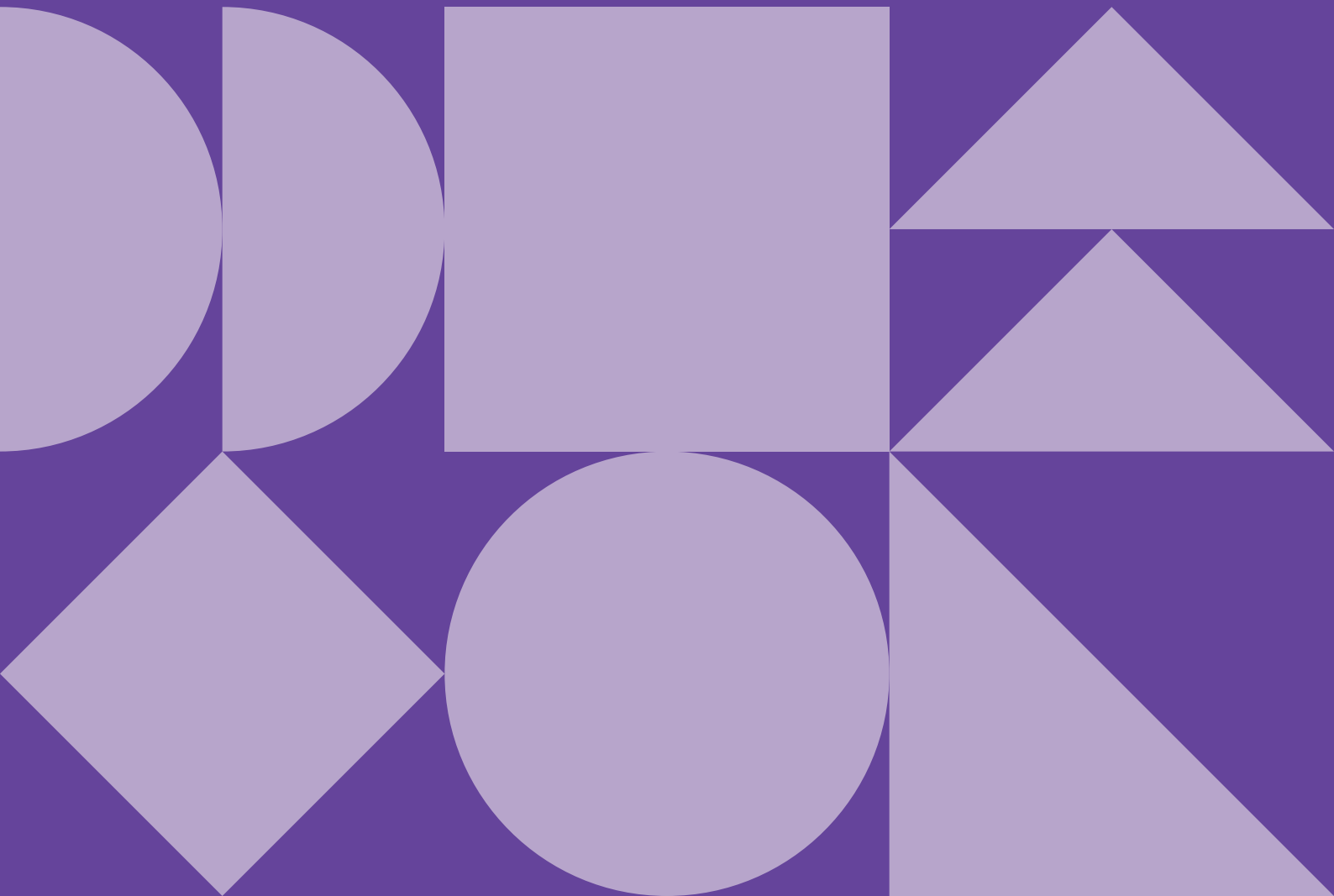


Meine Ramakers

Neurodiversity Guide

A workplace guide from the
lived experience perspective



Contents



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01	Neurodiversity
24	Experiences & Insights From the Neurodiversity Perspective
62	Why Words Matter
82	Neurodiversity at Work
105	Key Takeaways
107	References

My motivation for writing this guide comes from lived experience.

I received my autism diagnosis late in life, at age 36. Before that, I spent years searching, trying to understand why I felt different, why things that came easily to others felt so difficult for me. Autism wasn't on my radar at the time. Most of what I knew about it came from narrow stereotypes: that it's mostly seen in young boys, that autistic people are either brilliant or completely nonverbal, that they lack empathy, behave in visibly 'odd' ways, that autism is something to be pitied. None of that matched what I would later learn about autism, or about myself.

People often focus on how neuro-divergence looks, the things others can observe or interpret from the outside. But that doesn't reflect what it actually feels like. I didn't see myself in those portrayals. They didn't show the sensory overload, the social exhaustion, or how hard it can be to read people or situations and figure out what's expected. They didn't show how lonely it can feel to never really fit. I didn't know that 'masking' was a thing, that so many of us - consciously or unconsciously - learn to hide parts of ourselves to fit in socially. I had no idea I was doing it. Looking back, it makes sense that it took me so long to realise I'm autistic.

Getting my diagnosis was a relief. Things finally made sense. But there was anger too, for all the years I'd been trying to figure things out without the tools or language to understand myself. This guide is the resource I wish I'd had earlier: something that reflects real, lived neurodivergent experiences and looks at things from their perspective.

Eventually, I found my neurodivergent community. Being with others who shared similar experiences helped me see myself more clearly. It was like holding up a mirror. I began to understand, to let go of shame and to feel a sense of belonging I hadn't felt before. I wish that for every neurodivergent person. While neurodivergent experiences are wide-ranging and support needs vary significantly, this guide focuses on adult neurodivergent individuals in workplace settings, particularly those with lower support needs who may be more skilled at masking. Their challenges are often less visible, yet still significant. By centering these experiences, the guide aims to highlight the realities of navigating professional environments while neurodivergent and to offer practical strategies for inclusion and support.

This guide is not only for neurodivergent people, it's for everyone. While it is written from a neurodivergent perspective and centers neurodivergent experiences, its goal is to

build understanding, empathy and inclusion across the workplace. Whether you're neurodivergent yourself, a colleague, a manager or someone simply wanting to learn, it offers practical strategies to help create environments where all kinds of minds are valued and supported.

It intentionally moves away from the medical model, which tends to pathologize neurodivergence by framing it as a set of deficits to be diagnosed and treated. Instead, it is grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm, a social-psychological and socio-political framework that recognizes neurological differences as natural and valuable forms of human diversity. From this perspective, neurodivergence is not something to be "fixed," but something to be understood and respected. It emphasizes accepting and accommodating people as they are, and shifting the focus from changing individuals to changing environments and systems.

The goal is to create inclusive, accessible and equitable workplaces and societies, where neurodivergent people can thrive without needing to mask or conform to neurotypical expectations. The guide is structured into four chapters. It begins by introducing the neurodiversity paradigm and the key concepts that shape how we understand and experience neurodivergence.

The second chapter centers the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals. It challenges the assumption

that neurotypical perspectives are universal and explores how neurodivergent people perceive and navigate the world differently. Through core concepts — such as sensory sensitivity, differences in executive functioning and communication, stimming, masking and intersectionality - as well as personal narratives, it highlights the richness and complexity of neurodivergent realities and the importance of recognizing and validating them.

The third chapter examines how language shapes perceptions of neurodivergence - either reinforcing stereotypes or promoting inclusion, and how we can reshape it to be more respectful and accurate. Finally, the guide brings these insights into the workplace, offering practical strategies to foster truly inclusive environments where neurodivergent people can thrive.

This guide wouldn't be what it is without the help of ten neurodivergent colleagues and friends who took the time to read it, reflect on it and share their feedback. Their insights, honesty, and lived experience made it stronger, clearer and more grounded. I'm really grateful for their support. Thanks to them, this guide got better. Thank you for taking the time to read and reflect.

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Neurodiversity

Most of us grow up with a sense of what's considered "normal", how people should behave, communicate or succeed.

Societal norms are shaped by the values, behaviors, and expectations of the majority. These norms are often unspoken but deeply influential. They define what is considered "normal" or "the default" in how people behave, communicate and succeed in everyday life.

But what if those norms don't fit everyone?

1.1. What is “neurodiversity”?

Neurodiversity is a term that describes the natural variation in how human brains function. It recognizes that there is no single “right” way to think, learn, behave or interact with the world.

Neurotypical individuals tend to think, learn, and communicate in ways that reflect and reinforce societal norms. Neurodivergent individuals, on the other hand, experience and interact with the world differently. Their brains function in ways that diverge from these norms.

This guide centers the experiences of neurodivergent individuals.



Most of us grow up with a sense of what's considered "normal", how people should behave, communicate or succeed.

- In schools, lectures are often favored. Students are expected to sit still, listen quietly, and perform well on standardized tests, assuming everyone learns the same way.
- In workplaces, employees are typically expected to work in open-plan offices, follow a 9 to 5 schedule, multitask and engage in casual conversation with their colleagues.
- In social settings, people are assumed to enjoy interaction, follow unspoken rules, use typical

body language, make eye contact and express emotions in accepted ways.

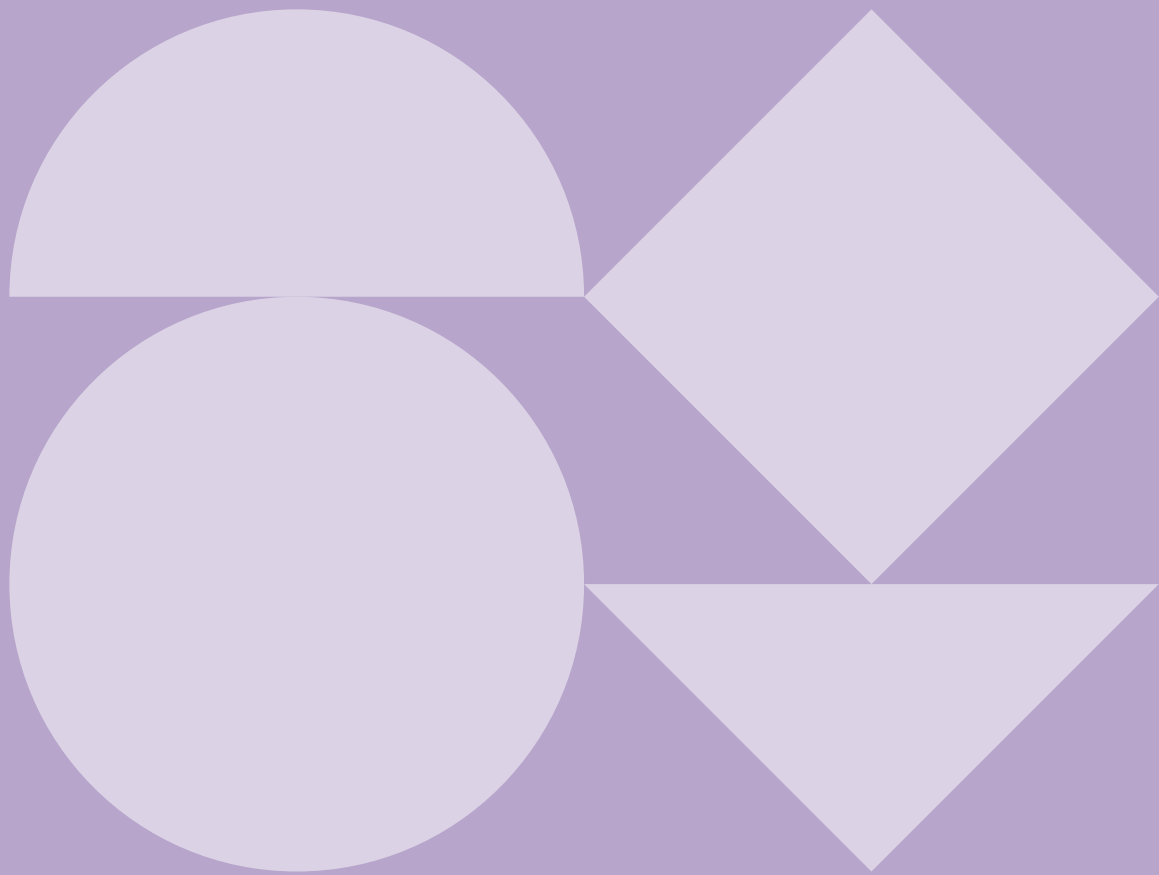
Societal norms are shaped by the values, behaviors, and expectations of the majority. These norms are often unspoken but deeply influential. They define what is considered "normal" or "the default" in how people behave, communicate and succeed in everyday life. But what if those norms don't fit everyone?

- Some students may struggle to sit still or focus during long lectures and benefit from alternative learning strategies.
- Some individuals may find social interactions exhausting, prefer written communication over face-to-face, or have a more direct communication style.



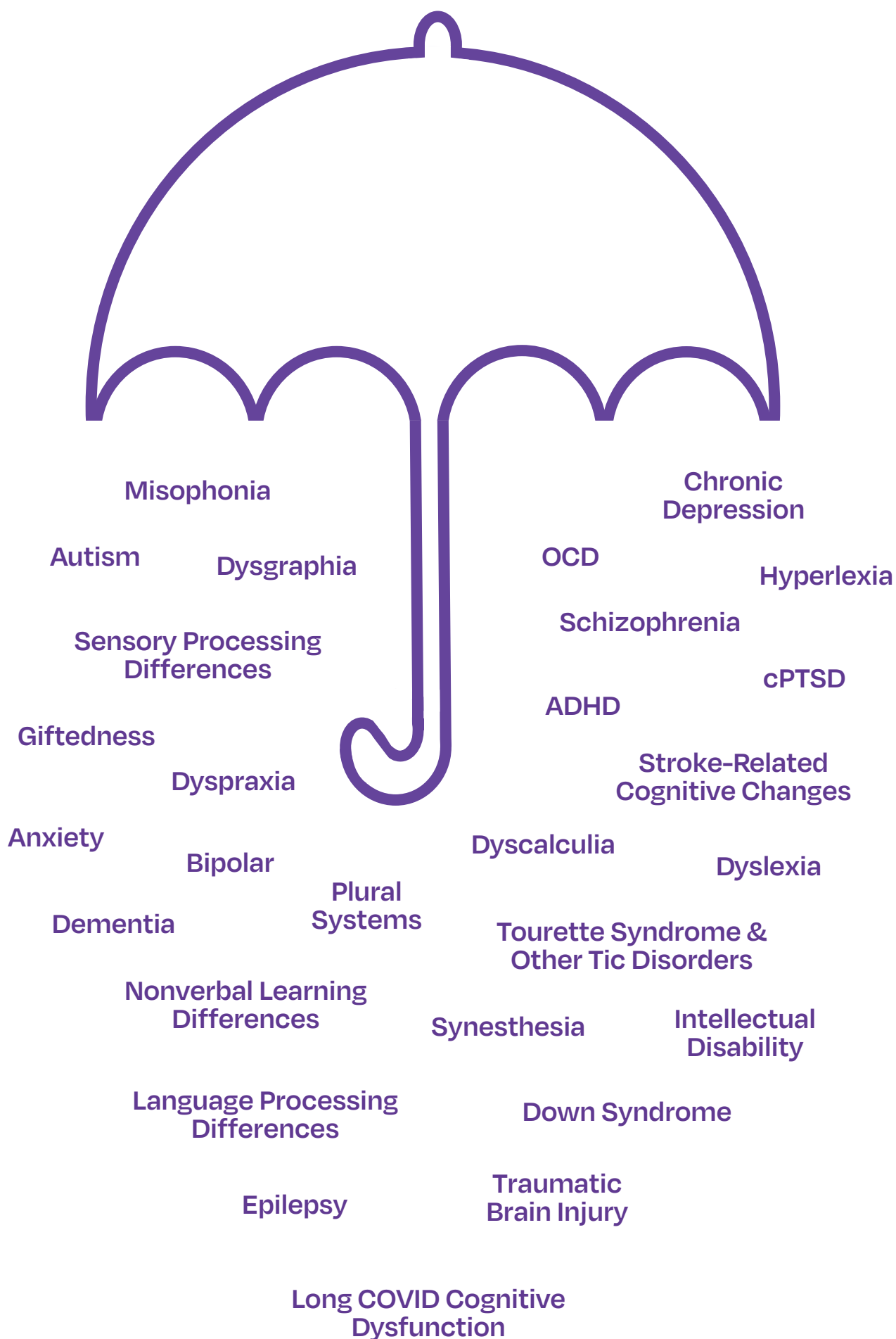
Term	Definition
Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.
Neurotypical	Refers to individuals whose neurocognitive functioning aligns with dominant societal norms. E.g. “Most of the team is neurotypical, but we’re working to be more inclusive.”
Neurodivergent	Refers to individuals whose neurocognitive functioning diverges significantly from dominant societal norms. Includes those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and more. E.g. “He is neurodivergent, he has ADHD and dyslexia.”
Neurodivergence	The condition or state of being neurodivergent. E.g. “Her neurodivergence includes autism and PTSD.”
Neurotype	A specific profile of neurocognitive functioning. Everyone has a neurotype. E.g. “Autism is a neurotype, just like being neurotypical is.”
Neurodiverse	Describes a group that includes people with different neurotypes. E.g. “Our classroom is neurodiverse, with students of many neurotypes.”

Term	Definition
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	A detail-oriented way of experiencing the world. Might involve differences in social communication, sensory sensitivity, and adaptability to change. Often includes deep interests and unique perspectives.
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Differences in attention and energy regulation. Can bring creativity, adaptability, and hyperfocus, as well as difficulties with time management
AuDHD (Autism & ADHD)	A unique neurotype combining autistic and ADHD traits. May involve sensory sensitivity, executive functioning challenges, emotional intensity, and social differences. Often includes internal tension, like needing routine but craving novelty, but can also bring deep focus, creativity, empathy, and resilience.
Dyslexia	A difference in processing written language. Reading and spelling may be difficult, while strengths often lie in visual thinking, storytelling, and problem-solving.
Dyspraxia	Differences in planning and coordinating movement. May affect handwriting, balance, or fine motor skills, but often paired with persistence and creative thinking.
Dysgraphia	Difference in written expression. Writing by hand or organizing thoughts on paper may be difficult, with strengths often found in verbal communication.
Tourette Syndrome	Involves involuntary movements or sounds (tics). Managing these can be demanding, but many people also develop resilience, determination, and creativity.
Sensory processing differences	A variation in how sensory input is experienced. Some sensations may be overwhelming, others barely noticed. People often need to adapt their environments to feel regulated.



1.2. The Neurodivergent Umbrella

Most forms of neurodivergence are present from birth, even if they only become noticeable later in life. The most common ones are included in this table.



Key Concepts of Innate Neurodiversity

■ **Innate neurodivergence is more common than you might think:**

Studies* suggest that up to 20% of the global population is considered innately neurodivergent. This means that neurodivergent individuals are not rare or unusual, they are a significant and vital part of our communities, workplaces and schools. Recognizing this prevalence helps shift the narrative from marginalization to inclusion.

■ **Neurodivergence exists on a spectrum:**

It is not a fixed category but a broad spectrum of cognitive and neurological differences. Individuals experience and express traits in diverse ways, which can vary in intensity, form and impact. As autism advocate Stephen Shore famously said, “If you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.” This highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting individual variation. These differences bring unique strengths and challenges for each person. For some, the impact on daily life is minimal, while others may require tailored support and accommodations. Importantly, support needs are dynamic, they can change over time and across different environments.

■ **Co-occurrence is common:** It’s not unusual for individuals to identify

with more than one form of neurodivergence**. Shared genetic, neurological or cognitive factors likely contribute to this overlap. Co-occurrence has been observed across various neurotypes. For example, autism and ADHD frequently co-occur, a combination often referred to as AuDHD. Understanding co-occurrence helps avoid oversimplification and supports more holistic approaches to care and inclusion.

Key Concepts of Acquired Neurodivergence

Most forms of neurodivergence are present from birth. However, the definition can be broadened to include forms that develop later in life, especially when they share core characteristics with innate neurodivergence.

Some forms may not be fully innate but involve a strong genetic and neurobiological predisposition, meaning individuals are born with a higher likelihood of developing them. Examples include bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Other forms may arise due to trauma, brain injury, illness or mental health experiences. Examples include complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD), traumatic brain injury, stroke, epilepsy and long COVID cognitive dysfunction.

* Cameron, C. R. (2021, August 22). Calculating the incidence of neurodiversity in the general population. *Ivey Business School*. / Goldberg, H. (2023). Unraveling neurodiversity: Insights from neuroscientific perspectives. *Encyclopedia*, 3(3), 972–980. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia3030070>

** Lang, J., Wylie, G., Haig, C., Gillberg, C., & Minnis, H. (2024). Towards system redesign: An exploratory analysis of neurodivergent traits in a childhood population referred for autism assessment. *PLOS ONE*, 19(1), e0296077. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296077>

These acquired forms often share traits with innate neurodivergence, such as differences in memory, attention, emotional regulation, processing speed, executive functioning and sensory experiences. People with these experiences often face similar barriers,

misunderstanding, and limited access to accommodations.

Including acquired neurodivergence under the neurodivergent umbrella helps reflect the full spectrum of neurocognitive diversity.

Giftedness

Giftedness typically refers to individuals with exceptional intellectual abilities, often measured by IQ scores, but it can also include creative, artistic or leadership talents. Gifted individuals process information faster, more deeply or in more complex ways than neurotypical peers.

Certain traits are commonly observed among gifted individuals, though not all experience them. These include:

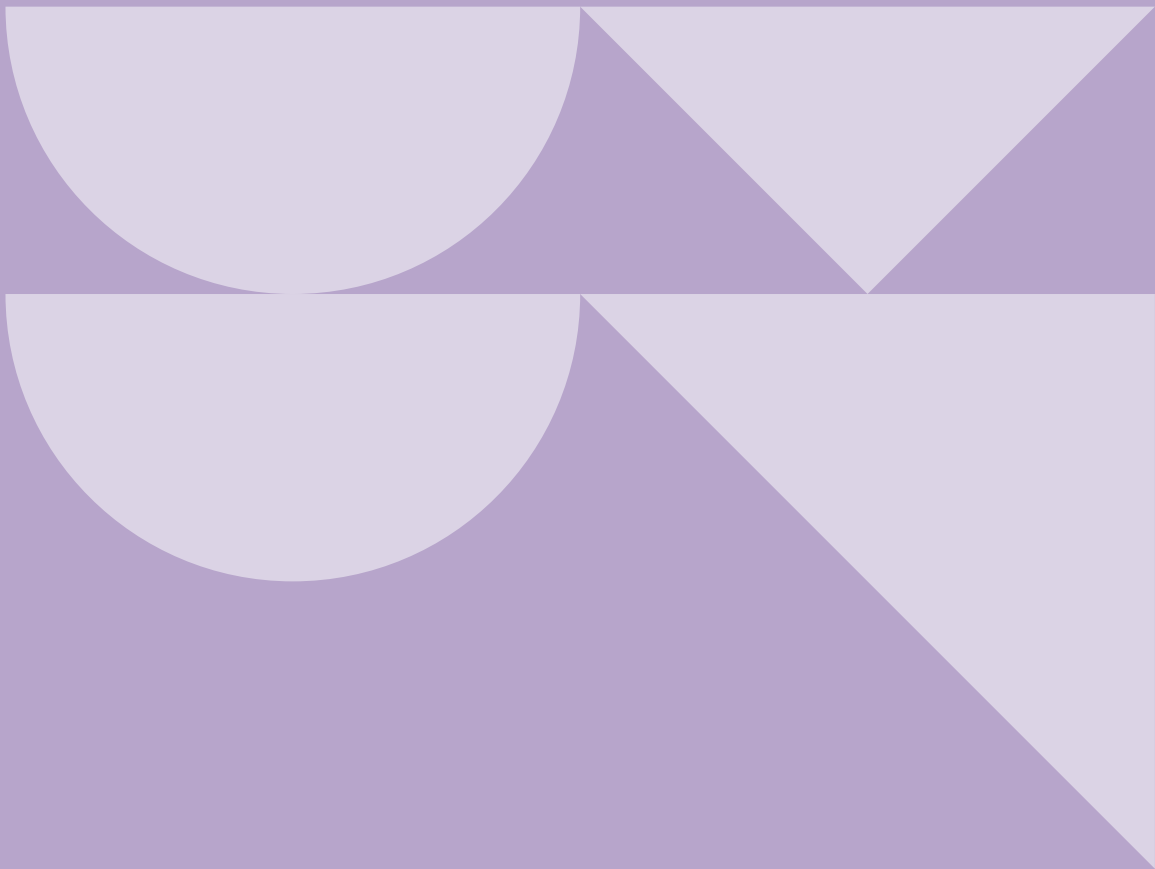
- **Asynchronous development:** Uneven growth across intellectual, emotional, physical and social domains.
- **Emotional intensity:** Such as strong reactions, a deep sense of justice or a passionate focus on interests.
- **Sensory sensitivity:** Heightened responses to stimuli like noise or light.

While giftedness isn't inherently disabling, it can lead to challenges in unsupportive environments — such as social isolation, underachievement or burnout — especially when needs aren't met in school or work settings. Not all gifted individuals identify as neurodivergent. Neurodivergence typically implies some level of functional challenge or difference that affects daily life. Those with pronounced sensitivities or asynchronous development may identify as neurodivergent. Some are both gifted and neurodivergent (e.g., autistic or ADHD) known as twice-exceptional (2e).

1.3. Medical Model vs Neurodiversity Paradigm

Many forms of neurodivergence, like autism and ADHD, are identified through medical labels. These labels can be helpful for accessing support and accommodations.

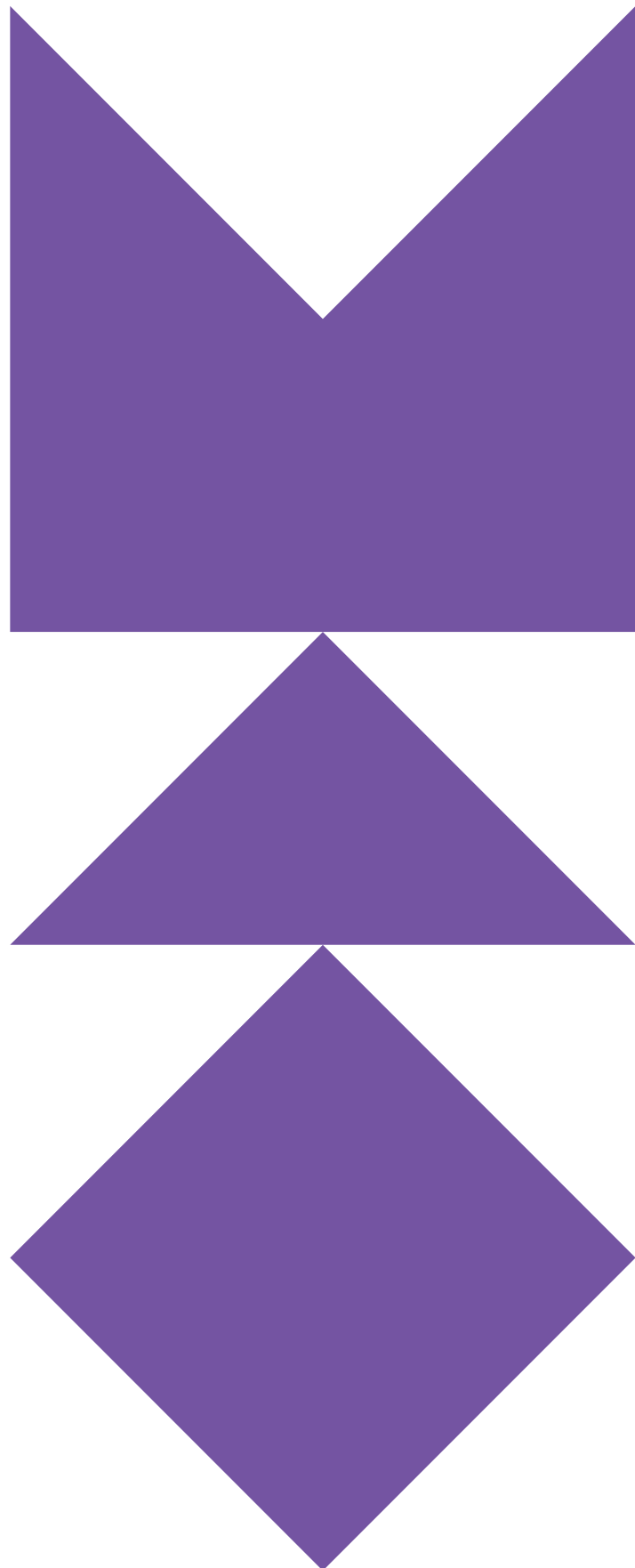
But they can also unintentionally suggest that these brains are “broken” or need to be fixed.

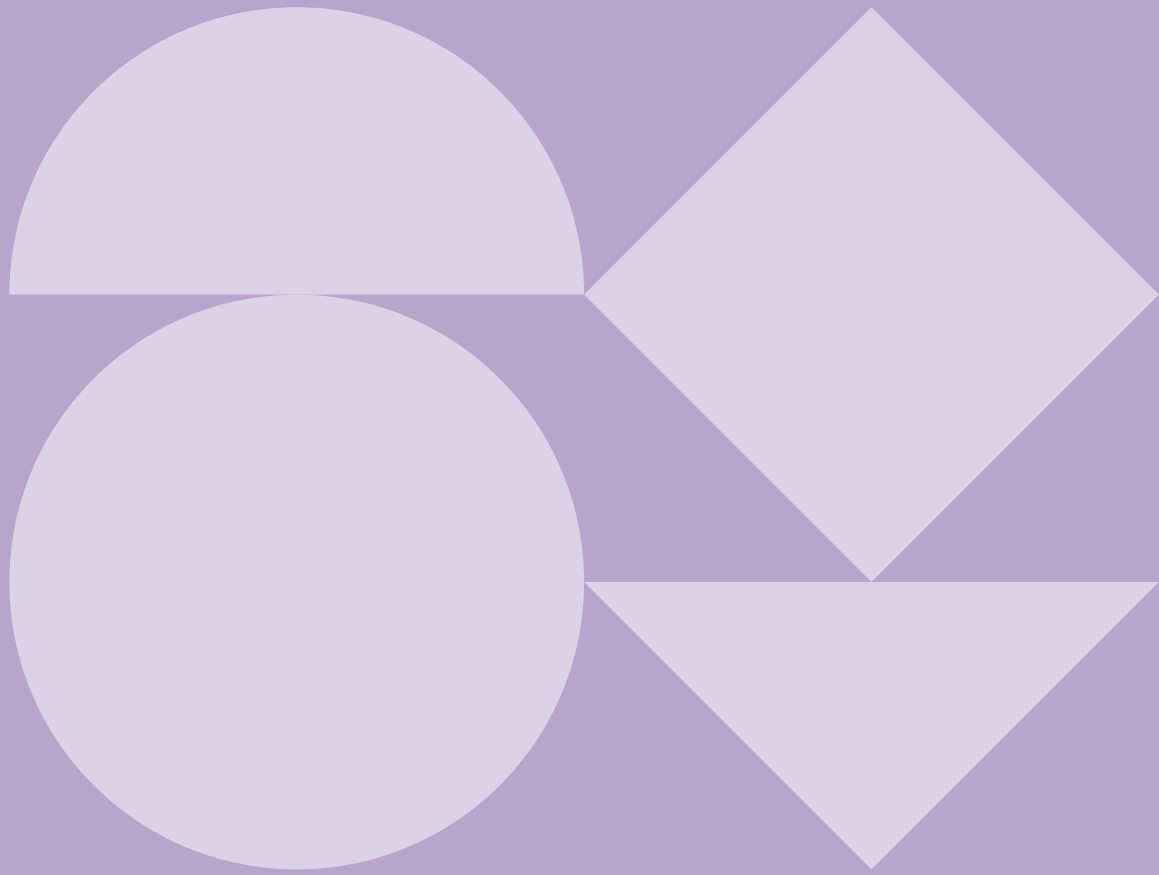


This idea comes from the medical model, which sees neurological differences as disorders that need diagnosis and treatment. It focuses on spotting symptoms and finding ways to help people fit into typical societal expectations. While this model has led to useful support systems, it often highlights what people can't do, rather than what they can. This can create stigma and pressure to hide natural traits.

In recent years, there has been a growing shift toward the neurodiversity paradigm. This newer perspective sees brain differences as a normal and valuable part of human diversity. Instead of viewing neurodivergent people as "broken," it highlights their unique strengths and ways of thinking.

At its heart, the neurodiversity paradigm supports the social model of disability. This model says that many challenges neurodivergent people face come from society, not from their brains. For example, a noisy classroom might be hard for someone with sensory sensitivity, but the problem isn't their sensitivity, it's the lack of quiet spaces. The solution is better accommodations that match different ways of thinking and experiencing the world.





1.4. Neurodivergence & Evolution

Neurodivergent traits — such as those linked to autism and ADHD — have strong genetic components and are highly heritable. These traits are found across cultures and time periods, indicating they are a natural part of human diversity. **Their persistence across generations suggests they've had adaptive value and contributed to human evolution.**

In early human societies, different cognitive styles likely supported different tasks. ADHD-related traits like curiosity, high energy and impulsivity may have been advantageous for exploring new environments or reacting quickly during hunting. Autism-related traits such as intense focus, attention to detail and independent thinking could have been valuable for tracking, tool-making or solving complex problems.

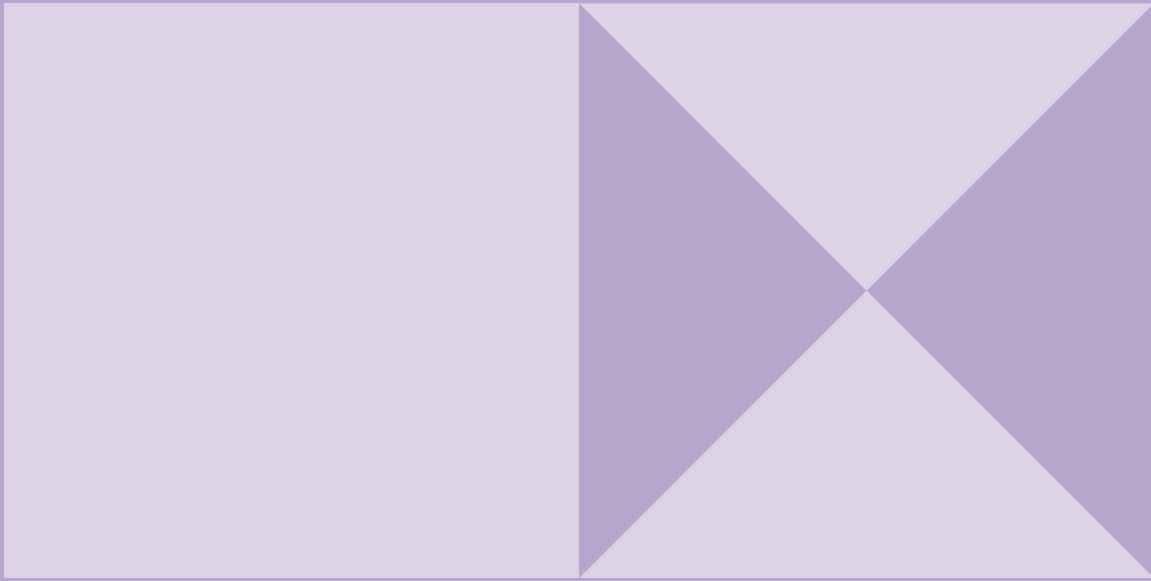
Importantly, these individual strengths benefited the group as a whole. Cognitive diversity — having people who think and solve problems in different ways — enhances group resilience. It helps communities adapt to change, respond to challenges and generate creative solutions. In this way, neurodiversity in human societies is much like biodiversity in nature: both contribute to the adaptability, strength, and long-term survival of the whole system.

So why do these traits often feel like challenges?

The mismatch theory offers one explanation. Traits like high energy, deep focus or sensory sensitivity may have supported survival and innovation in early human contexts, but don't always align with the demands of modern society. Today's environments are often fast-paced, highly structured and socially complex, designed around norms that privilege certain ways of thinking and behaving.

Neurodivergent challenges are not solely the result of biology or evolution, but are deeply shaped by the environments and systems people live in. While evolutionary mismatch may explain some difficulties, it's incomplete without considering how individual experiences, social structures and systemic inequalities influence how neurodivergence is expressed, supported or stigmatized. Biologist Milton Diamond observed, "Nature loves variety. Unfortunately, society hates it". This tension lies at the heart of many neurodivergent experiences.

* Swanepoel, A., Reiss, M. J., Launer, J., Music, G., & Wren, B. (2022). Evolutionary perspectives on neurodevelopmental disorders. In R. Abed & P. St John-Smith (Eds.), *Evolutionary psychiatry: Current perspectives on evolution and mental health* (pp. 228–243). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009030564.017>



1.5. Neurodiversity Smorgasbord

The Neurodiversity Smorgasbord is a model created by Sonny Jane Wise. It offers a more flexible way to understand how people's brains work differently. Instead of relying only on medical labels or formal diagnoses, this approach encourages people to explore and describe their own experiences in ways that feel true to them.

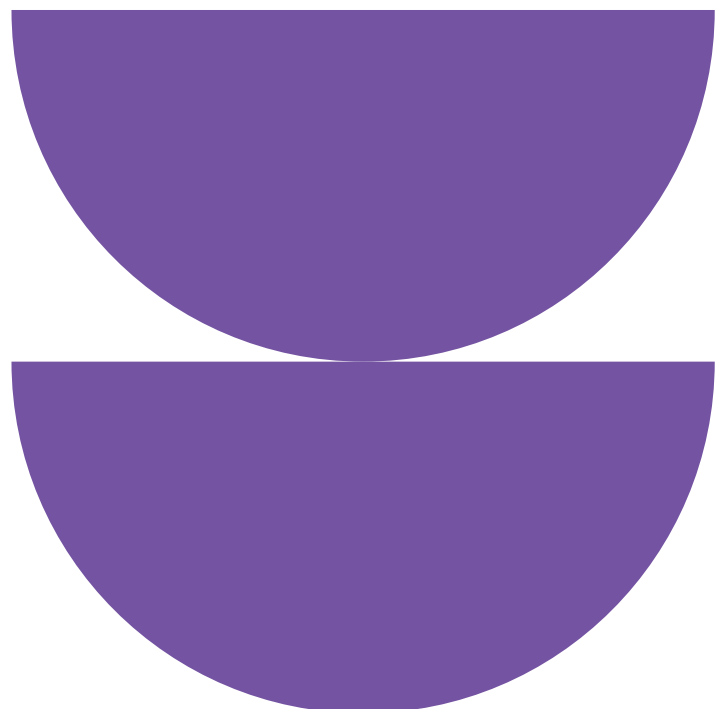
A "smorgasbord" is a Swedish word for a buffet, a table full of different foods where you choose what suits you. In this model, it's a metaphor for the wide range of traits, experiences and ways of thinking that people might have. **Some traits are common and well-known, while others are rare or often missed.**

This model challenges the belief that someone's differences only matter if someone's been diagnosed.

Many people face real challenges but don't have access to formal diagnosis, don't meet strict medical criteria or feel that existing labels don't fully reflect their lived experience. The Smorgasbord model says their experiences still matter. It empowers people to name and understand their own neurodivergence.

By recognizing that everyone has a unique mix of traits, like choosing different foods from a buffet, we can create more personalized and inclusive support. It helps us build environments that adapt to people's needs, rather than expecting people to fit into narrow definitions.

You can find the Neurodiversity Smorgasbord on the next page.



Term	Definition
Sensory	heightened (hypersensitivity to stimuli) and/or reduced (hyposensitivity to stimuli), sensory seeking (craving sensory input) and/or sensory avoiding (avoiding sensory input), sensory filtering (the brain's way of deciding which sensory inputs to pay attention to and which to ignore), synesthesia (a condition where stimulation of one sense automatically triggers another, e.g. seeing sounds).
Communication	spoken vs non-spoken communication (gestures or speech), hyperv verbal (talking a lot or very fast), echolalia (repeating words or phrases), stuttering, differences in tone, pace, eye contact and body language.
Attention	differences in regulating attention (ease of starting, maintaining or shifting focus), monotropism (deep focus on one task) vs polytropism (shifting focus across many tasks), flow state (natural, effortless deep focus) vs hyperfocus (intense, hard-to-shift fixation on a task).
Motor	differences in motor control (ease of movement and coordination), fine motor skills (small, precise movements like writing or buttoning), gross motor skills (large movements like walking or jumping), motor tics (involuntary movements).
Memory	differences in short-term memory (briefly holds small bits of info), long-term memory (stores info for a long time), working memory (temporary storage for what you're actively using), semantic memory (facts and general knowledge), procedural memory (how to perform tasks and skills), episodic memory (personal experiences and events).
Voice hearing	internal monologue, intrusive thoughts, external voices, internal voices.
Eating differences	

Term	Definition
Plurality	multiplicity (having more than one self), distinct multiple selves (separate identities within one mind), inner child (younger self within), multiple inner dialogues (different voices or perspectives inside), parts (individual aspects of the self).
Altered states	lucid dreaming, daydreaming, hallucinations, visions, mania, psychosis, dissociation, depression, anxiety, hypervigilance.
Time perception	variability in time perception, speeding up (time feels fast), slowing down (time feels slow), linear time (time feels like a straight line, moving steadily from past to present to future) vs cyclical time (time feels like it moves in loops or patterns, with events or experiences repeating).
Visual imagination	aphantasia (no mental images), partial aphantasia (limited mental imagery), hyperphantasia (extremely vivid mental images), phantasia (typical ability to visualize mentally).
Stimming	auditory stims (repetitive sounds), tactile stims (touch-based movements), visual stims (repetitive sights or motions), vestibular stims (balance or movement-related actions), proprioceptive stims (body pressure or joint movements), olfactory stims (smelling things repeatedly).
Differences in processing or expressing	differences in intensity, naming, processing and describing emotions.
Empathy	differences in cognitive empathy (understanding others' feelings), emotional empathy (feeling others' emotions), somatic empathy (physically sensing others' emotions), mirror empathy (automatically mimicking others' emotions), aesthetic empathy (being emotionally moved by art or beauty).
Sleep differences	

Reflection Exercise: How My Brain Works

We all take in, process, and express information differently, and neurodivergence can shape how this happens. This reflection invites you to explore your personal learning, cognitive, and communication styles. By understanding your own patterns — and appreciating how others may differ — you can improve how you focus, create, and collaborate.

Learning Styles

How do you absorb information? Learning styles describe how people take in, understand, and remember information. Sensory preferences play a big role in shaping these styles. Most people use a mix of learning styles. You might lean toward one, but combining formats often helps you understand and remember better. Styles can also shift depending on the task or environment.

Broadly speaking, there are four common learning styles:

- **Visual:** You learn best through images, diagrams, and spatial layouts.
- **Auditory:** You prefer sound-based input like lectures, discussions, or podcasts.
- **Kinesthetic/Tactile:** You learn by doing. Movement and hands-on activities help you grasp concepts.
- **Reading/Writing:** You absorb information through text. You prefer reading, note-taking, and writing things down.

Neurodivergence can influence learning. For example:

- Someone with dyslexia might find written text challenging but learn well through spoken explanations or visuals.
- A person with ADHD may struggle with long, passive formats but thrive in fast-paced, interactive environments.

Many neurodivergent people experience differences in sensory processing, which also shapes how they learn.

What helps information “click” for you? What materials or environments support your focus? Are there formats or situations that make learning harder for you?

Cognitive Styles

After absorbing information, we each have our own way of making sense of it. Cognitive styles describe how we process, organize, and apply what we've learned. They shape how we think, solve problems, and express ideas.

- **Analytical vs. Holistic:** Focus on details and break things down vs. see the big picture and connect ideas.
- **Verbal vs. Visual:** Think in words and language vs think in images, patterns, and spatial relationships.
- **Reflective vs. Impulsive:** Take time to consider options vs. make quick, instinctive decisions.
- **Concrete vs. Abstract:** Focus on facts and real-world examples vs. explore concepts, theories, and possibilities.
- **Sequential vs. Global:** Prefer step-by-step logic vs. understand ideas in a nonlinear, interconnected way.

Certain cognitive styles often appear more prominently in neurodivergent minds. For example:

- **Divergent thinking:** Fuels creativity and unconventional problem-solving (common in ADHD).
- **Pattern-based thinking:** Excels at spotting structures, systems, and logical relationships (often seen in autism)..
- **Hyperfocus:** Enables deep concentration on specific interests or tasks, sometimes for hours.
- **Deep analysis and thought loops:** Can lead to rich, detailed reflection, though sometimes hard to switch off.
- **Multisensory processing:** Blends visual, auditory, and tactile input to make sense of information (linked to dyslexia and other learning differences)
- **Nonlinear problem-solving:** Favors flexible, adaptive approaches over rigid methods (common in type I in ADHD).
- **Associative thinking:** Ideas connect rapidly and fluidly, often jumping between concepts in creative or unexpected ways.
- **Analytical thinking:** Involves breaking down complex problems into parts, applying logic and seeking precision.

Which cognitive styles feel more familiar to you? Did any descriptions make you think, "That's totally me"? Why?

(Continued)

Communication Styles

People express themselves in different ways. Understanding your communication style can help you connect more clearly and collaborate more effectively. Communication style dimensions vary...

By *format*:

- **Verbal:** Tend to speak and think out loud.
- **Written:** Organize thoughts through writing and reflection
- **Visual:** Use images, diagrams, and spatial layouts to express ideas.
- **Kinesthetic:** Communicate through movement, gestures, or hands-on interaction.

By *tone*:

- **Direct:** Value clarity and straightforwardness.
- **Indirect:** Use context, tone, and implication to convey meaning.

By *pace*:

- **Fast-paced:** Speak quickly, jump between ideas, respond spontaneously.
- **Slow-paced:** Reflect before responding, prefer thoughtful exchanges.

While people may lean toward certain styles, communication is flexible and shaped by context, relationships, and environment.

Neurodivergence can influence communication. For example:

- An autistic person may prefer clear, direct language and find ambiguity challenging.
- Someone with ADHD might speak quickly, jump between ideas, or interrupt unintentionally, especially when excited or engaged.
- A person with dyslexia may find writing difficult and prefer speech or visuals.

How do you share your thoughts? How does your way of absorbing information influence how you communicate? How do your thinking processes shape your communication style?



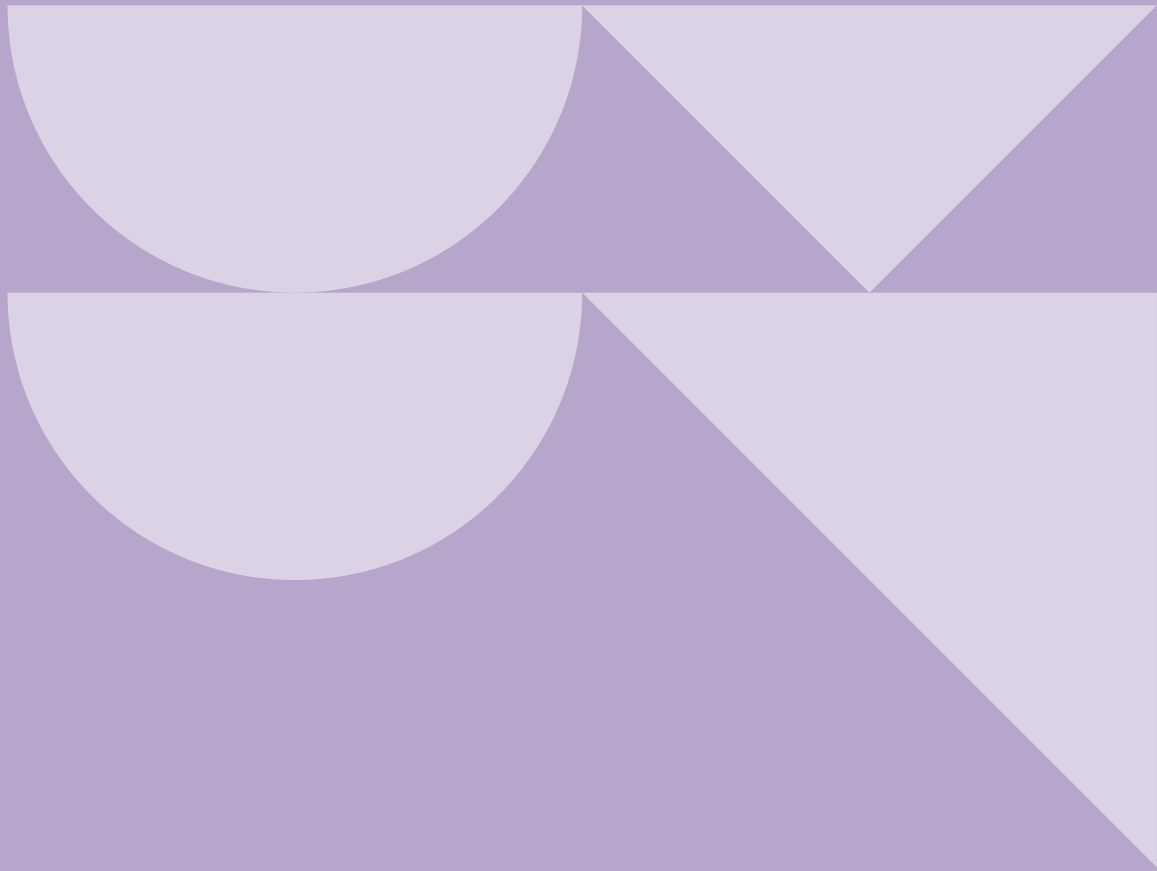


Experiences & Insights from the Neurodivergent Perspective

We all interpret the world through the lens of our own experiences. It's natural to assume that others think, feel, and perceive things the same way we do. This assumption — that our personal experience is universal — is known as the false consensus effect. It quietly shapes our ideas of what's "normal," often without us realizing it.

But human experience is far from uniform. Neurodivergent individuals often perceive, process, and respond to the world in ways that differ from mainstream expectations.

When society treats neurotypical experiences as the default, it can unintentionally overlook — or even invalidate — the lived realities of neurodivergent people.



2.1. Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory input is often processed differently by neurodivergent individuals, with many experiencing hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity. **While these experiences can also occur in neurotypical people, they tend to be more frequent or intense among those who are neurodivergent.**

Hyper- and hypo-Sensitivities

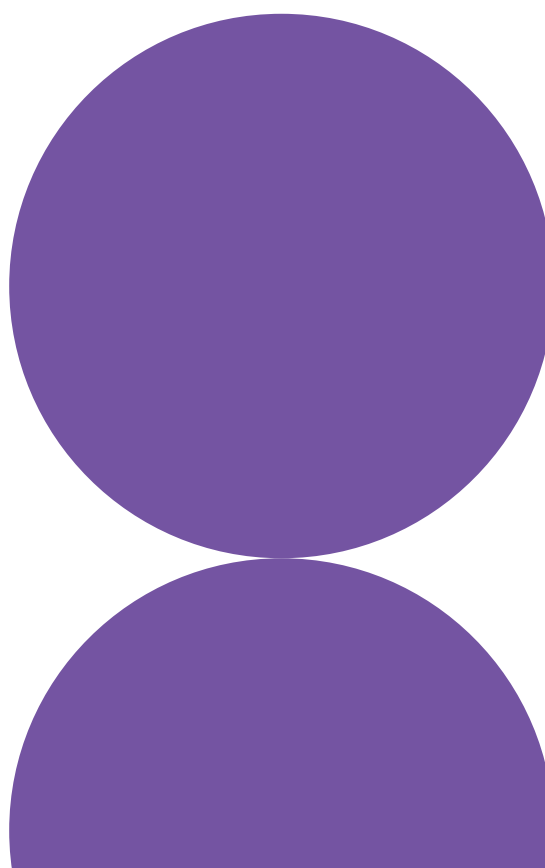
Hypersensitivity involves an increased sensitivity to sensory input, where everyday stimuli may feel overwhelming or distressing.

- For example, stimuli like loud sounds, strong smells, visual noise, crowded places, scratchy clothes, or certain food textures may trigger sensory overload or intense distress.

Hyposensitivity is a reduced awareness of sensory input. This often leads individuals to seek out more intense stimulation to feel regulated.

- For example, someone may not notice minor injuries, temperature changes, or subtle visual cues like facial expressions.
- Individuals may seek intense stimuli such as loud music, strong scents, or intense flavours, or engage in actions like fiddling with objects or playing with their hair to help maintain focus and regulation.

Many neurodivergent individuals experience a combination of both hyper- and hypo-sensitivities, across different senses, or even within the same sense.



Beyond the Five Traditional Senses

In addition to the five traditional senses — sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste — sensitivities can also occur in vestibular processing, proprioception, and interoception.

The **vestibular system** is located in the inner ear and helps us sense movement, balance, and spatial orientation.

- **Hypersensitivity:** Gentle or slow movements can cause dizziness or discomfort.

- **Hyposensitivity:** Individuals may seek constant motion to feel stable or alert through for example rocking, pacing or frequently changing positions.

Proprioception helps us sense the position, movement, and force of our body parts.

- **Hypersensitivity:** Individuals may feel overwhelmed by subtle movements or pressure.

- **Hyposensitivity:** Individuals may have difficulty sensing where their body is in space, leading to clumsiness, poor coordination, or using too much force when handling objects. They may seek stronger input, such as firm touch, to feel grounded.

- **Mixed sensitivity:** Individuals may experience both hyper- and hyposensitivity, depending on the context. For example, someone might enjoy tight hugs but feel uncomfortable with light or gentle touch.

Interoception helps us sense internal body states like hunger, thirst, pain and emotions.

- **Hypersensitivity:** Heightened awareness of internal signals.

- **Hyposensitivity:** Difficulty detecting internal signals.

Differences in interception can affect emotional regulation. Some people feel emotions intensely and benefit from strategies like mindfulness or grounding. Others process feelings more gradually and may rely on external feedback to understand how they feel. Emotional dysregulation, when emotions shift rapidly or are hard to manage, can also occur.

For neurodivergent individuals, these sensory differences can impact daily life in many ways, shaping social interactions, focus or comfort in different environments. Understanding and accommodating these experiences can make a huge difference.

Lived Experience: Sensory Sensitivities

“I experience various hyper- and hypo-sensitivities. I generally have rather bad proprioception (the subconscious sense of knowing where your limbs are and how they’re moving) and interoception (the brain’s ability to perceive signals from inside your body). The latter helps you to know, for example, when you’re hungry or thirsty, when you’re in pain, when you’re overwhelmed and need a break, or even when you need to use the bathroom. Rather basic things! When I work from home, my partner often reminds me to do these things: otherwise, I would get stuck in “hyperfocus” mode at my desk all day and then wonder why I’m completely exhausted by 2pm! At work, I sometimes set reminders, schedule in regular ‘self-check-in’ moments or even ask a close colleague to be my accountability buddy — I have one who reminds me to drink water whenever they go to the water foundation themselves! As for hyper-sensitivities, my biggest one is sound; this isn’t always a problem for me but fluctuates day to day or even within a single day depending on how much sleep I got, my mood, and other internal and external factors. On a day where sound hypersensitivity affects me, I might have to skip out on having lunch with my colleagues. In some cases, this has resulted in them taking it the wrong way and thinking that I’m not interested in socializing with them. My advice to your neurodivergent

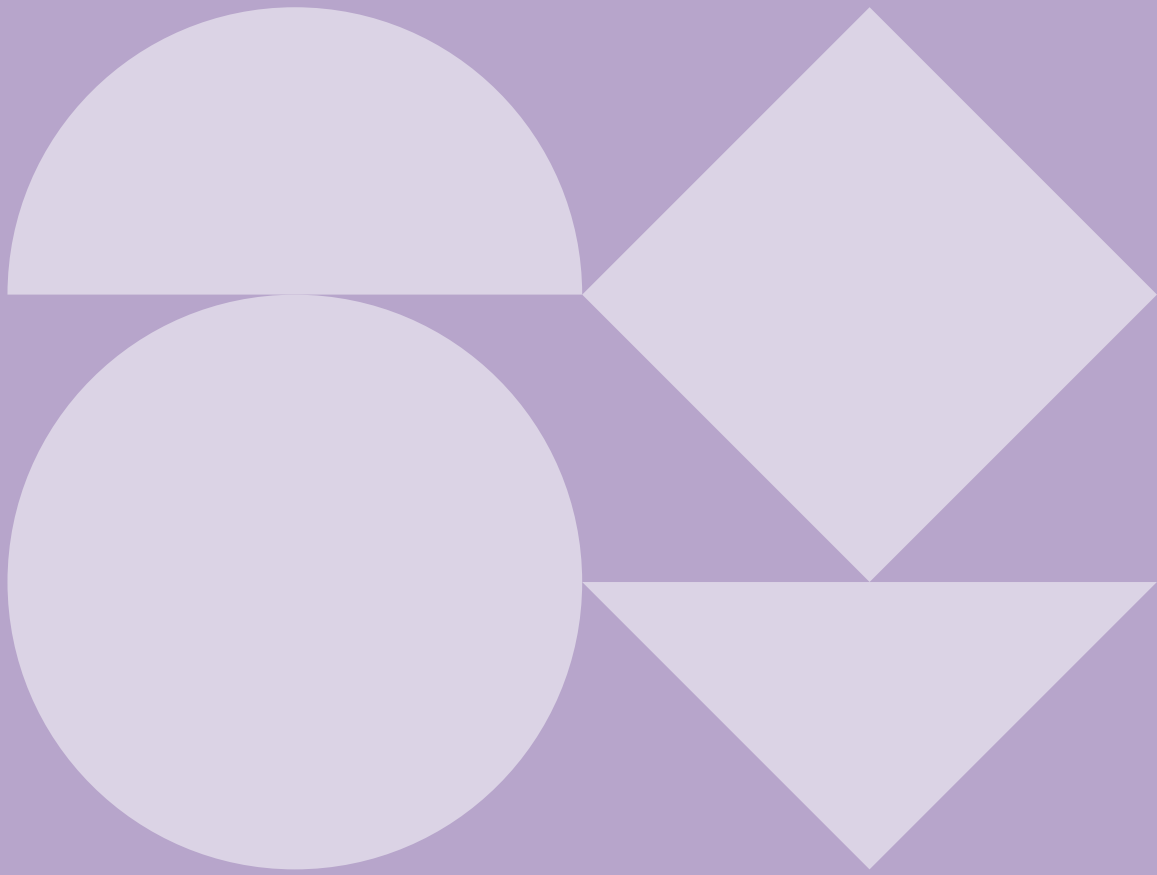
colleagues (or anyone, really!) would be to keep inviting them to participate — they will join in when they’re ready and able to.”

“Sensory hypersensitivity is something I live with every day. Noise is one of the hardest parts, not just loud sounds, but unpredictable ones. Sudden noises, overlapping conversations or irregular patterns can throw me off completely. I also struggle in visually cluttered or chaotic environments, places where there’s too much going on at once. I don’t have the filter that others seem to have. Everything comes in simultaneously, which makes it hard to focus or feel calm. When I’m well-rested, I can manage better. But the more tired I am, the more easily I get overwhelmed. This constant sensory input keeps my body in a state of stress. It feels like I’m stuck in a chronic fight-or-flight mode – muscles tense, breath shallow, and over time, this tension builds into chronic pain. Even when I move into a calmer space, I can’t relax right away. My nervous system doesn’t settle easily, it takes time to down-regulate. Hyposensitivity affects me in different ways. Emotionally, I don’t always understand what I’m feeling in the moment. I might sense that I’m upset, but I can’t immediately tell whether I’m angry, tired, sad, or reacting to something someone said. It takes time for the emotion to become clear.

This delay is especially difficult when something happens that I don't like — by the time I realize how I feel, the moment has passed, and the chance to respond is gone. That can make the emotion linger even longer. I also experience proprioceptive hyposensitivity, which affects my body awareness and spatial orientation. I often struggle to know how my body is positioned in space. I need extra external clues — like visual input or pressure — to locate my limbs or sense my posture.”

As an autistic person who usually is hypersensitive for most senses, I find it very difficult to work full time and have an active life in general. Being overstimulated most of the time is both mentally and physically exhausting. I think my experience aligns with most other autistic hypersensitive people but I want to make something very clear for neurotypical people. When this is discussed, it is usually mentioned that people are hypersensitive to loud noises or bright lights. While this aligns with some people's experience, it is not the case for me. Noises that are not loud, for example some colleagues talking quietly in the office, the air conditioning unit making a low-humming sound all day, or a colleague typing on their keyboard is also overstimulating to me. Every tiny sound is usually amplified in my brain. When this is misunderstood, I am faced with judgement as people tell me the office environment is not loud so it should be okay for me to be there.





2.2. Stimming & Tics

Stimming is a form of repetitive behaviour used to regulate emotions, focus, or sensory input. While many people stim from time to time, like taping a pen or twirling their hair, it holds deeper significance for many neurodivergent individuals, because their sensory experiences and emotional reactions can be more intense or unpredictable. Tics are another kind of repetitive behaviour, but unlike stimming, they are involuntary and can occur suddenly. **Both are often misunderstood or stigmatized. Recognising and accepting them is an important part of supporting neurodivergent people.**

Stimming

Stimming — short for self-stimulatory behaviour — is the use of repetitive movements, sounds, or actions to help manage emotions, focus, or sensory experiences. It's often driven by a need for sensory input or feedback. Common examples include rocking back and forth, hand-flapping, spinning objects, pacing, repeating certain words or phrases, humming or organizing items repetitively.

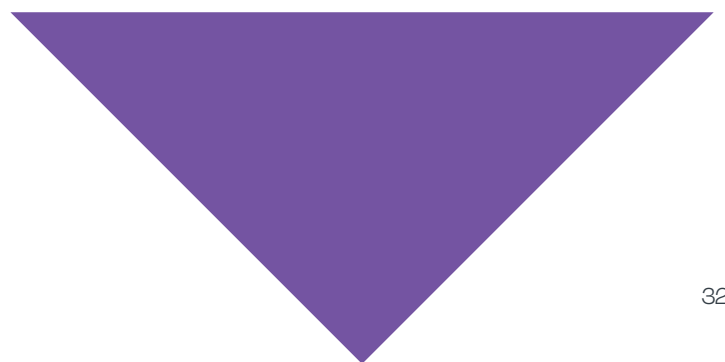
Stimming can help calm the nervous system during stress or boost alertness when feeling understimulated and it can be a way to express feelings like excitement or frustration. Some people stim on purpose to self-soothe or focus. Other times, stimming happens automatically, as a natural reaction to boredom, overwhelm, or strong emotions.

Stimming helps balance sensory input and can improve concentration by creating a steady, predictable rhythm. Even though it serves a helpful purpose, stimming is often misunderstood or socially stigmatized. As a result, some people feel pressure to hide or reduce these behaviors, even when they're calming and necessary.

Tics

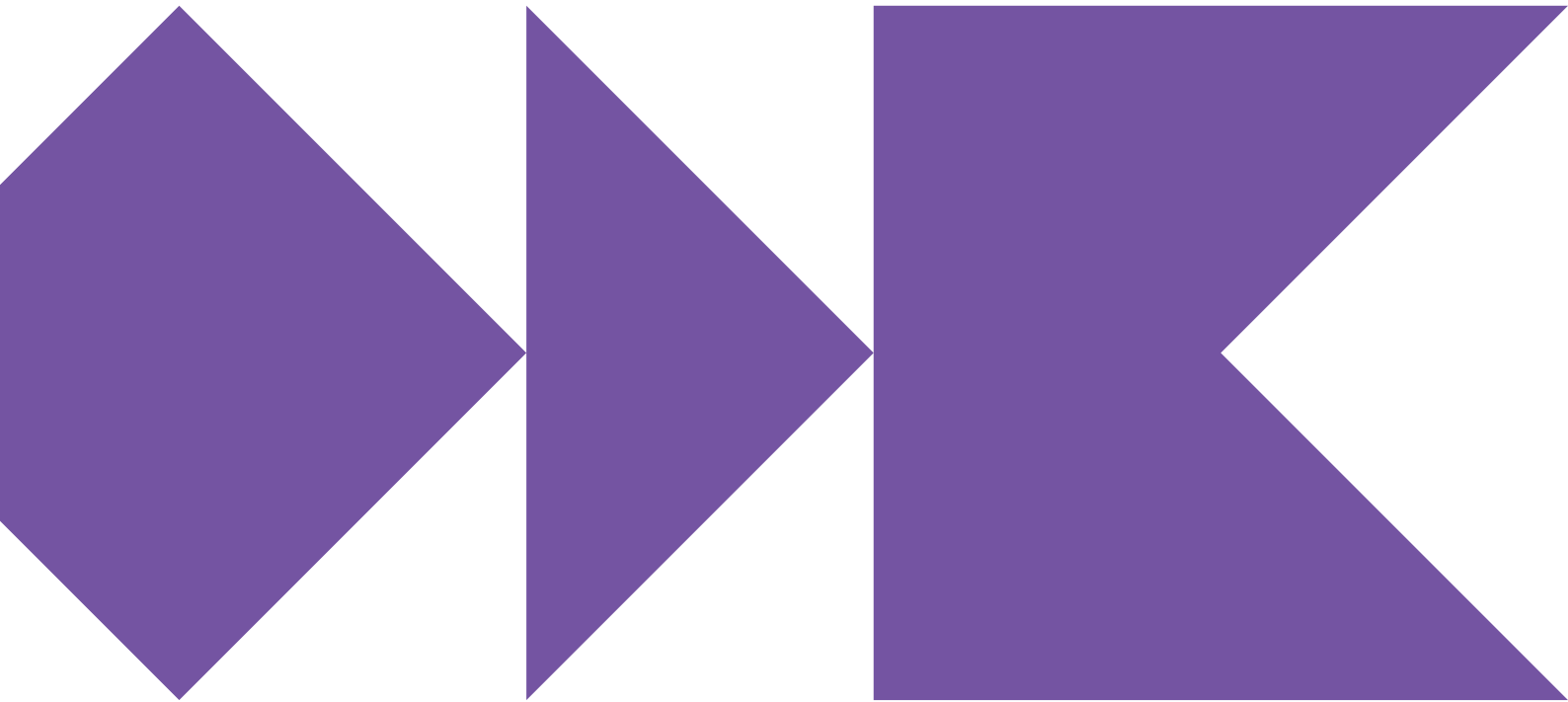
Tics are another type of repetitive behaviour. Tics are sudden, involuntary movements or sounds that happen repeatedly and often without warning. They can be simple, like eye blinking, throat clearing, or shoulder shrugging, or more complex, such as repeating words or touching objects. Tics are commonly associated with conditions like Tourette Syndrome, but they can also occur in other neurodivergent profiles.

While stimming and tics can sometimes look similar, there are key differences. Stimming is usually intentional and functional, helping someone feel better, stay calm, or maintain focus. Tics, on the other hand, are involuntary and often disruptive, with no specific purpose or emotional regulation benefit. People may be able to suppress tics for short periods, but doing so often causes discomfort or stress.



Tourette's Syndrome

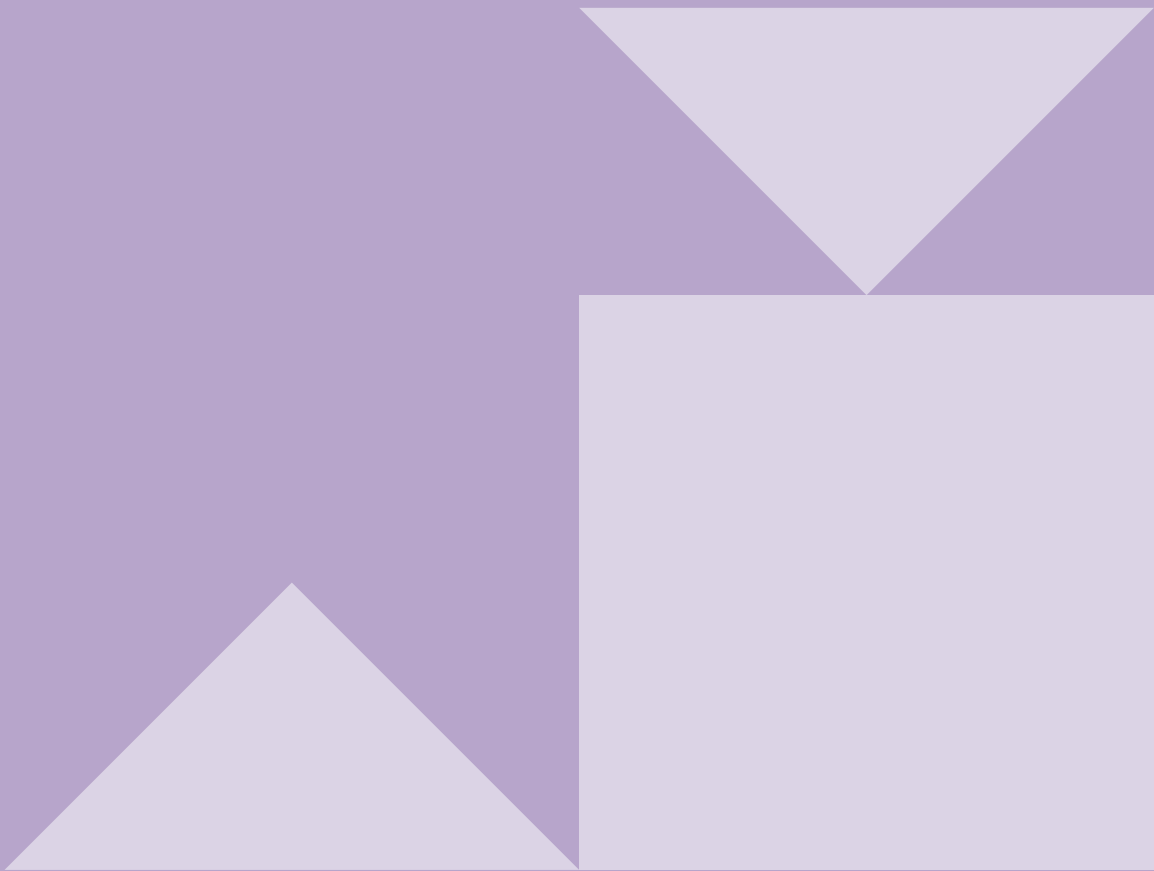
Tourette Syndrome (TS) is incredibly diverse. Some people have mild tics that barely affect daily life, while others face more complex challenges. But TS doesn't define a person's potential. Many build strong resilience as they learn to navigate their tics in everyday life. A powerful example is Grammy-winning artist Billie Eilish, who has spoken openly about her experience with TS, helping to raise awareness and challenge stereotypes. Often, it's not the tics themselves that hold people back, it's the misunderstanding. Media often exaggerates or mocks TS, which fuels stigma and isolation. One of the most persistent myths is that everyone with TS swears uncontrollably. In reality, only about 10% experience coprolalia, the involuntary use of inappropriate words. And even then, it's rarely as extreme as people imagine. These vocal tics are neurological and involuntary, they don't reflect someone's personality or intentions.





2.3. Executive Functioning Differences

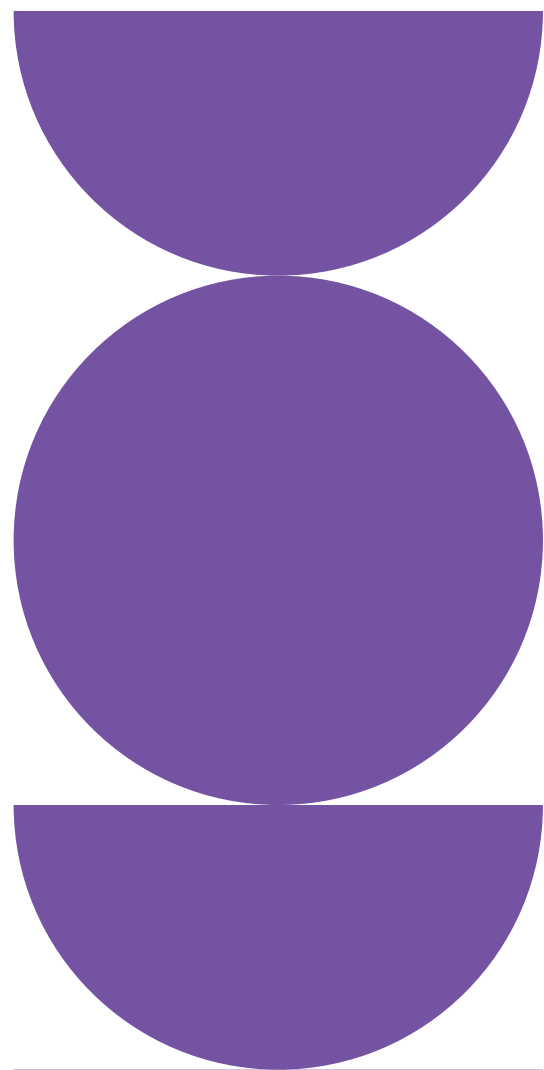
Executive functioning refers to a set of cognitive processes that help us manage and regulate our thoughts, actions, and emotions in order to achieve goals. These skills include planning, organizing, starting and completing tasks, managing time and attention, remembering instructions, controlling impulses, and adapting to changing situations. **For many neurodivergent individuals, these processes work differently, making everyday tasks more demanding.**



Common challenges

- Getting started on tasks, e.g. difficulty initiating, feeling stuck, or not knowing where to begin.
- Breaking tasks into steps or figuring out the order in which things need to happen.
- Planning and organising, such as keeping track of tasks, deadlines or materials.
- Time management difficulties, for example losing track of time, or misjudging how long things will take.
- Working memory difficulties, for example forgetting instructions, losing focus mid task, or difficulty holding several pieces of information at once.
- Task switching, especially shifting attention between activities or returning to a task after interruptions.
- Emotional regulation, particularly when routines change, unexpected events occur, or tasks feel overwhelming.
- Sustaining focus, especially during long, repetitive, or low interest activities.
- Self monitoring, such as noticing when something isn't working or recognising mistakes in the moment.

Understanding executive functioning differences helps us create more supportive and flexible environments. These challenges can vary from day to day and are often invisible to others, which can lead to misunderstandings or unfair judgments. In relationships or at work, these struggles are often mistaken for laziness or lack of motivation, when in reality, they reflect a different way of processing and organizing the world. In fact, many neurodivergent people are working very hard behind the scenes to manage what others may find routine.



Lived Experience: Executive Functioning Differences

“A strategy that helped me with executive function is working on my own schedule and communicate that to my colleagues and supervisor. I personally struggle with starting tasks (and resuming them if I am interrupted), so starting work early when I am most productive and finishing the biggest tasks early in the day helped a lot. Sometimes I am in the lab at 7am and can feel focused while starting a big task. And I also asked my colleagues not to interrupt me very much if I am busy, this is still not followed by some people, and it is still difficult to navigate setting a boundary.”

“Most of the times I’ve tried to start a task that has gone ‘out of hand’ (picking up clothes, house chores, having to do something repetitive like sending the same email to different people separately) I just freeze and I can’t start: I know what to do and how to (more or less) approach it, but I’m so overwhelmed that I just... Can’t. If given instructions ‘verbally’, I will surely forget half of them by the time the other person has finished giving them. I always request a written confirmation of what it has just been discussed so I can re-read it if necessary. Switching between tasks is something that it’s still kind of a ‘work

in progress’. It’s still difficult and I need a couple of minutes to assess what I need to do next.”

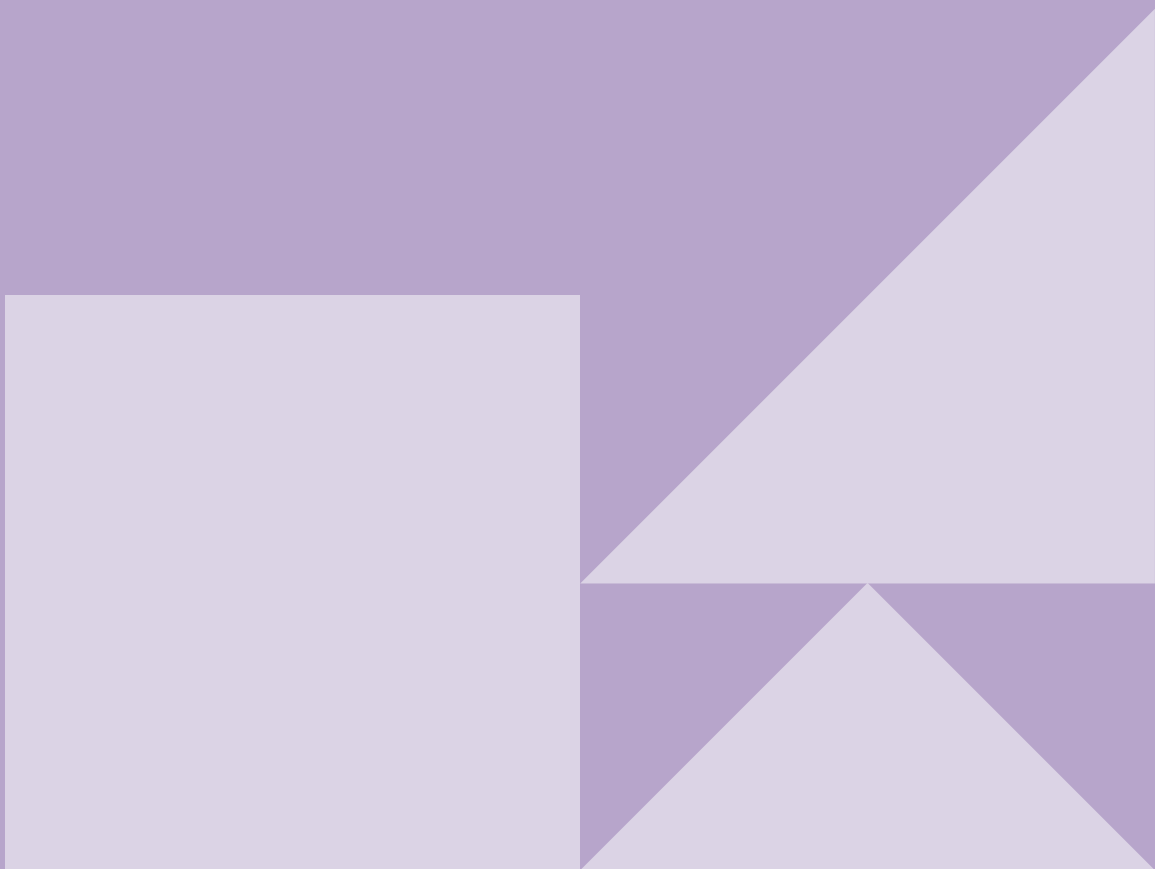
“Executive dysfunction doesn’t mean I’m incapable - it means I approach tasks differently. For example, when I have to prepare a big presentation, I often feel completely overwhelmed at first. The task seems too large, too abstract, too intimidating. But once I break it down into very small, manageable steps, I can start working on it. That first step is crucial - task initiation is often the hardest part, and it can come with a lot of stress and anxiety. Sometimes, the pressure of starting is so intense that I end up postponing the task entirely - even something important, like writing these lived experiences. Afterwards, it’s often quite striking: once you start a task, you accomplish it sometimes quite easily and don’t understand why it was such a struggle to initiate it. But the struggle is still valid, for me struggling with task initiation is an inherent part of the process. It’s not that I can’t do complex tasks; it’s that the path I take to get there might be less linear. I sometimes lose time in planning or struggle to get started, but I can compensate with periods of hyperfocus once I’m engaged. Over time, I’ve learned to develop strategies that help - like planning the next day’s tasks at the end of the current day, so I can start more smoothly in the morning. Executive functioning challenges don’t make someone

less intelligent or less valuable. Just because a person struggles with things others find easy, doesn't mean they can't excel at things others find difficult. We might not tackle things the same way, but we are just as capable of reaching strong and meaningful results."



2.4. Communication Style Differences

Neurodivergent individuals often communicate in ways that differ from societal norms. This is rooted in the unique way they experience the world, including differences in sensory processing and executive functioning.



Sensory sensitivities, whether heightened or reduced, can significantly shape how neurodivergent individuals communicate and engage socially. For those who are hypersensitive, noisy or chaotic environments can be overwhelming and make it hard to focus, speak or stay present in a conversation. This sensory overload can lead someone to go quiet, avoid eye contact or step away. Reactions that are often mistaken for disinterest or rudeness, while they're actually ways to cope with too much sensory input. Individuals who are hyposensitive on the other hand, may experience muted sensory input. They might seek stronger stimuli to stay engaged — such as speaking loudly, using exaggerated gestures or moving more — or they may miss subtle social cues like tone shifts or body language. Differences in sensory processing also affect emotional regulation, which in turn influences tone, facial expressions and response timing. For example, someone might speak in a flat tone despite feeling excited, or take longer to respond while processing both sensory and emotional input.

Executive functioning differences can also affect communication. Initiating a conversation can require more cognitive effort. Organizing thoughts in a clear, linear way may also be more difficult. This can lead to shifting topics unexpectedly, sharing large amounts of information, or expressing ideas in a way that seems scattered, even though it reflects

deep engagement. Processing what others say and formulating a response can take longer, especially in fast-paced situations. Self-monitoring, like adjusting tone, staying on topic or knowing when to speak, can be challenging, sometimes leading to bluntness or speaking out of turn. These are not signs of rudeness or disinterest, but reflections of how executive function works differently.

Info Dumping

Info-dumping is a common and meaningful way neurodivergent individuals express enthusiasm. It involves sharing detailed information about a topic they're deeply passionate about, often connected to special interests or hyperfixations. While it can sometimes be misunderstood as oversharing, it's usually a genuine attempt to connect and share joy. In neurodivergent-friendly spaces, info-dumping is welcomed and celebrated. Prompts like "What's your current hyperfixation?" encourage this form of authentic communication and help build connection through shared interests.

Neurodivergent Communication

Although communication varies from person to person, some traits are more frequently seen in neurodivergent individuals. Many prefer direct and literal language, which can be due to differences in interpreting sarcasm, indirect speech or social subtext. While this clarity can be refreshing, it may be misunderstood by those used to more nuanced conversation. Small talk may feel draining or pointless for some, leading them to skip social niceties and gravitate towards conversations with clear purpose or depth. Some people feel more comfortable at events with a clear activity or purpose, like a workshop, than at casual hangouts, which can feel too open-ended. Others may favor written communication, as it allows more time to process, organize thoughts, and express ideas clearly, while avoiding the unpredictability of spoken interaction.

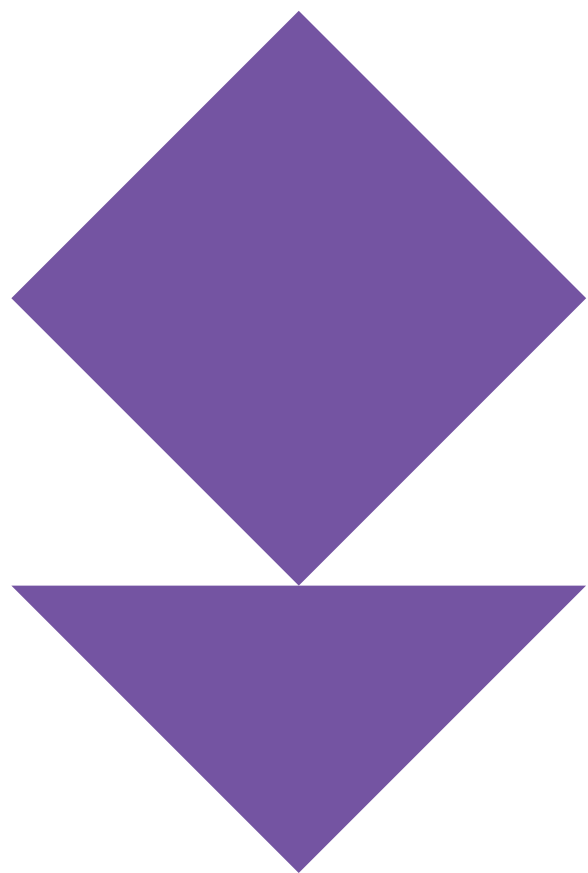
It's worth noting that these communication differences may not always be visible. Many neurodivergent individuals hide or mask their natural communication style to fit social expectations (see 2.5. Masking).

For individuals with learning differences like dyslexia, communication challenges often relate more to language processing than to social understanding. They may struggle with word retrieval, spelling

or reading under pressure, which can affect confidence in both speaking and writing.

The Double Empathy Problem

Differences in communication styles can lead to misinterpretation, frustration and conflict. For instance, someone might doodle during a meeting to stay focused, but others may see this as disengagement. These misunderstandings are not one-sided. The Double Empathy Problem, a term coined by autism researcher Damian Milton, highlights that both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals may struggle to understand each other's perspectives, because they experience and express the world differently. This reminds us that communication is a shared responsibility, and mutual understanding requires effort from both sides.

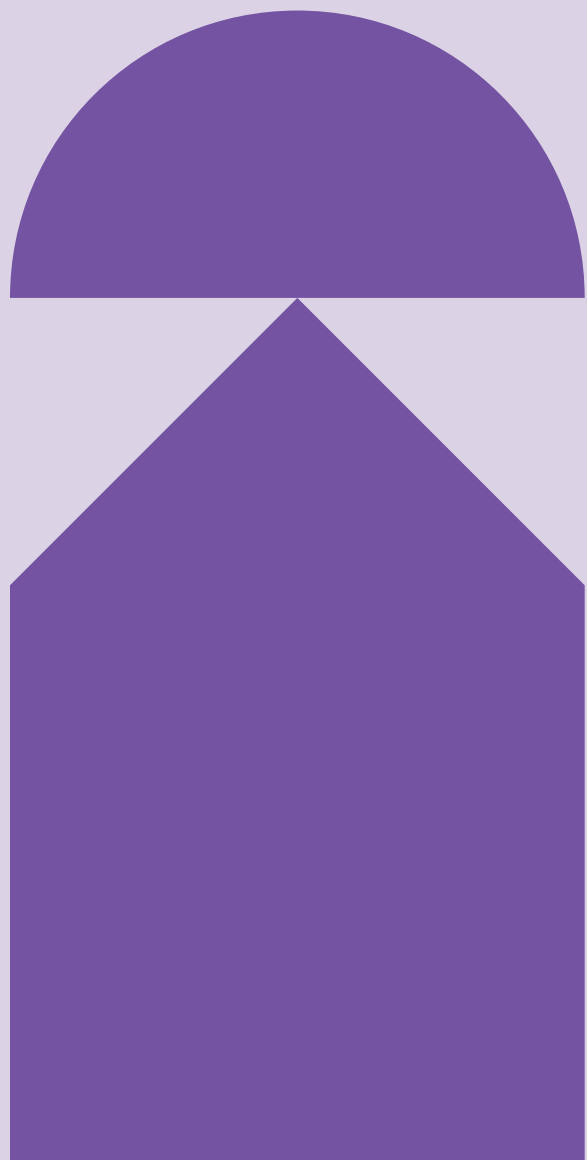


Lived Experience: Communication Style Differences

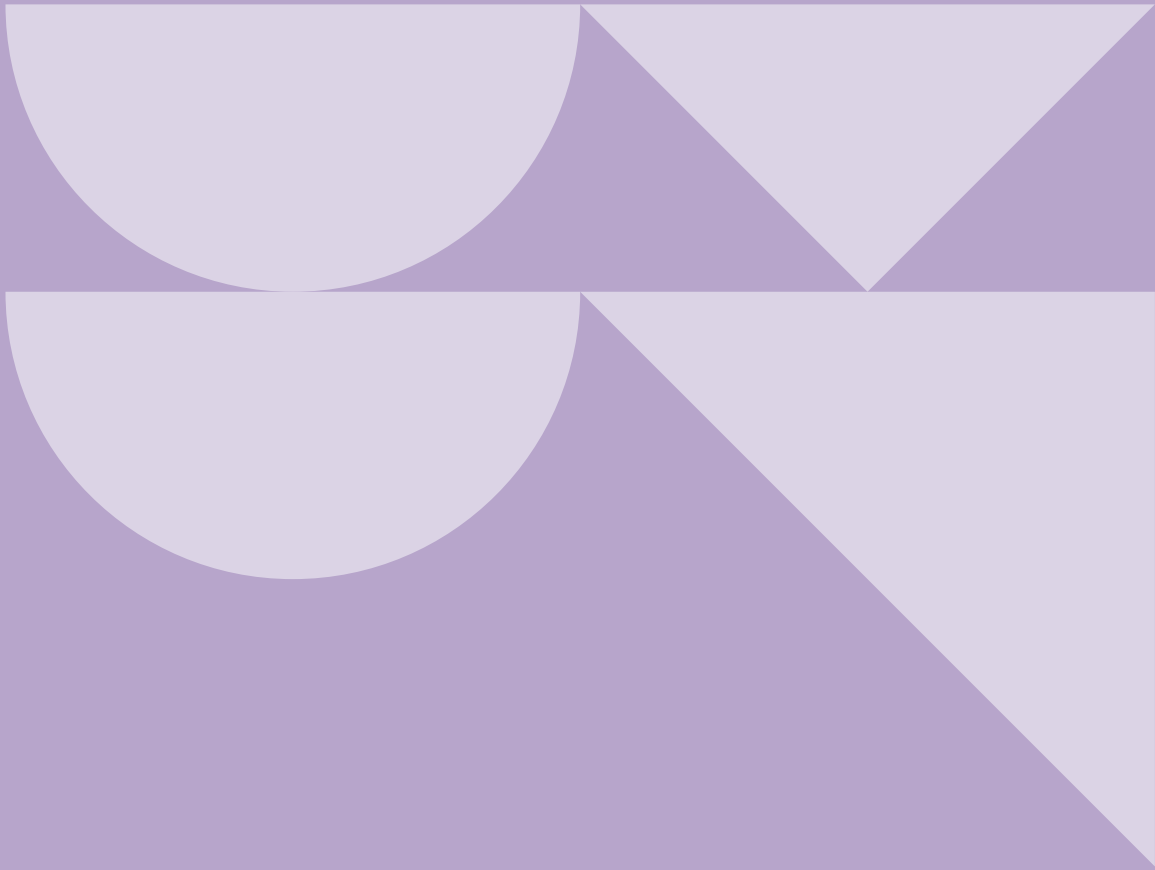
“I’ve noticed that my communication style can differ to that of my neurotypical colleagues. I’m less afraid to say something in a direct manner, and less inclined to “beat about the bush” — it’s not really a concept I understand! I also find navigating small talk difficult: I might not know what to say to fill a silence and sometimes find it hard to understand how to make, understand, or respond to jokes. On the one hand, people think I’m ‘too positive’ — I can’t possibly be this bubbly and outgoing and excitable, it must be fake! On the other, I’ve often been referred to as a ‘bitch’: seemingly uninterested when I should be or not using enough tact in my delivery that may come across as rude to some people. The way this affects me most at work is my general inability to ‘read between the lines’: I prefer for people to share their expectations of what I should or shouldn’t do directly, and it either takes a great deal of effort or can even be impossible for me to understand messages that are implicit or inferred. This has gotten me into situations where people think I am being overly insistent, for instance if I continue to push for something despite a hidden ‘polite no’ I had apparently missed!”

“My natural communication style is direct and honest. I say what I mean, and I appreciate when others do the same. I find it easy to talk to people who also speak clearly and don’t expect me to read between the lines. With others, it’s more challenging. Some rely heavily on nonverbal cues - like tone, gestures or facial expressions — which can feel confusing and inefficient to me. The better I know someone, the easier it gets. I learn their style over time. But with some, it stays difficult. I often adjust how I speak depending on who I’m talking to. Some people don’t seem to appreciate my directness. They rarely say so outright, but I pick up on subtle cues. When I notice that, I adapt. That’s when communication becomes less intuitive and more like something I’ve studied. I find myself decoding tone, reading body language, and trying to predict social expectations, things I’ve learned through observation, trial and error and years of experience. I think I’ve become quite good at it. While it helps me navigate social situations, it’s incredibly energy-draining. It’s a form of masking. I’m not showing up as my full self, just a version that’s easier for others to accept. That also means some people never really get to know the real me. After a day full of meetings or social interactions, I often feel mentally exhausted, not because of the content, but because of the effort it takes to stay socially ‘in sync’. Something that’s particularly hard for me is having a conversation in a noisy environment.

I can't filter out background noise, so I struggle to follow what the other person is saying. My brain is already working hard just to hear and process the words, so there's not much capacity left to pick up on nonverbal cues. I might miss things, or I misread them, and that adds to the stress. After a while, I go quiet. I struggle to keep eye contact. Eye contact adds extra intensity, and skipping it reduces sensory input and gives me a bit more space to think. Sometimes I just need to step away. I know it might seem rude or like I'm not engaged, but it's how I cope with too much sensory input. It's not about avoiding people, it's about protecting my energy so I can stay connected."







2.5. Masking

When discussing neurodivergence, one key concept to understand is masking, the act of suppressing or camouflaging natural behaviors, thoughts, or responses to meet social expectations. Masking can be both intentional and unconscious. Some individuals deliberately change their behavior to fit in or prevent rejection. Others mask instinctively, often without realizing they're doing it, as a result of repeated social pressure. Over time, masking can become automatic, a deeply ingrained coping mechanism in an unaccommodating world.

What masking can include

- Enduring sensory discomfort without expressing it.
- Suppressing stimming behaviors.
- Hiding one's natural communication style.
- Mimicking speech patterns, tone, or facial expressions to appear more “typical”.
- Forcing oneself to make small talk even when it feels unnatural or draining.
- Rehearsing conversations or scripting responses.
- Adopting socially expected hobbies or interest to blend in.
- Hiding a genuine emotional reaction, like masking frustration when plans shift.

For many neurodivergent people, masking is a survival strategy that often begins early in life. It's used to avoid bullying, punishment, exclusion or being misunderstood. Masking can also be a way of learning and applying social rules that aren't naturally intuitive. In both cases, it isn't about being fake, it's a protective and adaptive response to feel safe and function in a neurotypical world.

While masking can help some people navigate social situations, it often comes at a significant emotional and psychological cost.

- **Hypervigilance:** Constant self-monitoring while masking leads to hypervigilance, always scanning for social cues, avoiding mistakes, and fearing judgment. This heightened alertness often contributes to chronic anxiety.
- **Identity confusion:** When masking becomes habitual, individuals may lose track of who they are beneath the mask. Over time, it becomes difficult to distinguish authentic behaviors from performative ones, leading to feelings of inauthenticity, imposter syndrome, emotional numbness and low self-esteem.
- **Social fatigue:** Many neurodivergent individuals feel drained after social interactions, even when they seem “successful.” This exhaustion can cause irritability, a need for recovery time and withdrawal, negatively affecting relationships and mental health.
- **Social isolation and loneliness:** Masking suppresses genuine self-expression, making authentic connection difficult. Relationships may feel shallow or strained, leading to a deep sense of loneliness, even when surrounded by others.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

RSD* is an intense emotional response to perceived or actual rejection, criticism or failure. It's common among neurodivergent people, especially those with ADHD. Even neutral feedback or imagined disapproval can trigger overwhelming feelings of shame, sadness or anger. RSD often develops in response to years of being misunderstood, corrected or excluded. Psychiatrist Dr. William Dodson estimates that by age 12, a child with ADHD may have received up to 20,000 more negative messages than their neurotypical peers. These often sound like: "You're too loud.", "You're too much.", "Why are you so weird" or "Why can't you sit still?" Over time, this can create a deep fear of rejection and a heightened sensitivity to criticism. RSD can lead to avoidance of social or professional situations and make everyday interactions feel emotionally risky. It's not about being overly sensitive, it's a neurological response shaped by experience.

Neurodivergent Burnout

Neurodivergent individuals already have to navigate the challenges intrinsic to their neurotype, such as sensory overload, executive functioning differences, and emotional regulation. Masking adds an extra layer of pressure. The constant effort to suppress natural responses and conform to social norms can be mentally and physically exhausting. Over time, this strain contributes to burnout and depression.

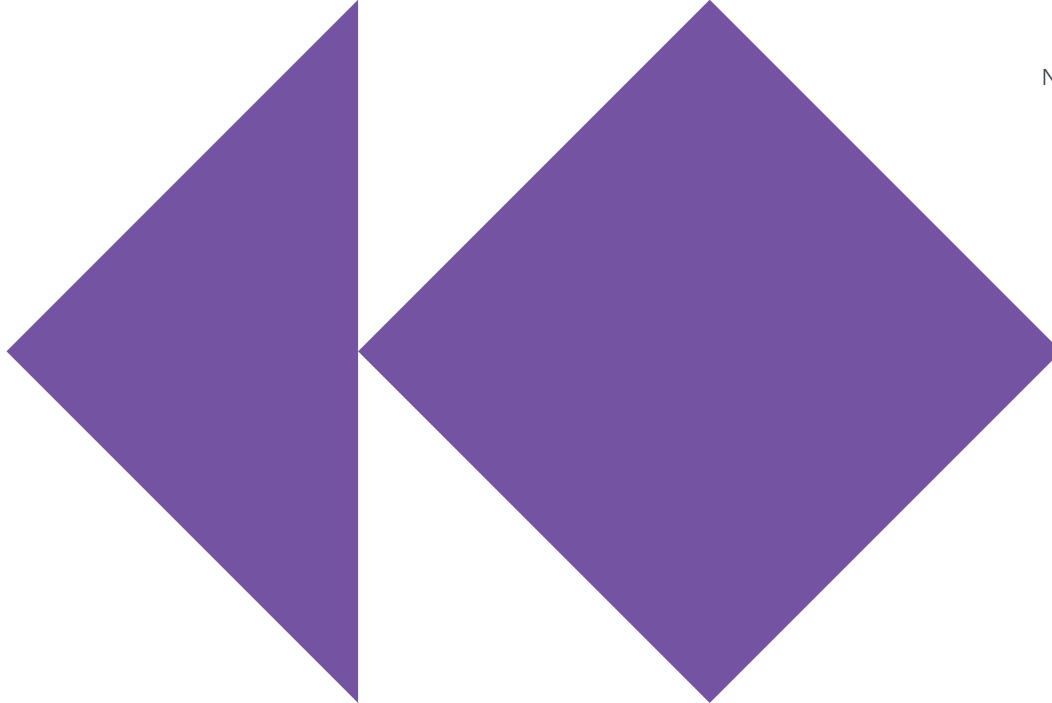
Neurodivergent burnout is different from typical work-related burnout. A

study by Raymaker and colleagues** — created entirely by autistic adults - highlights this. Participants described autistic burnout as the result of a combination of high stress (from sensory overload, social pressure, and the constant need to mask) and low support (such as a lack of understanding, limited resources, and few accommodations).

Key features of a neurodivergent burnout include chronic exhaustion, loss of skills and an increased sensitivity to sensory input. Recovery is linked to acceptance and social support, time off or reduced expectations, and less pressure to mask.

*Partridge, A. (2026). *Why does everybody hate me?: Living and loving with RSD*. Sheldon Press.

**Raymaker, D. M., Teo, A. R., Steckler, N. A., Lentz, B., Scharer, M., Delos Santos, A., Kapp, S. K., Hunter, M., Joyce, A., & Nicolaidis, C. (2020). "Having all of your internal resources exhausted beyond measure and being left with no clean-up crew": Defining autistic burnout. *Autism in Adulthood*, 2(2), 132–143. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0079>



Spoon Theory: A Tool for Energy Awareness

The Spoon Theory is a metaphor created by Christine Miserandino. It's used by neurodivergent individuals to describe and manage limited energy. Each “spoon” represents a unit of energy. Daily tasks — like getting dressed, attending meetings or handling sensory input — consume spoons. Note that the same task may require more spoons for a neurodivergent person than for a neurotypical one, leading to quicker energy depletion. Once someone runs out of spoons, energy depletion can result in shutdown, overwhelm, emotional distress, difficulty functioning or a need to withdraw and recover.

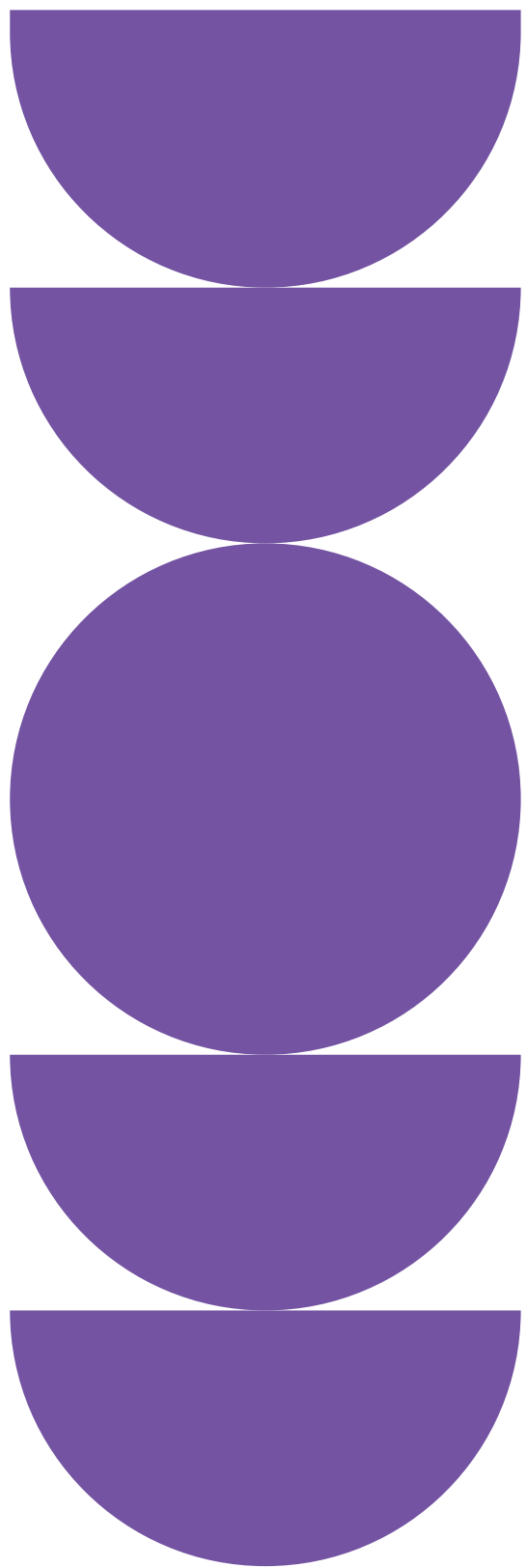
Originally created to explain life with chronic illness, The Spoon Theory now helps neurodivergent people communicate their limits clearly. Phrases like “I’m low on spoons” or “I’m saving my spoons” make invisible effort visible. More than just a metaphor, The Spoon Theory is a practical tool. It supports boundary-setting, helps with energy management, and strengthens self-advocacy.

Unmasking

Given the emotional toll masking can take, it's no surprise that many neurodivergent individuals seek relief through unmasking.

Unmasking is the intentional process of letting go of neurotypical expectations and embracing one's authentic neurodivergent identity, behaviors, and needs. It often involves finding safe(r) spaces where they can express themselves freely without fear of judgment, rejection, or pressure to conform. Unmasking can feel both liberating and vulnerable, as it often means learning to feel at home in your own skin and building relationships that support authentic self-expression.

You can compare neurodivergent masking with the journey many queer people go through. To avoid judgment or exclusion, many learn to camouflage their identity — adjusting how they speak, dress or act. Coming out and embracing queer pride is a way to reclaim identity and find a community that affirms who they truly are. Similarly, unmasking allows neurodivergent people to stop hiding and live more openly and honestly.



Lived Experience: (Un)Masking

“I was a master masker for several years and curated my life in such a way that most people — even those closest to me — didn’t know that I was neurodivergent or chronically unwell. However, since my diagnosis, I’ve started the long process of ‘unmasking’. As with many other neurodivergent people going through this process, it involved a long course of identity crisis: who is the real me? Is my “masked self” still me, in some way? What do I even look, sound, or act like without the mask? It’s a very layered and complex journey, and one that I could only have done with the support of my neurodivergent community.”

“I’m masking 24/7. There’s not a moment at my workplace or in my personal interaction with others that I am not masking. The only moment the mask goes off is when I’m completely alone. I mask because I’ve heard all my life that I’m “too much” or “too chaotic”. Because of previous experiences and my RSD (rejection sensitive dysphoria), I think people don’t want me around: for example, when invited to a party, if the fact that my presence is wanted is not explicitly said, I will assume that I’m just not wanted, that their invitation is just a formality. Normally, this would send me down a spiral of negative thoughts. It would help me to receive

the message that you really want me at your party so I can re-wire my brain into thinking “neutral means neutral” and not “neutral means bad”. Only then can I link what you say with what you really mean, as I’m just often “lost in translation”.

“People often assume that unmasking is simple — that it just means pretending less and being more yourself. But the reality is far more complicated. Unmasking involves stepping away from neurotypical expectations, and that shift is rarely met with neutrality. When I try to unmask, even slightly, I often receive negative reactions. People might perceive my behavior as inconsistent or strange, which leads me to retreat and mask again — sometimes even more intensely, as a way to compensate. There’s a common assumption that autistic people lack social awareness or sensitivity. But that’s not true. We often pick up on subtle reactions very quickly — a frown, a pause, a slightly harsher tone — and those signals can feel deeply discouraging. When someone responds negatively to us being ourselves, we immediately become cautious and shift back into masking mode. The way people react to unmasked behavior matters. If authenticity is met with judgment or rejection, it sends a clear message: you’re not allowed to be yourself here.

That's incredibly damaging to self-confidence and reinforces the pressure to conform. This cycle is exhausting and unsustainable. There's a constant tension: how much of myself can I safely show? How will others respond to behavior that deviates from what they're used to? Unmasking is not a one-time decision, it's a continuous negotiation with the environment. If the space isn't safe or accepting, unmasking simply isn't possible. Even when we do unmask, we never fully let go. There's always a part of us calculating, adjusting, protecting. Being different should be okay. You don't have to like me personally, but we can still collaborate professionally. Respect and inclusion shouldn't depend on how well I fit in."

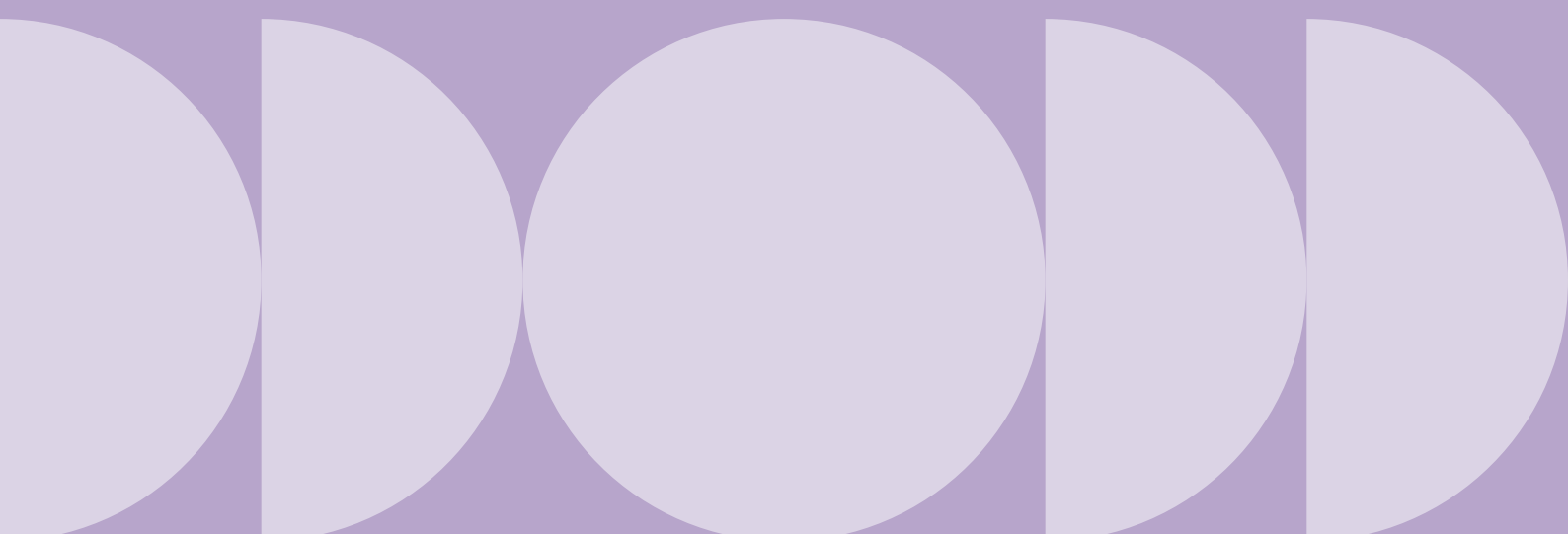


2.6. The Neurodivergent Take On Disability

As we explore the realities of neurodivergent experiences, it's important to consider how disability fits into the picture. Being neurodivergent does not automatically mean being disabled.

Disability is generally understood as a physical, mental, cognitive or sensory condition that significantly affects a person's ability to perform everyday activities or participate fully in society.

Some neurodivergent individuals don't identify as disabled, especially when they lead fulfilling lives without requiring significant accommodations. For others, disability is a real and valid part of their neurodivergent experience, either because of the external barriers they face in society or the internal challenges they navigate daily.



External Barriers

- **External Challenges:** These refer to the social, structural, and environmental obstacles that make it harder for neurodivergent individuals to participate fully in everyday life. Not because of their neurodivergence itself, but because of how the world is designed. This includes a lack of awareness or understanding, rigid systems, sensory-unfriendly environments, non-inclusive communication, inadequate accommodations and discrimination. These barriers reflect the social model of disability, which emphasizes that people are often disabled more by their surroundings than by their minds or bodies.
- **Internal Challenges:** Even in fully inclusive and supportive environments, some neurodivergent individuals may still experience difficulties related to how their brains function. For example, someone with ADHD might struggle with executive dysfunction or time blindness, while a person with autism may continue to face sensory overload or emotional regulation issues. These challenges can be deeply disabling, regardless of external support.

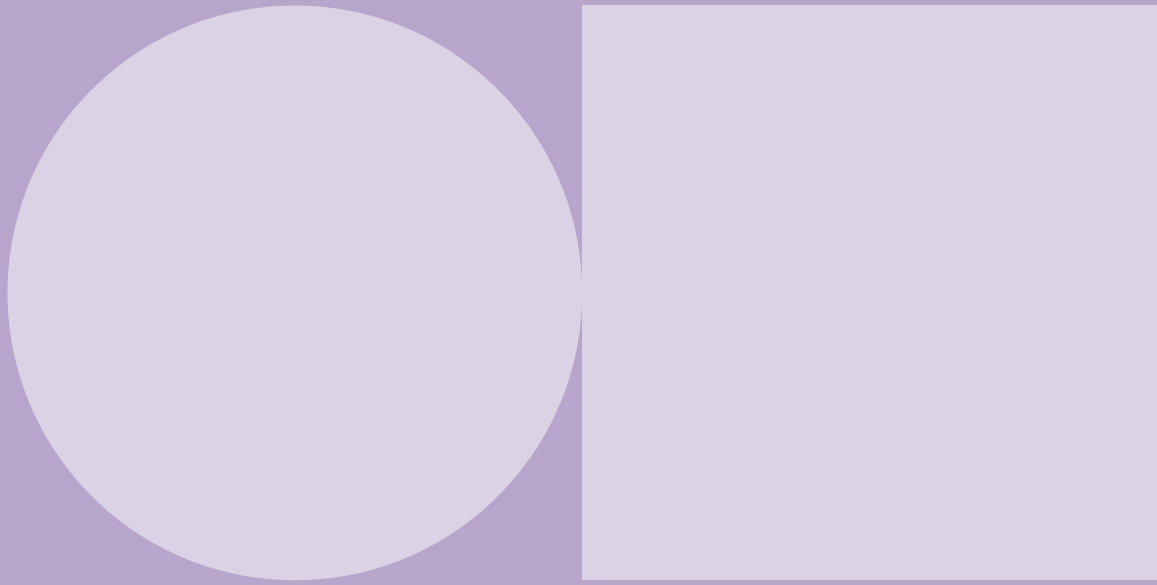
It's important to recognize the diversity within neurodivergence. No two individuals experience it in exactly the same way. What is disabling for

one person may not be for another, even if they share the same diagnosis.

In many cases, neurodivergence is considered an **invisible disability**, its effects aren't always obvious to others. This can make it harder to receive understanding and support, as challenges may go unnoticed unless explicitly explained. However, neurodivergence can sometimes become visible through traits such as stimming, tics, meltdowns, shutdowns or differences in speech and movement.

Neurodivergence is often a **dynamic disability**. This means that its impact can fluctuate depending on internal factors (like energy levels, sensory overload or mental health) and external ones (such as environment, stress or social demands). A person may appear to be coping well one day and struggle significantly the next. These shifts are not always predictable, and they don't mean someone is "faking" or inconsistent, they reflect the genuine variability of living with a dynamic condition. When this isn't understood, it can lead to a lack of support, understanding or even trust.

Whether visible or not, and whether constant or fluctuating, the impact on daily life can be significant. This is why many neurodivergent people identify as disabled: to recognize their needs and ensure they have access to the resources and understanding that help them thrive.



2.7. Impact of Recognizing One's Neurodivergence

For many neurodivergent individuals, discovering their neurodivergence, whether through a formal diagnosis or self-identification, can be a profound turning point.

This journey can look very different depending on when it happens. When neurodivergence is recognized in childhood, it becomes part of a person's identity early on. This can help with getting support and understanding their needs, but it can also lead to stigma, pressure to conform to neurotypical norms, and feelings of being different or broken.

For those who discover their neurodivergence later in life, the experience can be deeply transformative. Many describe it as a moment when everything finally makes sense. Past struggles — such as difficulties with social interaction, sensory sensitivity, or chronic exhaustion — are suddenly seen in a new light. This realization often

brings relief and self-compassion. At the same time, it can stir up grief and anger over years spent misunderstood or unsupported. Both reactions are valid and often intertwined.

Recognition — whether early or late — is often just the beginning. Understanding one's neurodivergence is a lifelong process that evolves with new experiences, environments, and self-reflection. Many people find themselves needing to rebuild their identity, rethinking how they see themselves and their past. While some find comfort and clarity in their label, others feel limited or stigmatized, especially when labels are used to narrowly define them or reinforce stereotypes.

"Everyone is diagnosed with ADHD and Autism these days"

This phrase reflects a common sentiment, but it oversimplifies a complex issue. Yes, there has been a noticeable increase in formal diagnoses of ADHD and autism in recent years. However, this rise is not necessarily due to an actual increase in cases*. Rather, it's due to improved awareness, better screening and access to diagnosis, broader diagnostic criteria, recognition of underrepresented groups, and increased self-identification. Historically, neurodivergence was mainly diagnosed in children. Now, many adults who were overlooked in childhood are receiving evaluations later in life. As one meme puts it: "So you're telling me fewer people had autism back then? My grandmother collected stamps from every country and every year, catalogued them by color, and got upset if one was out of order... and she was just 'quirky'?"

* Arvidsson, O., Brikell, I., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., Kuja-Halkola, R., Johnson, M., Gillberg, C., & Lundström, S. (2025). ASD and ADHD symptoms in 18-year-olds – A population-based study of twins born 1993 to 2001. *Psychiatry Research*, 351, 116613. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2025.116613>

Formal diagnosis vs. self-identification

The choice to pursue a formal diagnosis is deeply personal and depends on an individual's needs and circumstances. For some, self-identification — the process of recognizing neurodivergent traits in oneself without formal testing - can be just as meaningful. Both approaches have their own advantages and limitations.

A formal diagnosis can open doors to accommodations, medical support, and legal protections that are often inaccessible without official documentation.

However, there are significant barriers:

- **Cost and access:** Evaluations can be expensive, and wait times are often long.
- **Bias and misdiagnosis:** Some professionals may hold outdated views on neurodivergence, leading to misdiagnosis or dismissal, especially for non-male, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), or those who mask their traits.
- **Rigid criteria:** Narrow diagnostic definitions can exclude individuals who face real challenges but don't meet the strict medical thresholds, leaving them without recognition or support.

Because of these barriers, many in the neurodivergent community view self-identification as equally valid. For some, it's the only accessible path to understanding themselves and finding community.

However, self-identification also comes with challenges:

- **External skepticism:** Others may question or invalidate someone's identity without a formal diagnosis.
- **Internal doubt:** Some may experience uncertainty or imposter syndrome, wondering if their experiences are "valid enough" without an official label.

There are concerns that self-identification can lead to misunderstandings or misuse of diagnostic labels. The issue isn't self-identification itself, but rather the use of terms — such as "autistic" — without sufficient understanding or respect. When people adopt these labels casually, without lived experience, it can dilute their meaning and minimize the real challenges many face. This, in turn, may reduce access to accommodations, support, and recognition for those who genuinely need them.

Fortunately, most self-identifying neurodivergent individuals do so after deep reflection and research, approaching the labels with care and authenticity.

Lived experiences: The impact of recognizing one's neurodivergence

“This will sound very cliché but the moment I got the diagnosis I felt that everything made sense. Upon reflection, it was one of the best days of my life, although I was very sad at that moment. Discovering my neurodivergence gave me so much confidence, because I could finally realize all the weird little traits I had were not just because I was weird or wrong, but because I had a neurotype with different brain wiring. Since the diagnosis, I learned a lot about how to give myself accommodations and trying to learn not to feel the deep shame I carried with me for years. But I also want people to understand that it is not always sunshine and happiness, I still have days when I feel like I don't want to be neurodivergent and I don't want everything to be this hard for me. I think this is still mostly because of being in environments that doesn't accommodate me, and I still find social interaction difficult and tiring. Even feeling that, I am more than glad to discover my neurodivergence.”

new perspectives, understand myself better, and maybe find some helpful strategies. It felt like either result would be okay. But when I received the diagnosis — when it became clear that I am autistic — I realized I had secretly hoped for a different outcome. The diagnosis meant that my brain is wired differently. It meant that some things will never come easily to me, and some challenges will always be part of my life. Tips and tricks can help, but they don't “fix” it. I can learn to live with it, but I'll have to shape my life around it. Autism comes with real limitations. For some people, a diagnosis brings clarity and comfort — a sense of understanding and validation. For me, it felt more like a loss. A quiet goodbye to the version of life I had imagined. The diagnosis didn't just explain things, it took away a piece of hope. It felt like a verdict: things are hard now, and they may never be truly easy. These limitations won't disappear — I can only learn to live with them.”

“Before I went through the diagnostic process, I wasn't sure what outcome I was hoping for. I thought it didn't really matter — if I didn't have autism, that would be fine. If I did, I could start learning more about it, gain

2.8. Neurodivergence & Intersectionality

Being neurodivergent doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's shaped by other aspects of identity — such as gender, race, class, disability and sexuality. These aspects of identity don't simply coexist - they interact, overlap, and shape how someone experience the world.



Defining intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how different aspects of a person's identity interact to shape their experiences, especially in relation to discrimination or privilege. The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Neurodivergent people often face ableism — unfair treatment or exclusion because their brains work differently from what society considers “normal.” But the impact of ableism can vary greatly depending on other parts of a person's identity.

For example:

- A Black autistic woman may face racism, sexism, and ableism all at once.
- A working-class dyslexic person may face ableism, and also struggle to access education and support services due to economic inequality.

When identities overlap, they create unique challenges. These experiences can't be fully understood by examining each identity in isolation - it's the intersections that shape how someone is treated and what barriers they encounter. Privilege and disadvantage can coexist. Someone might benefit from privilege in one area (e.g., being white) while facing discrimination in another (e.g., being autistic).

Neurodivergence & gender

Despite growing awareness of neurodiversity, many women and gender-diverse individuals still face significant barriers to recognition and support.

Women and gender-diverse individuals are often underdiagnosed with autism and ADHD*. Diagnostic criteria were historically based on how these conditions present in boys and men, which means many neurodivergent people who don't fit that profile — such as women, non-binary, and trans individuals — are frequently overlooked. As a result, they're more likely to be misdiagnosed and may miss out on appropriate support.

Neurodivergent women often mask more than men. From early childhood, girls are taught to meet traditional gender expectations — to be polite, quiet, and emotionally aware. For neurodivergent girls, traits like sensory sensitivities, direct communication, or difficulty with social cues often clash with these norms. To avoid judgment or exclusion, many learn to masking to fit in. While masking can help them navigate social situations, it often leads to emotional exhaustion, identity confusion, and delayed or missed diagnoses. Because they seem to be coping, their struggles are more frequently overlooked.

* Gellert, B., Ostrowski, J., Pinkas, J., & Religioni, U. (2025). Underdiagnosed and misunderstood: Clinical challenges and educational needs of healthcare professionals in identifying autism spectrum disorder in women. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(8), 1073. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15081073>

** Alagband-rad, J., Hajikarim-Hamedani, A., & Motamed, M. (2023). Camouflage and masking behavior in adult autism: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, Article 1108110. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1108110>

Neurodivergence & Race

Neurodivergent Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) often face unique challenges shaped by the intersection of race, culture, and cognitive difference.

Many experience underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis* due to several overlapping factors:

- **Cultural stigma:** Neurodivergence may be seen as shameful or taboo, leading to silence and avoidance.
- **Medical mistrust:** A history of discrimination makes people less likely to seek help or trust diagnoses.
- **Lack of culturally competent care:** Providers may not understand or respect cultural backgrounds, resulting in mismatched support.
- **Diagnostic bias:** Tools and criteria are based on white, Western norms, making neurodivergence harder to recognize in non-white individuals.

Neurodivergent behaviors in BIPOC individuals are more often judged unfairly***. Traits such as impulsivity or emotional outbursts are more likely to be misinterpreted as “bad behavior” when expressed by BIPOC individuals compared to their white peers. Due to racial bias, they are more often punished or excluded rather

than understood and supported. For example, a teacher might mistake a neurodivergent student’s sensory distress for aggression or refusal to cooperate, instead of recognizing it as a need for support and accommodation.

Neurodivergence & Queer Identities

There is a higher rate of neurodivergence — especially autism and ADHD — among people who identify as LGBTQ+**. The reasons for this are still being explored, but many studies and community reports confirm the connection.

Queer and neurodivergent people often share a deep sense of being “different” from a young age. They may struggle to meet social expectations, feel out of place, or hide parts of themselves to be accepted. For queer individuals, this might mean suppressing their gender or sexual identity. For neurodivergent individuals, it could involve masking traits like sensory sensitivities or direct communication styles. When someone is both queer and neurodivergent, the pressure to hide who they are can be stronger.

For many, discovering one identity helps make sense of the other. Both queerness and neurodivergence involve questioning norms, embracing difference, and finding new ways to understand yourself. One can support the other in building self-awareness and acceptance.

* *Neurodiverse Futures*. (2025, August 21). *Why BIPOC neurodivergent people are still being ignored, misdiagnosed, or punished*. <http://neurodiversefutures.org/why-bipoc-neurodivergent-people-are-still-being-ignored-misdiagnosed-or-punished/>

** Warrier, V., Greenberg, D. M., Weir, E., Buckingham, C., Smith, P., Lai, M.-C., Allison, C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2020). Elevated rates of autism, other neurodevelopmental and psychiatric diagnoses, and autistic traits in transgender and gender-diverse individuals. *Nature Communications*, 11, Article 3959. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-17794-1>

Neurodivergence & Co-Occurring Conditions

Neurodivergent people are more likely to experience additional physical, sensory and mental health challenges****.

Common co-occurring conditions include:

- **Mental health challenges:** Such as anxiety, depression and mood regulation difficulties.
- **Physical health challenges:** Such as chronic pain, fatigue, gastrointestinal issues and migraines.
- **Sleep-related issues:** Like insomnia or irregular sleep patterns.
- **Learning differences:** Including dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and language processing challenges.
- **Sensory processing differences:** Such as heightened sensitivity to sound, light, touch or pain.

This is likely due to several interconnected factors:

- **Brain-body connection:** Neurodivergence affects how the brain processes signals from the body, which can influence sensory

experiences, sleep, digestion and energy levels.

- **Shared biology:** Some traits may have overlapping genetic or neurological roots.
- **Chronic stress:** The ongoing pressure to fit into neurotypical environments can lead to burnout, fatigue and stress-related physical symptoms like digestive issues.

Recognizing intersectionality is essential because:

- Overlapping conditions can make daily life more complex.
- Individuals often need support across multiple areas, but systems are rarely designed to meet those layered needs.
- When symptoms are viewed separately instead of as part of a bigger picture, misdiagnosis or missed diagnosis becomes more likely, leaving people without the support they actually need.

*** Neff, M. A. (2022, January 26). Is it ADHD or ODD? How racial bias impacts diagnosis. *Neurodivergent Insights*. https://neurodivergentinsights.com/adhd-odd-and-racial-bias/verse_individuals. *Nature Communications*, 11, Article 3959. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-17794-1>

**** Donaghy, B., Moore, D., & Green, J. (2023). Co-occurring physical health challenges in neurodivergent children and young people: A topical review and recommendation. *Child Care in Practice*, 29(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2022.2149471>



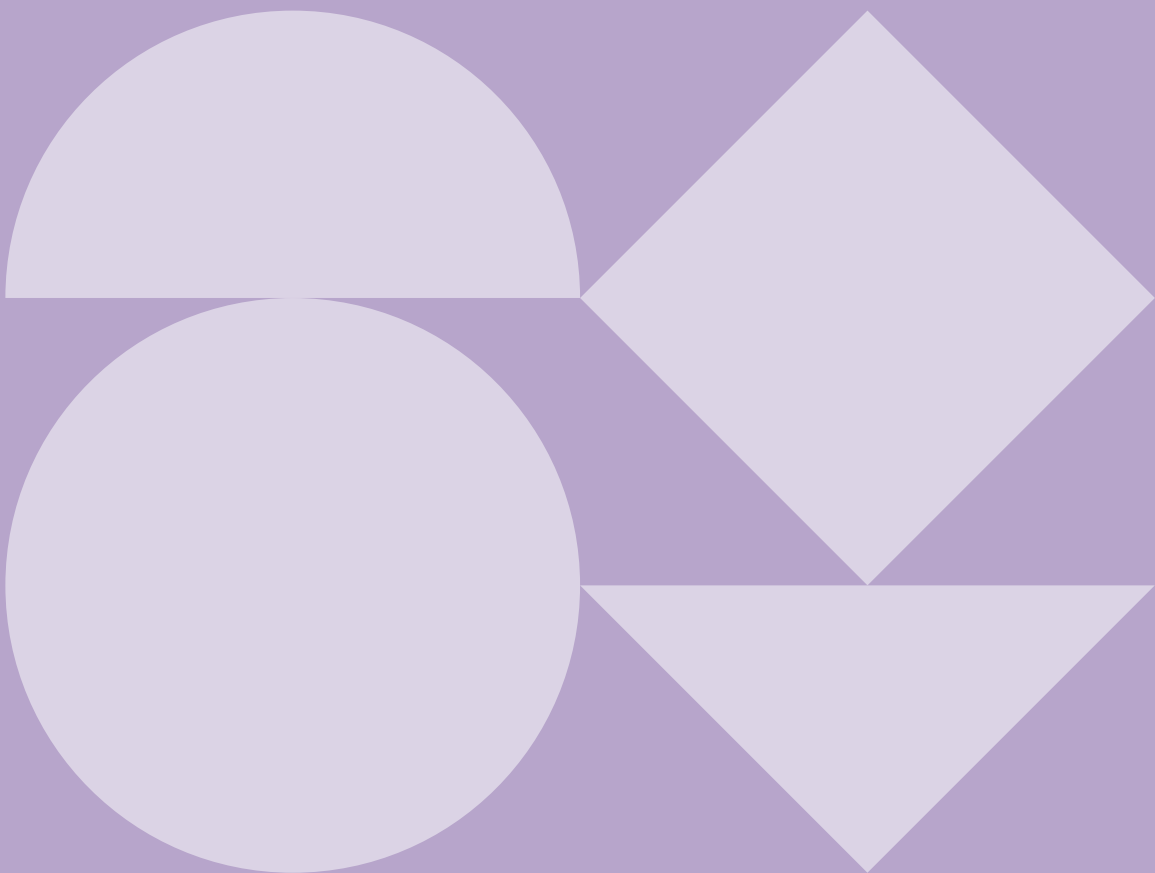
Why Words Matter

The way we talk about neurodivergence really matters. Language doesn't just show what we think — it also shapes how we think. Affirming and respectful language fosters understanding and inclusion, while pathologizing or dismissive terms reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to marginalization.

This doesn't just affect how others see neurodivergent people - it also affects how they see themselves. Positive language can help build confidence, pride and a sense of belonging. In contrast, negative words may lead to shame, self-doubt and internalized stigma. **The words we use can have a big impact.**

3.1. Misrepresentation in everyday language

The representation of neurodivergent individuals — whether in media, workplace conversations or everyday interactions — has often been problematic. These portrayals can reinforce stigma, fuel misunderstanding, and cause real harm.



Pathologizing and medicalized framing

Pathologizing means treating natural differences as medical problems that need fixing. In the context of neurodivergence, this often happens when everyday traits are seen as symptoms of a disorder.

For example:

- “You’re always so distracted — maybe you should get tested.” This frames a common ADHD trait — shifting focus quickly — as a problem, rather than recognizing how the person works best.
- “They don’t talk much at lunch. I wonder what’s wrong with them.” Here, being quiet or socially different is treated like a sign of illness, instead of a different comfort level or communication style.

This way of thinking stems from the medical model of disability, which focuses on diagnosing and correcting the individual, rather than changing the environment or accepting different ways of being.

It can be difficult to recognize pathologizing language, because it’s so deeply embedded in how neurodivergence is discussed — especially in diagnostic tools, academic articles and media. This framing often spills over into everyday

conversations, subtly shaping how we perceive neurodivergent people and traits.

One way to challenge this bias is through a simple thought exercise: flip the language and describe neurotypical traits using the same clinical tone often applied to neurodivergence.

For example, neurotypicality could be described as:

- Obsession with eye contact.
- Deficits in direct communication.
- Difficulty noticing patterns.
- Poor attention to detail.
- Lack of daily consistent routine.
- Lack of intense interests, devotions and talents.

Reversing the language like this makes it easier to see how our words influence the way we understand neurodivergence.

Stereotyping and Simplification

Stereotyping often grows out of pathologizing. When neurodivergent traits are viewed primarily through a medical lens, people begin to simplify and generalize, reducing individuals to a checklist of symptoms.

For example:

- Autistic people are often stereotyped as lacking empathy, or as either geniuses or completely nonverbal.
- ADHD is frequently reduced to being “hyper all the time” or “unable to focus.”

These stereotypes erase the diversity and complexity of neurodivergent experiences. They create unrealistic expectations, fuel stigma, and make it harder for individuals to be understood and accepted.

And they’re not just inaccurate — they’re limiting. Neurodivergent individuals who don’t fit these narrow ideas are often dismissed or not taken seriously. This can have real consequences, such as delayed or denied diagnoses and barriers to receiving necessary accommodations.

Comments like “You don’t look autistic” or “But you seem so normal” may sound harmless, but they are deeply invalidating. They imply that neuro-

divergence must be visible or stereotypical to be real and that appearing neurotypical is somehow preferable.

Harmful Narratives

Neurodivergent individuals are often portrayed through stories that reflect ableist assumptions, where their worth is measured by how well they perform, conform or make others feel. These portrayals may seem positive or sympathetic on the surface, but they reinforce exclusion and misunderstanding.

- **Inspiration Porn:** This narrative frames neurodivergent people as inspirational simply for existing or doing everyday things. It focuses less on their lived experience and more on making neurotypical audiences feel moved or hopeful.

Example: An autistic person works in customer service. Someone says, “It’s amazing that someone with autism can work in such a social job. So inspiring!” This centers neurotypical surprise and emotional reaction, rather than the person’s actual skills, experience or professional competence.

- **Overcoming Disability:** These stories treat neurodivergence as something to be conquered or defeated, rather than accepted as a valid and natural way of being. They imply that success is surprising or exceptional for neurodivergent people.

Example: A person with ADHD gives a talk at a conference: “Even with ADHD, he managed to prepare and deliver a great talk. He really pushed through.” This suggests that ADHD inherently makes success unlikely, and that achievement is exceptional.

- **Instrumental Inclusion:** This narrative includes neurodivergent people only when their presence serves a purpose for others, such as improving a company’s image, meeting diversity metrics or benefiting from perceived “special talents.”

Examples: Hiring autistic people solely for their attention to detail or pattern recognition, while ignoring their need for support and career development, treats them as resources rather than whole individuals. Similarly, sharing a neurodivergent employee’s personal story in a company newsletter to inspire others, without addressing the structural changes needed to support them, serves the company’s image more than it serves them or the wider neurodivergent community.

- **The Tragic Burden Narrative:** Unlike the others, this narrative doesn’t aim to inspire, it evokes pity. It portrays neurodivergent people, especially children, as burdens on families, schools or society. It focuses on the struggles of caregivers and institutions, often sidelining the neurodivergent person’s own voice.

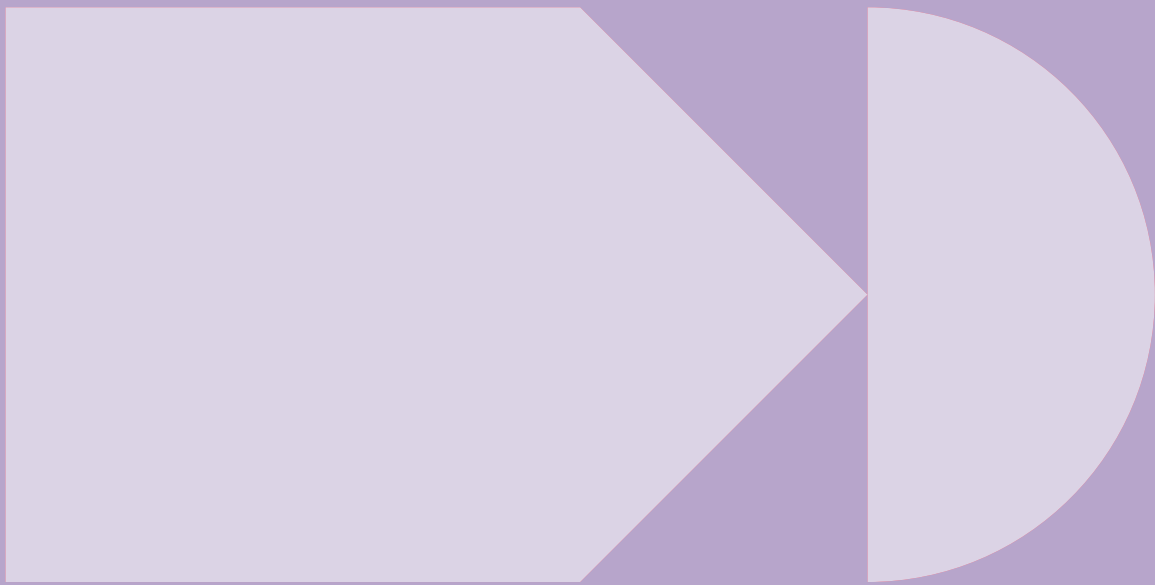
Examples: Stories may highlight how hard it is to raise a child with autism or how a classroom struggles to accommodate a student with ADHD.

While caregiver emotions are valid and deserve support, the Tragic Burden Narrative can be deeply harmful. It often erases the neurodivergent person’s perspective, turning them into a background figure in someone else’s story. When internalized from a young age, it can damage self-worth and shape how neurodivergent individuals see themselves. Stories should support caregivers and respect neurodivergent people, without framing their needs as conflicting.

All these narratives send harmful messages, such as:

- You must be exceptional to be accepted.
- You must conform to be respected.
- You must inspire others to be included.
- You are a burden unless you prove otherwise.

To build truly inclusive environments, we must move beyond these limiting stories. Neurodivergent people deserve to be valued for who they are, not for how well they fit into neurotypical expectations or how much they impact others emotionally.



3.2. Microaggressions and misuse of diagnostic labels

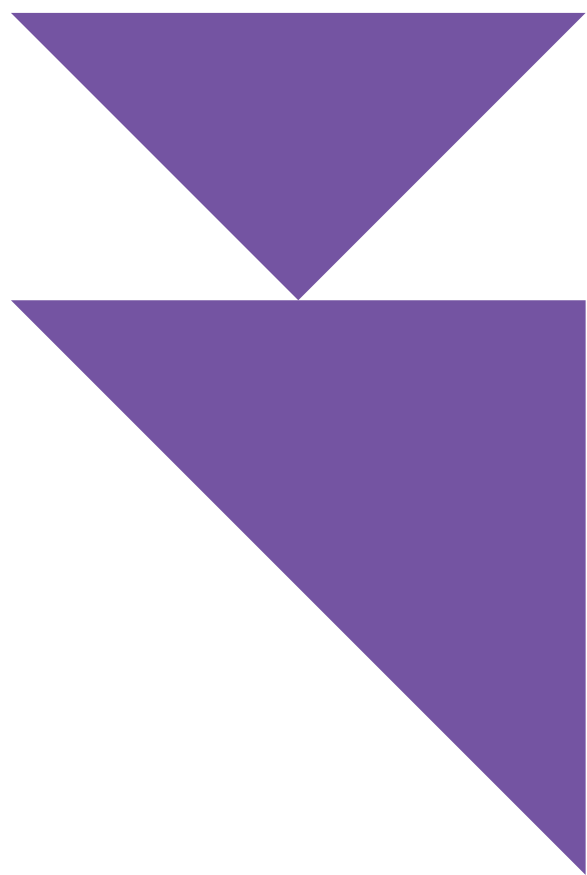
In everyday conversation, we hear phrases like “I’m so OCD” when someone likes things neat, or “Isn’t everyone a bit ADHD?” when talking about forgetfulness. **These comments may seem lighthearted or relatable, but they reflect a deeper issue: the casual misuse of diagnostic labels and the subtle reinforcement of stereotypes about neurodivergent people.**

Some examples:

- Saying “I’m so OCD” reduces obsessive-compulsive disorder to a personality quirk, ignoring the distressing and disruptive nature of compulsions and intrusive thoughts.
- Calling someone “autistic” when they’re being “difficult” turns a neurotype into an insult, reinforcing the harmful stereotype that autistic people are inflexible, rude or hard to work with.
- Comments like “Isn’t everyone a bit ADHD” frame ADHD as something everyone experiences, minimizing its challenges and the need for support.
- Saying “Aren’t we all on the spectrum somewhere?” flattens the diversity of autistic experiences and implies autism is just a personality trait.
- Saying “Everyone is getting diagnosed with ADHD these days” frames it as a trend, undermining the legitimacy of diagnoses and discouraging people from seeking help.
- Saying “You don’t look autistic” or “But you seem so normal” suggest that neurodivergence must be visible or stereotypical to be real, which contributes to misunderstanding and stigma.

These remarks are often described as microaggressions — subtle, everyday expressions of bias that, even when unintentional, contribute to stigma and exclusion. They also reflect ableist language, which assumes neurotypical ways of thinking and behaving are the norm, and treats neurodivergence as either a flaw or a joke.

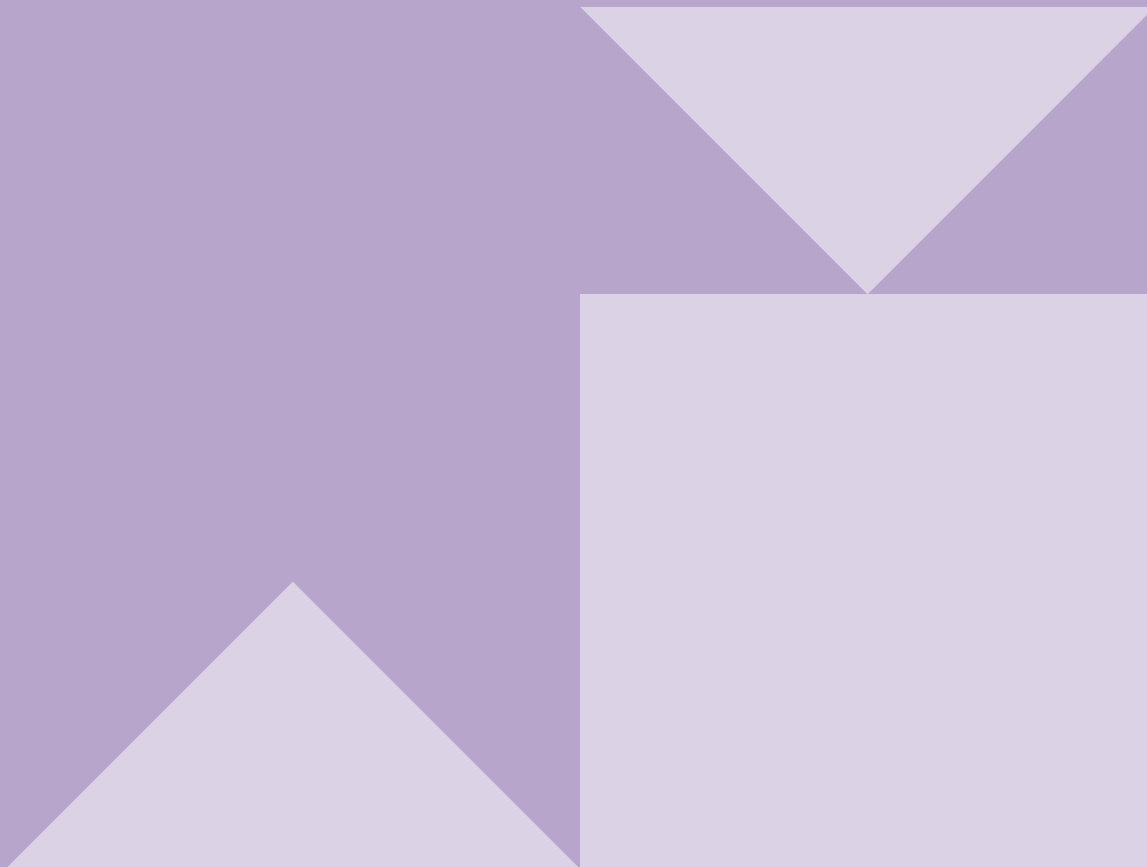
Being mindful of how we speak isn’t about being overly cautious — it’s about respect. Language shapes how people are seen, and treated, and how they see themselves. When we use it with care, we help create a world where neurodivergent people are understood, included, and valued for who they are.

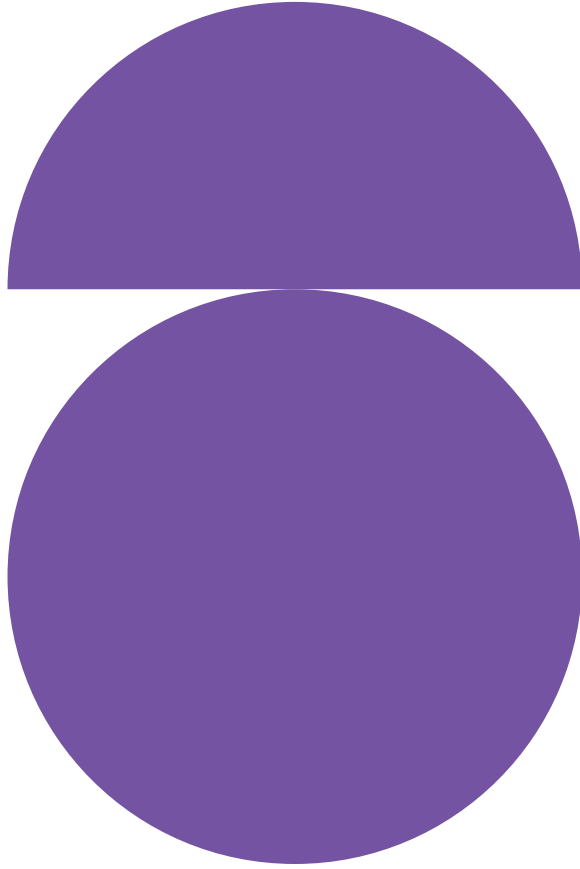


3.3. Challenging the language

Language shapes how neurodivergent people are understood — and misunderstood. Many commonly used terms continue to reflect a pathologizing perspective. Terms like “suffers from,” “disordered,” “deficient,” “impaired,” or “affected by” frame neurodivergence as inherently negative.

This kind of language is increasingly being challenged - both within neurodivergent communities and by allies who recognize its impact. The following sections explore two examples of how pathologizing language is being questioned and redefined.





The 'disorder' debate

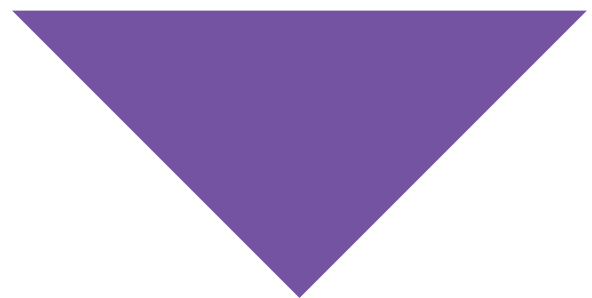
The term “disorder” — as used in labels like autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — is the subject of ongoing debate.

Some support the term for its medical and legal benefits, noting that it helps secure access to healthcare, accommodations, and protections. Others feel that acknowledging these conditions as disorders validates the real challenges neurodivergent individuals often face.

However, many argue that the term can be stigmatizing. It frames neurodivergence as something inherently wrong or broken - something to be “fixed” rather than understood and embraced. This pathologizing language can negatively impact mental well-being by reinforcing feelings of shame or inferiority.

As alternatives, some advocate for terms like condition (more neutral yet still medically recognized) or neurotype, difference or variation, which emphasize diversity rather than deficit.

Ultimately, this debate is about more than terminology, it's about identity, access, and inclusion. As the conversation evolves, it's essential to center the voices of neurodivergent individuals. Their lived experiences should guide how these terms are used, understood, and adapted — because they are the ones most directly affected.



“Imagine a bunch of apples met an orange, but instead of just saying it's an orange, they call it Apple Deficiency Syndrome Fruit.”

Wendy Graves
Canadian neurodiversity advocate

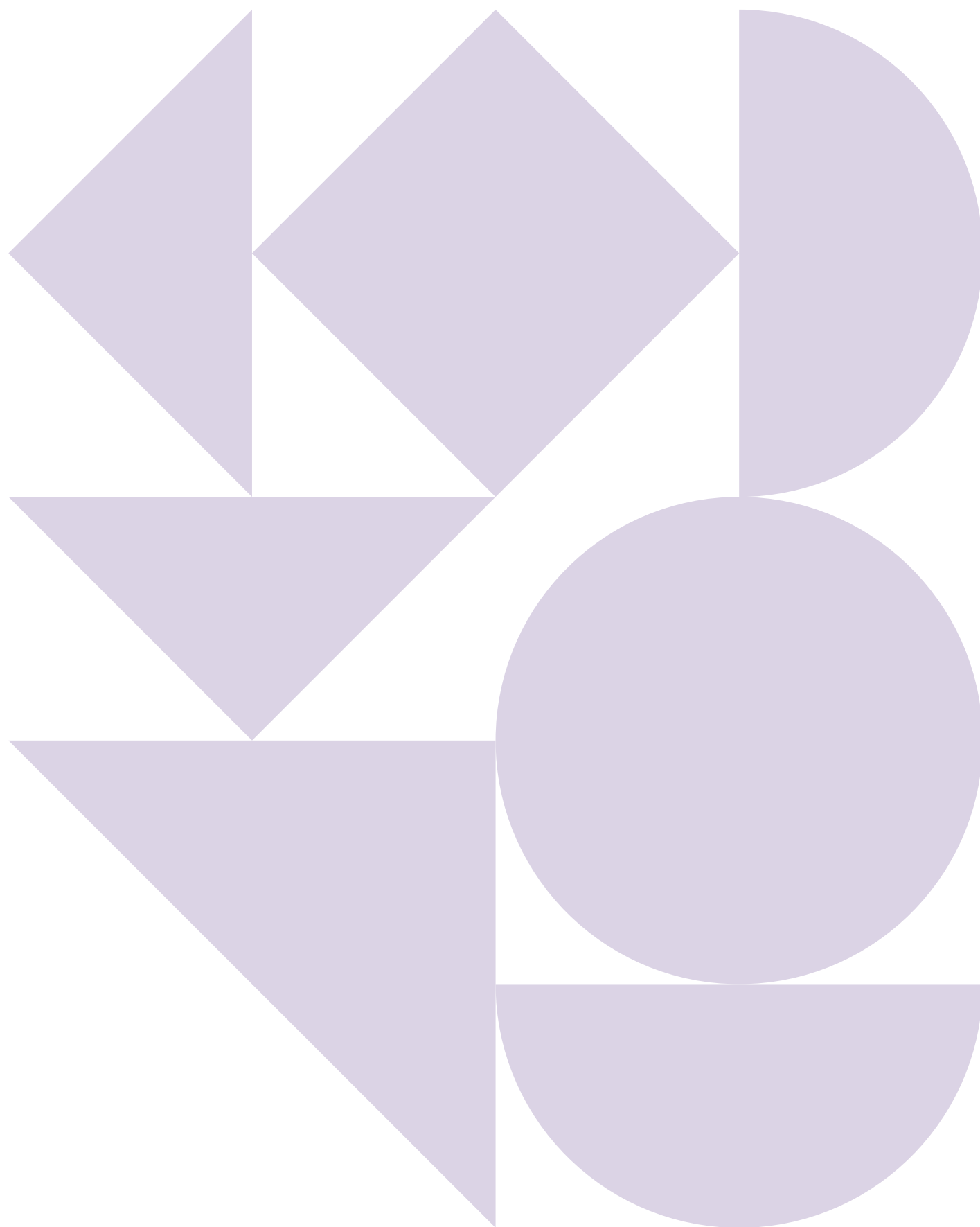
Why we're moving away from "High-Functioning" and "Low-Functioning"

Terms like high-functioning and low-functioning were once used to describe how well a neurodivergent person appeared to manage daily life. But these terms are often misleading and harmful.

- They prioritize neurotypical norms: these labels judge people by how well they conform to neurotypical expectations, rather than valuing neurodivergent ways of thinking, communicating, and being.
- They mask real challenges: those labeled high-functioning may hide struggles like sensory overload or burnout, leading to overlooked support needs.
- They reduce people to deficits: low-functioning ignores strengths, preferences, and potential, dehumanizing the individual.

Instead, many now use high, low or variable support needs to describe the kind of help someone requires, rather than how well they appear to cope.

But even these labels can feel limiting, as they suggest fixed levels of need. In reality, support needs vary with context, stress, and time. That's why many prefer more specific descriptions, like "needs support with transitions," "benefits from visual reminders," or "needs extra time to process verbal instructions", which better reflect actual needs without oversimplifying.



3.4. Reclaiming the narrative: community-based language

Neurodivergent communities are increasingly reclaiming the right to define their own experiences, needs and identities. **Central to this movement is community language — terms and expressions shaped by lived experience rather than imposed from outside.**

Having a shared language helps neurodivergent people talk about their experiences in ways that feel true to them. Throughout this guide, we've already seen many examples of community-based terms like stimming, (un)masking, info-dumping, hyperfocus, neurodivergent burnout, sensory overload, and spoon theory. **These words were created or reclaimed by the community to describe things that are often missed or misunderstood in medical or mainstream conversations.**



More examples of community-based terms

- **Special interest:** A deep, focused passion for a specific topic. Often brings joy, comfort, and a sense of mastery.
- **Monotropic thinking:** A tendency to focus deeply on one thing at a time, making it hard to switch attention.
- **Parallel play:** Socializing by doing separate activities side-by-side without direct interaction. A low-pressure way to connect.
- **Shutdown:** A response to overwhelm where a person becomes quiet, withdrawn, or unable to function. Often invisible to others.
- **Meltdown:** An intense reaction to stress or sensory overload, involving crying, yelling, or physical movement. It's a loss of control due to overwhelm.
- **Time blindness:** Difficulty sensing the passage of time or estimating how long tasks will take.
- **Task paralysis:** Feeling mentally stuck and unable to start a task.
- **Body-doubling:** Working alongside another person (in person or virtually) to stay focused and motivated. Their presence helps reduce distractions.
- **Sensory seeking:** Actively seeking intense sensory input to feel regulated or stimulated.
- **Social hangover:** Describes the deep fatigue, foggiess or shutdown-like state after extended social interaction.

How this language helps

- **Understanding yourself:** It gives people clear words for what they're feeling.
- **Talking to others:** It helps people share their needs and set boundaries.
- **Finding community:** Shared language helps people connect and feel like they belong.
- **Protecting against stigma:** Negative language can shape how people see themselves and create shame, especially when learned early. Using respectful language helps counter these messages.
- **Reclaiming narratives:** It lets people define themselves in their own words. Even though not every term fits everyone, shared language builds authenticity, self-worth, and belonging.

Person-first vs Identity-first language

When talking about neurodivergent identities, people use different language depending on how they relate to their neurodivergence. There are 2 common styles.

- **Person-first language** puts the person before the diagnosis: “I have dyslexia” or “a person with ADHD”.

- **Identity-first language** puts the identity front and center: “I’m dyslexic” or “an autistic person”.

Person-first language emerged from the disability rights movement in the United States during the 1970s and quickly became common in clinical, educational, and legislative setting. The goal was to emphasize that a person is not defined solely by their diagnosis. Saying “a person with ADHD” suggests that neurodivergence is something external or additional to the person.

Identity-first language has grown out of neurodivergent communities — most notably the autistic community — who see their traits as a fundamental part of who they are. Saying “I’m autistic” instead of “I have autism” reflects the view that neurodivergence isn’t something separate, but rather an essential aspect of their identity.

The language someone chooses to use is deeply personal. Different individuals and communities may prefer one style over the other. Respecting each person’s choice is essential. If you’re unsure how someone prefers to be described, it’s okay to ask.

When speaking about a group, it’s a good idea to alternate between person-first and identity-first language. This shows respect for the diversity of experiences and acknowledges that preferences can vary.

The importance of authentic representation

Authentic representation is about portraying neurodivergent individuals accurately, respectfully and with nuance — in media, education, workplaces, and public conversations. It goes beyond inclusion: it ensures that neurodivergent people are actively shaping the stories told about them, influencing decisions that affect their lives, and being heard in their own words.

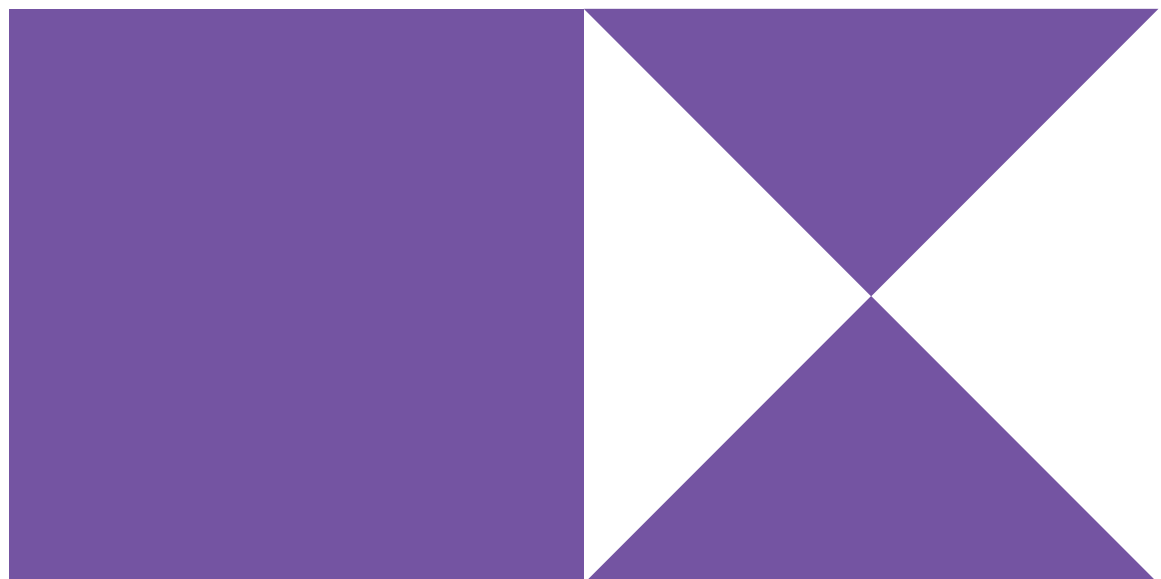
Rather than being spoken about, neurodivergent people should be spoken with — and ideally, be the ones doing the speaking. This kind of representation reflects lived experience, not just clinical labels or stereotypes. It shows the full humanity and diversity of neurodivergent lives.

Key elements of authentic representation include:

- Centering neurodivergent voices, especially in storytelling, policy and decision-making.
- Showing the full picture, not just struggles or special talents.
- Using positive, respectful language that matches how people want to be described

Pitfalls to avoid:

- Tokenism: Including neurodivergent people just to look inclusive, without giving them a real say.
- Burden of education: Expecting neurodivergent people to always explain their experiences, often without support.



Authentic Representation of Neurodivergent People in Research

To truly represent neurodivergent individuals in research, we need to challenge traditional deficit-based models that pathologize differences. Recognizing neurodivergent knowledge as essential to the research process is a crucial step toward more inclusive and respectful science.

Inclusion should go beyond simply involving neurodivergent people as participants. They should be actively involved as co-researchers, collaborators, and decision-makers. Their lived experience offer insights that can shape research questions, guide interpretation, and ensure that outcomes are relevant and respectful.

A strong example of this kind of involvement is LAVA* (Lees- en Adviesgroep Volwassenen met Autisme or Reading and Advisory Group of Autistic Adults), a Flemish group of autistic adults who help shape autism research, media, and policy. Consulting LAVA ensures autistic perspectives are truly integrated, not just acknowledged.

Researchers also have a responsibility to reflect on their own biases and the power structures within academic environments. This means asking critical questions such as: Whose voices are prioritized? What knowledge is considered valid? What assumptions shape our methods?

Authentic representation requires a shift — from researching neurodivergent people to working with them.



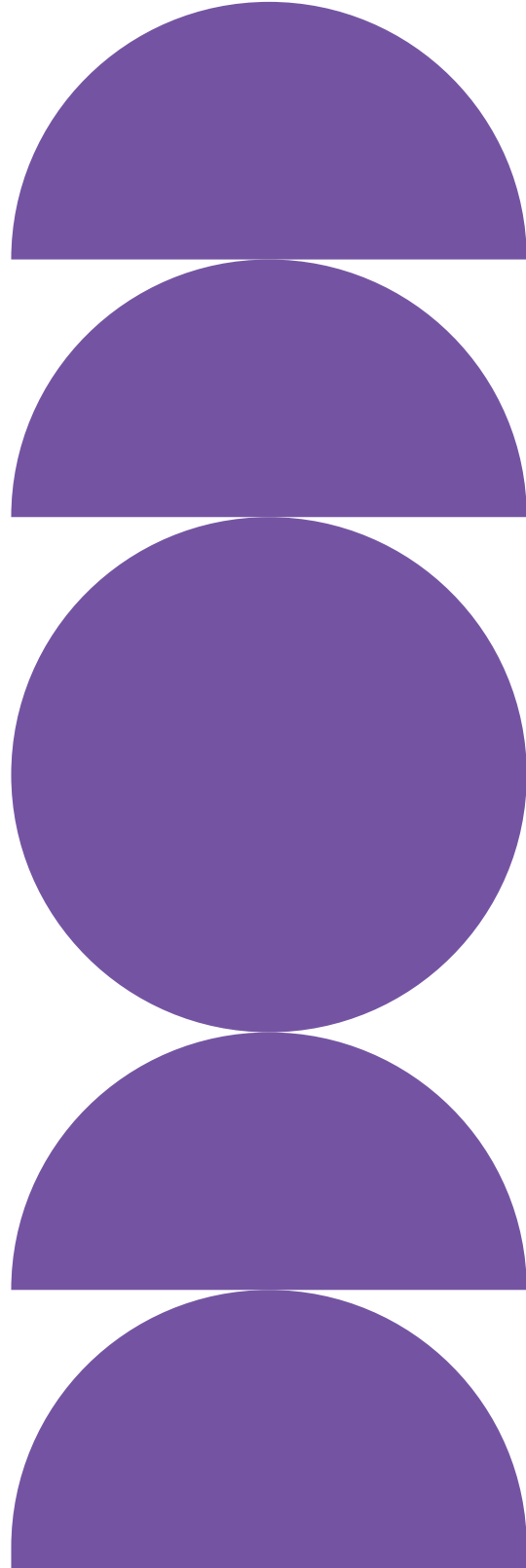
Finding belonging through neurodivergent community

Finding a community of people with similar neurodivergent experiences — whether through diagnosis or self-identification — can be deeply healing. It helps individuals feel seen, understood, and less alone.

In these spaces, people often experience emotional safety. They don't have to explain or hide their differences, which allows for greater authenticity and self-acceptance. Community also provides the language to describe experiences — terms like masking, sensory overload, energy spoons — which can be powerful tools for self-understanding and communication.

Beyond emotional support, neurodivergent communities share practical advice and coping strategies that are often more relevant than what professionals offer. They also foster empowerment, encouraging individuals to advocate for themselves and challenge the norms and systems that have historically misunderstood or excluded them.

In short, community helps neurodivergent people move from surviving to thriving. It provides more than support. Community offers strength through connection, shared understanding, and the freedom to be authentic.

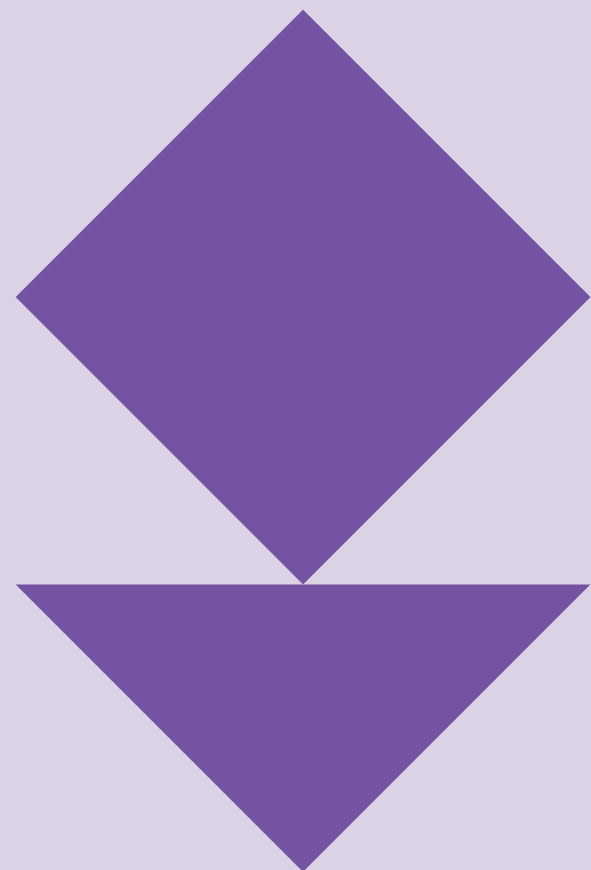


Lived Experiences: Finding belonging through neurodivergent community

“Finding belonging through my neurodivergent community has been one of the biggest joys of my adult life. By recognizing oneself as neurodivergent, it enables people to find other people with life experiences similar to them. The community has developed a rich vocabulary, culture, and ways of interacting over the years that foster a great deal of support and empowerment for neurodivergent individuals. For instance, words like “spoons” allow neurodivergent people to communicate their capacity, accessibility needs, and expectations with clarity and confidence. Akin to the LGBTQ+ community, which I’m also a part of, belonging to the neurodivergent community can encourage a sense of pride in one’s identity and get rid of the societal shame placed upon bodyminds who fall outside of the normal distribution curve of human experience.”

“As I learned more about neurodivergence, I realized that I had always been drawn to people who shared similar ways of thinking, sensing and communicating. Many were already part of my life - friends, colleagues, people I felt most at ease with. Without realizing it, I had been

building a neurodivergent community all along. With them, I don’t have to hold back or translate my thoughts, they get it. I feel more like myself. I can unmask. There’s a kind of mutual recognition that feels safe and affirming. My community brings me so much joy. Being surrounded by people who understand and reflect your reality without questioning it makes such a difference. They help me grow, heal and feel less alone.”



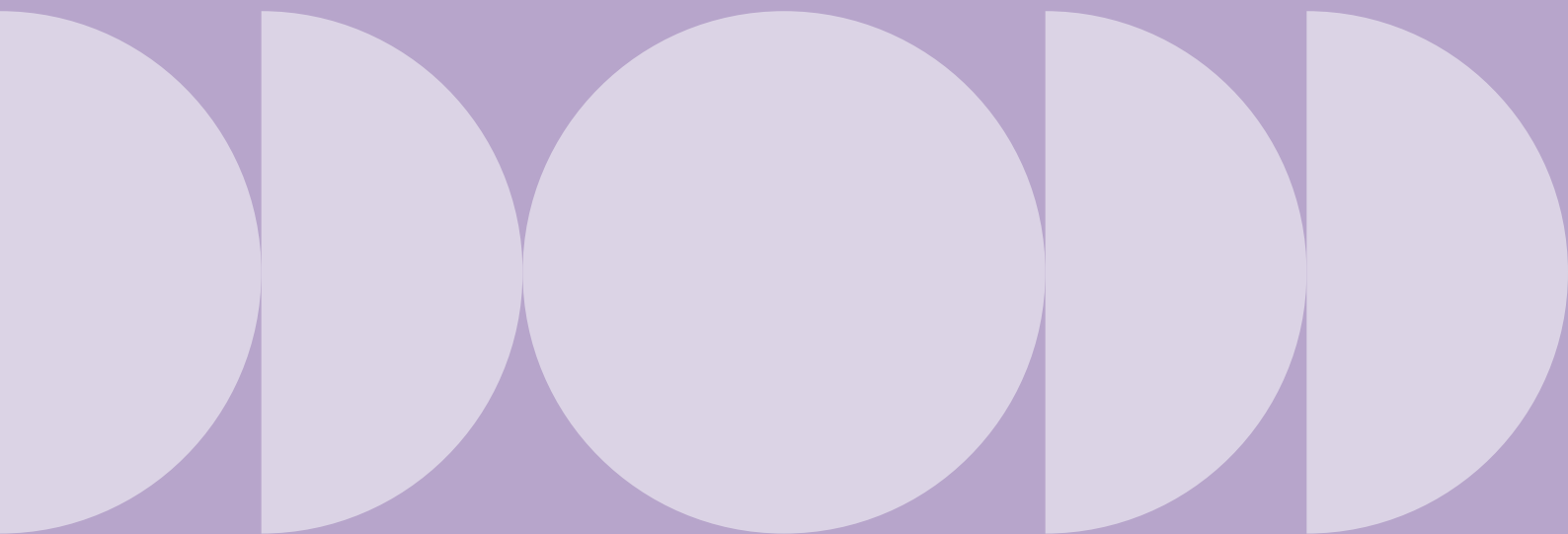


Neurodiversity at Work

Workplaces are made up of people, each with their own unique ways of thinking, communicating and contributing. In this chapter, we explore the concept of spiky profiles and how they shape individual experiences at work. We examine how teams can intentionally collaborate by recognizing and complementing each other's strengths and challenges. We look at what makes a neurodiverse team thrive, from psychological safety and open communication to practical support through accommodations. Finally, we consider the decision to disclose neurodivergence at work.

4.1. Spiky profiles

Every person has a unique cognitive profile, a pattern of strengths and challenges shaped by their brain, experiences and environment. For neurotypical individuals, these abilities often develop in a relatively balanced way across different domains. **For neurodivergent individuals, the profile is often more "spiky". A spiky profile means someone has strong skills in some areas and real difficulties in others.**



Some examples of spiky profiles

Here are some hypothetical examples of spiky profiles to show how strengths and challenges can coexist in neurodivergent individuals:

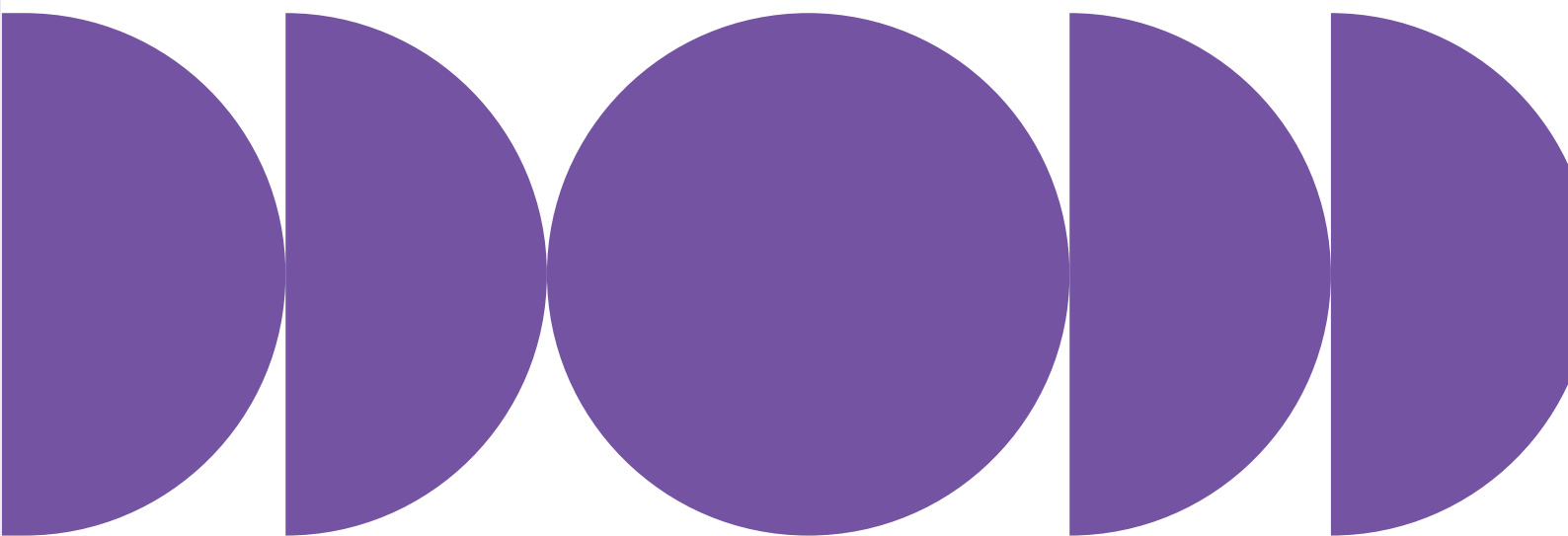
Example 'The Detail Specialist'

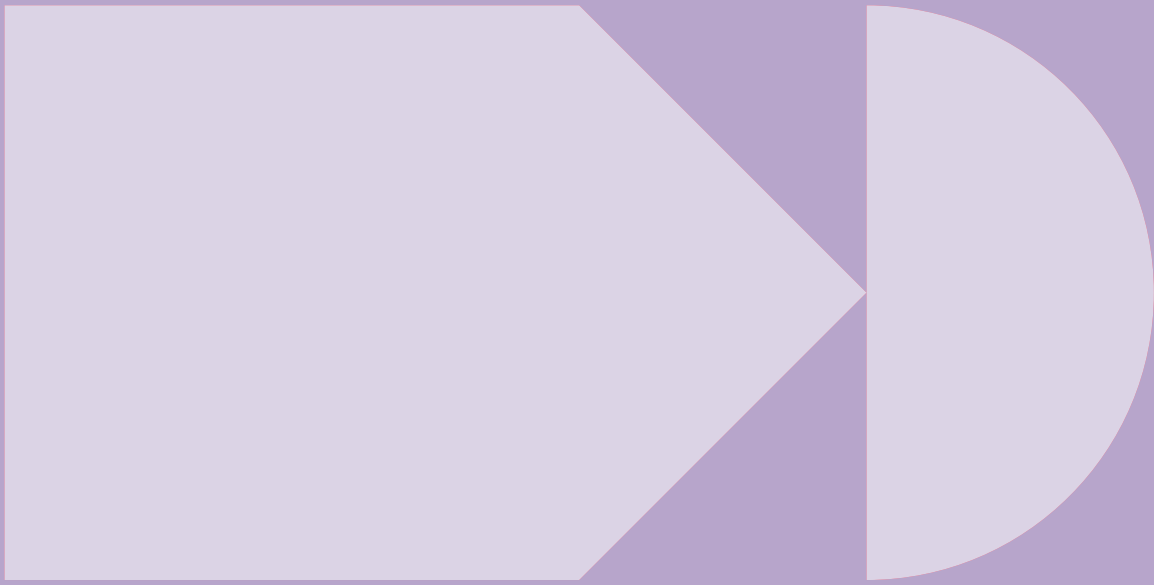
- **Strengths:** Attention to detail, precision and memory for facts or procedures.
- **Challenges:** Easily overwhelmed by sensory input, struggles with changes in routine
- **Workplace impact:** Good in accuracy-focused roles (e.g. auditing, proofreading), needs quiet and predictable environments

Example 'The Creative Sprinter'

- **Strengths:** Creativity, rapid idea generation, adaptability.
- **Challenges:** Difficulty with sustained attention, routine, long-term planning.
- **Workplace impact:** Excels in fast-paced or crisis situations, need flexible scheduling or task variation.

Cognitive profiles are not fixed. Strengths and challenges can shift over time, influenced by life experiences, learning strategies and support systems. Recognizing spiky profiles helps us move away from one-size-fits-all expectations and toward a more inclusive understanding of human potential.





4.2. Towards a workplace where everyone thrives

Understanding individual cognitive profiles, especially spiky profiles, is the first step toward building a truly inclusive workplace. Each person brings a unique combination of strengths, perspectives and challenges to the work-floor.

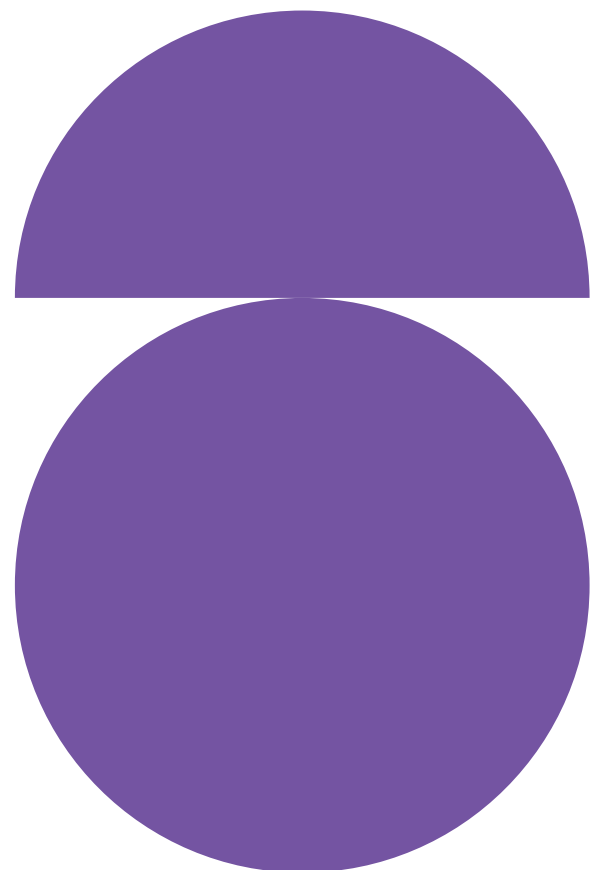
How to shape inclusive environments

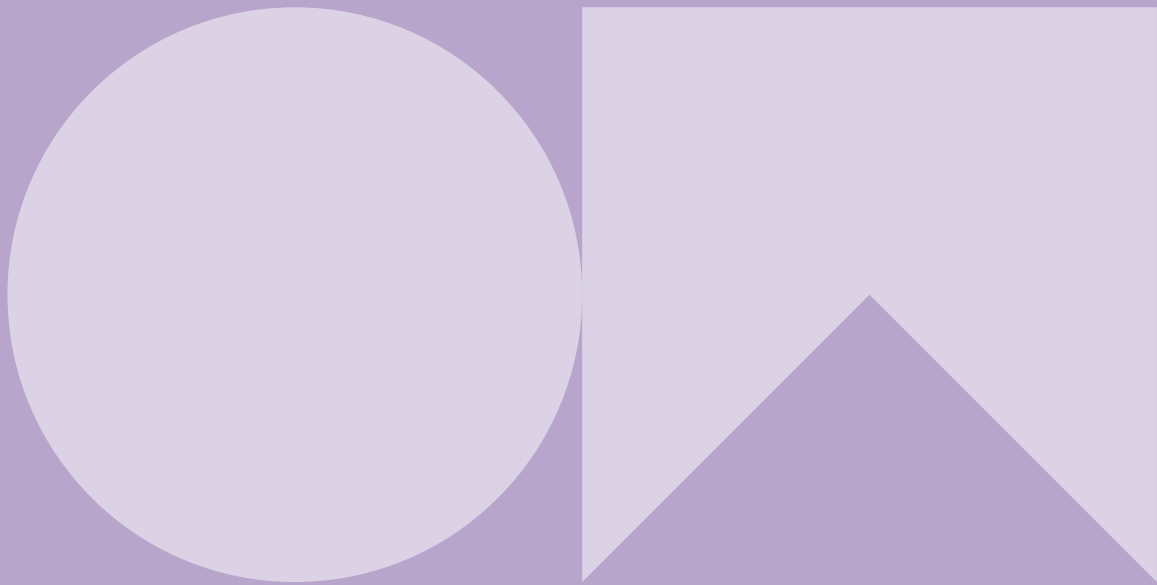
When we take the time to understand individual differences, we begin to see how people can support and complement one another. By shaping environments where individuals can contribute in ways that align with how they naturally function, we create workplaces where everyone has the chance to feel good and truly thrive.

To do this, we focus on:

- **Identifying individual strengths:**
What energizes each person?
What do they do well? Where do they naturally shine?
- **Understanding individual needs:**
What support does each person require? What helps them feel safe, understood and empowered?
- **Working together intentionally:**
How can we shape roles, workflows, and communication to allow people to support and complement each other?

By understanding and supporting each other's cognitive profiles, we create a workplace where people feel seen, valued and empowered. Not just to do their best work, but to be their best selves.





4.3. Psychological safety and open communication

To make a team truly thrive, it's not enough to recognize each person's strengths and needs, we also need to create an environment where people feel safe to show up as themselves. That's where psychological safety comes in. Psychological safety means feeling safe to be yourself at work, sharing ideas, asking questions, admitting mistakes, or giving feedback, without fear of being judged, blamed or punished.

This doesn't mean avoiding conflict or criticism. It means making sure people feel respected and supported, even when they disagree or make mistakes. **In neurodiverse teams, open communication is especially important. Team members may have different sensory needs, ways of processing information or communication styles. Open communication helps bridge these differences.**

In a psychologically safe team:

- **Communication is open and direct:** People share concerns and feedback, even when it's uncomfortable.
- **Mistakes are part of learning:** Teams focus on what can be learned, not who's at fault.
- **Every voice matters:** Input is welcomed from everyone, regardless of role or background
- **Leaders model vulnerability:** They admit what they don't know, share their own mistakes, and ask others for input.
- **Feedback is constructive:** It's focused on growth, not criticism.
- **Risk-taking is supported:** Trying new ideas and challenging assumptions is encouraged.
- **Inclusion is intentional:** Differences in thinking, identity, and working styles are valued, and people feel accepted for who they are.
- **Support is mutual:** Team members back each other up, especially in uncertain moments.

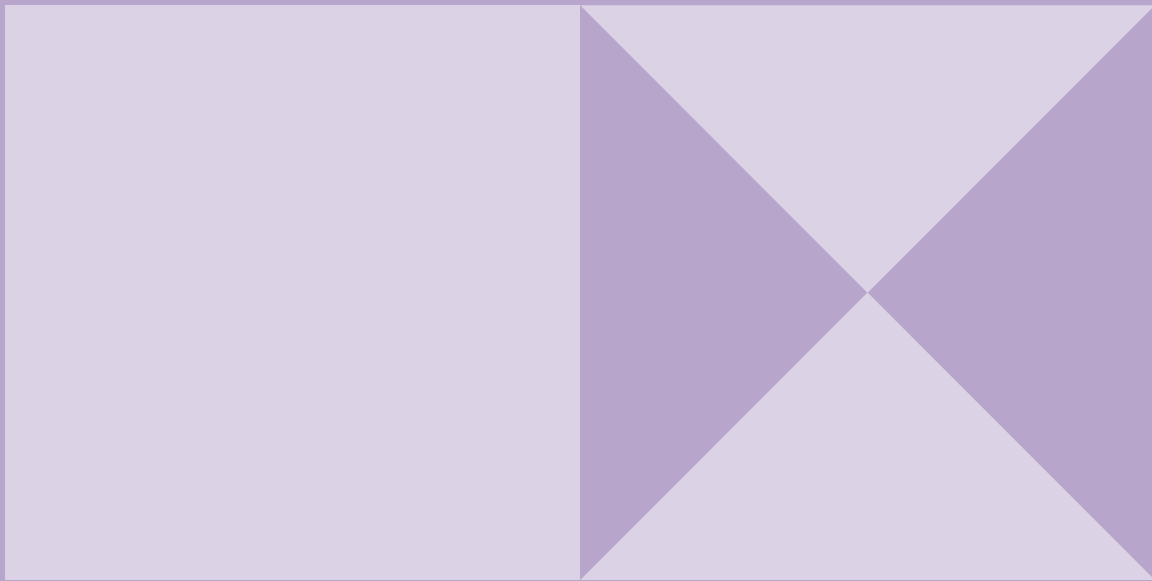
Key practices for open communication:

- **Clarity:** Straightforward language supports different processing styles.

- **Flexibility:** Offer multiple ways to contribute (spoken, written, visual, asynchronous, etc.).
- **Respect Differences:** Communication preferences may vary. Honor them.
- **Structure:** Set clear norms around meetings, collaboration, and feedback to reduce ambiguity.
- **Stay Curious:** Don't assume. Instead of guessing, ask: "What works best for you?"

Team leaders play a key role in creating psychological safety. They set the tone for how safe people feel to speak up, take risks and be themselves. Their behavior - how they respond to mistakes, give feedback, and invite input — directly shapes the team's culture. A leader who models openness, admits their own mistakes, and listens with empathy shows that it's safe to be honest and vulnerable. They also create structure by setting clear expectations, encouraging respectful communication, and making sure every voice is heard. Without this leadership, psychological safety rarely takes root. With it, teams can thrive.

Building psychological safety takes intention. It starts with the leader, but it continues with the team. When everyone contributes to a culture of trust and respect, psychological safety becomes part of how the team works and grows.



4.4. The neurodiverse team

Neurodiverse teams bring together neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals. When collaboration is intentional — understanding and appreciating each other's strengths, needs and cognitive styles - teams become more inclusive and thoughtful. In these environments, everyone has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

The unique strengths that neurodivergent individuals may bring to a team — such as creativity, pattern recognition, divergent thinking, the ability to manage complexity, detailed analysis, intrinsic motivation, energy, hyperfocus, autonomy, authenticity and deep empathy — can further enhance team dynamics. While these traits exist across all neurotypes, neurodivergent people often experience them in more intense, distinctive or specialized ways.

That said, it's essential to avoid the trap of instrumental inclusion — valuing neurodivergent individuals only when they bring exceptional skills. True inclusion means recognizing and supporting people as they are, whether their contributions are bold, quiet, complex or average.

In a neurodiverse team, it's also important to acknowledge the challenges neurodivergent individuals may face. These challenges are real, they're not about effort or attitude, and they can't be overcome simply by trying harder. Often, they stem from environments that aren't designed with cognitive diversity in mind. As the saying goes: "If a fish is judged by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid." Inclusion means rethinking the environment, not the individual.

A strong team is like a puzzle, with each person as a unique piece. When every piece fits where it belongs, the full picture comes together. Neurodivergent individuals may be puzzle pieces with more complex or unconventional shapes, requiring more thoughtful placement. But that very complexity is often where their greatest value lies. Inclusion means making space for every piece, not forcing anyone to fit a mold, but recognizing that the picture isn't complete without them.

What team members value in neurodiverse collaboration:

- **Diversity of thoughts:** When people with different cognitive styles collaborate, they often challenge each other's assumptions and bring fresh perspectives. This creates creative tension — a productive push-and-pull that fuels innovation. Instead of settling for the obvious solution, cognitively diverse teams explore multiple angles, question defaults, and arrive at more original, effective outcomes.
- **Neuroinclusive practices:** Creating environments and systems that support a wide range of cognitive styles, often bring greater clarity, structure and flexibility to the workplace. Teams value this. Clear expectations, structured meetings, transparent communication, well-defined roles and adaptable workflows don't just support neurodivergent colleagues, they benefit everyone in the team.
- **Improved performance:** When supported appropriately, neurodiverse teams tend to collaborate more effectively, generate more innovative ideas, and show higher engagement. Research suggests they can be up to 30% more productive*, than less diverse teams, a testament to the power of inclusion.

* HR Future. (n.d.). 30% more productive: The ROI of a neurodiverse workforce. Retrieved from [https://www.hrfuture.net/workplace-culture/strategy/diversity-inclusion/30-more-productive-the-roi-of-a-neurodiverse-workforce/\[hrfuture.net\]](https://www.hrfuture.net/workplace-culture/strategy/diversity-inclusion/30-more-productive-the-roi-of-a-neurodiverse-workforce/[hrfuture.net]). Golden, D., Sniderman, B., Buckley, N., & Holdowsky, J. (2024, July 12). Unleashing innovation with neuroinclusion. Deloitte Insights.

Reflection Exercise: What helps you thrive at work?

We all work differently, and understanding those differences is key to creating environments where everyone can thrive. This reflection exercise invites you to explore what helps you feel focused, energized and supported in your work.

This exercise is for everyone, whether you're neurodivergent or neurotypical. While sensory, cognitive and emotional differences may be more noticeable — and sometimes more critical to get right — for neurodivergent individuals, we all benefit from tuning into our unique needs and preferences.

Through four themes — sensory needs, structure and autonomy, collaboration, and energy and focus — you'll have space to reflect on what works for you, what doesn't and what adjustments might help you thrive.

Sensory needs

Sensitivity to stimulation varies widely and directly impacts focus and productivity. While some people thrive in busy, energetic environments, others need calm and quiet to concentrate.

Neurodivergent individuals often process sensory input differently. For example, sounds, lights, or textures may feel overwhelming to some, while others seek extra stimulation to stay engaged.

A supportive workspace should reflect these differences. Flexible hours, personalized breaks, and small adjustments - like noise-canceling headphones or better lighting - can make a big difference. For those who need more stimulation, movement, music, or social interaction can help. Creating a workspace that adapts to individual sensory needs is key to helping everyone perform at their best.

What environment works best for you, and what do you need to organize that?

Structure and autonomy

People differ in how much structure or autonomy they need to work effectively. Some thrive with clear expectations and step-by-step guidance, while others prefer flexibility to manage tasks in their own way. Many benefit from a mix, structure for clarity, and autonomy for motivation.

For neurodivergent individuals, preferences around structure and autonomy can be shaped by how they process information, manage executive function tasks, and respond to sensory input.

For example, someone with ADHD might struggle with rigid routines but excel when given the freedom to work in short, high-focus bursts. An autistic employee may find comfort in predictable workflows and clear expectations, yet benefit from autonomy in customizing their environment to reduce sensory stress. A dyslexic person might benefit from personalized approaches that accommodate non-linear thinking and reduce reliance on text-heavy processes. While these examples reflect common patterns, it's important to remember that each person's experience is unique, even among individuals with the same neurodivergent profile. Flexibility in structure and autonomy helps people work in ways that suit them best.

Do you have the right balance of structure and autonomy in your work, and what adjustments could help you thrive?

Collaboration

People vary in how they like to collaborate. Some thrive in group settings, enjoying the energy of brainstorming and shared work. Others find frequent social interaction tiring and prefer one-on-one conversations or working alone to stay focused and creative. Both teamwork and quiet time are important, big ideas often come from reflection, not just meetings.

Neurodivergent individuals may experience collaboration differently due to differences in sensory processing, communication styles, and cognitive functioning. For some, group work can be overstimulating. Spontaneous discussions, noisy environments, and social dynamics may require extra effort to manage. Others thrive in collaborative settings. They may draw energy from brainstorming, shared problem-solving, and external motivation, as long as needs are respected.

Respecting different collaboration styles helps everyone contribute in ways that feel natural and effective.

How do you prefer to collaborate, and how do you organize your work to reflect that?

(Continued)

Energy and focus

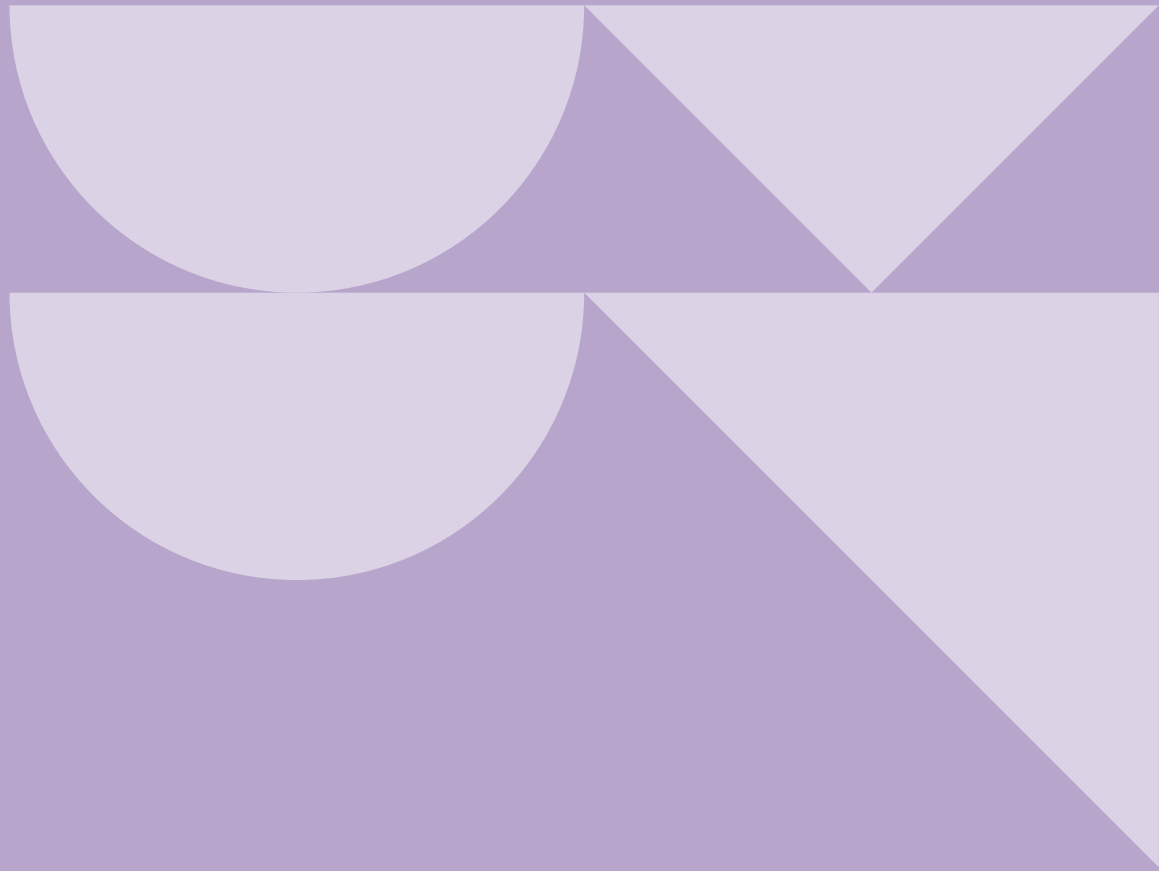
Our ability to focus and be productive naturally shifts throughout the day and over time. Sometimes we feel sharp, energized, and ready to tackle tasks. Other times, concentration fades and fatigue sets in. These ups and downs are part of our natural rhythm and affect how we work.

For neurodivergent individuals, energy fluctuations can be more pronounced. People with ADHD may experience bursts of hyperfocus followed by periods of low concentration. Autistic individuals often have energy swings tied to sensory overload or social interactions, needing time to recover. Those with dyslexia or other learning differences may find certain tasks require more cognitive effort, which can lead to quicker fatigue and reduced focus.

Balancing workload and aligning tasks with your natural energy rhythm helps maintain motivation, focus, and well-being. These preferences can shift depending on the task or emotional state. For example, someone might need more structure when overwhelmed, but seek independence when deeply engaged.

How do your energy levels change throughout the day, and what helps you stay focused?





4.5. Support challenges with accommodations

Supporting people means more than just accepting differences, it means actively removing the barriers that prevent people from fully participating. For neurodivergent individuals, those barriers might be sensory, cognitive, communicative or emotional. To foster a workplace where everyone, including our neurodivergent colleagues, can thrive, we need to look at how we design our environments and respond to individual needs.

Universal design & individual accommodations

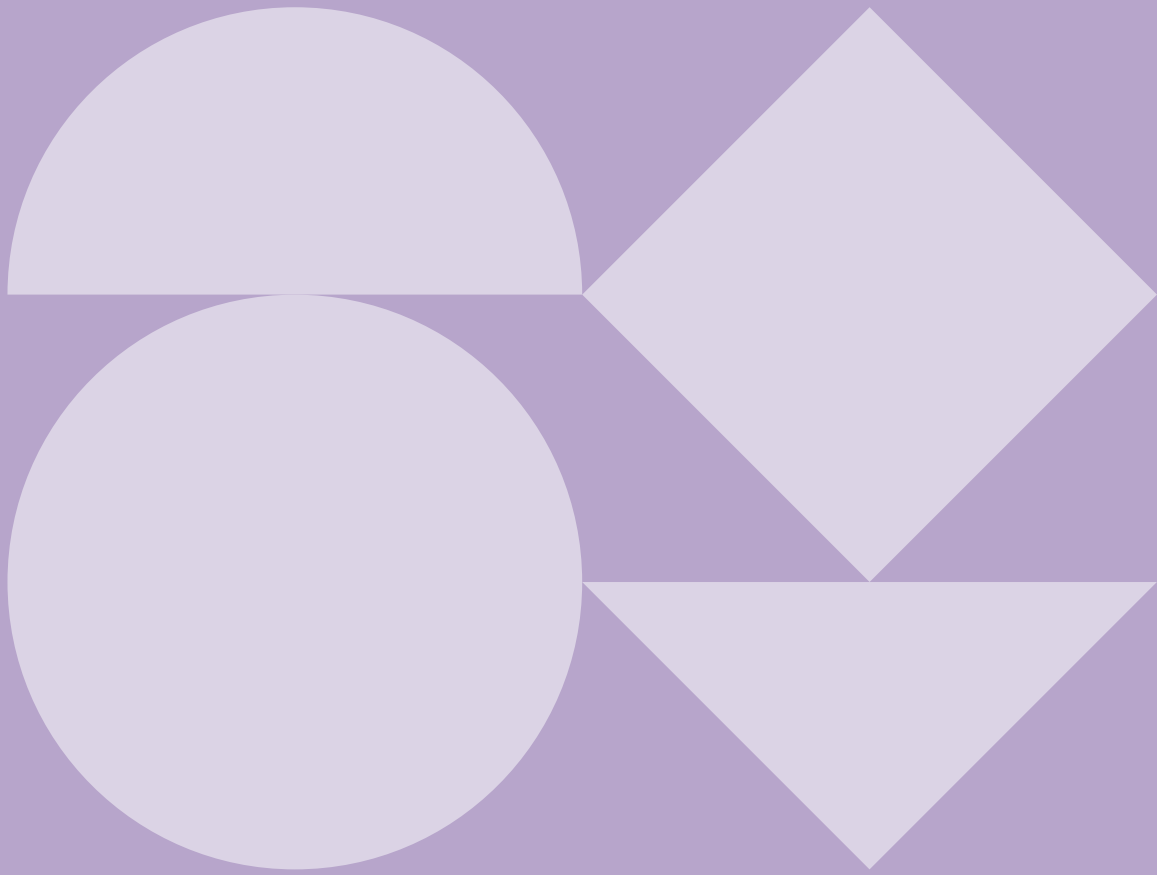
There are two main approaches to building a more inclusive workplace: universal design and individual accommodations.

- **Universal design** is a proactive approach that builds inclusivity into the workplace from the start. It involves designing spaces, policies, and processes to be accessible to all employees, regardless of their neurodivergence. This ensures the environment is welcoming for everyone, without requiring employees to request modifications. For example, open office layouts can incorporate quiet zones from the beginning, rather than waiting for employees to struggle with noise.

- **Individual accommodations**, on the other hand, are a reactive approach where specific adaptations are made when an employee requests support. While this method ensures tailored solutions for unique needs, it relies on individuals advocating for themselves, which can sometimes be challenging. It can also lead to uneven accessibility across different teams or departments.

A combination of both approaches often works best. Universal design provides a strong foundation of inclusivity, while individual accommodations ensure that specific needs are met. This balance creates a work culture where neurodivergent employees can thrive without needing to fight for equal access.

Every employee has the right to request accommodations that help them perform their jobs effectively. The employer is legally required to consider and provide accommodations if they are reasonable.



4.6. Reasonable accommodations

Reasonable accommodations are changes or supports that remove barriers caused by disability, neurodivergence, or specific need.

They're not about giving special treatment — they're about levelling the playing field so everyone has a fair chance to do their best at work.

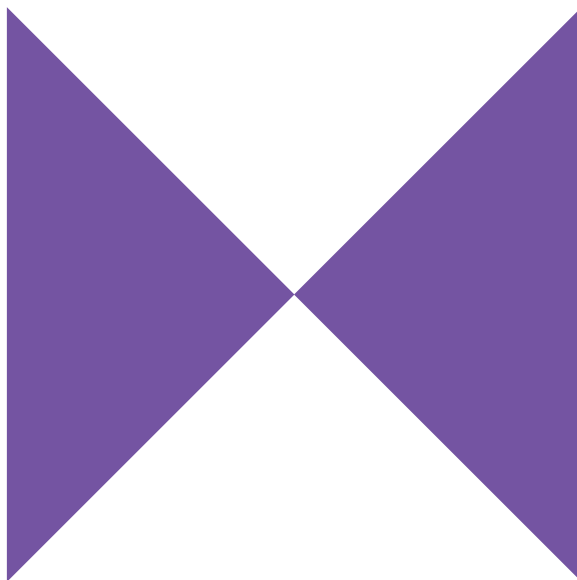
Types of reasonable accommodations

Accommodations can take many forms, depending on individual needs. Here are some examples:

- **Physical:** Quiet spaces, noise-canceling headphones, adjustable lighting, visual timers, fidget tools, movement breaks.
- **Procedural:** Flexible hours, remote work, written instructions, extra time between tasks, reduced workload during overload.
- **Interpersonal:** Clear communication, time to process before responding, email/chat instead of calls, regular check-ins, acceptance of stimming.

Key Points

- **It's a legal right:** Under Article 22ter of the Belgian Constitution, “every person with a disability has the right to full inclusion in society, including the right to reasonable accommodation”. Employers are legally required to assess and provide reasonable accommodations. Refusing without valid justification is considered discrimination — unless the request imposes a disproportionate burden, such as excessive cost or disruption.
- **What counts as “reasonable”?:** Reasonableness depends on factors like cost, duration, frequency, impact on the employee and the organization, and whether alternative solutions exist.
- **No diagnosis required:** You don't need a formal medical diagnosis to request support. If something is making it harder to do your job, you have the right to ask for accommodations.
- **How to request accommodations:** The initiative can come from either the employee or the employer. What matters most is having an open and respectful conversation about what support could improve.



Preparing for a conversation about reasonable accommodations

For many neurodivergent employees, asking for support at work can be difficult. Opening up to a manager about personal challenges takes vulnerability and trust. It's a big step, often taken with uncertainty about whether it will be met with understanding or judgment. The following self-reflection questions can help neurodivergent employees reflect and prepare.

Know your strengths

- What tasks or environments help you feel confident and productive?
- What do you enjoy most about your work?
- What unique skills or perspectives do you bring to your team?

Spot your challenges

- In what settings or situations do you find it harder to concentrate, stay regulated or do your best work?
- Do things like noise, lighting or other sensory inputs make it harder for you to feel comfortable or stay focused at work?
- Are there communication styles or workflows that feel overwhelming or unclear?

Identify what helps

- What tools, routines or environments help you stay focused and calm?
- What strategies or supports have worked well for you before?
- What kind of flexibility or structure helps you thrive?

Define your needs

- What specific adjustments would reduce stress or remove barriers?
- Are there accommodations you've heard of that might help?
- How would these changes improve your ability to do your job?

Financial support through 'Individueel Maatwerk'

Through Individueel Maatwerk*, employers in Flanders can request a budget to help cover extra costs when hiring or supporting someone with a recognized work disability.

There are two types of financial support:

- **Wage Premium (Loonpremie):** A partial reimbursement of the employee's wage to compensate for lower productivity or to fund extra support.
- **Support Premium (Begeleidingspremie):** A fixed amount to cover the cost of workplace guidance, such as onboarding help, job coaching, or ongoing support.

Access Riders

For neurodivergent employees who regularly work with different people - and often find themselves needing to explain the same things repeatedly — an access rider can be a helpful tool. Originally used in the arts world, it's now increasingly valuable in workplace settings.

An access rider is a short, personal document that outlines:

- How you work best.
- What support or adjustments you may need.

- Any communication preferences or sensory considerations.

It's a proactive way to share access needs clearly and upfront, reducing the emotional effort of repeated explanations. It also helps others understand how to collaborate more effectively and respectfully.

Each access rider is unique and can be tailored to specific needs. Common sections include:

Introduction

- A short summary of who you are and how you work.
- Optional: pronouns, preferred contact method, any relevant context.

Access needs

- Physical environment (e.g., quiet space, lighting, seating).
- Communication (e.g., written agendas, extra processing time).
- Scheduling (e.g., flexible hours, breaks).
- Sensory considerations (e.g., noise sensitivity).

Working preferences

- How you prefer to receive feedback or instructions.
- What helps you stay focused and regulated.
- Any tools or routines that support your productivity.

Boundaries and permissions

- Who can access this document.
- What information you're comfortable sharing and with whom.

* Vlaamse Overheid. (n.d.). *Individueel maatwerk*. Retrieved from <https://www.vlaanderen.be/werken/individueel-maatwerk>



4.7. Decision to disclose at work

For many neurodivergent people, the decision to disclose their neurodivergence at work is complex and deeply personal. **While disclosure can lead to greater understanding, access to accommodations, and a sense of authenticity, it also carries risks, especially in environments that aren't fully inclusive.**

Lived experiences: To disclose or not to disclose at work

Neurodivergent individuals often weigh the potential benefits of disclosure against the possibility of stigma, misunderstanding or discrimination. Some fear being judged or treated differently. Others worry that their neurodivergence might be used to explain away their achievements, justify exclusion or limit future career opportunities.

Because many forms of neurodivergence are invisible, people often have the autonomy to choose whether to disclose, and that choice is essential to preserving their safety and maintaining control over their own story.

Importantly, disclosure doesn't have to be all or nothing. Many neurodivergent people choose partial disclosure, sharing specific needs or challenges without naming a diagnosis. For example, someone might say they are sensitive to sound and need a quieter workspace, without mentioning that they are autistic. This approach allows individuals to advocate for themselves while maintaining control over how much personal information they share.

Support should not depend on disclosure. Instead of focusing on whether someone shares their neurotype, workplaces should prioritize creating environments where everyone feels safe, supported,

and valued. This means building a welcoming environment from the start, normalizing accommodations when needed, fostering psychological safety, and respecting personal boundaries. When people feel genuinely accepted, they may choose to disclose on their own terms, but that choice should always be theirs.

Lived experiences: To disclose or not to disclose at work

“This is a topic that I struggled a lot after my diagnosis. Before my assessment and diagnosis, I always thought that I will disclose it to my supervisor hoping that they will understand my struggles and provide accommodations. Once I got the diagnosis, I was scared that it could be used against me and I did not want to tell anyone, when I eventually did tell my supervisor it was one of the worst conversations I ever had about my diagnosis. Since then, I have changed jobs and I have realized that the decision to disclose any diagnosis is person-based, if you trust with the person you have that conversation with then it usually is a better outcome. It is also a very sad and frustrating fact that disclosing doesn't automatically lead to good accommodations, and it still is based on your direct supervisor and their decisions.”

“When I interviewed for this role, I disclosed my attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). At that point, I had been diagnosed and in the neurodivergent community long enough to take pride in my identity, and to realize that if my workplace didn't accept me for who I am, then it isn't the place for me. That being said, I recognize the privilege I have in

being able to disclose this: I'm white, I have relatively low support needs, and I am fairly decent at masking. I think that the decision to disclose or not disclose any part of your identity is a completely personal decision, affected by a huge variety of factors: for instance, while ADHD is fairly widely accepted, conditions such as autism and bipolar may carry a larger amount of societal stigma.”

“I make no secret of my ADHD, although I do not disclose every single thing going on. Many people have no idea what, for instance, ADHD entails: many think we are an unlimited source of energy, stressing the word “energy” and not the word “attention”. I believe many people with ADHD struggle more with their attention and how “diffuse” it can get than with their “energy”. On me, I'm hyperactive in my head, not physically.”



Key Takeaways

As we come to the end of this guide, here are some key takeaways to carry with you. These insights can help you take meaningful steps toward building more inclusive, neurodiversity-friendly environments.

- **Neurodivergence is part of everyday life:** around 1 in 5 people are neurodivergent. They're a vital part of our workplaces and communities.
- **It looks different for everyone:** Neurodivergence covers a broad spectrum of traits that vary in form, intensity and the ways they affect daily life. Each person has a unique combination of strengths and challenges, some may need little support, while others benefit from tailored accommodations.
- **From deficits to diversity:** Move away from frameworks that pathologize neurodivergence and reduce people to diagnoses and treatments. Instead, recognizes neurological differences as natural and valuable forms of human diversity.
- **Diagnosis isn't everything:** Many neurodivergent people identify based on lived experience, even without a formal diagnosis - and that self-identification is valid. Others may face real challenges but don't meet strict diagnostic criteria or feel existing labels don't fully capture their experience. To be truly inclusive, we need to move beyond narrow definitions and embrace a broader, more flexible understanding of neurodivergence.
- **It's not always visible or consistent:** Many neurodivergent traits aren't outwardly visible. People may seem to be coping while managing significant internal challenges. These experiences can also shift over time - their impact may vary depending on context, stress or energy levels. Support needs can change too. This variability doesn't make neurodivergence any less real, it highlights the need for flexible understanding and support.
- **Don't assume sameness:** People experience the world in different ways. Assuming others think like we do can unintentionally dismiss their reality.
- **Sensory and executive functioning differences shape daily life:** Neurodivergent people may process sensory input or manage tasks, time and focus differently. These differences can affect daily life in real ways.

- **Masking takes a toll:** Masking — hiding one's natural self to fit in — is exhausting. Acceptance should never depend on how well someone blends in.
- **Normalize stimming:** Stimming helps people manage emotions, focus and sensory input. It's often misunderstood or stigmatized. Accepting it as natural supports inclusion.
- **Different ways of communicating are valid:** Neurodivergent and neurotypical people may communicate in different ways. Misunderstandings can happen on both sides - this is known as the double empathy problem. Building mutual understanding takes openness, patience and effort from both sides.
- **Recognize intersectionality:** Neurodivergence doesn't exist in isolation. It intersects with other aspects of identity like race, gender, class, culture and more. These overlapping identities shape how people experience the world, access support and are perceived.
- **Words matter:** Language shapes how we see others, and how they see themselves. Choose words that are respectful, inclusive, and free from stereotypes.
- **Listen to lived experience:** Authentic representation is important. Neurodivergent people should be included in — and lead — conversations about neurodivergence.
- **Inclusion is a shared responsibility:** Creating inclusive workplaces takes intention. When we recognize strengths, understand needs and support each other, we create workplaces where everyone can thrive. Psychological safety and open communication are key. It's up to all of us to play a role in making inclusion real.
- **Accommodate differences:** inclusion means changing systems, not individuals. Instead of expecting neurodivergent people to fit rigid norms, we should design environments that support a range of needs. Universal design is the goal, but even small, thoughtful accommodations can make a big difference.
- **Respect privacy:** No one should have to disclose their neurodivergence to be supported. It's their choice if, when and how they share.

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