

THE DIFFERENT SYSTEM

Student Manual & Workbook

Updated companion for the complete read-to-camera training and guided sessions

Understanding nervous-system difference without shame, labels or blame

For people living with difference, and the carers, partners, parents and practitioners trying to understand them.

Nine Realms Institute

Before You Begin

This manual has been rebuilt to match the newer full training script, including the deeper theory and the guided session that now follows every lesson.

It is not a diagnostic workbook. It does not tell you that you are autistic, ADHD or neurodivergent. It does not diagnose anyone you care for. It helps you describe the system more accurately before turning difficulty into judgement.

Where autism, ADHD or another neurodevelopmental difference may be relevant, appropriate professional assessment and support matter. This workbook can help you organise your observations and language. It should not replace clinical, educational, safeguarding or mental health support.

The core rule remains simple: describe the system before naming the person.

THE WORKING AGREEMENT

Use this course to increase accuracy, dignity and support. Do not use it to weaponise a label, excuse harm, remove responsibility, or turn every difficulty into a fixed identity.

Your Working Agreement

- ☐ I will not use this course to diagnose myself or someone else.
- ☐ I will not use a label as a weapon or a shortcut.
- ☐ I will not turn every difficulty into bad character.
- ☐ I will not excuse harm simply because there is a system-level explanation.
- ☐ I will look for load, capacity, environment, transition, sensory input, executive function, shame, recovery, agency and support.
- ☐ I will choose one small honest support rather than attempting to rebuild a whole life in one week.

My reason for taking this course

What I hope will become clearer

What I want to be careful not to do

How To Use This Manual With The Training

Each lesson now has two parts: the teaching and the guided session. Watch the teaching first. Then use the guided session slowly. After that, come back to this manual and write from what the system actually noticed, not from what you think you should say.

The workbook is not here to make you perform insight. It is here to help the insight become visible enough that one practical change can be chosen.

Do not rush through the exercises. If something feels overwhelming, stop. Return to the room. Seek appropriate support where safety, safeguarding, severe distress or crisis is involved.

The Order Of Work

- Watch the lesson once without writing too much.
- Complete the first response page immediately after the lesson.
- Listen to or watch the guided session slowly.
- Complete the session integration page after the system has settled.
- Choose one small support, one small language change, or one small environmental change.
- Track what changes over the week before making another intervention.

Programme Map

Part	Lessons	Focus	Core question
Part One	1-3	Stop Misreading The Person	What if the behaviour is not the whole truth?
Part Two	4-7	The System Under Load	What is the system carrying that no one has counted?
Part Three	8-10	The Emotional Reality	What happens when the system has moved beyond ordinary response?
Part Four	11-12	A Life That Fits Better	What would support look like if it respected the actual system?

The Core Language

Term	Meaning in this course
System	The whole living organisation: body, attention, emotion, sensory processing, history, environment, threat, support and capacity.
Load	What the system is carrying before the visible behaviour appears.
Capacity	What the system can genuinely access in this moment, not what it can access on its best day.
Masking	The labour of appearing easier, more normal or less affected than the person actually feels.
Sensory Ledger	A way of counting light, noise, smell, texture, movement, temperature and crowding before judging behaviour.
Attention Access	The conditions under which attention becomes available, captured, scattered, locked or impossible to move.
Executive Bridge	The invisible steps between wanting and doing: beginning, sequencing, prioritising, time-sensing, shifting, remembering and completing.
Transition Bridge	The support that helps the system move from one state, plan or expectation to another.
Repair	What happens after overwhelm when the system has returned and responsibility, boundary and support can be spoken about accurately.
Compatibility	Designing life around the actual system to reduce unnecessary suffering without making the world smaller through fear.

Weekly Integration Tracker

Use this table to track the one small change you choose each week. Do not make ten changes. One precise change teaches the system more than a dramatic plan that cannot be maintained.

Lesson	Old verdict or problem	New system question	One small support	What changed?
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				

Lesson 1: The Wrong Question

What if this is not bad behaviour, but a system under load?

THRESHOLD

The question is not what is wrong with the person. The question is what is happening in the system.

What This Lesson Is For

Behaviour is the visible layer. Interpretation is the story attached to it. The system is the deeper layer underneath: load, capacity, environment, threat, sensory input, attention, transition, shame, history and support.

This lesson asks you to pause before the verdict. Not because every behaviour is acceptable, but because the wrong explanation creates the wrong response.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Visible behaviour: what everyone sees and argues about.
- Interpretation: the moral story placed on the behaviour.
- System: the real conditions that produced the behaviour.
- Accuracy: the first form of help.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Entering the system map and placing the old verdict to one side.

What old word did you notice first?

What system-level question replaced it?

What changed in your body when you stopped arguing with the behaviour and started mapping the load?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where do I move fastest into judgement?

What response do I use when I believe the behaviour is deliberate?

How can I hold a boundary without using shame as the tool?

Practice Page: The System Listening Practice

Map point	Your notes
Visible behaviour	
Old verdict	
Possible system load	
Better first question	
One support to test	

Lesson 2: Difference Is Not A Character Flaw

What if the system is not broken, but designed for a world that has not learned how to read it?

THRESHOLD

A differently organised system is not a failed version of a normal one.

What This Lesson Is For

Normal usually means common, expected or convenient for the environment. It does not automatically mean healthy, kind, intelligent or true.

This lesson separates difference from defect without romanticising suffering. A person can have strengths and support needs at the same time.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Difference is organisation, not moral failure.
- Dignity does not require denial.
- Strength can still have a cost.
- Support need is not an insult.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Meeting the differently organised system without making it smaller or prettier than it is.

Where have I treated difference as failure?

Where have I romanticised a strength and ignored the cost?

What would respect look like without pretending the difficulty is not real?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where have I expected convenience and called it normal?

Which support need have I treated as attitude?

How can I honour the person without minimising the load?

Practice Page: Dignity Without Denial Map

Map point	Your notes
Difference noticed	
Old defect story	
Actual support need	
Real strength	
Dignity without denial	

Lesson 3: The Hidden Cost Of Passing

What does it cost to look fine when the system is not fine?

THRESHOLD

The public version is not always the true measure of capacity.

What This Lesson Is For

Masking can be intelligent, adaptive and necessary. It can also become expensive. The person may spend enormous energy appearing easier than they feel.

This lesson helps students count the cost of passing: the recovery time, delayed collapse, private irritability, silence, exhaustion, shame and loss of self-contact.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Masking: the labour of appearing less affected.
- Public function can conceal private cost.
- Delayed collapse is still part of the event.
- A person can be capable and depleted at the same time.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Finding the place where the public self and private system have been forced too far apart.

Where did I notice the mask?

What does the mask protect?

What does it cost after the room is over?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Which public performance have I mistaken for real capacity?

What do I ask for immediately after the person has been holding themselves together?

What recovery do I need to stop treating as laziness?

Practice Page: The Masking Ledger

Map point	Your notes
Public performance	
Private cost	
Recovery needed	
What the mask protects	
What can be reduced or made safer	

Lesson 4: Sensory Load: The World Is Not Neutral

How do sound, light, movement, smell and density shape the system?

THRESHOLD

The room is not a backdrop. It is part of the event.

What This Lesson Is For

Some nervous systems do not experience the environment as neutral. Light, sound, texture, smell, temperature, movement, proximity and crowding can all become load.

This lesson teaches the sensory ledger: count what the system is carrying before you judge the reaction that appears at the end.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Input accumulates even when no one else notices it.
- Sensory pain may look like mood, attitude or avoidance.
- The last request is rarely the whole cause.
- Changing the environment can be a serious intervention.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Walking through the environment slowly enough to notice what the system has been counting.

Which input do I usually ignore because other people tolerate it?

What happens after several inputs stack together?

Which environment needs one small adjustment first?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

What do I call overreaction because I do not feel the input myself?

How can I reduce load without making the person feel fragile or difficult?

What room, routine or social setting needs redesign?

Practice Page: The Sensory Ledger

Map point	Your notes
Light	
Sound	
Smell / texture / temperature	
Crowding / movement	
One environmental adjustment	

Lesson 5: Attention Is Not Obedience

Why can focus, initiation and regulation not be reduced to willpower?

THRESHOLD

Attention is a living system, not a servant waiting for orders.

What This Lesson Is For

Attention can be intense, scattered, absorbed, absent, delayed or locked. This is not always a choice. The person may care deeply and still be unable to move attention on command.

This lesson separates willingness from access. It helps students map what makes attention available, what captures it, what fragments it and what helps it return.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Willpower is not the whole engine.
- Interest, threat, novelty, pressure and shame change access to attention.
- Starting and switching are different demands.
- Attention needs bridges, not insults.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Following attention as a field of energy rather than a moral test.

Where does attention become unavailable?

What captures attention too completely?

What bridge helps attention return without humiliation?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where do I interpret lack of response as lack of care?

What instruction assumes instant access to attention?

How can I give fewer, clearer signals?

Practice Page: The Attention Access Map

Map point	Your notes
Where attention disappears	
What captures attention	
What fragments attention	
What helps attention return	
One clearer signal or bridge	

Lesson 6: Executive Function: The Invisible Bridge

Why is knowing not the same as being able to begin, sequence and complete?

THRESHOLD

The bridge between intention and action may be invisible, broken, overloaded or missing.

What This Lesson Is For

Executive function is the set of invisible steps between wanting and doing: beginning, sequencing, prioritising, time-sensing, shifting, remembering, completing and recovering.

This lesson makes the invisible bridge visible so support can be built where the system actually gets stuck.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Knowing is not doing.
- The first step may be the hardest part of the task.
- A task can be too large because it has too many hidden steps.
- External structure can create access without removing dignity.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Standing at the edge of the task and discovering where the bridge disappears.

Which task looks simple from the outside but contains too many hidden steps?

Where does the bridge break: beginning, sequencing, remembering, switching or completing?

What is the smallest next visible step?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where do I say “just do it” because the bridge is invisible to me?

How can I make the first step visible without taking over?

What structure would support action without turning into control?

Practice Page: The Invisible Bridge Builder

Map point	Your notes
Task that looks simple	
Hidden steps	
Where the bridge breaks	
Smallest visible next step	
Support structure to test	

Lesson 7: Transitions, Rigidity And The Need For Predictability

What if the resistance is not to you, but to the rupture in the system?

THRESHOLD

What looks like stubbornness may be a nervous system trying to cross a threshold without a bridge.

What This Lesson Is For

A transition is not simply moving from one activity to another. It is ending one state, releasing one mental track, forming the next, predicting what will happen and tolerating the gap between known and unknown.

This lesson reframes rigidity as possible threshold distress. Predictability is not always control. Sometimes it is the bridge that makes movement possible.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Transitions require energy, prediction and trust.
- Unexpected change can feel like rupture.
- Rigidity can be a protective attempt to stay coherent.
- A transition bridge is more useful than a lecture about flexibility.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Approaching the threshold slowly and building a bridge between known and unknown.

Which transitions create the strongest resistance?

What part of the transition is hardest: ending, starting, not knowing, being interrupted or losing control of timing?

What warning, sequence or ritual could help the system cross?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where do I spring change on the person and expect instant flexibility?

What predictable structure could reduce the size of the rupture?

How can I distinguish genuine transition distress from controlling behaviour?

Practice Page: The Transition Bridge

Map point	Your notes
Transition that creates distress	
What is ending	
What is unknown	
Predictability bridge	
One transition ritual or warning	

Lesson 8: Meltdown, Shutdown And Collapse

What if the system has moved beyond negotiation?

THRESHOLD

A meltdown is not a tantrum. A shutdown is not consent. Support depends on timing.

What This Lesson Is For

There is a point where the system is no longer in conversation. Before that point, words, choices, boundaries and humour may help. After that point, more language often becomes more load.

This lesson teaches timing: prevention, protection, reduction, recovery and later repair. It does not remove responsibility. It places responsibility in the right phase.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Meltdown: explosive overload or discharge.
- Shutdown: inward collapse, freeze, disconnect or word loss.
- Collapse: the depleted system after capacity has gone.
- Repair belongs after the system has returned.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Recognising the point beyond negotiation and learning what each phase asks for.

How do I know the system is approaching the threshold?

What makes it worse once the threshold has been crossed?

What helps recovery before conversation begins again?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

What do I keep saying after language has become load?

How can I protect safety without escalating shame?

What conversation belongs later, not during the collapse?

Practice Page: The Timing Map

Map point	Your notes
Early warning signs	
Threshold crossed signs	
What makes it worse	
What helps recovery	
Repair conversation for later	

Lesson 9: Rejection, Shame And The Social Wound

What happens when difference is repeatedly misunderstood?

THRESHOLD

The wound is not only being different. It is being repeatedly misunderstood.

What This Lesson Is For

By the time behaviour appears, the person may already be carrying the memory of being misread. Lazy. Dramatic. Weird. Too sensitive. Not trying. Those words do not simply disappear.

This lesson maps the social wound: the way repeated misunderstanding becomes anticipation, self-protection, masking, shame, anger or withdrawal.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Social memory teaches the system what to expect.
- Shame can become part of the load before anything happens.
- Rejection sensitivity may be history, not drama.
- Repair must speak to the wound beneath the event.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Meeting the part of the system that learned to expect rejection.

Which words have followed me or the person I care for?

What does the system expect before a conversation even begins?

What would repair need to include beyond apology?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Which label have I repeated because I was frightened or tired?

How might my tone activate old social memory?

What does the person need to experience repeatedly before trust becomes believable?

Practice Page: The Social Wound Map

Map point	Your notes
Old social label	
Where it came from	
What the system now expects	
New repair language	
Repeated experience needed	

Lesson 10: Caring Without Control

How do we support without managing the person out of existence?

THRESHOLD

Support should increase contact with life. When it removes agency, care becomes control.

What This Lesson Is For

Support can begin with love and become a second cage when it is never reviewed. A parent, partner or practitioner may become calendar, shield, translator, alarm system and crisis manager until the person has no space to practise agency.

This lesson asks what support should do: increase contact with life, protect dignity, build capacity where possible and keep safety without replacing the person.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- Protection can become imprisonment.
- Agency must be preserved where it is genuinely available.
- Support should be reviewed, not assumed forever.
- The opposite mistake is abandonment disguised as independence.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Finding the line where care opens life rather than closing it down.

Where has support helped life expand?

Where has support started replacing the person?

What can be returned, shared or redesigned without removing safety?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

What am I doing from love that may now reduce agency?

Where am I over-functioning because I am afraid?

What support would respect the actual capacity available now?

Practice Page: The Support And Agency Audit

Map point	Your notes
Support that helps	
Support that may control	
Agency available now	
Safety that still matters	
What to review or return	

Lesson 11: Building A Compatible Life

What would life look like if it were designed around the actual system instead of the fantasy system?

THRESHOLD

Insight must become architecture.

What This Lesson Is For

Understanding without redesign can become another cruelty. The person knows why they suffer, but nothing around the suffering changes.

This lesson turns insight into architecture: sensory boundaries, daily rhythm, recovery, task design, communication, connection, movement, meaning and support.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- The goal is not to become normal.
- The goal is to reduce unnecessary suffering so more energy is available for life.
- Compatibility is design around the actual system.
- Small maintained changes are stronger than dramatic unsustainable plans.

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Designing one piece of life around the real system, not the fantasy system.

Which part of life is still built for the fantasy system?

Where would one structural change reduce daily suffering?

What support, boundary or rhythm needs to become architecture?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where have I asked the person to fit the system instead of redesigning the system?

Which change would help everyone breathe more easily?

How can we build a life that is not smaller through fear, but more compatible through truth?

Practice Page: The Compatible Life Blueprint

Map point	Your notes
Area of life	
Fantasy system expectation	
Actual system reality	
Compatible design change	
How to maintain it gently	

Lesson 12: The Person Beneath The Adaptation

Who becomes visible when the system stops fighting for survival?

THRESHOLD

The final aim is contact with the actual person. A label can be a door, but it is not the whole house.

What This Lesson Is For

This course is not trying to diagnose anyone. A label can be useful, protective and relieving. It can be a door. But a door is not the whole house.

The final lesson returns to the person beneath the adaptations: the child after collapse, the adult who has tried to function, the partner who goes silent, the parent who carries too much, the practitioner who sensed behaviour was not the whole truth.

The Mechanism To Listen For

- A label can help, but it must not replace the person.
- Adaptation may have been survival.
- The aim is contact, not perfection.
- The question becomes: who is here when survival is no longer the whole job?

My first response after watching this lesson

Lesson Reflection

What did this lesson name that I had previously judged, ignored or made too simple?

Where have I been using a verdict when I needed a system map?

What part of the teaching felt most uncomfortable, relieving or accurate?

What one question do I want to carry into the week?

Guided Session Integration

Use this page after the guided session for this lesson. Do not write as if you are trying to pass the course. Write what the system actually noticed.

Session focus: Letting the adaptations soften enough to remember the person underneath.

Which adaptation has been mistaken for personality?

What becomes visible when the system is less busy surviving?

What do I want to protect, honour or restore after this course?

Supporter Reflection

For carers, partners, parents, practitioners, or the part of you that has been trying to manage the system through force.

Where have I related to the label, pattern or crisis more than the person?

What part of the person becomes visible when pressure reduces?

How will I keep looking for the person underneath the adaptation?

Practice Page: The Actual Person Practice

Map point	Your notes
Adaptation or role	
What it protected	
Person beneath it	
What contact needs now	
What I want to honour going forward	

Closing Integration: What The Course Has Changed

At the end of this programme, the goal is not to have a perfect label, a perfect strategy or a life without difficulty. The goal is to have more accurate contact with the actual system and the actual person.

Use this final section to gather what changed in your language, your perception, your care, your boundaries and your support architecture.

The old verdict I am no longer willing to use carelessly is:

The system-level question I now want to ask first is:

The support that made the biggest difference was:

The boundary that still matters is:

The person I can now see more clearly is:

The next honest step is:

Final Note

This manual is a companion to a training, not a substitute for professional support. Use what is accurate. Leave what is not. Return to the central discipline whenever the system becomes difficult to read: describe the system before naming the person.