



## What's New to talk about?

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There's a new word in town that is important to talk about in terms of how people think about things. The topic is Neuro Diversity, and according to Harvard Health, it is described this way. Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits.



The word neurodiversity refers to the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities. The neurodiversity movement emerged during the 1990s, aiming to increase acceptance and inclusion of all people while embracing neurological differences. Through online platforms, more and more autistic people were able to connect and form a self-advocacy movement. At the same time, Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, coined the term neurodiversity to promote equality and inclusion of "neurological minorities." While it is primarily a social justice movement, neurodiversity research and education is increasingly important in how clinicians view and address certain disabilities and neurological conditions.

### Words matter in neurodiversity

Neurodiversity advocates encourage inclusive, nonjudgmental language. While many disability advocacy organizations prefer person-first language ("a person with autism," "a person with Down syndrome"), some research has found that the majority of the autistic community prefers identity-first language ("an autistic person"). Therefore, rather than making assumptions, it is best to ask directly about a person's preferred language, and how they want to be addressed. Knowledge about neurodiversity and respectful language is also important for clinicians, so they can address the mental and physical health of people with neurodevelopmental differences.

### Neurodiversity and autism spectrum disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is associated with differences in communication, learning, and behavior, though it can look different from person to person. People with ASD may have a wide range of strengths, abilities, needs, and challenges. For example, some autistic people are able to communicate verbally, have a normal or above average IQ, and live independently. Others might not be able to communicate their needs or feelings, may struggle with impairing and harmful behaviors that impact their safety and well-being, and may be dependent on support in all areas of their life. Additionally, for some people with autism, differences may not cause any suffering to the person themselves. Instead, the suffering may result from the barriers imposed by societal norms, causing social exclusion and inequity.

Medical evaluation and treatment is important for individuals with ASD. For example, establishing a formal diagnosis may enable access to social and medical services if needed. A diagnostic explanation may help the individual or their family understand their differences better and enable community connections. Additionally, neurodevelopmental conditions may also be associated with other health issues that require extra monitoring or treatment. It is important that people who need and desire behavioral supports or interventions to promote communication, social, academic, and daily living skills have access to those services in order to maximize their quality of life and developmental potential. However, approaches to interventions cannot be one-size-fits-all, as all individuals will have different goals, desires, and needs.

### **Fostering neurodiversity in the workplace**

Stigma, a lack of awareness, and lack of appropriate infrastructure (such as office setup or staffing structures) can cause exclusion of people with neurodevelopmental differences. Understanding and embracing neurodiversity in communities, schools, healthcare settings, and workplaces can improve inclusivity for all people. It is important for all of us to foster an environment that is conducive to neurodiversity, and to recognize and emphasize each person's individual strengths and talents while also providing support for their differences and needs.



### **How can employers make their workplaces more neurodiversity-friendly?**

- Offer small adjustments to an employee's workspace to accommodate any sensory needs, such as
  - Sound sensitivity: Offer a quiet break space, communicate expected loud noises (like fire drills), and offer noise-cancelling headphones.
  - Tactile: Allow modifications to the usual work uniform.
  - Movements: Allow the use of fidget toys, allow extra movement breaks, and offer flexible seating.
- Use a clear communication style:
  - Avoid sarcasm, euphemisms, and implied messages.
  - Provide concise verbal and written instructions for tasks, and break tasks down into small steps.
  - Inform people about workplace/social etiquette, and don't assume someone is deliberately breaking the rules or being rude.
  - Try to give advance notice if plans are changing, and provide a reason for the change.
  - Don't make assumptions — ask a person's individual preferences, needs, and goals.
  - Be kind, be patient.

**“Every individual matters. Every individual has a role to play. Every individual makes a difference.”**  
— Jane Goodall



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