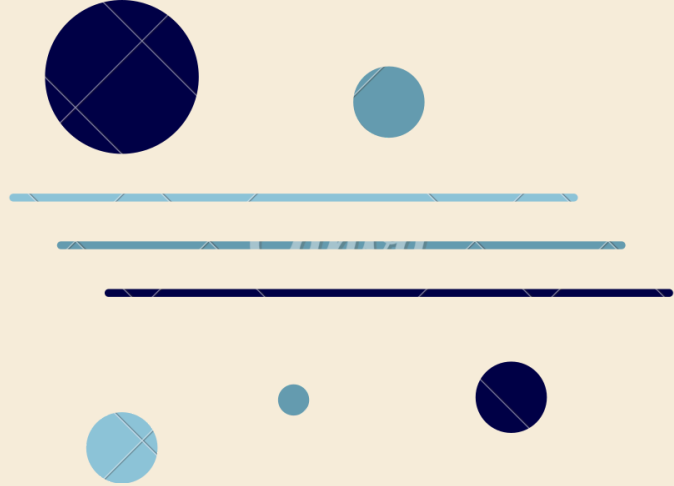
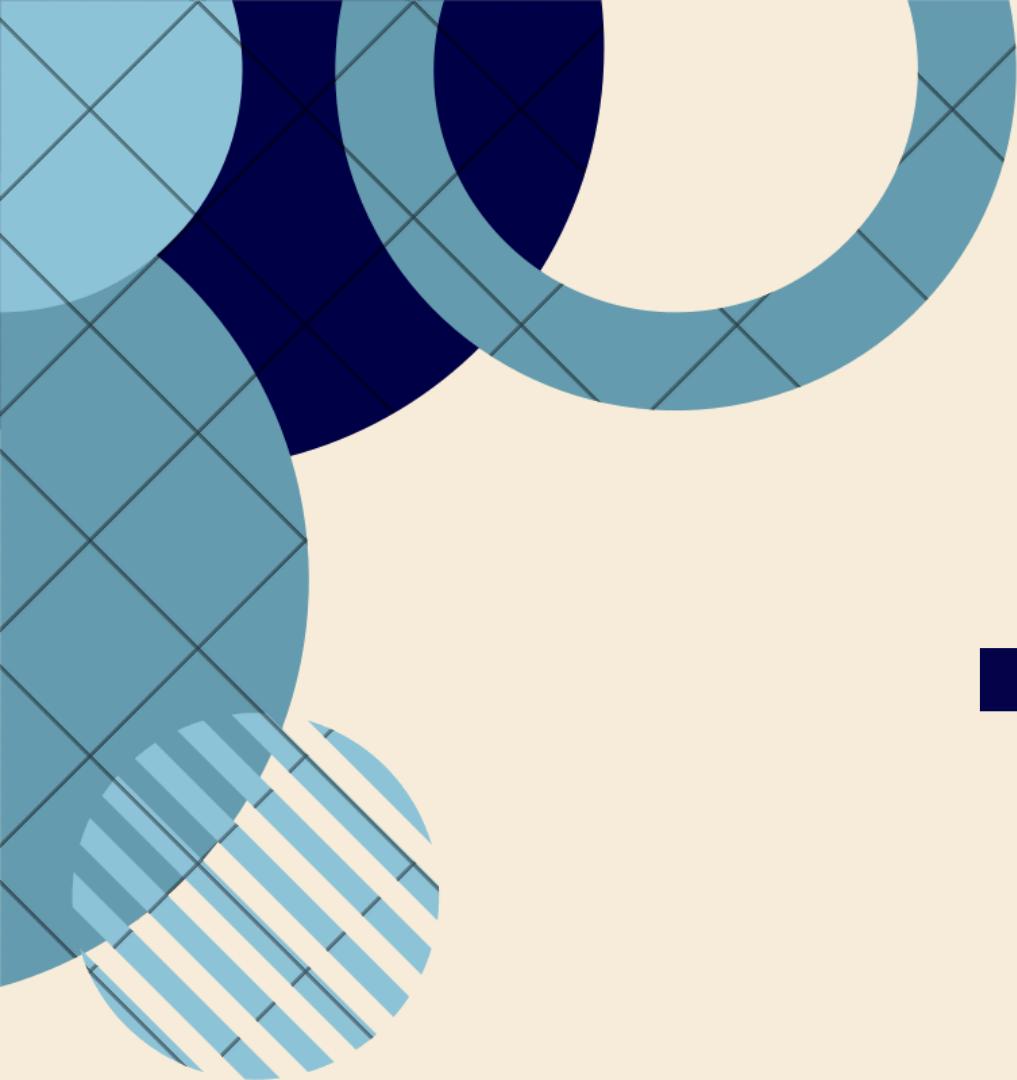
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# That's All Folks!

Presentation by **Alex Owen-Hill**

