HANDOUT:

Psychological safety within the group:

When working with a training group that includes neurodivergent participants, the trainer's relationship with each individual is crucial for their sense of safety, engagement, and learning effectiveness. The trainer must demonstrate empathy, flexibility, and constant awareness of the varied communication styles and information-processing needs within a heterogeneous group.

What should be avoided when training neurodivergent participants?

- Irony, sarcasm, and vague hints.
- Rigid judgments ("normal/abnormal," "typical/atypical").
- Framing neurologically driven behaviours as signs of poor manners or 'uncultured' conduct.
- Forcing group work, verbal contributions, or sustained eye contact.
- Surprises without prior warning.

Key principles for building relationships with neurodivergent participants:

- **Authenticity and respect for differences.** Trainers should cultivate genuine interactions by avoiding assumptions and stereotypes - recognizing that no two autistic or ADHD individuals share identical needs. By demonstrating authentic respect, you validate diverse ways of being and learning, laying a foundation of trust. Instead of speaking about participants in abstract terms, engage with them directly, use inclusive language and steer clear of labels. Honor each person's unique pace for absorbing information, expressing emotions, and communicating preferences.

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- **Clear, literal, and polite communication**. Ambiguity can be a barrier: metaphors, irony, or vague instructions often prove confusing - especially for autistic learners. Provide step-by-step directions in plain language (for example, "Please open your notebook, write today's title, then wait for my next prompt" instead of "Get ready to work"). Courteous, literal phrasing reduces misunderstandings and helps participants focus on content rather than decoding hidden meanings.
- **Space for autonomy.** Neurodivergent participants may need to withdraw periodically, take sensory breaks, or limit eye contact (behaviours that don't indicate disengagement). Offer multiple ways to participate: silent reflection, chat functions in online settings, camera-off options, or small-group and solo tasks. Granting this autonomy shows respect for individual comfort levels and encourages genuine engagement on each learner's terms.
- **Creating safe environment**. Forced interactions like demanding someone speak in front of the entire group can trigger intense stress. Emphasize voluntariness by announcing in advance who will contribute and for how long, and by maintaining a predictable agenda. When participants know what to expect and can choose their level of involvement, social safety increases, paving the way for more effective learning.
- **Positive reinforcement and non-judgmental feedback.** Focus praise on specific behaviours or accomplishments ("Your summary of that case study was clear and well-organized") rather than general traits ("You're so smart"). When corrective feedback is needed, offer it privately and with sensitivity. This approach strengthens confidence, maintains dignity, and encourages a growth mindset without the fear of public criticism.

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