

Supporting neurodiversity in the workplace

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Workplace
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Helping everyone thrive at work

To help everyone perform at their best, it's important to understand how traditional workplaces might affect neurodivergent people. In this guide, we'll explain what neurodiversity is, the value of neurodiversity in the workplace, and how you can support neurodivergent employees at work.



What is
neurodiversity?

Values of
neurodiversity

Supporting
neurodiversity

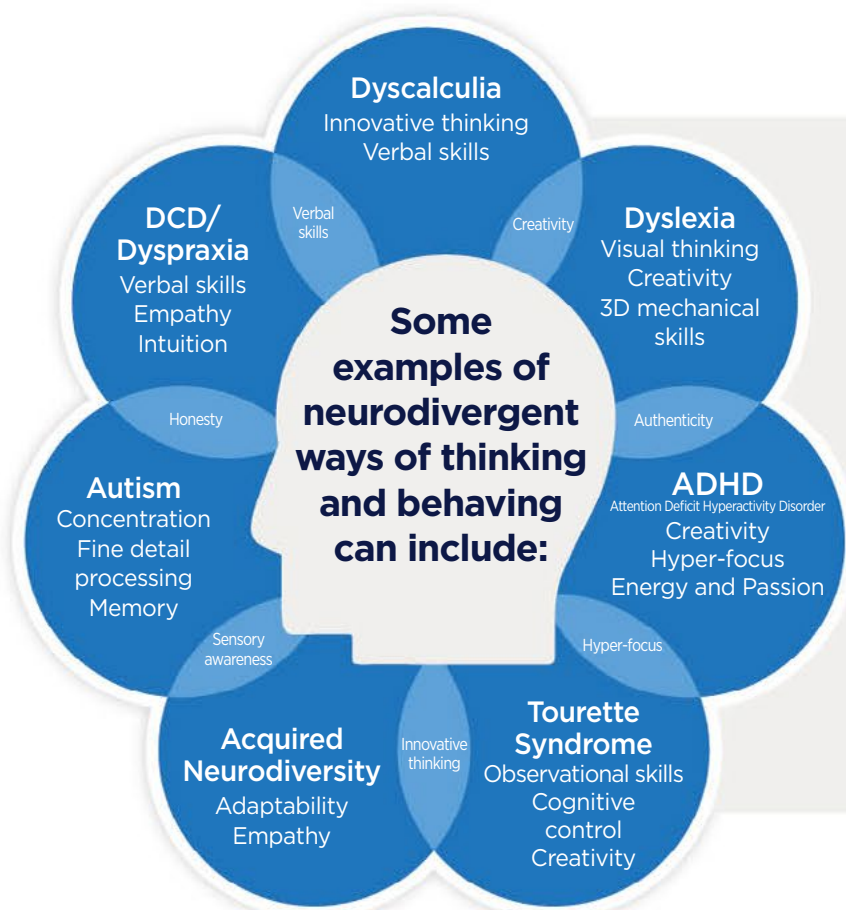


What is neurodiversity?

The term neurodiversity refers to the way that everyone's brains naturally work differently from one another. Just as you may be born right-handed, or have green eyes, how your brain works and where you sit on the cognitive spectrum will be unique to you.

Most people are not neurodivergent – they are 'neurotypical'. This means they think and behave in a way that society traditionally considers to be 'normal'.³ But at least 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent, which means they behave, think, process, and interpret information in different ways to most other people.

Traditional working practices are often designed with a neurotypical society in mind, which can make it difficult for neurodivergent employees to thrive at work.



These conditions often exist on a spectrum and can vary in their effects on different people. For example, not everyone with ADHD has the same types or severity of symptoms.



What are the values of neurodiversity in the workplace?

We all have things we're naturally good at and things we're not so good at. Neurodivergent employees often bring unique skills and talents to their work.

For example, depending on the individual, they might be particularly good at:

- problem-solving
- logical thinking
- creativity
- innovation
- consistency
- thinking outside of the box
- spotting patterns and trends
- retaining information
- data analysis
- seeing things from a different perspective
- attention to detail
- taking risks
- pushing boundaries

Heads up – there are also some aspects of a traditional working environment that neurodivergent employees might find more challenging or feel uncomfortable about.



How can you support neurodiversity in the workplace?

A diverse and inclusive work environment has many benefits, both for the business and for its employees. As an employer, you can recognise and nurture the unique skills of neurodivergent employees, while also supporting them through any individual challenges they may face at work.

It's important to note that the extent a person's neurodivergence affects them can vary. For some, if it substantially affects their daily life, it may be regarded as a disability under the UK Equality Act 2010. This legislation protects people from discrimination. It's your responsibility as an employer to make any workplace adjustments to support and enable neurodivergent employees at work.

Fewer than three in ten autistic people in the UK are in employment.

Source: Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021. Office for National Statistics. ons.gov.uk, published 10 February 2022.



Gillian Cairns and Marjorie Zambezi, Occupational Health Advisors at Bupa, advise:

“Workplace adjustments to support neurodivergent employees make them feel valued, supported, and part of the team.”

If an employer doesn't give a neurodivergent employee the proper tools to do their role, they may not be able to perform to the best of their ability. This could cause the employee to become stressed, and they may worry about losing their job. They could also develop a mistrust in the employer for not treating their condition seriously. Consequently, they may become withdrawn and anxious at work.

Making workplace adjustments helps give neurodivergent employees the tools they need to contribute fully towards achieving their goals, and the goals of the organisation.”

Although each person will be different, here are some examples of simple things you can do to support neurodivergent employees.

Get to know the individual

Try to learn more about your team member's neurodivergence so that you can best support them. But remember, even though there are some behaviours or characteristics that are common to neurodivergent conditions, it's important not to make any assumptions as these will vary from person-to-person. While one person with ADHD might struggle to concentrate, another might not. Likewise, while one person with autism might be very good with numbers, another might not. Try not to create any stereotypes. Get to know the person and find out how you can best support their unique characteristics, strengths, and challenges.

Provide supportive technology and equipment

Assistive technology and equipment may help some neurodivergent employees carry out their roles. For example, some people with dyspraxia might experience difficulties with their motor coordination, which can make using office equipment like a keyboard or mouse difficult. Some people with autism have limited speech, while some individuals with dyslexia might struggle with reading and writing. Some things you can invest in that might help neurodivergent employees to feel more comfortable at work include:

- speech-to-text, text-to-speech or mind-mapping software
- dictation tools
- a daily planner
- dual-screens

Dr Naomi Humber, Head of Mental Wellbeing, Bupa Health Clinics, explains:

“Life would be very boring if we were all the same. Being neurodiverse is a true superpower and employers should celebrate the diversity of their workforce and such talents within their employees. Allowing those who are neurodiverse to play to their strengths whilst supporting them within the working environment is key to enabling them to flourish and reach their potential.”

ADHD

It's estimated that more than three in 100 adults have ADHD.



Source: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: background information – prevalence. NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries. cks.nice.org.uk, last revised November 2022.

1 in 17

At least one in 17 people are thought to be dyspraxic.



Source: Dyspraxia. Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities. learningdisabilities.org.uk, accessed 30 May 2023.

Communicate clearly

Some neurodivergent employees may have difficulty communicating with others.

For example, someone with autism might:

- struggle to read facial expressions
- have difficulty interpreting your tone of voice
- take what you say literally
- find it hard to understand sarcasm or metaphors
- have difficulty filtering out less important information

So, try to use direct language and say exactly what you mean. Ask specific questions, structure your instructions, avoid using jargon, and allow enough time to process what you're saying.

It might also help to provide communications materials in a range of formats. For example, clearly documenting training materials and instructions in audio and visual formats may work better for someone with dyslexia than traditional written materials.

Assign work tasks appropriately

Try to think about the type of work, tasks, and routines that will work best for the individual. For example, some people with ADHD struggle with repetitive work. They might work best in a diverse role, where they can take regular breaks and work flexible hours. Or if your employee has dyslexia, consider giving them more time to read and finish tasks. You could also record your meetings so that they don't have to take notes. As with all team members, make sure to monitor workload to stop anyone feeling overloaded, stressed, or under pressure at work.

700,000

In the UK, it's estimated that around 700,000 adults and children are autistic.



Source: What is autism? National Autistic Society. autism.org.uk, accessed 30 May 2023.

1 in 10

people in the UK are thought to be dyslexic.



Source: Dyslexia. British Dyslexia Association. bdadyslexia.org.uk, accessed 30 May 2023.

Consider the physical environment

Traditional workspaces are often designed with the needs of a neurotypical society in mind. But some working conditions can form a barrier to neurodivergent employees. Bright lighting, lots of noise, and interruptions in a busy office may feel overstimulating or overwhelming for some neurodivergent people. The journey to the office may cause them anxiety, and the lack of personal or quiet space could also be difficult to manage. If your employee finds this challenging, you could try:

- investing in adjustable lighting or desk lamps
- using partitions and room dividers or providing a larger personal working space
- including clear instructions next to office equipment
- allowing individuals to work from home

It might also help to have specific quiet zones in your workplace that are available for all employees to use when they need. This can help to create a supportive space while preventing neurodivergent individuals from feeling singled out.

“Thinking about the workplace environment in relation to neurodivergent employees can also highlight the employer’s commitment to diversity and inclusion and reduce the stigma around neurodivergence. It can make staff feel safe and empowered to disclose a neurodivergence, and make it more likely that neurodivergent staff will be treated fairly by their managers and colleagues. Not only that, it opens the organisation up to a pool of talent that may otherwise have been overlooked, as well as help retain skilled staff and reduce recruitment costs.”

Gillian Cairns and Marjorie Zambezi,
Occupational Health Advisors at Bupa

Be understanding and empathetic

It’s important to be understanding and approachable so that your staff feel they can ask for help if they need it. It will help them feel supported, but don’t put any pressure on them to open up if they don’t want to. They might find it helpful to join groups within the organisation where they can talk to other employees with similar experiences.

Make sure you check in regularly to see how they’re doing and whether you need to make any adjustments to their working practices. Your staff might have a better idea of what could help and they’ll also know if their needs have changed. It’s a good idea to keep a record of what adjustments they’ve asked for and what you’ve done in response. Review these adjustments to make sure they’re working. But remember to always ask for the individual’s approval before making any adjustments. It may also help to arrange coaching and mentoring for any personal development point they’d like help with, such as time-management or organisation.

If your employee is struggling at work, try to remain patient and empathetic towards their feelings, as you would with any other employee. Ensure the rest of your team have an awareness and understanding of neurodiversity to avoid any discrimination. You may wish to let the rest of your staff know of their teammate’s neurodivergence. But it’s important to obtain the individuals permission first, as they may prefer to keep this private or tell their colleagues themselves.

Always get permission from neurodivergent employees before making adjustments to their working practices, or disclosing their condition to anyone else. Ask the individual if and how they may want to share their neurodiversity with others.

Raise awareness of neurodiversity in your organisation

Raising awareness and encouraging a greater understanding of neurodiversity in your workplace can have benefits for both employees and employers. Creating an inclusive workplace where neurodiversity is celebrated and accepted can help employers to recruit and retain a diverse and talented workforce. It can also help you to understand and support your neurodivergent customers. Talking openly about neurodiversity, and reducing the stigma surrounding it, will help ensure neurodivergent employees are treated fairly. It may also help neurodivergent employees to open up about any challenges they may be facing at work.

Dr Naomi Humber, Head of Mental Wellbeing, Bupa Health Clinics, explains:

“Fostering our mental wellbeing is essential for us all, and those who are neurodiverse are no different. In fact, such conditions can make working life a challenge at times, so it is crucial to support those within the workplace and make any reasonable adjustments, practical or otherwise, to aid a supportive environment that nurtures both productivity and resilience. This will have huge benefits for the individual employee’s sense of self-worth, inner confidence, and commitment to their work.”

Nurture good mental wellbeing

Although neurodiversity and mental health are two different things, they can sometimes get mixed up. Being neurodivergent is not a mental health condition. But mental health problems such as stress and anxiety are common in neurodivergent people. As a manager, try to remain empathetic and understanding of your neurodivergent employees, who are trying their best to navigate a neurotypical world.

Make small adjustments to make their working life easier and look out for their mental wellbeing. For example, it might help to:

- hold one-to-ones more regularly
- signpost neurodivergent individuals to your organisation’s support services
- ensure individuals have enough time to attend any appointments.

Gillian Cairns and Marjorie Zambezi, Occupational Health Advisors at Bupa remind us:

“Being neurodiverse means facing challenges that a neurotypical person doesn’t have to. Especially as people with neurodivergent conditions are more at risk of having mental illnesses or poor wellbeing. This is often due to a lack of support, and the stress of ‘masking’ — acting neurotypically in order to avoid stigma or a negative response.

Mental wellbeing helps boost self-confidence, raises self-esteem, builds a sense of purpose, and helps us connect with others. It also helps give us a positive outlook to get the most out of life.”

Resources

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