



## Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity isn't new, but awareness of it has been gaining mainstream traction in recent years. In 1998, Australian sociologist Judy Singer coined the term "neurodiversity" to recognize that everyone's brain develops uniquely. Neurodiversity refers to diversity in the human brain and cognitive functions, such as thinking, learning, and behaving.

This article explains neurodiversity, neurodivergent conditions, strengths and challenges of neurodivergence, and tips for fostering a neurodiverse environment.

### What Is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the concept that the differences in brain functions are variations—not deficits—in the way people experience and interact with the world. Individuals who exhibit such variations are considered "neurodivergent." There's a growing understanding that individuals who are neurodivergent are not disabled but somewhat differently abled.

Since there isn't a "normal" way for a brain to work or function, the larger population is said to be "neurotypical."

### Forms of Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence is often used as an umbrella term covering several conditions, including the following:

- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism spectrum disorder (autism)
- Down syndrome
- Dyscalculia (difficulty with math)
- Dysgraphia (difficulty with writing)
- Dyslexia (difficulty with reading)
- Dyspraxia (difficulty with coordination)

- Mental health conditions, including bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Sensory processing disorders
- Tourette syndrome

In the neurodiversity movement, neuro-differences are typically recognized or appreciated as a social category similar to differences in ethnicity or gender.

### Challenges Facing People Who Are Neurodivergent

People who are neurodivergent have differences in the way their brain works. First and foremost, neurodivergence is generally nonvisible. That's a significant hurdle, as looking at a person who is neurodivergent would not let you know they are neurodivergent. That leaves many people who are neurodivergent having to disclose their specific needs to do their best work or be socially accepted.

Additionally, some people who are neurodivergent struggle because of systems or processes that create new challenges or don't allow them to demonstrate their strengths. For example, they may have challenges fitting in socially, behaving in expected ways, or easily adjusting to change. Some common and challenging symptoms of neurodivergence include:

- Atypical physical behaviors (e.g., expressing tics and shouting at unexpected times)
- Atypical responses to sensory input (e.g., sensitivity to light, sound, heat, cold, or crowds)
- Inflexibility or inability to adapt or change
- Learning challenges (e.g., difficulty focusing or reading)
- Social communication difficulties
- Speech and language challenges

These symptoms are simply examples since specific challenges hinge on the individual's form of neurodivergence.

In general, society is often tailored for neurotypical minds. As a result, neurodivergence can often be misunderstood, making people who are neurodivergent feel the need to camouflage in neurotypical societies, situations, and organizations. This complex behavior is called masking and can be done deliberately or subconsciously. One of the most significant issues with masking is that it creates a lot of exhaustion and stress and can increase the risk of burnout.

Masking differs between individuals, but the behavior is often triggered by an inaccessible environment or a need to fit in, avoid judgment, and have a sense of belonging. Ultimately, masking and being unable to be authentic can have serious mental health implications.

## Strengths of People Who Are Neurodivergent

Since people who are neurodivergent are cognitively different from people who are neurotypical, they can bring unique strengths to situations or environments. Furthermore, people who are neurodivergent can often make connections that neurotypical people might not.

Consider the following general but powerful skills and talents of those who are neurodivergent:

- Fresh, unique perspectives
- Exceptional focus and concentration
- Out-of-the-box problem-solving skills, which support innovative and creative thinking
- Strong observational skills and keen attention to detail

While people who are neurodivergent tend to excel in those areas, it's vital to remember that every person is different. The strengths of these individuals have an opportunity to shine when they're given the proper credit and support.

## Fostering Neurodiversity

There are ways you and every person can challenge or influence cultural norms and contribute to a neurodivergent-friendly environment. Consider these tips for fostering neurodiversity:

- **Practice awareness.** Understanding neurodiversity is the first step. Take it upon yourself to learn more about neurodivergent features, their specific

strengths and challenges, and how to reduce the associated stigma.

- **Listen.** People with neurodivergent features may feel misunderstood or left out. Let others know you hear them and respect their ideas and choices.
- **Respect individual differences.** Regardless of neuro-differences, everyone has a different learning or working style. Everyone thinks, processes information, and learns differently, so respect those differences and leverage individuals' strengths.
- **Communicate clearly.** There's room for error if communication is not specific or clear enough. To reduce potential confusion, ensure communications are specific and include actions so the recipient understands the ask or task. For example, in the workplace, ask your teammates or direct reports what their communication preferences are. Keep in mind that respecting neurodiversity may also mean respecting nonverbal choices.
- **Avoid value-based labels.** Terms such as "low functioning" and "high functioning" are often used with neurodivergent conditions, such as autism. Avoid using those terms, as they assume a person's level of function is based on neurotypical function.

## Summary

People who are neurodivergent may spend significant time adjusting to their environment or managing their social impressions. While neurodiversity has its strengths, it also comes with challenges individuals may need to navigate.

Understanding and accepting human neurodiversity is important so everyone can live their most authentic lives and not feel like they need to adjust their behavior or other characteristics in certain environments. Ultimately, it comes down to treating others with respect and accepting them for who they are.