

A Guide for Neurotypical and Neurodivergent Conversation and Ways of Thinking

Neurodivergent here is centered around ASD, but ADHD has significant overlap

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A guide for communication and understanding I developed to help inform family, friends and colleagues in 2024, a year after my diagnosis. I shared this with work colleagues in an ally group I joined. Its uptake was very positive, so I share it as I see it can help.

These are arranged in a top 5 format. I used my own research and experience and then pressure tested and refined them with a LLM AI to validate by with research articles. My Dr actually liked it so much she uses it in her work...

Offer this after a draining or difficult conversation, or before hand when planned and important. Best offered personally and with conversation to spark past experience and empathy. If your team is open and wants to learn, use it as a pre-read to a long format conference or workshop. Its better to get ahead using this approach than offering this as a set of excuses (as they would be heard) after.

For a Neurotypical Communicating with a Neurodivergent Person:

Here's a bulleted list of the top 5 things a neurotypical person should know when communicating with a Neurotypical adult, including potential points of frustration or derailment for both parties:

1. **Respect their need for clear communication:**

- Neurodivergent individuals often prefer direct and straightforward communication. Ambiguity and idioms can be frustrating if not fully understood in the context used.
- **Potential frustration:** A neurotypical person might find the directness blunt or overly literal, while a Neurodivergent person may be confused by figurative language or implied meanings.

2. **Understand sensory sensitivities:**

- Neurodivergent people have heightened sensitivities to inputs like noise, light, or touch which they are not in control of. These inputs are intrusive and will interrupt their thought processes which are continuous and non-stop. Its not just inputs, but issues in conveying messages. Poor voice / phone quality during a conference call that prevents conveying a thought, or hearing a reply is a form of this sensory issue and will cause Neurodivergent folk to "freeze" a moment.
- **Potential derailment:** Sensory overload can make it difficult for a Neurodivergent person to focus on a conversation, leading to withdrawal or discomfort. Neurotypicals might misinterpret this as disinterest or rudeness.

3. **Allow time for processing:**

- Neurodivergent individuals may need extra time to process spoken information and formulate responses. They process Monotropically, meaning they hyper-focus on a problem at a time. Their problem space, however, is generally much larger than what a neurotypical works with. This also explains why Neurodivergent folk sometimes if understanding is uncertain will prefer electronic communications, over real-time conversation when rushed, as it allows them to get out their thoughts without interruption.. They are guarding against being interrupted and not being heard.
- **Potential frustration:** A neurotypical person might perceive pauses or delayed responses as hesitation or lack of engagement. They might perceive responses as too broad, or wordy if written. This can lead to the impression that the Neurodivergent person is dominating the conversation, interrupting, or cutting others off.

4. **Be prepared for different social interaction styles:**

- Social cues and norms that are intuitive to neurotypicals can be challenging for Neurodivergent individuals, such as eye contact (more ASD) or interpreting body language. They are not aware of or looking out for implied messaging or meaning.
- **Potential frustration:** Neurotypicals might feel uncomfortable with atypical nonverbal cues (e.g., lack of eye contact), while Neurodivergent individuals might be stressed by the expectation to conform to typical social norms. The Neurodivergent will mask, which they had learned through childhood development as a coping technique to mimic expected reactions and behaviors and not stand out. This makes social contexts, where there isn't a problem to solve, draining for them.

5. **Foster a patient and inclusive environment:**

- Create a welcoming atmosphere where differences are acknowledged and accommodations are made willingly.
- **Potential derailment:** If the neurotypical person shows impatience or dismissiveness towards accommodating needs, it can lead to misunderstandings and make the Neurodivergent person feel unwelcome or misunderstood.

For a Neurodivergent Person Communicating with a Neurotypical Person:

Here's a bulleted list of the top 5 things a Neurodivergent person should keep in mind when communicating with a neurotypical adult, including potential points of frustration or derailment for both parties:

1. Be aware of implicit communication styles:

- Neurotypical individuals often use and understand non-verbal cues and implied meanings in conversation.
- **Potential frustration:** A Neurodivergent person might miss these subtleties, which can lead to misunderstandings. Neurotypicals might feel that their signals are being ignored or misunderstood.

2. Recognize varying emotional expressions:

- Emotions may be expressed differently by neurotypicals, often through subtle facial expressions or changes in tone.
- **Potential derailment:** Misreading or not noticing these cues can lead to incorrect interpretations of the neurotypical's feelings or intentions, potentially causing confusion on both sides.

3. Prepare for a faster pace in verbal exchanges:

- Neurotypical conversations can sometimes move quickly with interruptions and rapid shifts in topics considered normal.
- **Potential frustration:** This pace can be overwhelming for a Neurodivergent person who needs more time to process and respond, potentially leading to feeling rushed or anxious and being drained. Think of an all-day work conference that drains, followed by a social event..... sound familiar ?

4. Express your own needs clearly:

- Since neurotypicals might not intuitively understand your preferences for communication and interaction, it's helpful to be clear about your needs and boundaries. Without conveying your diagnosis, if warranted, you can offer as introduction, that you are very passionate about your expertise, and you may appear excited when they become valuable to problem-solving.
- **Potential derailment:** Without clear communication, a neurotypical might inadvertently cross boundaries or fail to make needed accommodations, leading to discomfort and miscommunication for both.

Pro-Tip for the Neurodivergent person. Before a presentation, talk, or conference / speaking event, in your introduction, tell folks this topic is a passion of yours, and you may get overly excited about it. This is a way of conveying your potential hyperfocus without having to convey any sort of "disorder". It works

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5. Acknowledge differences in social energy:

- Social interactions can vary in intensity and duration, often requiring more energy for Neurodivergent individuals just to maintain presence. Social interactions that are not centered around a key idea, topic, or problem may not generate enough

interest or may be too loosely arranged for a Neurodivergent to follow particularly if they are not interested.

- **Potential frustration:** A neurotypical might expect longer and more energetic interactions, which can be draining. Explaining your energy limits and need for breaks can help manage these expectations.

How a Neurodivergent person thinks, creates, and problem solves:

Here's a bulleted list of the top 5 differences to understand how Neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals differ in their thinking and problem-solving approaches. These points include potential sources of frustration or misunderstanding:

1. **Literal and detail-oriented thinking:**

- Neurodivergent individuals often think in a very literal and detail-focused manner, which means they might miss or ignore broader implications.
- **Potential frustration:** A neurotypical might feel misunderstood when broad or abstract concepts aren't grasped or are taken too literally by the Neurodivergent person.

2. **Systematic problem-solving:**

- Many Neurodivergent people excel in systematic and logical problem-solving, approaching tasks in a structured way. Using logic, cause and effect to validate their hypothesis. This also relates to their resistance to outcomes rooted in narrative and not a fact base. They aren't challenging, they are trying to solve an un-met need in their mind.
- **Potential derailment:** A neurotypical might find this approach rigid or inflexible if they prefer a more intuitive, emotional, or less structured approach.

3. **Focus on consistency and routines:**

- Neurodivergent individuals often prefer consistent routines and can excel in solving problems within a framework. They at the same time are free thinking and follow the thread where it goes, while needing a structure to exist in. Routines are a contract with others while hyper focused thinking in their heads can go in many varied directions as needed.
- **Potential frustration:** Changes in planned processes or unexpected variables can be particularly challenging and frustrating for Neurodivergent individuals, which might be perceived as inflexibility by neurotypicals.

4. **Unique insights and innovations:**

- Due to their different cognitive processes, Neurodivergent individuals may offer unique perspectives or innovative solutions that might not be immediately obvious to neurotypicals.
- **Potential derailment:** Neurotypicals might overlook or undervalue these insights if they don't fit conventional expectations. A retreat to or restatement of the goal or high level problem often resets each side, to then get back to what to do and why.

5. **Preference for clear, unambiguous information:**

- Clear and direct information is often necessary for Neurodivergent individuals to engage effectively in problem-solving. They need to know what and why. Otherwise it is paralyzing.
- **Potential frustration:** Neurotypicals' use of implied or ambiguous information can lead to misunderstandings or difficulty in a problem-solving session.

How a Neurotypical person thinks, creates, and problem solves:

1. **Holistic and Shifting Thinking in problem-solving:**

- Neurotypicals often use a contextual or holistic approach to thinking, where not only the direct information but also the surrounding context is considered. The context may shift and change through the process and not be consistent or is contradictory. This causes a halt or stop in an Neurodivergent folks thinking as they try to reconcile in real-time the contradictions that emerge from a neurotypical's stream-of-consciousness verbalization as they describe the problem and solution.
- **Potential frustration:** This might lead to confusion or misunderstandings if the Neurodivergent individual is focusing solely on the fundamental problem and its specifics or the literal interpretation. Solving people-oriented problems such as in an organization with nuanced and varying importance given to emotion or relationship, which are outside of the core problem will confuse and frustrate a Neurodivergent person, unless that connection is made visible. To them, those are secondary considerations to be dealt with "after" the big rock is resolved. If there is a problem-solution narrative offered by a neurotypical, and it has, to the Neurodivergent, obvious contradictions, or "magical-thinking" the Neurodivergent person will struggle. They will need to get back to root cause and effect and this may appear to the neurotypical as an interrogation or disbelief making them take it as a personal affront or being argumentative. That interaction then causes the Neurodivergent person to be surprised as they are now accused of being a problem themselves, when, ironically they are devoting more energy to the problem than non Neurodivergent folk

2. **Flexibility in problem-solving:**

- Neurotypical individuals prefer a flexible approach to problem-solving, often willing to deviate from the original plan based on situational cues.
- **Potential derailment:** This can be disorienting for someone who relies on strict routines and systematic methods, between people, that have correspondent and visible proof, leading to potential conflict. If a set of assumptions or way of solving a problem are agreed to, then the Neurodivergent person may be confused, and seek clarification, if those change or are dropped without a reason that connects the change to base-reality. It is OK to shift approach, but, as with core reasoning a Neurodivergent person needs to know why. The worst they can hear is "because I said so". Then the Neurodivergent person will go "shields up" and just go along to get along

3. **Emotion-driven decision making:**

- Decisions and problem-solving in neurotypicals can often be influenced by emotional factors or 'gut feelings.'
- **Potential frustration:** Neurodivergent individuals who depend exclusively on logical reasoning (cause and effect) might find decisions based only on emotions, without explanation or connection to the goal, to be irrational, and then suspect as to motive. This causes a loss of trust by the Neurodivergent person.

4. **Social problem-solving:**

- Neurotypicals often consider the social implications of a solution, including how it affects interpersonal relationships.
- **Potential derailment:** Neurodivergent individuals prioritize the effectiveness or efficiency of a solution over its social acceptability, which can lead to misunderstandings or friction unless made visible and stated as opposed to implicitly understood by all. Neurodivergent people will incorporate interpersonal aspects, but, only after the approach to the core problem-solution is put to rest. Neurodivergent folk do not see/hear or remember or care about relationship impacts when solving for a core systems problem. These are often second tier items to them. Not second-class or less important, but, "after" the actual technical problem is addressed. Its serial thinking by priority with equal importance to core and interpersonal. Neurotypical folks can easily swap out thinking goals from core to interpersonal. But, that is likely because the depth of solution a Neurotypical has is not as large as a Neurodivergent does. Of course these characterizations in real life are also on a spectrum. YMMV

5. **Indirect communication in problem-solving:**

- In problem-solving scenarios, neurotypicals might use hints or implied needs rather than stating problems directly. A well know example in the context of married partners is, where the neurotypical states "the garage is looking disorganized", and the Neurodivergent person, although hearing it, may not readily connect that this was a request of them to clean the garage. A better way to get there would be to address the Neurodivergent person and state "could you clean out the garage by tomorrow, it needs it".
- **Potential frustration:** This style can be challenging for Neurodivergent individuals who prefer straightforward and explicit communication, potentially leading to incomplete problem resolution. And of course then this leads to frustration on the part of the Neurotypical person, who has been familiarized with the Neurotypical set of norms. Neurodivergent folks are always the outside or minority and thus appear to be the "odd" folk...or labelled as Introvert
- **Pro-Tip** My experience highlights that people who score as INTJ in Myers Briggs, usefulness in real world aside, are likely to be Neurodivergent, so consider them as well in these hints.