

What does Neurodiversity mean?

Neurodiversity is the concept that all humans vary in terms of our cognitive ability. Everyone has both talents and things they struggle with. However, for some people the variation between those strengths and challenges are more pronounced, which can bring advantages but also can be disabling. 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 people were able to connect and form a movement offering support and information. 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 neurological conditions and society at large support the neurodivergent amongst us navigate and thrive in the world.

It is estimated that nearly 15 to 20% of the world's population is neurodivergent. This fact challenges the perception that diverse brain types are inherently flawed and require correction. Neurodivergent individuals may face difficulties due to variations in brain function and structure, but their intelligence remains unaffected.

The neurodiversity perspective recognises that such differences are not deficits but part of the norm. The notion that there is a single normal or healthy or a single right style of neurocognitive functioning, is as false as the notion that there is a single normal or right gender, race or culture. Neurodiversity is an important aspect of human diversity.

Applied neurodiversity and the different types...

Applied neurodiversity involves conditions present at birth which are more likely associated with gross motor control and learning difficulties.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a common learning difficulty that affects reading writing and spelling. It does not impact intelligence, common signs include:

- slow reading and writing;
- challenges with organisation and planning;
- letter reversals;
- trouble following written instructions;
- inconsistent spelling; and
- a better understanding of verbal information.

The exact cause of dyslexia is unknown but it often runs in families and is linked to genetic variations. It is typically identified during school years.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a maths related learning disability, it can also be known as math dyslexia. It affects various areas including:

- understanding quantities and concepts;
- remembering numbers;
- connecting numerals with words;
- comprehending math logic;
- recalling math facts; and

- estimating measurements.

Dyscalculia is based on evaluation using different tests for adults and children.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a condition that affects movement and coordination. Tasks requiring balance, sports, and fine motor skills such as writing are hard to perform. Signs of dyspraxia include:

- disturbed coordination;
- difficulty with time management and organisation;
- challenges in learning and memory;
- social interaction difficulties; and
- struggles with daily living skills.

Dyspraxia is based on evaluation, using different tests for adults and children.

Clinical Neurodiversity

Clinical neurodiversity refers to congenital neurological differences that are considered health conditions. This category of neurodiversity is related to difficulties in communication skills, social skills, behaviour and impulse control. They include...

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – ADHD

ADHD is a common disorder characterised by difficulties in attention and impulse control. It is typically identified in childhood and can persist into adulthood.

Symptoms of ADHD include daydreaming, forgetfulness, fidgeting, excessive talking, impulsivity, low self-control, difficulty taking turns and challenges in social interaction.

ADHD is categorised into three types, predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive- impulsive and a combination of both.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder encompasses a wide range of challenges related to social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech and non verbal communication. It is a common neurodevelopmental disorder affecting approximately one in fifty children.

Common signs of autism include:

- lack of response to names;
- limited eye contact;
- literal interpretation of language;
- repetitive phrases and repetitive movements;
- difficulty expressing emotions;
- intense interests;
- difficulty with friendships; and
- sensitivity to certain tastes, smells sounds.

Symptoms typically emerge by ages 2-3. ASD is often accompanied by sensory sensitivities, gastrointestinal disorders, seizures, sleep issues and mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and tension problems. ASD is a spectrum disorder, meaning individuals exhibit different strengths and challenges. Some may excel in learning and problem solving, while others face significant difficulties in the same area. Support needs to vary as well, ranging from extensive assistance to independent living.

Tourette syndrome

Tourette syndrome is a neurological condition that causes involuntary tics, sudden twitches, movements sounds that individuals repeat. Symptoms typically begin between 5 to 10 years of age, often starting with motor tics in the head and neck area. It is considered a chronic condition.

Intellectual disability

Intellectual disability refers to specific impairments of cognitive functioning and skills, including interpersonal skills and self-care. It leads to slower or different development and learning compared to typically developing individuals. Diagnosis requires an IQ below 70 significant limitations in two or more adaptive areas. Onset must occur before the age of 18.

Acquired neurodiversity

Acquired neurodiversity involves neurological differences that develop as part of a health condition or injury. They include acquired brain injury, a stroke, encephalitis, which is inflammation of the brain tissue due to infection an autoimmune response. Other illnesses and their treatments, such as Parkinson's disease, chronic fatigue syndrome and certain cancer treatments can also lead to neurological conditions. Rather than being a separate category, mental health illnesses also come under the category of acquired neurodiversity. These may include disorders like depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and obsessive compulsive disorder. Neurodivergent people tend to find some things very easy and others incredibly hard. This usually leads to an inconsistent performance at school or work.

Neurodiversity can be a competitive advantage when the individuals in the right environment, making use strengths instead of constantly trying to overcome challenges.

There is evidence that neurodiversity maybe inherited, one in four people who have neurodiversity will have a parent who also is neurodivergent, one in three will have a relative in their family.

The brain ways 2 1/2 lbs and has 100 billion neurons, imagine the Shard covered in TV screens, the number of pixels is equal to the number of neurons we have in our brain. The brain is serviced by 50 chemicals. It can be taught and develop to support us to manage its function and work in our best interests.

Personal challenges of those with neurodiversity may include:

- struggling with personal organisation;
- difficulty in regulating sleep as their brain is constantly working;
- may have difficulty in managing their emotions;
- memory problems, often their long term memory is excellent however short term memory poor;
- they may struggle with action, difficulty speeding up and slowing down. They may speak out of turn;
- make careless mistakes and struggle to pay attention to detail;
- have difficulty in maintaining attention and timing out of relationships;
- not appear to listen;
- may fail to follow through on tasks and instructions;
- exhibit poor organisational skills,

- avoid tasks requiring sustained attention not paying bills;
- lose things that are necessary for a task, keys and glasses before leaving home;
- be easily distracted by unrelated thoughts; and
- forget daily activities ... cleaning their teeth for example.

Apart from the personal challenges, there are the external challenges they face.

Discrimination in the workplace and in society at large, often misunderstood through ignorance and lack of education.

15% of autistic people are unemployed.

28% long term unemployed are dyslexic.

2/3 of those with neurodiversity fear discrimination in the workplace.

It is estimated that 50% of our prison population are neurodivergent.

An article published by Harvard Health publishing outlines how an employer can make their work place more neurodiversity-friendly:

- 'offer small adjustments to an employees workspace to accommodate any sensory needs such as sound sensitivity, offer a quiet space, communicate expected loud noise 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, offer flexible seating;
- use clear communication styles, 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; and
- be kind, be patient.

There are ways in which individuals can support themselves. Identifying hobbies and activities they enjoy. Learning to make lists and plans can be helpful. Creating a sensory kit containing ear defenders and items that give comfort in times of stress can be supportive. Connecting with others who have shared experience and seeking professional support. With support, develop strategies for making the most of their positives and limiting the impact of challenges in their everyday life.

There is no doubt benefiting from the love and care of family and friends is invaluable.

Whilst mental health has gained profile in recent years, it is often difficult to gain a diagnosis and support to address their needs. Evidence shows that with targeted coaching the performance of neurodivergent employees does improve. The level of stress they experience dramatically decreases when a neurodivergent person benefits from 4 x 2 hours coaching sessions the purpose of which is to help them develop strategies to navigate the world.

With neurodiversity can some gifts...

- A strong sense of fairness;
- hyper focus;
- creativity;
- innovative thinking;
- seeing the big picture;
- thinking outside the box;
- connecting ideas;
- generosity and kindness;
- A self deprecating sense of humour ;
- can have a high level of energy; and
- can be punctual.

To navigate our world neurodiverse individuals will have developed personal strategies to cope. They are likely to have developed high level of resilience and be persistent. With the right support they will develop self respect.

The common prejudices surrounding neurodiversity are based on preconceived opinion not based on reason or experience, all too often informed by the media and film.

Some of these are:

- it doesn't affect women;
- people who are dyslexic are lazy;
- oh everyone wants a label today;
- all artistic people are on the spectrum;

- they're all good at maths and puzzles; and
- they will need lifelong care.

As part of our assignment we were asked to talk to someone who is in this case is neurodiverse, about their experience of living in the world with this characteristic. I spent time with my relatively new friend Buddy who is autistic.

Buddy is 23 and lives with his parents who are in their early 60s in a flat above me. He happily shared his story in a straightforward emotionless manner, all very matter of fact.

Diagnosed at 4 and he became aware at 7, 'these children are very different from me and I needed help with my work.' He clearly remembers seeing lots of therapists and hated going to school and would often refuse from the age of 8.

At the age of 12, he moved out of mainstream education and at 16 attended a school for the performing arts which he loved and where he says, he excelled as he very obviously has the most amazing memory. He can recall dates and events in this life effortlessly.

At 19, he attended Goldsmiths to study Musical Theatre, he achieved a first class honours degree.

When thinking of what he would like to do, Buddy decided he would like to be an Usher in a West End theatre, however, a module on his course was 'Theatre as a Learning Medium' which exposed him to working with kids which he loved. He and his parents navigated him towards securing a Teaching Assistant Course and part-time work at his old school which he loves.

Now having spent time studying neurodiversity and the work I have done at Homa, I reflect that I felt better prepared me to be with him in my adult form. I believe a created a space that was open, empathetic and non judgemental.

Buddy obviously has some challenges, he struggles with loud noise and habitually wears ear defenders. He only eats pizza, fries, Hertz frankfurts and has scrambled eggs for breakfast everyday.

He needs lots of rest and a minimum of 12 hours sleep a night.

He takes medication in the morning, as he says, to get him through the day and some in the evening to help him sleep.

Throughout his young life he experienced bullying.

He needs very clear instruction to work through tasks.

His does chores for his parents to get money as his job is clearly unpaid.

He needs a structure to his life and a daily routine is crucial to his well being.

Buddy's greatest gift is his memory.

His passions spark joy – he attends at least two live performances very week. He always listens to Audible books when he showers. He loves the series Super Nanny and The World's Strictest Parents and watches them over and over again. The joy this gives him was clear for me to see.

There is something very endearing I found about his straight forward no nonsense approach to life and the challenges he has.

In conclusion, understanding neurodiversity can be a game changer. It is important to accept the fact that our brains to work differently. Increasing awareness,

challenging stereotypes and creating a compassionate environment can help people learn, function and thrive in society in ways that works best for them.

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List of resources

The Guardian a range of articles, including an interview with Judy Singer, The mother of Neurodiversity: how Judy Singer changed the world. July 2023.

Ted talks... Doctor Judy Ho, Clinical psychologist, Elizabeth Wiklander and Jennifer Poyntz.

Genius Within ... A consultancy devoted to supporting neurodiverse individuals and their organisations.

Harvard Health publishing a range of articles on neurodiversity.

College of policing.... Neurodiversity A glossary of terms.

Books

Scattered Minds by Gabor Mate

Surrounded by Idiots by Thomas Erickson

5 chairs 5 choices: own your behaviours, master your communication, determine your success by Louise Evans