

Thinking Differently

The term “neurodivergent” is used to describe having a brain that works differently from what society considers the average or “neurotypical” person. Other terms you might hear are “neurodistinct” or “neurominority.” Differences are commonly seen in learning, attention, and other mental processing functions. Behavior, communication, and social interactions may be impacted. These differences may meet the criteria for a diagnosable condition. Below are some examples of conditions that are most commonly considered neurodivergent.

Clinical neurodivergence

Brain/nervous system differences that one is born with, that are currently also considered health conditions.

ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) is characterized by issues with attention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. May have difficulties with self-control, focusing, forgetfulness, and time management.

Autism spectrum

A condition that impacts how a person interacts, learns, communicates, and behaves. It is often accompanied by sensory sensitivities.

“**Spectrum**” is a term associated with autism, but it can be a helpful way to understand all neurodivergent conditions. Spectrum means they aren’t on a straight line from “less” to “more” – mild to profound. Each person has their own unique combination of traits. A strength for one may be a challenge for another.

Tourette syndrome

A brain/nervous system condition causing involuntary, repeated sounds and movements called “tics.” These actions are generally outside the person’s control and may grow worse in stressful situations.

Intellectual disability

Characterized by impaired mental functioning, interpersonal skills, and ability to care for oneself. Condition may be present at birth, such as Down syndrome or develop as a result of birth complications or illness, such as measles.

Applied neurodivergence

Brain/nervous system differences that one is born with that are related to learning and motor skills. They’re not tied to intelligence.

Dyslexia

Condition that makes it difficult to learn and process language. Can impact reading, writing, and spelling. May affect organization, planning and ability to follow written instructions. Verbal information may be more easily understood.

Dyspraxia

Difficulty with performing coordinated movements. This condition is also known as developmental coordination disorder (DCD). It impacts balance, coordination, and fine motor skills, such as writing. Sequencing difficulty may also affect time management, organization, learning, memory, and social conversations.

Dyscalculia

Condition affecting mathematical ability and number processing. It can make it difficult to understand quantities and math logic or perform calculations. It may impact the ability to recall numbers and estimate measurements.

Dysgraphia

Difficulty with written information. May impact writing, spelling, and typing. It may be difficult to put thoughts on paper and written elements may be missing, incorrect, or in the incorrect order. Spoken communication may be more effective and comfortable.

Acquired neurodivergence

These are brain/nervous system differences that develop as a result of a health condition or injury. The condition may remain the same, get worse, or improve.

Mental health conditions, such as bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and social anxiety.

Neurological illness or brain injury, such as dementia or traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Learn more

The conditions described here are those most commonly considered neurodivergent, but this is not a comprehensive list. There are many resources online and in print to explore neurodiversity at work with the goal of gaining a better understanding, not to diagnose or label. The resources below are a place to start.

Cleveland Clinic: Neurodivergent

my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/23154-neurodivergent

CareScribe: The Ultimate Guide to Neurodiversity in the Workplace

carescribe.io/resources/the-ultimate-guide-to-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace

Medvidi: A Guide to Neurodivergence and Types of Neurodiversity

medvidi.com/blog/types-of-neurodiversity

Neurodiversity Network: Resources

neurodiversitynetwork.net

Trait awareness

Everyone is an individual in terms of how they present in the world. This is as true for neurodivergent people as it is for neurotypical people. But there are certain traits associated with neurodivergent conditions that are shared by many. Recognizing that these traits may be an aspect of brain processing differences can support a more empathetic and inclusive mindset.

Examples include:

- Honest, straightforward communication style
- Strong sense of fairness and justice
- Difficulty interpreting expressions/non-verbal cues
- Difficulty with eye contact
- Speaking tone/rhythm that differs from the norm
- Have but not outwardly express emotions, empathy
- Sensory sensitivity to lights, sound, smells, textures
- Literal thinking, difficulty with abstract thought
- Intense focus on specific subjects
- Highly motivated by activities of interest
- Difficulty getting back on track after interruptions
- Creative, “out-of-the-box” problem-solving skills
- Difficulty organizing, completing, focusing on tasks
- Restlessness, fidgeting, strong need to talk
- Unpredictable situations may trigger strong anxiety
- Difficulty adapting to changes in routine or focus
- Physical movement can help maintain focus

References

CareScribe. (n.d.). *The ultimate guide to neurodiversity in the workplace*. <https://carescribe.io/resources/the-ultimate-guide-to-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace/>

Khalig, R. & Toomey, D. (2023, August 18). *A guide to neurodivergence and types of neurodiversity*. MEDvidi. <https://medvidi.com/blog/types-of-neurodiversity>

Rudy, L.J. (2024, November 27). What does ‘neurotypical’ mean? <https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurotypical-260047>

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Neuroinclusivity: What Does It Look Like?

We all want the opportunity to be successful, valued, and included in our workplaces. But we can all face challenges in making that a reality. Companies with an inclusive culture recognize this and actively work to support success for all employees. We can also do this as individuals. The strategies below can help you play a part in building a workplace culture that values “thinking differently together.”

Awareness self-check

It's important to recognize that while we may all appreciate and support the goal of inclusivity, mindsets that we may not even be aware of can get in the way.

Unconscious bias can play a role in how we view and interact with coworkers. Taking an honest look at our attitudes and actions can help us interrupt that bias.

Self-reflection questions

- How do you react when behaviors and interaction styles are different from your own?
 - Can you see aspects of “othering” in your reaction, such as pulling away or being dismissive?
- What are your initial thoughts when learning someone is neurodivergent?
 - Can you see any aspects of common misconceptions in these thoughts?
 - Do you notice yourself jumping to any assumptions that may be based on misconceptions?
- Are you open to learning and expanding what you know about neurodiversity and inclusivity?

Misconceptions about neurodivergence

Neurodivergent conditions are a childhood issue.

For most conditions, brain processing differences continue into adulthood. It is estimated that 15-20% of adults are neurodivergent. (MyDisabilityJobs, 2024)

Neurodivergence means intellectual disabilities.

Processing differences are not related to intelligence. They can be present across the full range of intellectual abilities.

Neurodivergent people are all the same.

No two people are alike. Traits vary widely, even among people with the same condition.

Neurodivergent people aren't social.

Social interactions can be complex for some neurodivergent people, but this doesn't mean they're not interested in meaningful connections with others.

Neurodivergent people have “superpowers.”

Despite what we see in movies, having an extraordinary memory or math ability is rare. However, these areas may be strengths for some.

They should try to be more neurotypical.

This is essentially “masking,” and it can be an exhausting exercise that leads to burnout. It's better to offer reasonable accommodations that allow the person to excel just as they are.

References

Griffin, M. (2022, March 21). *Neurodiversity celebration week 2022 – Myth busting*. I.M3. <https://www.ion3.org/resource/neurodiversity-celebration-week-2022-myth-busting.html>

MyDisabilityJobs. (2024, January 5). *Neurodiversity in the workplace: Statistics update 2024*. <https://mydisabilityjobs.com/statistics/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace/>

Perspective reset

Brain processing differences can make some aspects of the everyday workplace experience more difficult.

Challenges may be due to:

Executive functioning differences. These brain processes allow us to manage our thoughts, emotions, and actions in order to accomplish tasks and goals. See *box to the right*. One or more may be underdeveloped or present differently for the neurodivergent person.

Communication disconnects: Neurodivergent people may struggle with processing language, interpreting non-verbal cues, and expressing themselves. This can make neurotypical communication norms a challenge.

Social interaction nuances: Traits such as discomfort with eye contact or difficulty deciphering social rules or language subtleties, can affect social interactions and relationships.

Sensory overload: Heightened sensitivity can make loud, busy environments, bright lights, or strong smells nearly overwhelming for those with some neurodivergent conditions.

While the challenges are real, they look different viewed through the lens of neurodiversity. That is, these are examples of brain differences, not deficits. The fact that they are challenging is often largely due to having to meet neurotypical norms and standards when you're not neurotypical.

Self-reflection questions

1. Can you think of a time when you faced a challenge related to executive functioning or one of the other areas listed above?
2. Did that mean you were not capable of doing your job well?
3. Would altering a process or some type of accommodation remove the challenge?

Thinking about the norms in your workplace – how you communicate, socialize, hold meetings – can you see ways in which they assume a neurotypical perspective?

Can you see how this might make it harder for a neurodivergent individual to do their job?

What changes could make them more inclusive?

Executive function skills

Organization

Create and maintain systems to keep track of information and store materials in an efficient way.

Time management

Ability to estimate/allocate time and meet deadlines.

Focused attention

Maintain attention to a task over time, not giving in to distractions, fatigue, or boredom.

Working memory

A mental “scratchpad” used to temporarily hold information needed to complete a task in the moment, such as following instructions or steps in a task. Its capacity is very limited.

Flexible thinking

Ability to change course, adapt to changes, rebound from mistakes.

Self-regulation

Think before acting, able to monitor and resist urges or impulses to say or do things that wouldn't be beneficial.

Emotional control

Able to manage emotions, avoid being overwhelmed, and keep reactions appropriate to a situation.

Self-awareness

Called “metacognition,” this is the ability to think about how you are thinking, to notice your perspective and evaluate your thoughts and actions.

Task initiation

Able to start projects in a timely way, avoiding procrastination.

Planning/prioritization

Being able to plot out steps to complete a task and able to determine level of importance.

Goal-directed persistence

Ability to make and reach goals, to keep going despite obstacles or setbacks.

Stress tolerance

Able to cope with and thrive through stress.

Kaufman, E. (2024, November 7). *Adult executive function skills: Comprehensive guide*. UpSkill Specialists. <https://www.upskillspecialists.com/post/adult-executive-function-skills-the-comprehensive-guide-2024>

Inclusivity in action

Along with learning and understanding more about neurodiversity, we can also actively help shape a workplace environment that works well for all coworkers. The following strategies are a good place to start.

Adopt communication best practices. Brain processing differences can make neurotypical communication challenging. Adopting clear communication strategies can help. Check those you use regularly. The remainder are growth areas.

Language

- ☐ Use clear, straightforward language
- ☐ Spell out expectations, priorities, steps, timelines
- ☐ Specify what, where, who, how, and when
- ☐ “Chunk” information in concise sentences.
- ☐ Highlight/repeat key points
- ☐ Summarize takeaways

Formatting

- ☐ Use bullets, paragraphs to create structure
- ☐ Use a sans serif font, size at 12 pt or greater
- ☐ Avoid overuse of bold, italic, underlines, etc.
- ☐ Limit number of colors, prioritize contrast
- ☐ Use visual aids – diagrams, graphs, screenshots

Processing support

- ☐ Use a mix of modes – verbal, written, visual
- ☐ Give advance notice for meetings
- ☐ Provide recordings and transcripts
- ☐ Don't put others on the spot with “pop” questions
- ☐ Plan time to connect vs. impromptu interruptions
- ☐ Follow conversations with an email recap

Honor each individual as a unique person and the expert of their experience. Commit to turning away from stereotypes and getting to know your coworkers as individuals. No need to diagnose or label, simply work on getting in tune with who they are as people. Respectfully asking about preferences is always a good option.

Make an effort to learn about coworkers' strengths. Along with lending support for challenge areas, try to discover where each team member shines. Recognizing and applying strengths boosts team performance. It also offers opportunities to call out successes.

Example: Avoid

HEY! Thinking about the project we worked on last week and wondering if you'd eyeball the **takeaways** and give me your thoughts. **I'd really like some data** when we attend the conference. I don't want to pressure you, but I know you're a team player!!

Example: Adopt

Good morning Joe,

I'm going to be attending the annual conference next Tuesday and will need support data.

I'd like you to run a report from the Atlas project spreadsheet we completed last Friday. Please compile the following metrics on separate tabs:

- User volume
- Trial times
- Satisfaction rate

I'll need that information in PDF format. Please **email it to me no later than the end of day tomorrow** (Thursday).

Thank you, I appreciate you prioritizing this!

Nourish a sense of belonging. Make it a norm to check in and have casual “How are you doing?” conversations with coworkers. Ask about topics they're passionate about and look for things you share in common.

Commit to keep on learning. Shifting from a lens of ingrained neurotypical norms takes energy and investment. It is an ongoing process. Keep evaluating your own expectations, actions, and attitudes. Challenge yourself to keep broadening your perspectives.

What Works Best?

The concept of neurodiversity reminds us that we all have different ways of thinking, learning, and interacting with others. The more we can identify what works best for us in these different areas, the more effective we can make our workplace experience. Discussing and sharing these preferences with others, where appropriate, may also help shape more inclusive norms.

- What does your ideal work environment look like?
- What makes you feel most energized and motivated at work?
- What's the most effective way for you to take in and learn information? *For example, reading a manual, a tutorial, a one-on-one training, something else.*
- What would you say is your greatest strength at work?
- What is your preferred form of communication? *For example, email, instant message, phone, in person.*
- What makes you feel connected and respected?
- What was a memorable "win" for you at work?
- What's a "pet peeve" you have related to the workplace or work processes? How would you change this situation?
- What makes you feel most like you are part of the team?
- What is the best way for you to maintain focus? What gets in the way?
- What is something you'd like your coworkers to understand about you?