



# Authentic People

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Boundary Street, Liverpool, L5 9YJ.

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## Introduction to Neurodiversity

### Introduction

This guide explores the benefits of a neurodiverse workplace, and the strengths and skills people with a neurodivergent condition can bring to your organisation. It provides an overview of the various neurodivergent conditions and your responsibility as an employer/line manager or colleague in supporting neurodivergent candidates and colleagues to overcome any challenges associated with their condition.

### The benefits of a neuro-inclusive workplace

The neurodivergent community represents an invaluable but underutilised pool of candidates, especially in a competitive recruitment market where organisations struggle to find the talent that they need.

Understanding and appreciating that we all think differently benefits everyone. The ability to see a problem or situation from a different perspective can create real innovation and business success. Adding a different voice to your team can prevent what has been coined "Groupthink" - a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in irrational or dysfunctional

Many studies have shown that inclusive workplaces contribute to higher levels of engagement and productivity among colleagues, which in turn creates better business outcomes. Being curious and inquisitive about the life experiences of our colleagues can help to build effective working relationships and reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and frictions within your team.

We all have an important role to play in authentically promoting our organisation as a neurodivergent-friendly, inclusive employer, which can in turn help to attract top talent.

### What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a term that was coined in the 1990s by sociologist Judy Singer, who looked at neurological differences as a social concept rather than from a restrictive medical perspective, as a way to celebrate the diversity of human minds.

Did you know that...

...neurodiversity is the acceptance that everyone's brains work differently? It is estimated that between 15% and 20% of people are neurodivergent, so it is likely that you will work with or manage a neurodivergent colleague at some point in your career.



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Having a neurodivergent condition affects how somebody thinks and processes information, and influences how they interpret and interact with the world. You cannot "have neurodiversity" but you can be born with a neurodivergent condition.

## Key terms

- **Neurotypical:** Someone with typical neurological development and functioning.
- **Neurodivergent/neurodifferent/neurominority:** People tend to identify as neurodivergent if their brain function is significantly different from that of a neurotypical brain. Each person has their own preferred language; therefore, it is important to ask for personal preferences.
- **Comorbidity:** Having more than one (neurodivergent) condition. This is quite common and can impact how a person presents due to how the different conditions interact with each other.
- **Stimming:** Repetitive behaviour that helps somebody regulate their emotions. Someone may constantly twiddle their thumbs, rock backwards and forwards, or play with their hair or a fidget toy.
- **Masking:** Describes a neurodivergent person hiding their true self or mimicking behaviour to fit into the neurotypical world. For example, an autistic person may memorise a list of questions to ask someone when they meet them for the first time, so that they can conform to the neurotypical rules on social interaction that when you meet someone, you ask, "How are you?"
- **Rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD):** An extreme emotional sensitivity where a person perceives rejection and feedback as being far greater than it is, including when there is none. Commonly linked to ADHD.
- **Workplace needs assessment:** A holistic and ergonomic assessment of a colleagues working environment with suggestions and recommendations for reasonable adjustments.

## Neurodivergent conditions

It is important to educate yourself on the different neurodivergent conditions and how they can present in the workplace. Detailed below are the lifelong neurodivergent conditions that people can be born with.

### Autism/Asperger's

The National Autistic Society defines autism as "a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world" and estimates that one person in 100 in the UK are on the autism spectrum. It is a complex condition greatly misunderstood by many.

Historically, Asperger's syndrome and autism were diagnosed separately, but since 2013 have been brought under the umbrella term of "autistic spectrum condition (ASC)" or "autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)". Many autistic people feel happier to see their autism as a "condition" as opposed to a "disorder" and as an intrinsic part of who they are. Therefore, for some, referring to them as an "autistic person" is preferable to "a person with autism" (see [How to talk and write about autism](#) on The Autistic Society's website). However, it is a personal preference.



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The terms "high functioning" and "low functioning", referring to ability levels, are no longer an acceptable way to talk about an autistic person, as they are perceived as derogatory and limiting.

*Did you know that...*

*...autism is not a learning disability or related to IQ? Just because someone is diagnosed with autism, or any neurodivergent condition, does not mean that they have a low IQ; in fact, it is quite the opposite in some instances.*

To be diagnosed as autistic, a person would experience challenges in the areas of social communication, interaction and imagination, and the sensory world (see [Areas of overlap](#) below). The extent of these challenges, however, depends very much on the individual. No two autistic people are the same, and autism does not range on a linear scale from 1 to 100; it is a spectrum condition.

## ADHD

The NHS website explains that "The symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can be categorised into 2 types of behavioural categories: inattentiveness (difficulty concentrating and focusing) and hyperactivity and impulsiveness. Many people with ADHD have problems that fall into both these categories, but this is not always the case". This definition could imply that those with ADHD have challenges with attention all the time, which is not true.

"ADHD'ers" have an interest-based nervous system, which means that if a task is of high interest, their brain can go into "hyperfocus". This intense attention for long periods of time can lead them to forget about other tasks or even routine day-to-day activities such as eating and drinking.

It is estimated that there is an adult incidence rate of between 3% and 4% of the UK population.

## Tourette's syndrome

Tourette's syndrome is a neurodevelopmental disorder with onset in childhood, characterised by multiple motor (movement of the body) tics and at least one vocal (phonic) tic. Common "tics", a term used to describe involuntary movement or sound, include eye blinking, coughing, throat clearing, sniffing and facial movements. Stress, excitement and relaxation can influence their occurrence and pattern. Tics cannot be controlled and attempts to do so can cause extreme muscle ache and exhaustion.

*Did you know that...*

*..."coprolalia" is the clinical term for tics that produce socially unacceptable words and, according to Tourette's Action UK, approximately 15% to 20% of people with Tourette's syndrome have this symptom?*



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## Specific learning difficulties: Dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia

Dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia are all known as specific learning difficulties as they cause challenges with certain abilities used for learning.

- **Dyslexia** causes problems with reading, writing and spelling, and affects one person in 10. Some dyslexic people also have [Irlen Syndrome](#). This affects how the brain processes visual information, so somebody may require coloured overlays, paper or glasses in order to read and write.
- **Dysgraphia** affects written expression and presents as difficulties with spelling and grammar, poor handwriting and trouble putting thoughts on paper.
- **Dyscalculia** affects the ability to process numbers and results in challenges with arithmetic and telling the time.
- **Dyspraxia**, also known as developmental coordination disorder (DCD), is a condition that affects physical coordination. It can impact someone's gross motor skills, such as walking, or fine motor skills, such as tying shoelaces or fastening buttons.

## Acquired Neurodiversity

Sometimes, people are not born with a neurodivergent condition, but they acquire a condition that presents with the same challenges described above. These people can even recover from some of these conditions, which means that they no longer present with any challenges. Examples of acquired neurodiversity include:

- onset multiple sclerosis;
- onset Parkinson's disease;
- brain injury;
- menopause
- long COVID; and
- chronic fatigue.

This illustrates the importance of regularly checking in on your colleagues' mental and physical health as their support needs at work may change depending on whether they get diagnosed with or recover from a condition that affects their brain functioning.

## Neurodivergent strengths

Neurotypical people can experience challenges in areas such as processing speed (the fluency with which the brain receives, understands and responds to information), planning and organising, time management and working memory, but not to the same extent as someone with a neurodivergent condition.

*Did you know that...*

*...the "spiky profile" is a visual representation of personal and work-related strengths and areas for development? People with a neurodivergence are more likely to perform highly in some areas,*



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and lower in others. This means that their "skill profile" looks "spiky" with peaks and valleys, rather than a consistent "middle ground".

A neurodivergent person, however, can have far greater strengths in areas such as attention to detail, "big picture" thinking, pattern recognition, analytical skills and creativity (to name but a few). These skills can give your organisation a real competitive advantage.

Neurodivergent condition	Skills and strengths
<b>Autism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced memory and pattern recognition</li> <li>• Attention to detail/thorough and accurate</li> <li>• Methodical and analytical</li> <li>• Deep concentration and focus</li> <li>• Comes up with novel approaches</li> <li>• Observational skills</li> <li>• Creativity</li> <li>• Ability to absorb and retain facts - many autistic people have an area of special interest, where they learn and remember a vast amount of detail on one particular topic</li> <li>• Tenacity and resilience</li> <li>• Visual skills</li> <li>• Accepting of difference</li> <li>• Expertise</li> <li>• Integrity</li> </ul> <p>Source: <a href="#">The University of Leeds</a></p>
<b>ADHD</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to focus for long periods of time on highly stimulating tasks</li> <li>• Possesses addictive enthusiasm</li> <li>• Relentless drive</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Trusting</li> <li>• Strives for perfection</li> <li>• Good at building relationships</li> <li>• Sees the big picture</li> <li>• Solution-focused</li> <li>• Quick thinking</li> <li>• Creative problem-solving</li> </ul>
<b>Dyslexia and dysgraphia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative problem-solving</li> <li>• 3D visual imaging</li> </ul>



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Big picture thinker</li><li>• Verbally articulate</li><li>• Good long-term memory</li><li>• Empathic</li><li>• Good at building relationships</li></ul>
<b>Dyscalculia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3D visual imaging</li><li>• Creative</li><li>• Verbally articulate</li><li>• Good long-term memory</li><li>• Empathic</li><li>• Good at building relationships</li></ul>
<b>Dyspraxia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Analytical</li><li>• Problem-solving</li><li>• Creative</li><li>• Good long-term memory</li><li>• Empathic</li><li>• Curious and inquisitive</li><li>• Loyal</li></ul>
<b>Tourette's syndrome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enhanced cognitive control</li><li>• Verbal strengths</li><li>• Perceptually acute</li><li>• Creative</li><li>• Energetic</li><li>• Successful and quick to complete tasks they enjoy</li><li>• Good sense of humour</li><li>• Often empathetic</li></ul> <p>Source: <a href="#">University of Florida Health</a></p>

## Neurodivergent traits and behaviors

### Areas of overlap

The neurodivergent conditions discussed above have areas of commonality and overlap in terms of the challenges experienced and the coping mechanisms employed by people to overcome them.



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All neurodivergent people may "stim" to help regulate emotions, as well as "mask" their neurodivergence to fit into the neurotypical world. They tend to adopt conscious and unconscious coping strategies that can cause stress and tiredness. Spending day after day at work not being your authentic self, in effect role-playing, can be exhausting for those who are neurodivergent. You should look for signs of this as it may be an indication of overwhelm or potential for overwhelm and that extra support or reasonable adjustments are required.

## Sensory sensitivity

We process the world around us based on our senses; what we see, hear, smell, touch and taste. Some people are hyper- (very) or hypo- (not very) sensitive to the sensory world. This sensitivity is not something that can be controlled, i.e. turned off/on or tuned down.

A neurodivergent individual can be affected by the sensory world around them, but in different ways. It is often the environment that is the catalyst that causes the challenges associated with a neurodivergent condition, rather than the condition itself.

The working environment can therefore represent one of the biggest barriers for neurodivergent colleagues in that they can have lots of information coming in through their senses to process. In certain professions such as food tasting, however, these hypersensitivities are a very positive attribute!

The sensory environment also impacts how effective someone's executive functioning skills are.

## Challenges and coping strategies

Below, we discuss the challenges that neurodivergent individuals may experience in the workplace, as well as the masking techniques and coping strategies they may employ and display to cope with the challenges that their conditions present.

This section has been broken down by neurodivergent condition for ease of understanding. Please do note that this is by no means an exhaustive list; no two people with the same condition will present in exactly the same way, i.e. have the same challenges and strengths), especially those with autism and ADHD. In the same way that neurotypical people are all different, so too are those who are neurodivergent.

### Autism

	Behaviours you may witness
Challenges with social communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not engaging in small talk or talking in group situations</li> <li>• Not participating in team building/social events</li> </ul>



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<p><b>and interaction including the "unwritten rules"</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding eye contact (not adhering to the neurotypical norm that eye contact demonstrates listening) and looking at people's noses or lips instead</li> <li>• Saying inappropriate comments</li> <li>• Not understanding or responding appropriately to non-verbal communication, e.g. a handshake, or misinterpreting somebody's tone of voice</li> <li>• Lack of understanding of personal space - standing too close or far away from the social interaction</li> <li>• Not instigating or maintaining relationships</li> <li>• Interpreting communication literally, e.g. "It will only take a couple of minutes" will be interpreted as something taking exactly two minutes</li> </ul>
<p><b>The sensory world and situations that may cause stress or trigger overwhelm</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyper or hypo sensitivity to noise, smells, lighting, touch or taste</li> <li>• Mono processing (taking time to process one thing at a time)</li> <li>• Disengaging when multiple people are talking at the same time</li> <li>• Unable to cope with anxiety/anxious situations, ambiguity or change</li> <li>• Appears stressed when a routine is not followed, e.g. someone is late for a meeting, or if rules are not followed to the letter</li> </ul>
<p><b>Coping mechanisms</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reliance/dependence on routine and rules</li> <li>• Stimming - rocking, hand rubbing, making a repetitive sound - you may notice an colleagues fidgeting or shuffling from one leg to the other</li> <li>• Taking themselves away to be alone</li> <li>• Holding hands on ears to block out sounds or hands over eyes to block out bright lights</li> <li>• Asking lots of questions to put information into their frame of reference</li> </ul>

## ADHD

	<p><b>Behaviours you may witness</b></p>
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<b>Challenges with social communication and interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Missing social cues and rules (saying something at the wrong time or in the wrong way to someone)</li><li>• Blurting</li><li>• Not listening to and interrupting others due to need to verbalise before they forget</li><li>• Over talking</li><li>• Speaking very fast</li></ul>
<b>Hypo or hyper focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unable to concentrate on less stimulating tasks, moving from one task to another and not being able to sit still</li><li>• High concentration on interesting tasks at the expense of others</li><li>• Working for long periods without any breaks</li><li>• Appearing to be hyper organised or forgetting things that need to be done</li></ul>
<b>Organising, planning and prioritising workload and time management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unable to remember lots of instructions</li><li>• Scattered thinking patterns</li><li>• Arriving late or achieving tasks late</li><li>• Prioritising tasks based on interest rather than business priorities</li><li>• No perception of time</li></ul>
<b>Rejection sensitivity dysphoria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perfectionism, task avoidance and people-pleasing tendencies to avoid receiving any negative feedback</li></ul>
<b>Coping mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Using earplugs in order to focus</li><li>• Taking notes in meetings to maintain focus</li><li>• Enjoy participating in high-risk activities in their spare time because of the associated dopamine hit</li></ul>

## Tourette's syndrome

Many people associate Tourette's syndrome with tics. These are some of the other challenges people may experience:

- Struggles without an established structure and routine.



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- Struggles if flow and focus is interrupted.
- Tics may become more frequent or louder when stressed/anxious or at certain times of the day.
- Signs of acute muscle pain and exhaustion due to constant tics.
- Anxious about change or when routines are not kept.
- Not showing appropriate emotional responses at a given time.
- Co-existence of other conditions (particularly ADHD and/or ASC).

## Dyslexia and dysgraphia

People with dyslexia or dysgraphia often have similar challenges and overlapping behaviours.

	Behaviours you may witness
<b>Challenges with reading, writing, spelling and grammar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Words may appear to move/flicker/halo some colleagues may also have <a href="#">Irlen Syndrome</a> that causes headaches</li> <li>• Avoiding or taking a long time to complete tasks that involve writing (e.g. reports)</li> <li>• Spelling mistakes, especially with words that have the same sound, e.g. their and there; been and bean, bear and bare</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges with working memory and processing speed for written and/or verbal language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding written and/or verbal language can take longer - some colleagues with dyslexia may be challenged processing what they see but are excellent at processing what they hear</li> <li>• Forgetting (verbal) instructions</li> <li>• Losing things</li> <li>• Not keeping up in meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Coping mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking questions to clarify understanding of the written word</li> <li>• Spending time highlighting key points in written communication</li> <li>• Taking notes as memory aids or when there are sensory distractions</li> <li>• Printing out emails to read/process them</li> <li>• Phoning people rather than sending an email</li> </ul>



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## Dyspraxia

You may notice:

- Challenges with fine motor skills, e.g. struggling to do buttons up on uniform, or gross motor skills, e.g. running.
- Unable to hold a pen in a standard way.
- Writing notes when there are other distractions.
- Lack of spatial awareness, knocking things over or tripping over easily.
- Struggles to follow instructions doing a movement task, e.g. training that involves bodily movement for firearms or first-aid training.
- Trouble understanding directions.
- Poor concentration.

## Dyscalculia

You may observe a colleague experiencing difficulties:

- Reading (certain) numbers and understanding their value.
- Transposing numbers from a phone call or conversation to a digital or written format.
- Telling the time on an analogue clock.
- Remembering phone numbers and verbal instructions.
- Counting money.
- Organising/planning.
- Working in Microsoft Excel.
- Working with money or numbers.
- Hyper or hypo sensitivity to the working environment.
- Slow processing speed.

To compensate for these challenges, you may notice the colleague writing everything down.

## Your duties under the Equality Act

Neurodivergent conditions are widely considered as non-visible or "hidden" disabilities. A person is classed as disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Long term is defined as lasting, or likely to last, for 12 months or more.

This could mean that someone's neurodivergent condition qualifies as a disability under the legislation and that they will be protected from discrimination at work.

*Did you know that...*



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*...people are protected from discrimination during your entire recruitment and selection processes, as well as the whole colleague lifecycle if they become an colleague, including a former colleague requesting a reference?*

The following are the prohibited forms of discrimination against disabled people:

- **Direct discrimination:** When someone is treated less favourably because they have a disability. Harassment and victimisation are forms of direct discrimination, which are also unlawful.
- **Indirect discrimination:** Where a workplace rule or practice disproportionately disadvantages disabled colleagues. Due to their disability, they may find it more difficult to meet or comply with that rule or practice, e.g. attendance targets.
- **Discrimination arising from a disability:** Where someone is treated less favorably, not because of their disability, but for something "related" to the disability, e.g. absence due to stress or anxiety.

Discrimination against a person because of their association with another person who has a protected characteristic, including disability, is unlawful. This means, for example, that parents or carers of neurodivergent dependants are also protected from discrimination under the Equality Act.

A colleague does not need to prove that they are disabled, i.e. have an occupational health assessment or medical diagnosis, to be classed as disabled. Therefore, when someone discloses their disability or you suspect that you are managing someone with a disability, it is best practice to adopt a "needs-led" approach. This means that, as an employer/line manager/colleague, you support the person's needs to help them be the best that they can be at work.

## Reasonable adjustments

Employers have an obligation to make reasonable adjustments where a disabled individual is placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to persons who are not disabled, because of a provision, criterion or practice or physical feature of the premises, or would be placed at a substantial disadvantage but for the provision of an auxiliary aid.

An employer or line manager should seek to make adjustments to create a barrier-free environment for candidates and colleagues with a disability wherever possible. The objective is to create a level playing field and enable prospective and current colleagues to perform to the best of their ability.

The scope of the duty is broad. It can include adjustments to physical aspects of the working environment, as well as changes to policies and procedures. These adjustments are often free or come at little cost to your organisation.

If somebody discloses their neurodivergent condition to you, it can be easier to then discuss with them what reasonable adjustments they need to overcome challenges during a recruitment process or to perform their job effectively. However, it may be that you feel the need to instigate



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a conversation around offering a colleague support if you suspect the individual has a neurodivergent condition. This is a key part of a disclosure conversation.

You should also discuss whether a colleague needs any reasonable adjustments in relation to caring for a disabled dependant.