

Matt George ([00:00](#)):

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Matt George ([00:23](#)):

Hello listeners and welcome to episode four of the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast. We're almost to the halfway mark of this first season. Can you believe it? On the podcast today, for episode four, is a man named Bill Wong. I was reflecting on the conversation that I was lucky enough to have with him and he's a fascinating person. I started to engage with his work via a TED talk he did at TEDx Grand Forks.

Matt George ([00:58](#)):

The title was Fighting On: Overcoming Autism Diagnosis with Bill Wong and I thought the description of the talk was really fascinating. It's had over 22,000 views and I'll read how TEDx introduced Bill. I think it captures it nicely.

Matt George ([01:20](#)):

Using his rare perspective as an occupational therapist and an individual with autism, Bill Wong OTD OTR/L presents problems individuals with autism are facing today. Offering community based solutions, Bill showcases how individuals with autism are capable of success, even if the routes they take in life don't fit the expected.

Matt George ([01:48](#)):

Born in Hong Kong but raised in the United States, Bill Wong didn't speak until he was nearly three. Although he demonstrated restricted and repetitive behavior, his pediatrician refused to diagnose him with autism because of his high IQ. It wasn't until after obtaining an undergraduate degree in statistics and finding limited job prospects that Bill was finally diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and discovered his passion in occupational therapy.

Matt George ([02:17](#)):

Since 2010, Bill has completed a Master's degree in occupational therapy and received his clinical doctorate. Now an established clinician with a specialty in autism, he is also a well known presence on social media, an avenue he uses to share his successes and challenges as an individual with autism.

Matt George ([02:37](#)):

Moving forward, Bill plans to use his passion to engage students in Chinese speaking countries with education in their native language while continuing to establish himself as a leader in OT in autism communities. Again, that is TEDx Grand Forks and we'll put a link to Bill's talk in our show notes.

Matt George ([02:59](#)):

I asked him how he wanted to be discovered by you all, the audience, and he said Twitter. He's very active on Twitter. He has almost 13,000 followers following the work, he's got a great bio, lots of titles, lots of different hats. You can find him [@BillWongOT](#). I think you're really going to love this

conversation. I feel very lucky to have had this conversation with Bill Wong. Enjoy episode four of the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast.

Matt George ([03:39](#)):

Bill Wong, welcome to the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast.

Bill Wong ([03:44](#)):

Thank you for having me, Matt.

Matt George ([03:48](#)):

You're very welcome indeed. We're really eager to dig into your experience, into your career as well and before we started recording, you mentioned to me that you're used to this. Does that mean you speak a lot?

Bill Wong ([04:02](#)):

I guess for me, that means I have done some podcasts as a host before and I've also been on the other end as a guest as well, so I'm pretty used to the drill.

Matt George ([04:14](#)):

You're used to the drill. What's your experience with the podcast medium? What do you think? Do you think it's good to have these freeform conversations?

Bill Wong ([04:23](#)):

Oh yeah, I think it's definitely [inaudible 00:04:26] on select topics. The ones that I usually host are from AOTA. We're doing a leadership podcast, so therefore I'm part [inaudible 00:04:40] or [inaudible 00:04:41] facilitator those so therefore, I've been on that end and then I've also been on the guest end as well. Of course on that podcast as well as [inaudible 00:04:52] podcast by [inaudible 00:04:54] community and also autism community as well, so I'm pretty used to it by now. I think this year I've been to about six podcasts as guest, five or six podcasts as a guest so I'm pretty used to it.

Matt George ([05:08](#)):

Fantastic. I'm always surprised when people tell us it's their first because the medium has been around for some time, so this is certainly not your first.

Bill Wong ([05:17](#)):

No, but that podcast I do for AOTA, I've been doing that for almost five years now so yeah, I've been used to the format actually because it's part of my role in AOTA. It's not a big role, per se. It's a small group, but we're producing this leadership podcast, I'm so used to the format by now. It's all good.

Matt George ([05:39](#)):

That's great. I really want to get into what AOTA is but first, let's start at the beginning and let's actually start outside of your career and your life. This has been a really strange year for everybody. Where do we find you right now?

Bill Wong ([05:57](#)):

Where do I find you right now? In terms of geographic location, I do not [inaudible 00:06:02] this question.

Matt George ([06:04](#)):

Yeah, where's your location exactly?

Bill Wong ([06:07](#)):

I live in East Los Angeles specifically, in the USA. I think that's a good enough answer, right?

Matt George ([06:14](#)):

Yeah, East LA. That's wonderful. We were in LA County in September and it was really beautiful. Coming from the east coast of Canada, it's a big change.

Bill Wong ([06:24](#)):

Yeah, I've been speaking on east coast. I think the most east I have been in Canada was in [inaudible 00:06:31]. I was there I think a few years ago.

Matt George ([06:35](#)):

Wow, excellent, excellent. Okay, so we find you in East LA. What has this year been like for you in America, in California? It must've been a really strange year.

Bill Wong ([06:46](#)):

It is very strange year and now of course you also have to add, aside from COVID, you also have to add too the wildfires that we had. The air quality is so bad that going outside is definitely a challenge as well.

Matt George ([07:02](#)):

[crosstalk 00:07:02] with the wildfires right now?

Bill Wong ([07:04](#)):

Yeah, we have quite a bit of fires on the west coast, so the air quality from what I know is usually decent but for the last few weeks has been very bad.

Matt George ([07:18](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Wong ([07:19](#)):

I would say at least 10 times worse than usual if not more.

Matt George ([07:27](#)):

Yes, and then factoring in COVID on top of that, what has your experience been like this year? Has your work carried on as usual? Has your life carried on as usual or has it been a total disruption?

Bill Wong ([07:41](#)):

Ooh, good question. Because of work, I still work in the nursing home but the routine has definitely changed for sure with daily check ins and then infection protocols, you know? Infection control protocols, so adjusting to different ones from different facilities. That has definitely been the challenge, so that's a different part, right? Then in terms of education because I'm a teacher as well, at least for the lecture based classes, this whole year is all online. Definitely that was a big change, you know?

Bill Wong ([08:19](#)):

Then of course, one of my favorite hobbies is to play golf. That has also changed as well, you know? When the shelter in place orders were happening, the golf courses did not open for two months and then now, unless I'm going out with my mom or my dad to play golf, you can't share carts with anybody.

Matt George ([08:47](#)):

Right, right.

Bill Wong ([08:50](#)):

Yeah, that's another one.

Matt George ([08:51](#)):

When you think about your teaching right now, and I want to dig into what you're teaching and where you're teaching, do you think we lose something when we take education online? I know it's the situation wherein right now we have to adapt. How do you feel like you've been adapting to that?

Bill Wong ([09:10](#)):

Oh man, I think I've heard from a lot of my colleagues in my field. They've said they've had to do a lot more work than say when the classes are [inaudible 00:09:19].

Matt George ([09:19](#)):

Oh really?

Bill Wong ([09:21](#)):

There are a few factors. One is I think it's your schedule, but a lot more flexible than before because sometimes it's maybe the students, they may not want to meet you at the regular scheduled time. They may want to do something else and then I think even that there's a lot of uncertainties, so therefore you've got to try to respond to students' emails. I can imagine there will be a lot of emailing about clarification for assignments or papers, whatever it is. You know? That kind of stuff happens.

Bill Wong ([09:59](#)):

Then in my schools, we track attendance, because they had to use the... Every class, they have to do discussion boards as a means to track attendance, you know? Of course, I also have to grade the discussion boards posts, so that is definitely... That work wouldn't exist if classes were on ground, you know?

Matt George ([10:22](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bill Wong ([10:24](#)):

Yeah, there's a lot more work than usual, I would say. Another thing I think is given that the students have a lot of anxiety of what's happening already, so [inaudible 00:10:39] the students want to know where they stand as soon as possible.

Matt George ([10:43](#)):

Sure. Let's stay there for a second because that's really interesting. We are on the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast and we talk a lot on this podcast about sensory overload. In the elements of our current time, you notice that in your student body, would you say?

Bill Wong ([11:01](#)):

Oh, you know what they call Zoom fatigue or being on video conference? Yeah, there is such a good term like that because they're on video conferencing software programs too long. Sometimes they'll be on for hours upon hours of the lectures. Sometimes the students just zone out, probably a lot more quickly than say on ground, because in person, it's like if I see the people raise their hands, then it's like, "Okay, I'm going to stop and I will answer questions." But if it's online now, even if it's on Zoom, I can't see all the students on one screen. It's hard to know when the students have questions.

Matt George ([11:53](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Wong ([11:55](#)):

Therefore sometimes the students are like, "Bill, just go, man. Just go. We're all [inaudible 00:12:02]," and then it's like if you have any questions, okay, we just type it into the chat box or when the lecture's over, we'll just shout out the questions to you.

Matt George ([12:14](#)):

Yeah, and it's also that I think we've heard on the course of this podcast we're always being bombarded with news. It seems to me like especially news from America. I know Canadians even, we pay a lot of attention to what's happening south of the border, so when you're on your computer the entire day, even for work, it's tempting to be constantly checking the news, to be checking Twitter, to be checking these sources.

Bill Wong ([12:44](#)):

Oh yeah, definitely. Or sometimes on Zoom, you can just turn off your camera and sometimes it's like I don't know if you're doing something else, you know? I don't know if you're checking your email, I don't know if you're on Twitter, I don't know if you're on Facebook, I don't know that.

Matt George ([13:02](#)):

Exactly. Bill, with your permission, let's sort of trace your career a little bit. Describe for people not only what you do professionally today but how did you get here. Tell us a little bit about your origin story in your career.

Bill Wong ([13:21](#)):

I guess how did I get here. Let me get a clarifying question first before I [crosstalk 00:13:26] understand.

Matt George ([13:26](#)):

Absolutely.

Bill Wong ([13:28](#)):

I guess, what you mean by how you get here is just to where I am today professionally. Is that what is being asked?

Matt George ([13:38](#)):

Exactly. What was that arc of your career? How did it progress to now?

Bill Wong ([13:45](#)):

Very good question. Forgive me to ramble on and on, because autistic individuals, they can have a tendency to do that. Also of course, being an instructor, being rambling on and on and on is not a very good thing.

Matt George ([13:59](#)):

As you know on a podcast, this is the perfect time to ramble.

Bill Wong ([14:04](#)):

Although of course there's also a length of time. There's also [inaudible 00:14:10] constraints, so that's why it's finding the right balance in terms of sharing relevant information versus going on and on nonstop. Anyway, now I'm going to go back to the question. I would say this. Growing up, math was actually my strong point. It was actually not a field like health sciences. I would say it was very far away because growing up, I got a trophy. I won a mental math competition, so I was pretty good at arithmetic and then also I remember in fifth grade before I immigrated to the US with my family, after competing in the open qualifier for the International Math Olympics.

Bill Wong ([15:01](#)):

Therefore, my math was a strong point of course and it was all throughout high school. It's not surprising that I was declaring stats as my major for my undergrad. Then I think what the turning point when I did not pursue that further was when I was taking the upper division courses in undergrad. About the sophomore or junior year of my undergrad, that was when I had my moment of it's not worth it to pursue anymore, especially when I heard what I'd be in for if I were to pursue statistics in graduate school.

Bill Wong ([15:46](#)):

I did not want to be more miserable for three more years, you know? For me, I realized right away when I took some upper division courses in stats, it's a lot of truths and it's very abstract and it's not very black and white as arithmetic. Then I tried accounting but for me, for someone like me, I guess little did I know, for someone like me who don't have very good [inaudible 00:16:20], accounting was actually not

a very good match given that the sole complex in terms of rules [inaudible 00:16:27] stuff like that. For me, it's like nope. That actually is not it.

Bill Wong ([16:32](#)):

Then coming out of undergrad with a stats degree, I was unemployed for a year and a half actually and about a year towards that unemployment period, that was when my parents said, "You either could continue to be unemployed or you should start looking at some other careers to continue life, because you shouldn't be wasting your time like this." So, we explored a few fields. We explored business school.

Bill Wong ([17:06](#)):

The business school was actually our first choice because that was the least amount of prerequisites to make up if you were to go to a graduate school. Unfortunately, my score for the graduate school exam, it was not the best that my parents would hope for and I think my parents' perception was if I couldn't get into a good business school, then it would be not a very worthwhile investment.

Bill Wong ([17:36](#)):

Then we tried seminary because at the time, my parents and I, we were pretty active in the church and we knew some young clergy. [inaudible 00:17:50] similar path, but then we looked at the job prospects. I was like, "Nope. That ain't it either."

Matt George ([17:56](#)):

That's not it either.

Bill Wong ([17:58](#)):

That ain't it either. Then we looked at occupational therapy and I guess at the time it's like we didn't consider occupational therapy assistance because I guess my family is like, "Why are we going backwards into the degree? You have a Bachelor's already. Why are you going back to having Associate's? It doesn't make sense." Then we looked at a Master's program for occupational therapy. We only looked at one school ironically because I guess that school was pretty close to home, so that school is actually University of Southern California.

Matt George ([18:37](#)):

USC.

Bill Wong ([18:38](#)):

Yeah, of course. There's also another USC down in Australia as well, you know?

Matt George ([18:42](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([18:43](#)):

That's why I said the full name as well. It's better to say that way because Australia, there's the University of Sunshine Coast and they also know that as USC too.

Matt George ([18:54](#)):

Okay.

Bill Wong ([18:56](#)):

Yeah, so this is an FYI. I noticed later on in my career but this is more of a side note. But then back to the story, my parents were like, "You know what? This school is pretty close." Then we look at the prerequisites. Hey, maybe I could make it because even though it's a top school, by the time there's like... You know what? My math skills were pretty strong. They're still pretty strong, especially considering I had the stats major, so who knows? Maybe I would be able to get in the field because my GPA is about par with the admission requirements and then [inaudible 00:19:41], hey, if I have a decent day, I probably could meet the requirements for the graduate school examinations score too. It's like hey, you've got this.

Matt George ([19:54](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Wong ([19:55](#)):

Then of course we also looked at the job prospects. It was like the pay is pretty good and the unemployment rate is pretty low at the time. Then we also heard about the admissions rate at the time at that USC. It was 50%, so it's not now of course but 50%, I was like, "Dude, my odds are pretty high."

Matt George ([20:16](#)):

That's a good deal.

Bill Wong ([20:18](#)):

That's a good deal, you know? We spent about a year to actually make up the prerequisites to enter into the occupational therapy school and I guess that school was also the only school I applied. Although, in the US right now, this is not the strategy I would advise some students to do so because nowadays, the environment is so competitive. I would not advise that.

Matt George ([20:43](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([20:47](#)):

Anyway, I started my occupational therapy at that USC in 2009, summer 2009. It was a very rough beginning but it was sort of expected because to transition from a field like statistics to a field like occupational therapy, it was definitely a transition because it's not like crunching numbers anymore. It's more like a lot of health science stuff. I remember back in my day when I was in high school, anatomy and physiology, they're my worst enemies, so definitely I was barely getting by.

Bill Wong ([21:25](#)):

Yeah, I was barely getting by and then the following term, [inaudible 00:21:30] survive. I think many of my classmates said, "It probably got better, right?" Academically, [inaudible 00:21:37] get better because I started beginning to get the hang of the field, beginning to get a hang of what occupational

therapy is and as I got to know more about it, I was like, "You know what?" I think at the six months, that was when I finally bought into it. You know what? That was going to be my career.

Bill Wong ([21:58](#)):

But on the flip side of things, we also had to do clinical rotations or internships and actually I struggled a lot there in the very beginning. A comment that I got was more eye contact, more reading social cues, not managing the time well. When I heard that the first time, I was sort of put off by it but it's like, you know what? I was still learning. It was still a transition phase.

Bill Wong ([22:27](#)):

The second time that happened again, that was when the alarm bells. I was like, "Hey, how come I struggle in this more than my classmates do?"

Matt George ([22:37](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([22:40](#)):

Then I think a few weeks later, actually I read a reading in pediatrics about how autistic children play and I remember, I reflected upon my childhood. I was like, "You know what? These descriptions look like me."

Matt George ([22:58](#)):

Interesting.

Bill Wong ([22:59](#)):

I brought that attention of course to my parents but my parents were like, "You are in OT school of all places. How could you have autism?" I just listened to my parents and I just put it off but then in the summer of 2010, I was in a clinical internship. [inaudible 00:23:18] really matters not. It's not those observational placements I had before. It was actually the hands-on placements and I really struggled mightily in that one.

Bill Wong ([23:28](#)):

In fact, out of the 12 week placement, I walked out after week seven. Technically, I failed that placement but when my parents learned that I walked out of the placement and I got a fail, I told them, "Well, you know what? This struggle has been continuing for a year now in terms of my clinical internships. I need to find out why I was struggling."

Bill Wong ([23:55](#)):

I guess at that time, I was also very fortunate to be on the insurance plan for my university, so I was able to get the screening and assessment done pretty quickly. That period, I remember that took me a year. Not a year, sorry. A month actually. That took me a month to actually get tested and I remember in August of 2010, that was when I found out my diagnosis of Asperger's. Yeah.

Matt George ([24:34](#)):

When you received the feedback from your professors at the time and you read the article about how kids play, something resonated with you. You saw some of yourself in those descriptions.

Bill Wong ([24:49](#)):

Actually all of it.

Matt George ([24:50](#)):

Interesting.

Bill Wong ([24:52](#)):

Yeah, so we can break down that question because I'm sure we can continue on in terms of how I got [inaudible 00:24:58] today but you feel free to pause.

Matt George ([25:01](#)):

Yeah, no, that's really fascinating. You end up receiving a positive diagnosis. What happens from there?

Bill Wong ([25:09](#)):

Good question. Of course, the day of, I brought it up to my parents and instead of scolding me about failing the clinical internship, they were not... I guess they feel regretful in terms of making me do the internship without listening to me because they felt very guilty of me being in [inaudible 00:25:38] at that time because they knew that I could not afford to fail another clinical internship. Therefore, they felt that they caused the failure, so to speak.

Bill Wong ([25:50](#)):

Then in terms of my classmates, a lot of them were very shocked and the shock part is not because I was a little bit different socially but was more because I was going through all my education without any kind of accommodations. I think the diagnosis part, that was probably the second thing that they were surprised by because they probably could not have imagined somebody who is autistic amongst them in the classroom.

Matt George ([26:30](#)):

Fast forward, you get to your later years of study, you eventually come out of university and now you're practicing in the field. Is that right?

Bill Wong ([26:40](#)):

Yes, I am and I would say this. In between, definitely there was a long road there to get back because the fact that I failed clinical rotation. That means I have to make up one aside from the one that I'm supposed to have remaining.

Matt George ([26:57](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([26:57](#)):

Therefore, I would say I took about a year longer than my classmates in general to get my license to practice. I would say this, I think towards the middle part of my second internship, that was when I decided, "You know what? I got to get a doctoral degree." Because you know what? Part of it is because my graduate exam score. I knew that it would still be valid for two more years and I did not want to go through that test again.

Matt George ([27:36](#)):

Yep.

Bill Wong ([27:36](#)):

Did not want to go through that standardized test again, so I was like, "You know what? I'm going to give myself a two year window, get a doctorate done and then start my career that way." Oh yeah, then in between too, I think just before I resumed my clinical internship, it was summer of 2011 because I started my clinical internships in fall of 2011. In summer 2011, there was a big turning point because I actually vented on Facebook, was like, "Who the heck in the OT community has autism?"

Bill Wong ([28:20](#)):

Then there was a caregiver from the UK. She actually commented and say, "Hey, there is this autistic OT from the UK. He works in adolescent, young adult mental health and he's autistic. Here's his website. You might want to contact him to see if he's willing to talk to you." Then two to three weeks later, I was able to connect with him and actually-

Matt George ([28:47](#)):

Wow.

Bill Wong ([28:47](#)):

Yeah, that was a big turning point, definitely wanted to mention that.

Matt George ([28:54](#)):

What did that conversation do for you in terms of it being a turning point?

Bill Wong ([28:57](#)):

I say that because in our first meeting, we actually compared our professional journeys up to where I was. Where he was as a student compared to where I was as a student. We were comparing our journeys and actually, although in terms of when he found out his diagnosis was different point but our struggles were very similar.

Matt George ([29:23](#)):

Right, so you were able to relate with his experience.

Bill Wong ([29:28](#)):

Yes, and that actually gave me the help that I can be an OT, you know?

Matt George ([29:34](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Bill, what does it mean to you to be an occupational therapist? You strike me as a very passionate person.

Bill Wong ([29:42](#)):

I guess for me, what happened was... I guess I'm going to continue to answer the previous question actually.

Matt George ([29:48](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Wong ([29:51](#)):

For me, it took me a year to actually find that guy but I know that the subsequent encounters that I've met other autistic OT students is... They actually approached me almost as a last resort, so to speak. Then of course in the US, typically our occupational therapy education is about two years, two years and a half if you include clinical internship, so a year is definitely not a luxury that many people have. Right?

Matt George ([30:24](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([30:27](#)):

I think I sort of made an oath to myself. If I were able to become an occupational therapist, I definitely do not want a repeat of what has happened to me to somebody else.

Matt George ([30:44](#)):

Absolutely, absolutely. That's why you do a lot of this work as well and I know when we finish this story about what being an OT means to you, I really want to talk about your TEDx talk in Grand Forks because I was really blown away by that.

Bill Wong ([30:58](#)):

Oh yeah. Actually, that story now. Actually, it's good that you bring it down by the way because I could go on and on about how I got to where I am today.

Matt George ([31:08](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Wong ([31:11](#)):

The back story was this. For my doctorate year, I actually did not used to practice, so in summer of 2013, that was actually my first year of practicing as an occupational therapist. I remember my first job was in pediatrics actually and at that time, it actually matched me very good on paper because there were a few things. Then my clinical rotation performance, pediatrics was actually my best one and then given I'm autistic, so I definitely could have some insights about how autistic children might behave or understand why they are who they are.

Bill Wong ([31:58](#)):

Thirdly is the location. I don't know if you guys use kilometers. It's about 10 kilometers from home, that job is not so bad [crosstalk 00:32:09] distance and the fourth thing, the final thing is actually I met the supervisor in person at a previous conference. Therefore, it was like [inaudible 00:32:19] about the transition plan. Hey, it's somebody that already knows you in the job so naturally, people do things like, "Hey, you know what? You have all these four factors. This is not a bad first job." You know?

Matt George (32:35):

Sure.

Bill Wong (32:35):

But unfortunately that job only lasted three months with me and the reason why was because I guess one of the things that I struggle... This is a very typical struggle for autistic individuals is they really struggle with play and I do as well. Therefore, it's like because of a lot of the pediatrics [inaudible 00:33:01] that I encounter, there was a lot of play involved and I definitely struggle with creative play. I was very bad at that. Secondly-

Matt George (33:10):

In what way would you say that you struggle with creative play?

Bill Wong (33:14):

What way? I guess it means I just could not imagine. Some other occupational pediatric therapists I observe, they're so playful. I am not, so to speak.

Matt George (33:27):

Right.

Bill Wong (33:27):

I'm definitely not. Okay, that is definitely not me. Then secondly is because I grew up in Hong Kong, so I was so used to the behavior management system for the British behavior management system. Apparently, that did not work in the States. That does not work in the States. I definitely remember that was definitely another struggle for me, that I did not anticipate.

Bill Wong (33:57):

I was that and then after that, almost a year, I was actually unemployed so to speak. I was trying to figure out what my next direction was and through some soul searching, I settled on the nursing home setting which I have now been working for six years. Then I chose to transition very slowly and then it was three months into that job, [inaudible 00:34:27] nursing job, that was when I got approached by a team member from TEDx Grand Forks.

Bill Wong (34:32):

That time, that team member was an OT student, so she actually found me on Twitter and said, "Bill, your story is very interesting. I want to nominate you to talk on this TEDx. Will you be open to that?" I remember we talked for an hour and a half just to know the gist of it and then she told me, "Okay, if I nominate you, if you were chosen for a final round, don't be surprised if there's a group interview."

Bill Wong ([35:06](#)):

Three weeks later, I got the group interview and that was that evening, they notified me that I was a speaker. I think that was the back story of that.

Matt George ([35:20](#)):

That's fantastic and I was watching it before we spoke and you mentioned getting an email from a man with autism who was nervous about his career opportunities.

Bill Wong ([35:33](#)):

Let me correct you. It was a lady.

Matt George ([35:35](#)):

Yes, thank you. It was a lady. This lady emails you and she's nervous about her career opportunities and you said something really insightful. You said that perhaps your work hadn't reached far enough because your goal was to address the figures that you gave, which is 3.5 million autistic adults in America and 35% unemployment. Do I have those figures correct?

Bill Wong ([36:00](#)):

That was 2015.

Matt George ([36:02](#)):

In 2015.

Bill Wong ([36:04](#)):

Yeah, that was 2014-2015 so obviously that number is probably not as true right now, you know? That was five years ago.

Matt George ([36:13](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([36:14](#)):

That was six years ago.

Matt George ([36:16](#)):

Right, yeah, longer than we think. What did getting that email mean to you?

Bill Wong ([36:22](#)):

That meant that I had not done good enough because I think that's what I mentioned earlier after I found the guy, the autistic OT, three, four years beforehand. I did not want to repeat what happened to me again. I think I eventually found out she dropped out of occupational therapy school. That kind of stuff, I was like, "That is very unacceptable," that kind of stuff that is happening in terms of the educational system.

Matt George ([37:01](#)):

Is that why you used a phrase... I love when you go through this TEDx talk and we'll put a link to it in our show notes so our listeners can watch you speak. You bring up some really famous people who also share the diagnosis of autism and you use the term fight on. I thought that was really elegant in the sense that that's what you're trying to accomplish. You're trying to, whether it's employment or education, you're trying to help those with the diagnosis of autism fight on.

Bill Wong ([37:34](#)):

Here's the thing. At the University of Southern California, that is actually our slogan.

Matt George ([37:41](#)):

Is it? Okay.

Bill Wong ([37:43](#)):

That's actually a slogan.

Matt George ([37:44](#)):

Very good.

Bill Wong ([37:45](#)):

I explained to my speech coach about the title. I was like, "I don't care when you shape my speeches, but okay, after the final product, after I get a sense what the speech is all about, it's like, hey, I need to keep the fighting on part. The reason why is because, hey, that's my alma mater for occupational therapy school so therefore, I want to keep it." Then another thing you will also notice is the background too.

Bill Wong ([38:15](#)):

I think that's one of the... Sometimes USC football, I'm talking about the American football, [inaudible 00:38:25] for the jerseys I think. It's not the [inaudible 00:38:28] and gold, but it's black and gold. Sometimes that also symbolizes the school in a sense, so I was like, "Keep that color. There is a purpose to it."

Matt George ([38:39](#)):

There's a purpose to it. That's great. You're representing USC. What was the feedback of that TEDx talk? Did you reach some of the folks you intended to reach with that talk?

Bill Wong ([38:51](#)):

You know what? I think I had some emails ever since. I have some emails from autistic individuals ever since, especially those who are going through school. They were like, "Wow, I want to be like you. How the heck do you do what you do? In a sense, you give me hope but what you do is a mountain to climb." I think that's the feedback from that and then the fact that it's 20,000 views. I noticed that there are some programs, whenever they're having me over for a guest lecture, that has become a prerequisite for the students to watch before I come into the lectures.

Matt George ([39:36](#)):

Well, that's great, Bill. When we talk about that employment gap, that 35% unemployment, what do you believe we can do to tackle that? We certainly want to talk about solutions on this podcast. Are there ways that you think we can start to talk about or to address this employment gap?

Bill Wong ([39:59](#)):

I don't know if you've heard of the term masking or academically it's called camouflaging.

Matt George ([40:08](#)):

Interesting. Can you explain?

Bill Wong ([40:10](#)):

Yeah, I can definitely explain that. For camouflaging and masking, that actually means right now when I'm talking to you, I definitely am masking in a sense. Pretending I'm very socially competent, you know, than I think. It's like wearing a mask. Sometimes you've got to be socially competent so you can keep your job or keep your relationships or keep rapport with friends, that kind of stuff. I heard from other autistic individuals on Twitter, that can get very tiring.

Matt George ([40:50](#)):

Right.

Bill Wong ([40:51](#)):

[inaudible 00:40:51] I have a social media presence, so it starts when I wake up and it only stops when I sleep because I think the reason why is because I'm an occupational therapist, so therefore even on my social media space, I would consider myself a microinfluencer, I got to keep it professional. To keep it professional, sometimes I have to mask even when I'm posting on Twitter or on Facebook. That kind of stuff is definitely very hard.

Bill Wong ([41:27](#)):

I think we can talk about solutions, right? The social skills training in the workplace, I think that's very important but at the same time on the flip side, I think the people who are neurotypical, I think it's also very important for them to understand the autistic individuals. They're actually putting a lot more effort than you think to actually get along with you in the workplace or [inaudible 00:41:57].

Bill Wong ([41:57](#)):

Then of course the sensory stuff as well. In my environment in the nursing home, actually there are a lot of sensory stuff that can be going on. There can be stuff like... I know in my place until a few months ago, the nursing home, they had fluorescent lights and a lot of autistic individuals, they do not like that.

Matt George ([42:21](#)):

Interesting.

Bill Wong ([42:22](#)):

Yeah, that's one of them and then of course, I also heard kids. Sometimes they don't like alarms, especially unpredictable alarms. That's why they have a hard time with fire drills or earthquake drills,

that kind of stuff. In a nursing home, that can really happen as well because sometimes I will walk in, I would not know when they would have a fire drill.

Matt George ([42:46](#)):

Right. Good point. Bill, when you think about your life day-to-day, the final question that I always ask our guest, when the world seems a bit too noisy or a bit too busy or we're overwhelmed, what's one strategy you use to cope with that? It could be maybe mindfulness. It could be music. What are some of the things that you do day-to-day to center yourself?

Bill Wong ([43:15](#)):

Ooh, that's a good question. Music definitely was one of them. In my car, definitely I would blast my music. I would definitely do that. Yeah, in LA, it's actually relatively common. It's a very ghetto thing, but I guess that's one bad habit I picked up from my undergrad phase.

Matt George ([43:37](#)):

Driving around LA with your music.

Bill Wong ([43:39](#)):

Yeah, that's a very bad habit but a lot of young people, they do it. I won't say young people but people who are young at heart.

Matt George ([43:44](#)):

Certainly, and it's a great way to de-stress from a busy day.

Bill Wong ([43:51](#)):

They would do that and then also at my home. You notice I'm at my room right now. I think once my family understand that I have autism, so they understand my room is my space.

Matt George ([44:08](#)):

Sure.

Bill Wong ([44:10](#)):

I think before they were like, "Bill, just socialize with us." I think after the diagnosis, they were like, "You know what? Just be you. If you can function and do what you do with your day job, that's good enough."

Matt George ([44:24](#)):

Yeah. That's great, Bill. Bill, for our listeners that want to see your work, that want to listen to what you're saying, hearing the things you have to teach us, where is the best place to find you? Is it on social media? Where is the best place to interface with your work?

Bill Wong ([44:39](#)):

I'll do Twitter. @BillWongOT, that's my Twitter. Yeah, I know. Now you know why I ramble on and on because I could've gone on and on about my work as well because I know that Grand Forks stuff, that was only about half of my journey.

Matt George ([44:59](#)):

Absolutely, Bill, and you've had a really fascinating journey thus far and I seriously hope we get to speak again. I'm going to make sure our listeners follow your Twitter account so we know what you're talking about and I'll follow personally as well to keep up with all the things that you're doing. Thank you very, very much for being on the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast.

Bill Wong ([45:20](#)):

Thank you.

Matt George ([45:22](#)):

Thank you, Bill. Take care.

Bill Wong ([45:23](#)):

Take care.

Matt George ([45:31](#)):

Okay, Crystal, we're back for our reflection session for episode four and I've started to realize that I really actually enjoy these times to sit back and reflect on the conversations we've been having. I did it personally after the episode with Bill Wong just because I felt lucky to have the opportunity but now we get to actually talk about what was meaningful to us, what we considered. We're evolving as we go in this podcast and we're now on episode four, so give me your first impressions after listening to that conversation.

Crystal ([46:08](#)):

First of all, I was delighted to have Dr. Bill Wong on the podcast. Some of our audience may know that October is occupational therapy month in Canada and so, Bill is a guest and it's being published in the month of October. I was really happy just the fortuitous timing of that. October 27th is actually World Occupational Therapy Day and October is also Sensory Awareness Month. Of all the guests to have during the month of October, I thought...

Crystal ([46:50](#)):

I'm an occupational therapist myself. I have followed Bill for years on Twitter and really appreciate what he shares as an occupational therapist but also as an autistic person. He's very forthcoming about his experiences and what he shared on our podcast. Yeah, just the value of that is incredibly important. We're already in episode four, Matt. When we launched and thought, "What direction are we going in? What are the types of conversations we're going to have?", we put out to the community. We said, "Who do you want us to have as guests?", and several people responded and said "Okay, you're going to hear from thought leaders and industry experts. We want to hear person first stories. We want to have autistic people on, people who identify as neurodiverse, people who have sensory sensitivities themselves. Let us hear from them."

Matt George ([47:59](#)):

Yeah, I already knew when I was speaking to him that that exact model, this person first element of the podcast and when Bill traced his story and was so forthcoming about what he's experienced, I realized

that the influence he carries in the community, over 12,000 followers on Twitter, over 22,000 views on the TEDx Grand Forks talk, was exactly that. The authenticity, the relatability.

Matt George ([48:27](#)):

One thing that I thought was fascinating and I thought might pique your interest was when he said that it's interesting that his parents and those in the healthcare sector were reluctant to follow through with the diagnosis because of his high IQ, but then he learns through his occupational therapy training how young autistic children play and how they navigate the world and he said, "I see myself in this." What an amazing moment and that's one of those podcast moments I live for because that's a really a-ha moment for me to say what a fascinating experience of the world.

Crystal ([49:03](#)):

Yeah, Matt. I highlighted just a couple of quotes of what he said and one of them was that response. Literally, how can you have autism? I think it was possibly his parents and that initial response of them. You're going through university, right? He said later going through the education system without any accommodation whatsoever. But this is what he talked... He recognized his struggles and I'll just say not fortuitous but how he was going down this path of studying math and statistics and considering professions and careers, identifying that they weren't a match and the public...

Crystal ([49:55](#)):

There was that movie *The Accountant* and the public might have this perception, this wrong perception about people with autism. "Oh, you're all good at math and these wonderful careers." Bill talking about how that was not a match for him and looking for something else, finding occupational therapy where he then studied autism as part of that and started to understand, reflect on his struggles. I think that's incredibly powerful as an adult to recognize your struggles, reflect on them, seek help.

Crystal ([50:36](#)):

He ended up with a diagnosis that was very informative and very helpful for him to have but that seeking to understand as adults and we have an opportunity to do that, right? To understand our problems and look for solutions. It was also... I don't know what you thought about this. He mentioned, this was only about 10 years ago when he disclosed his diagnosis, the journey of his family, their feelings of regret and guilt. He talked about the shock of his classmates, fellow occupational therapy students and something else that I highlighted. He talked about how his fellow classmates saying they could not imagine someone autistic amongst them.

Crystal ([51:34](#)):

That just really makes me think people and their struggles and people with differences and what we have in common. All kinds of people are everywhere.

Matt George ([51:45](#)):

Yeah, this is actually a recurring theme and I'm glad you brought that up because we saw this with Maureen Benny. We'll see this forthcoming with Carol Kranowitz. We have an amazing conversation coming up about *The Out-of-Sync Child*, which sold over a million copies, has been blurbed by *The New York Times*. When you name it, the evolution of that thing changes and that's been a recurring theme and I'm fascinated by that discussion, so I'm glad that that connected with you as well.

Matt George ([52:12](#)):

There was one other thing that I thought was important. In Bill's TED talk and why it had so much reception, TEDx Grand Forks and we have a link to that in our forthcoming show notes and blog post, when he talked about the idea of that evolution of his employment, like we say things not sticking, not quite right. Well, 35%, as Bill says, of adults in America are unemployed and one of his missions is discovering why that is and what I's need to be dotted, what T's need to be crossed to solve that because that, in his mind, is an unacceptable figure.

Matt George ([52:52](#)):

That was interesting for him to paint his picture and relate it back to that stat, I thought carried a lot of weight.

Crystal ([52:59](#)):

We talk or just as we have these conversations and many of the people we're talking to, in particular Bill, you really captured his passion about that with him and he said he wants to make sure along these lines, "what happened to me doesn't happen to someone else". That pivotal moment, he talked about several turning points and that pivotal moment where he found another occupational therapist who identified and publicly identified as having autism. As we bring the community, that diverse community, together of people who experience sensory sensitivities for many different ways, just feeling not alone, feeling like there's someone else who shares a little bit of what happens in daily life.

Crystal ([54:01](#)):

Then helping other people along so that some of the struggles, again for Bill, just empowering other people to experience better, more, different.

Matt George ([54:16](#)):

I've seen the power of community in this sector throughout the course of this podcast. Like you mention, this figure in Bill's life eventually became a mentor. As I said in episode five, we're going to hear from the author Carol Kranowitz about how many parents reached out to her and said, "This helped me so much understand the evolution of my child and my relationship with my child."

Matt George ([54:40](#)):

The community building aspect, the aspect of I see you, I hear you in this community has become so obvious throughout the course of this podcast.

Crystal ([54:49](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, Bill talked about his slogan fighting on and how that really resonated with him, that was his school's slogan and he talked about just sharing his message on our podcast in so many ways that people have value. All kinds of people have value and let's find those solutions, sensory friendly solutions at home.

Crystal ([55:19](#)):

He talked about his experiences a little bit at home, at work, and finding a workplace that worked for him, that was right for him and finding those opportunities so that people can share their value in daily life. It was incredible.

Matt George ([55:37](#)):

Absolutely. Dr. Bill Wong is incredibly active on social media. Fighting on, as you say, the slogan of his alma mater USC. We will be linking to all of these things for Dr. Bill Wong including taking part in our innovation segment, his TEDx Grand Forks talk as well. Crystal, thank you for giving me the opportunity to reflect on this conversation but also for our listeners to be able to reflect on this conversation.

Crystal ([56:03](#)):

Thank you, Matt. I'm going to leave you with something that Bill shared very much towards the end of his interview. Two words that I think really encapsulate his mission and his passion and what we're all trying to do in these conversations as we strive to make people comfortable. That really just is be you.

Matt George ([56:35](#)):

Hello, listeners and welcome back to episode four of the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast. This is the innovation segment. We don't want you to leave this podcast without something to go and do in the world. That's what we're all craving right now during the pandemic. We want to know what to do. That's our fundamental anxiety. We want to give you the strategies, tools, tactics and resources to go out into the world and do that, to create sensory friendly solutions in your daily lives.

Matt George ([57:06](#)):

We're going to stick with the great Dr. Bill Wong for this innovation segment. You've heard it more than once throughout the course of this podcast episode. We're going to point you to his TED talk. This was at TEDx Grand Forks and the title is Fighting On: Overcoming Autism Diagnosis. Dr. Wong is very forthcoming about his experience of the world. This is a person first podcast, so we really love him for that. We thank him for that, for walking us through his journey, backing it up with some hard statistics like that 35% figure that you'll hear about.

Matt George ([57:46](#)):

You'll also hear why it resonated with almost 23,000 people. We've heard already throughout the course of this podcast your listener feedback and we thank you for it. That you want to hear the real world experiences of the people that we're talking to and this innovation segment is no different. Please go to YouTube or directly to TEDx. They have a TEDx talks channel on YouTube, 27 million subscribers. There's lots of people paying attention. Go to Fighting On: Overcoming Autism Diagnosis with the great Dr. Bill Wong at the TEDx Grand Forks.

Matt George ([58:30](#)):

We'll see you back for episode five of the Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast with the bestselling author of The Out-of-Sync Child, Carol Kranowitz.

Matt George ([58:46](#)):

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Matt George ([59:14](#)):

The podcast is also supported by New Brunswick Community College as part of the community resource awareness during and after COVID-19 applied research project, funded by the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation. Learn more about NBCC's efforts to transform lives and communities at [nbcc.ca](http://nbcc.ca).

Matt George ([59:33](#)):

The Sensory Friendly Solutions podcast is produced by me, Matt George, is engineered by the great Zachary [Pelche 00:59:40] and is part of the Unsettled Media podcast network.