

An Introduction to Neurodiversity

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As some of you might be aware, I have ADHD, and I'm quite open about it. You might have also seen me use the phrase "*neurodivergent*" to describe myself. Well, this week - from March 13th through to March 19th – has been Neurodiversity Celebration Week.

To mark this week, I've put this together to explain what *Neurodiversity* is, how *Neurodivergences* can affect people, and some simple steps that can be taken to accommodate *Neurodivergent* people - and help them thrive.

This is a mix of my own experiences, input I've generously received from neurodivergent friends, and some of my own research into neurodiversity. While I am happy to try & answer any questions you have after reading this, the only thing I can claim to be an expert in are my own experiences!

With that said, let's start by explaining the three words I've put in italics in the last paragraph!

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity is a concept which suggests that some developmental disorders are better viewed as variations in how we (and our brains) experience and interact with the world around us. Historically, these differences have been seen as illnesses to treat, with the aim of having affected people cured, and able to lead a normal life without them.

If the historic view from psychiatry has been to seek to file down square pegs to fit in round holes, Neurodiversity instead argues that we should look at ways we can make the holes a little less circular, and let those square pegs make a difference *as square pegs*.

SO WHAT MAKES SOMETHING A NEURODIVERGENCE?

The dictionary definition of neurodivergence (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) is "divergence in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal". Calling this definition 'a little vague' is quite an understatement.

Generally, neurodivergence is an umbrella term for a set of disorders which consistently affect the ways people think, learn, experience reality and interact with it & others in it. Exactly which disorders are neurodivergences isn't set in stone, but the following are always included under the umbrella:

- The Autism Spectrum of Disorders (ASD)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia, Dyspraxia & Dyscalcula)

In addition, other disorders such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Tourette's Syndrome, Down's Syndrome and Bipolar Disorder may be considered neurodivergences.

One of the details often highlighted is that neurodivergences are typically lifelong conditions; they aren't cases of a person *being healthy and then getting sick*.

Neurodivergent is the adjective form; someone who has a neurodivergence may consider themselves *neurodivergent*. Also, *neurotypical* is sometimes used as a term for someone who does not have any neurodivergences.

Now that those words have been defined, the next question I can think to ask is why?

WHY HAVE AN UMBRELLA TERM FOR NEURODIVERGENCES?

It might seem odd to bucket together such different disorders, but there actually a few reasons why grouping them is a worthwhile idea.

Firstly, despite having such different signs and symptoms, these disorders commonly occur together. For example, people with Autism are somewhere between two and ten times more likely to have ADHD than people who don't have Autism.

The second reason is that despite their different possible origins and causes, many neurodivergent people share similar experiences of how their disorders affect their ability to function in day-to-day settings. Understanding these experiences, and what can be done to support them, is a huge part of Neurodiversity.

HOW DO NEURODIVERGENCES AFFECT PEOPLE?

Given neurodivergence is a bucket which includes many different conditions, there can be a lot of different symptoms. I'm going to mainly focus on traits of ASD, ADHD & learning difficulties, as well as looking at some of the traits that can occur for any neurodivergence.

It is worth mentioning that while many of the conditions considered neurodivergences are most easily identified in children or teenagers who struggle at school, evidence suggests that they do not affect intelligence. Instead, neurodivergent people who do well at school are often able to hide their symptoms better, for a number of possible reasons.

Anybody may struggle with some of the symptoms of any of these conditions. However, the separations between general difficulties and a diagnosable condition is in how consistently these issues occur across all parts of a person's life, and how frequent they are. A neurotypical person might struggle with some symptoms a few areas, but less elsewhere. On the other hand, a neurodivergent person struggles with their symptoms across work, their home life, in their hobbies, relationships, and in taking care of themselves.

Autism

Autistic people commonly have difficulties with:

- Understanding what other people think, or feel;
- Judging other people's tone, meaning, or intentions;
- Communicating their own emotions, intentions or feelings;
- Identifying things communicated non-verbally, or through sarcasm & implication

Additionally, many Autistic people often prefer routines and following deliberate plans. One way this has been described to me is that Autistic people have a limited *mental budget* for social interactions every day, and so plan everything to ensure that this doesn't run out.

ADHD

Signs and symptoms of ADHD typically fall into one of two categories - inattentiveness and hyperactivity.

Common inattentiveness symptoms include:

- Frequently starting new tasks before finishing previous ones;
- Being easily distracted & appearing to have a short attention span;
- Struggling to remain focused on a difficult or tedious task;
- Difficulty understanding how to prioritise tasks;
- Frequently making mistakes that seem careless (e.g. writing the wrong letter or number, or typing the wrong word)

Meanwhile common hyperactivity symptoms include:

- Extensive, almost constant, fidgeting
- Restlessness, verging on appearing on-edge at all times
- Frequently blurting out answers to questions over others, or otherwise interrupting
- Struggling to manage stress levels
- Limited sense of risk or perceived danger

ADHD can be considered as a deficiency in dopamine (the brain's reward hormone). This can lead people with ADHD to seek out sources of dopamine wherever they can, and to put off or abandon things when they stop providing dopamine. As such, people with ADHD can be extremely prone to addictions, binges, or developing eating disorders.

For example, I've always had a terrible relationship with food. I used to snack compulsively, and I felt hunger as two different sensations: one in my stomach; the other in my head. The first was manageable, but the second was often unbearable; this need to eat something, *anything*, to function effectively. That second feeling was a craving for dopamine, which had learned that food & drinks (especially sugary or caffeinated) were a good source of it.

Specific Learning Difficulties

Dyslexia affects how people process language. It's commonly seen as difficulties with reading & writing, but it can also affect speaking, listening. Beyond this, it also affects how people's brains process words and concepts, sometimes as unbreakable blocks rather than being made of individual letters.

Dyspraxia is a condition which affects how movement and coordination develop. This affects people's ability to perform dexterous tasks that might seem easy otherwise (like tying shoelaces). This can affect someone's ability to write, type, or even just prepare for the day.

Dyscalculia affects how people understand and process numbers, and maths. This can impact their ability to perform mental maths; how well they can estimate sizes, weights,

distances or numbers; how well they can find alternative ways to solve problems; and can cause difficulties with measuring things.

More General Impacts

The following traits are reported by people with a variety of different diagnosed neurodivergences, even if they are stereotypically associated with a particular condition.

Sensory Processing Issues

Neurodivergences greatly affect how people process information from their senses, which means that they might have particular senses that more sensitive or vulnerable to being overwhelmed. In a work environment, sight or sound based sensory issues are likely to be the most noticeable of these, each of the senses could be affected.

Hearing-related sensory issues can include:

- Aversion to loud noises
- Struggling to separate different nearby conversations (or getting easily frustrated at having multiple conversations nearby)
- Difficulties working effectively without having limited or controlled background noise

Vision-related sensory issues can include:

- Aversion to bright lights
- Preference for wearing sunglasses, even in environments where they seem inappropriate/unhelpful
- Having screens display at extremely high (or low) brightness

People with these touch-related sensory issues might have limited specific textures of clothes or materials that they are comfortable with, and strongly react to having to other textures. Taste & smell related sensory issues may lead to affected people not noticing (or be extremely aware of) smells, and they may have a very limited selection of foods that they are comfortable eating.

Sensory Overwhelm

Neurodivergent people can get overwhelmed while trying to process large amounts of information in the world around us. What capacity people have before getting overwhelmed, and how they react when overwhelmed, can vary both day-to-day, and person-to-person.

For example, I can get overwhelmed by trying to process lots of noises & conversations, and I've had days where getting overwhelmed makes me lose the ability to think ahead of what I'm doing, so I need to keep checking tasks with people. However, I've had other days where getting overwhelmed by noises sets off my fight-or-flight response.

Often, taking steps to reduce sensory inputs can help people get through (and out of) being overwhelmed, but this can take a while. Additionally, being overwhelmed can be exhausting, so even after this, someone who had been overwhelmed might struggle for a few hours.

Rejection Sensitivity

Another trait that can occur amongst Neurodivergent people is known as Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria, which is described as causing disproportionate negative emotional responses to 'actual or perceived rejection'. This can mean that things like valid criticism, or slight imperfections can greatly upset someone, to levels that even they are not expecting.

For many people that this affects, they may (unknowingly) default to expecting conversations be negative, critical, or upsetting unless they are explicitly told otherwise, making them anxious for no apparent reason.

Time Blindness

As the name suggests, people who struggle with Time Blindness have significant difficulties gauging how much time has passed, and how much time tasks may take.

This can lead to people being consistently late (or very early, from overcompensating for this); struggling to provide accurate estimates for how long tasks will take or missing deadlines. This can also result in people consistently (but accidentally) staying late after work, or missing the start of their lunch breaks.

Stimming & Repetitive Behaviours

Many Neurodivergent people experience high levels of stress in what would otherwise be low-stress environments or contexts. As outlets for this stress, they start doing a repetitive movement (known as stimming), as a self-soothing behaviour.

What behaviours are effective vary person-to-person and day-to-day, but they can include:

- Fiddling with an object in their hand;
- Scratching, picking or fidgeting with their faces or hands;
- Drumming their fingers or bouncing their legs;
- Rocking backwards and forwards.

These behaviours can be disruptive for other people, but these are unintentional, almost involuntary responses to stress levels. Unfortunately, some of these can hurt or be damaging (like scratching an area until it bleeds), but their brain might not be aware of any pain signals coming in.

Executive Dysfunction

The brain's Executive Function is essentially its ability to manage itself: setting goals; planning action for them; self-monitoring; and co-ordinating the steps to complete any tasks. The strength of a person's Executive Function also impacts their working memory (like RAM in a PC), and their emotional regulation.

Neurodivergent people may exhibit Executive Dysfunction, where some aspects of their Executive Function are limited. This can involve: not being aware of their own condition (e.g. keeping a thick jumper on despite sweating); perceiving some simple tasks as having an unbearable obstacle in front of them (e.g. putting off something like showering for days at a time because it requires too much mental energy); or struggling to follow a set of instructions without an example to follow.

For people with ADHD specifically, one of the areas of Executive Dysfunction appears to be in managing tiredness; as people with ADHD often report exhaustion in environments where they are expected to remain still or quiet (such as classrooms or lectures).

Hyperfocus & Hyperfixation

For people who experience these, whatever they are focused (or fixated) on becomes one of the only things that they are aware of, losing track of time, hunger, thirst, tiredness or simply other people around them. This can be incredibly powerful, almost seeming like an extraordinary gift, when it allows someone to complete huge amounts done much faster (and seemingly easier) than expected.

However, almost like some mythological gift from the gods, this has a sting to it: it is incredibly unreliable, as what causes it and how long it lasts can vary massively. To make matters worse, it's possible to get hyperfocused on a passing thought or distraction, completely pulling the mind away from what it was originally doing. Trying to get it back on track can be like trying to push the same pole of two magnets together.

The distinction between *hyperfocus* and *hyperfixation* isn't concretely defined, but it is sometimes associated with whether the state remains after something is finished. The accomplishment of completing a task may bring an end to a state of hyperfocus about that task, but if that person is hyperfixated on a task, it might all they can think of for hours after they finished what they were doing.

Masking

Neurodivergent people who were not diagnosed early on in their childhood may have grown up believing that some of their symptoms are personality flaws. As such, they may have become used to attempting to hide any behaviours that they were unable to 'fix'.

This is essentially acting; except the character they are playing is a neurotypical version of themselves. As this requires a constant, deliberate, conscious effort, it is exhausting. Masking for long periods can lead neurodivergent people to be very vulnerable to burnout, and severe mental health issues as a result.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH NEURODIVERGENCES?

One of the key principles of Neurodiversity is that the supporting neurodivergent people is not a matter of eliminating their neurodivergence. Instead, we should consider individual traits, and how they can be supported. In this section, I'd like to share some ideas for things that have really helped me, and have been suggested by friends of mine with other neurodivergences.

Before getting specific, the best support comes down to three things: flexibility, compassion and openness.

While these will explicitly help neurodivergent people, ring-fencing them as measures just for neurodivergent people may lead to them being ignored, due to discomfort with potential social consequences for using them.

Upfront Intentions & Expectations

Firstly, be open and honest about intentions or expectations:

If you're writing an email to someone, including a sentence at the start which says what you're emailing about helps set expectations, and makes it much easier to understand and respond to. Additionally, including an agenda (or even a few sentences about what will be covered) can greatly help with helping neurodivergent people be prepared (both physically and mentally) for that meeting.

If you're asking for something to be done, it's worth spelling out any expectations you have; even if you think those should be obvious. Neurodivergent people can find it incredibly hard to spot those seemingly obvious things otherwise.

If possible, include a description of whether something is a good thing in the subject/title. Being invited to a meeting which says "Quick 1:1 – Good Thing" will cause far less stress or panic than just "Quick 1:1".

Meeting Summaries

Another kind of flexibility that can help is in having written notes from meetings (or just summaries of each person's Actions) can be very helpful in case someone was struggling with taking (or remembering to check) their own notes.

Sensory Measures

Neurodivergent people will often identify things that help with their sensory issues in their own time or outside of work. Allowing those tools in work environments (where safe to) will really help them.

This would vary depending on individual sensory needs, but examples could include: using noise-cancelling headphones; wearing sunglasses while at their desk; or having a particular jacket (or even blanket) that they wear while working.

These will need to be balanced against safety considerations – and may need to be reserved to just desk work – but even that will make a significant difference.

Asking Questions

Creating an environment in which people feel comfortable asking (and answering) questions is very important, and can go both ways:

Neurodivergent people might need to ask more questions about things that they're struggling with, so creating an environment where people can ask questions freely can be incredibly helpful.

Similarly, please don't be afraid to ask questions about people's experience. If they're coming from a place of interest (and are in good-faith), the vast majority of neurodivergent people are at least willing (if not happy) to talk about their experiences.

Tips for Team Leads

The following are some tips from my experiences with both this and previous roles, or things that have, or would have, made a difference to me:

Firstly, if you can, offer some flexibility with times. On different days, how much time it takes me to get ready for a day can vary massively. Having confidence that it won't be a problem (as long as I make the time up) makes difficult days at least somewhat easier.

Secondly, try to open up discussions about how people in your team are doing each day. If nothing else, it can be useful to identify when someone is pushing themselves unreasonably. For example, in a previous role, I had a day where I was struggling, but had a deadline due. To meet the deadline, I forced myself to keep working until 10pm. My manager held up that work as an example of my best work, without acknowledging the 5 hours of overtime that went into it, or the possible reasons why that happened.

Third, living with a neurodivergence can make a person's performance very inconsistent. This inconsistency is something that they will be deeply aware of already; so it can be helpful to instead approach any days where performance is lacking as a product of them struggling, rather than being ineffective or lazy. Approaching this as a helping hand, and looking to split any tasks that need to be done into smaller pieces, will often be a much more effective solution than challenging them on it, both in the short and long-term.

CONCLUSION

While I won't try to speak for every neurodivergent person, I can say that even if my ADHD is a part of who I am, I'd prefer to not have to deal with the impacts each and every day.

As such, if there's one thing I could ask you to take away from this, it's this: Neurodivergent people aren't trying to be difficult, or fish for attention. The deck is stacked against us because our brains aren't well suited to the expectations of the world around us, but there are things that can help level that out a little bit.

Even if someone hasn't been diagnosed with anything (or hasn't said if they are), extending them this same grace can make the world of difference.

You might have noticed that I haven't talked about whether there are any positives associated with neurodivergences. Unfortunately, it can be much harder to distinguish which skills are related to neurodivergences, rather than just part of someone's skillset. However, it is worth talking to the people around you about their skills, as they might be able to contribute in different ways, in part because they perceive the world in very different ways.