

YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT AUTISM, BUT WHAT ABOUT NEURODIVERGENCE?

BY RYAN PATRICK CASEY, M.A.

When I first started my work in Autism support fifteen years ago, some of the terms that were used in the field were different and some had not been born yet.

“Asperger’s,” at that time, was still a diagnosis being used and one that could be found in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). Today it’s no longer in that publication—the bible of mental health professionals. It was removed as an official diagnosis because clinicians felt that the boundaries between “Asperger’s” and “standard Autism” were not clear enough. When this change occurred, “Asperger’s” along with (PDD-NOS) Pervasive Developmental Disorder–Not Otherwise Specified—was all merged into one, Autism Spectrum.

However, an even wider view of Autism is “Neurodivergence” (a term stemming from Neurodiversity and being Neurodivergent). To understand Neurodivergence—we need to go back to the origins of the “Neuro” terms as they first related to Autism.



The first use of these, emerging in the late nineties, was “Neurodiversity.” It was first coined by Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist who is herself on the Autism Spectrum. She used “Neurodiversity” in her 1998 honors thesis and in conversations within the Autism and disability rights communities. Singer developed

this term to reframe the deficit-based models of Autism which viewed it as a pathology, in exchange for a more positive view of the Spectrum. “Neurodiversity” highlighted strengths, adaptations, and the value of difference. Whereas prior to that, it was referred to as ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and often only viewed as a problematic condition. “Neurodiversity” also highlighted that the world is comprised of diverse minds (remember Singer was a sociologist). Out of this sprang the term, “Neurodivergent.” Although it’s not an official diagnosis or medical classification, some people on the Spectrum began to consider themselves as being “Neurodivergent.” Over the years, I have heard some people use the term “Neurodiversity” or (“Neurodiverse”) and “Neurodivergent” interchangeably. However, technically the better use of the term “Neurodivergent” should be used to describe an individual, someone who enjoys the Neurodiverse world we live in, and striving for Neurodiversity in all walks of life (such as: work, school, and sports).

“Neurodiversity” also became an umbrella term that covers several diagnoses, in addition to Autism, such as: ADHD, Dyslexia, and Tourette Syndrome. It can also cover many more diagnoses, in addition to people who have no diagnosis, but choose to identify as being “Neurodivergent”. Next came an even newer word: “Neurodivergence.” One might say, well, that’s just a slight modification of the other “Neuro” terms, but not so fast my friend, there’s more going on here. We all know what “Neuro” refers to – but what about “Divergence”?

That part stems from the Latin “divergere,” which means to “to go in different directions”.

So, in effect, the term “Neurodivergence” refers to both an action and going in a different direction. Unlike Neurodiversity and



Neurodivergent, “Neurodivergence” implies more of an active motion toward something. But who’s moving and where are they going?

Neurodivergence is coalescing with several sub-cultures, work environments, and Neurodivergent modes of processing info into a completely new way of thinking. This includes new ways to approach problems. Research has found that they are, on average, more novel in their approach to problem solving. They also possess strong pattern recognition, attention-to-detail, and hyper-focused “deep-thought.” In the workplace, I have also witnessed that this population tends to show more honesty, a lack of interest in non-work related social hierarchies (so less nepotism), and a greater amount of diligence toward figuring something out (they typically love receiving and solving puzzles!)

With these traits in mind, Neurodivergence, if properly woven into the fabric of the world (especially the workplace), could lead to breakthroughs in areas such as: design, research, and art. And ideally in fields such as: medicine, the environment, and world diplomacy.

Innovative and “deep-thought” meditations on the problems and challenges our world faces are what we need now more than ever.

Of course like anyone else, not every Neurodivergent person is capable of changing the world. And that’s ok. And not every Neurodivergent person will be in positions of power wherein they can affect change. However, if enough Neurodivergent people are better integrated into society, then Neurodivergence has a strong shot at changing the direction of the entire world.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung once wrote, “The world hangs by a thin thread, and that thread is the psyche of man. We are the great danger. The psyche is the great danger. ... Only a change in our attitude can save us.”



Perhaps Neurodivergence contains the change in attitude we need.

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