
CREATING THE DIALOGUE FOR NEURODIVERGENCE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

Exploring the words & applying the actions for a psychologically safe environment



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“If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid...”

Albert Einstein



INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is a word that has been bandied around in ND circles for as long as I've been on the scene. How do we make sure people feel included? What reasonable adjustments should I ask for? When/should I disclose? are questions I see asked in Facebook groups and on Twitter. I have often wondered what I need when starting a new job, and struggle to know what Access to Work could provide. Or what would really help me. How do you explain an ADHD brain to a new boss? is one on a long list of questions.

I've been thinking about this a lot more recently, particularly after changing jobs, finally being in the space to reflect on previous workplace trauma and not in constant survival mode. I know how important it is for my neurodivergent brain to have a place where my thinking can be an asset at work, to feel included and have strategies or plans in place when things get difficult. As I process everything through words, I've written my learning down of the last few years into this "guide".

A decade ago, I would have loved some kind of resource to walk me through all of this or *what* I might experience as an adult at work, and I'm sure anyone who has ever employed me would have benefited from this too.

So, I'm going to do just that, write the surviving a workplace guide I never had. Except it isn't really a guide, there's no one size fits all "guide" to neurodiversity, it's a more trial and error template based on my experiences, with hints of what you could try and experiment with too. A template that you can adapt to suit your workplace, your experience, your needs or something you can completely change all together. I hope it can at least prompt some conversations.

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY AND NEURODIVERGENCE?

Neurodiversity is a term that was first coined by the Australian Social Scientist Judy Singer, to describe the natural variations in the way people think and process information, explaining that we are all cognitively diverse. The Neurodiversity movement grew with an aim to promote equality and inclusion of “neurological minorities.” The term recognises the challenges people face, but also the strengths they bring too.

Neurodivergent refers to people with less typical neurotypes, so ADHD, dyslexia, autism, dyscalculia, dyspraxia & dysgraphia.

People who are neurodivergent often have an uneven pattern of strengths and weaknesses, sometimes referred to as a “spiky profile.” We will often find some things very easy and other perceived “easy tasks” incredibly challenging. This can result in inconsistent performance at work. By

creating inclusive, safe spaces and reducing factors that are “disabling” or barriers, we can work together to amplify our strengths.

Often neurodivergence causes challenges with organisation, managing attention, concentration, time management, planning, thinking through and processing actions. These executive functions are what we all need to help us get out of bed in the morning, plan our day, prepare lunch and stick to a to-do list. When the part of the brain that manages our executive function is slightly off kilter, things may take longer or we might need more prompts and strategies than others. It can also result in emotional distress, frustration and anger if not properly understood and supported.

I have ADHD and Dyspraxia, so I will be talking through this lens and experience.

“Why not propose that just as biodiversity is essential to ecosystem stability, so neurodiversity may be essential for cultural stability.”

(Judy Singer, NeuroDiversity, The Birth of an Idea.)

Numeracy & numbers

(Dyscalculia)

Writing ability & fine motor skills

(Dysgraphia)

Processing information, organisation of thoughts & actions, short term memory, time management & prone to depression & anxiety.

Creative thinking, honesty, empathy, self awareness, being able to work independently, able to tackle adversity, capacity to see the bigger picture & problem solving.

Motor coordination, visual spatial skills & balance.

(Dyspraxia)

Reading, comprehension & spelling

(Dyslexia.)

Sensory sensitivities & emotional regulation.

Social communication

(Autism.)

Attention, focus, short term memory, impulsivity, hyperactivity & concentration.

(ADHD - inattentive, hyperactive or combined type)

Ability to hyperfocus.

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD.)

UNDERSTANDING BEFORE ACTING

I don't often talk explicitly about what "I can't" do but if you're going to be a supportive line manager or employer of neurodivergent folk, it's important to consider for a moment, the 'whys'. And why on some mornings it can feel like I'm going into battle with my ADHD brain. And how a lack of support can turn this battle into an impossible task.

Imagine this battle being the perceived simple tasks as everyday as struggling to find your way around a building you've been to many times before. Or having to rely on google maps so much for routes you do regularly rather than trusting your brain, to be taken the long way round with no understanding of how to get off the scenic route. Google maps makes you late for a meeting, again. Other days before work you worry about finding your way to a new place more than the work itself, so you overcompensate by setting off several hours ahead of when you need to, only to make yourself exhausted.

It can be forgetting your keys when you're in charge of locking up after a youth session at night, and failing to remember to text or call to say you've arrived home safely, triggering phone calls from annoyed managers who want to sign off for the night, then eventually the police. Sometimes when you're not forgetting things, you're asking a lot of questions to help you process information and give you the reassurance you need, this leads to your colleagues misreading you as being difficult, and managers questioning your ability to cope.

During an induction for one job you take notes but because of the time it takes to process new information, your notes make no sense and you fail to turn up to a meeting the next day; a meeting you were explicitly told to make a note of. Or you put the wrong date in your calendar and turn up early or late. Sometimes you don't get paid for your 0 hours sessional work because you didn't get your time sheet in on time, and no one offers accountability to support with challenging admin tasks.

Sometimes you lose focus and struggle to know what to prioritise and so miss your deadlines, or end up hyperfocusing and working over your hours to get things finished. You regularly spend longer than you should on a piece of work because you can't judge how long it will take you to finish without a clear structure with things broken into manageable chunks and deadlines. Other days you feel so overwhelmed by a busy noisy office, that you need time away on your own; this makes people assume you are being rude or unsociable. Most days though, the practical tasks are challenging, and you fear the tea run and your clumsiness making you spill it everywhere, adding further to any social awkwardness and appearing incompetent. Your colleagues don't understand why you never offer to make the tea for everyone when you head towards the kettle, it becomes a topic of office banter.

On other occasions colleagues shout at you for getting things wrong, managers will try to get you to talk it out as if they're dealing with some playground argument. One time you're sent to mediation with a colleague, where she proceeds to spend the hour telling you how awful you are, and what this has done to her. You've been told you can't be this, you shouldn't do that, your Myers Briggs personality doesn't fit. Concerns have been raised about your personality by more than one manager, in more than one workplace. You're shamed for not disclosing sooner. You feel uncomfortable now they know. You confide in a supervisor who appears to know it all; you look at her to guide you, you want to be more like her and less like yourself. She takes advantage of your apparent vulnerabilities. You're told you are not at a level where you can have a say or should worry about strategic thinking, you believe you will never be at a level where you will be listened to at work. Your anxiety makes you believe that you shouldn't be there. You stop contributing in meetings and avoid talking to colleagues more than you need to. Sometimes you're so terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing that you physically can't speak.

You try to make yourself invisible.

Can you see how all of this forming part of your early career journey can be exhausting? Some often, others happening once is enough to be bring back difficult memories. All of these scenarios (and more that I'm unable to talk about publicly) have happened to me at work or on university placements over the last decade. And are the motivation for writing this guide.



RECOGNISING WHAT A NEURODIVERGENT BRAIN CAN BRING

One of the most common questions I'm asked is: But doesn't being that open about your ADHD/dyspraxia disadvantage you? The answer to this question is yes, yes it has. More times than I'd like to remember, but I was in the wrong place, surrounded by the wrong people with outdated practices. I didn't disclose my dyspraxia (ADHD diagnosis came later so that wasn't an option) when I was very young because I didn't want it to disadvantage me. I didn't want my Neurodivergence to affect any opportunities or future career prospects. And most of all I didn't want to appear different. I say this now with a deeper understanding of the disadvantages I faced at work simply because I was in an environment that was not built to include me. Just writing that sentence breaks my heart, knowing I had to experience all of that to truly value the place I am in now. The key take away to remember here is that there are so many possibilities neurodiversity can add to a workplace. It doesn't just need to be a catalogue of barriers or "reasonable adjustments" that are needed. The less "reasonable adjustments" a person has to ask for is generally an indication of how inclusive a workplace is to its neurodivergent workers.

Some of the things that Neurodiversity and a spiky profile can bring to a team:

- Thinking creatively
- Lived experience
- Incredible long-term memory for detail
- Being able to work independently
- Honesty
- Having the capacity to see the bigger picture
- Meeting deadlines. I work well to deadlines: the lack of dopamine in my brain thrives off it!
- Using structure and being organised
- Finding solutions to difficult problems and approaching things from a different way
- Empathy and ability to listen
- Able to tackle adversity
- Channelling intense focus
- Problem solving like a ninja
- Making connections or points others may miss
- Self awareness
- Incredibly loyal, determined and passionate
- Noticing the finer details

This list could go on. Who wouldn't want any of this in their team?

BEING OPEN ISN'T EASY: CREATING A PLACE OF TRUST

I haven't always been this open about my Neurodivergence, and it isn't easy. Sometimes disclosure feels like the hardest mountain to climb in the world, because it's often made out to be a big thing but it really shouldn't be. Exposing your vulnerabilities is tough, alongside experiencing stigma, your own internal bias and prejudice within systems that are not built to include us.

The first thing to do to make disclosure seem less of a big deal is to create an environment and culture in your organisation that demonstrates openness and a place of trust. Start this before anyone joins your organisation; in job adverts, on your website and social media. Embed being open and accepting of differences into your brand. Encourage open discussion about disability & neurodivergence with the whole team, make it a normal part of your day to day. Not something different or rare to look "inclusive" once in a while.

If your ND employee trusts the people they work with and know they will be supported when needed, they are more likely to be honest when they're struggling or could potentially find something challenging. You will then have the opportunity as a line manager to mitigate against this or explore solutions.

In some workplaces I have disclosed, some even at interview, but sometimes I haven't felt comfortable discussing in depth my brain to a new manager. It's when the latter takes place I've experienced more workplace trauma, because assumptions are made about abilities and functioning, without anyone really understanding why. And any explaining is impossible when trust and safety doesn't exist at work. Developing trust from the start is the first step towards inclusion.

Inclusion isn't hard. It isn't complicated. But when done right and when standard practices are inclusive it can make the world of difference. You don't suddenly build a lift when a wheelchair user applies for a job, you will always have that lift. Exactly the same principle. Always assume that at least one of the brains on your team will be ND.



INCLUSION FROM THE START

Interview

Making your organisation seem welcoming and supportive from the beginning is important to attract and maintain neurodivergent staff. Some ideas to begin that process:

- Pre-interview tasks emailed in advance, rather than something to do during the interview. Not all jobs require a task beforehand, but for most comms roles these are pretty standard. For the interview for my current job I was emailed a task, with clear instructions and summary at the end explaining everything I had to do and by when, then just before the deadline I was sent a reminder email.
- Using a de-biased interview & application process
- Writing every interview question in the chat as they are asked. Being able to read back the question helps with working memory and processing. So simple, yet so helpful. Also providing the interview questions prior to the interview without anyone having to ask.
- Not asking questions in two parts. This is horrendous for ND brains, as I can guarantee I'll forget there was a second part of the question. The feedback for an interview I had several years ago for a job I didn't get was, "did not answer the second part of the question," I did not know there was a second part.
- Offering prompts if an answer needs to be expanded, or you didn't mention a key part of the job description. In one question I forgot to mention social media, when social media is pretty key to my comms role. I was so focused on describing a newsletter in detail. This prompt allowed me to say what I wanted to say, I just needed to be reminded it was in my brain waiting to get out.

Induction

Over the years I've had jobs with no induction process, literally just a tour that was classed as induction and places with a list to get through, but with so many conversations I forgot everything when the induction was over. Getting inductions right shouldn't be hard, but putting the right kind of induction in place can mean the difference between a Neurodivergent employee feeling overwhelmed before they even begin or thriving in a place that accepts them. When planning an induction consider:

- A longer induction process. Something that is only a week long will lead to our

often poor working memory not being able to handle all of the new information.

- A clear timetable of induction sessions, noting any useful reading to do before the session. Having something to read or watch helps us retain information, and to think of questions to ask before the session.
- Record all virtual induction sessions. Sounds simple but this has literally changed my life. I know this is harder when in person, but if over zoom, press record. The session can then be available for anyone who wants to go back and watch it later. Every induction session I've been to, I've watched bits of again, and when I've been on annual leave I don't fall behind as I can catch up on sessions I've missed.
- Reflection – building in reflection as part of the induction helps everyone to learn and feedback what went well, what wasn't helpful and things to do differently next time.

Probation

A probation period is about learning and developing your practice in a new job, and building relationships with your line manager and other colleagues. A probation period, alongside being a time for the employer to assess if they've employed the right person for the role, is also an opportunity for us to understand if we are in the right job, with the right amount of support and opportunities for progression.

The first few months can often be a stressful time in a new role, as we start to get to know colleagues, our line manager, learn new processes and understand expectations. If you're anything like me you also worry about "failure" or "doing the wrong thing" more so than most people, as we navigate our neurodivergence at work and how much of us it feels safe for our colleagues to see.

This extra pressure may mean we simply need more time. Just like extra time being offered in a maths exam for someone who takes longer to process information, extending a probation period for similar reasons, should be offered as standard to anyone who needs a bit more time to adjust and settle into a new job. Extending probation period is often seen as negative, or as a failure. I was convinced I'd failed when I had a conversation about extending my probation period with my line manager recently, but really it's about having the luxury of more time to improve, learn and reflect on your practice. Suggesting a probation extension, means that a line manager wants you to do well and recognises the need for a bit more time and support to get there. It doesn't mean you can't do it. Not everyone will need an extension of their probation period, but offering this as an option early on, and framing it positively, will help neurodivergent employees feel comfortable and safe in their new role and your organisation.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AS AN EMPLOYER?

Incorporate systemic inclusion & Neurodivergent accessible practices throughout your organisational structure.

Being neurodivergent inclusive should be down to the organisation adopting practices, a culture of celebrating difference and values that ensure Neurodivergent people are able to get everything they need without having to ask. My view of reasonable adjustments has changed, from believing that it was always down to me to ask to be included, to now understanding that real inclusive environments are where adjustments are not needed. To embed inclusion into your practice, consider:

- Changing your practices to be inclusive of Neurodivergent people whether they disclose to you or not. It is highly likely that someone in your workplace will be undiagnosed. How can you ensure they feel part of the team?
- Developing specific policies or strategies that mention supporting neurodiversity. This can attract a larger pool of candidates because you are publicly saying in writing why your organisation will be a good place to work for their brain to thrive. Can you write a neurodiversity at work policy?
- Encouraging an open environment that values lived experience. I've always felt safe, comfortable and reassured when other people are open about their neurodivergence

and lived experiences too.

This openness always starts at management by creating a culture where lived experience is valued and respected.

How can you begin generating an inclusive workplace culture?

- Can you re-design how you facilitate meetings? There a lot of productivity apps or project management tools that can be used to accompany meetings, like Notion or Miro. They are useful to everyone and will make processing, memory, executive functioning and organisation easier. Making meetings participatory can also help. I process a lot verbally, so when accessing new information I need to be engaged, rather than sitting and listening. Factoring in enough breaks during meetings is also important for everyone, but especially if you have ADHD and need to move around.
- Developing a specific strand of your organisation to explore further neurodiversity in the workplace. Encourage conversations and reflections. This could be allocated to a specific person or group to develop training, resources and to normalise discussing difference at work.
- Listen to the experiences, ideas and knowledge your neurodivergent colleagues bring.
- If you organise specific training for the staff team. Be clear about what

actions, by whom, and a time line for change. Neurodiversity should never be a tick box exercise.

- Asses the office environment. Can you ensure it's less sensory stimulating? Are the quiet spaces to go to if needed? Is it welcoming to people who might find big office environments overwhelming?
- Admin: everyone has to do admin at some point but this can especially be overwhelming for ADHD brains. Have you identified the most efficient admin process for time sheets or expenses with as few steps as possible? Can you offer admin accountability?
- Building time into the work day for reflections, conversations and well-being discussions can help to break down barriers and foster a more open workplace.

Recognising and understanding Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria or RSD

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria is intense feelings of rejection, most common in autism and ADHD and can lead to overwhelming feelings of despair or failure. Everyone's RSD triggers are different, and some people don't experience RSD very often. A simple suggestion or pointing out mistakes has triggered a trauma response in me before, as it highlights past feelings of failure or not being good enough. A lot of reassurance can help, alongside being very clear and explicit about why. Telling me how I'm valued and needed really helps to reassess feelings of rejection. Knowing that my contributions to a team make a difference, alongside developing strong supportive relationships with

colleagues can help to mitigate things going too off kilter.

Listen and Keep communication open, honest and supportive

It's very easy to make assumptions about someone's neurodivergence based on another ND person you know, something you've read or your own idea of ADHD/Dyspraxia. This can make well meaning thoughts and actions have the opposite affect and feel less supportive at best and intrusive at worst. For example don't assume that ADHD is about stereotypically hyperactive boys, be open to learning about the gender differences and how it might present in adults. The best thing you can do as a line manager is to listen to what your employee needs, what their neurodivergence means to them and how you can offer support. Alongside respecting boundaries and understanding that being able to comfortably discuss some things takes time and a place of trust. Offer different channels of communication so that when they feel ready, you can be contacted in a way that's comfortable and accessible to them. Make sure you use email, phone, text, teams message and face to face or video call as often as each other. If you know your employee needs warning before a phone call to give them time to gather their thoughts, drop them an email first explaining the reason for the call and what you plan to discuss. Even if it's just a check in, be more specific. Being vague can unintentionally cause panic and overwhelm. An email subject of "have you got five minutes, I need to speak to you," might trigger a response that they've done something wrong, and mentally they'll be clearing their desk. An email saying, "are you free on

X day for a phone call? I'd like to see how you're getting on this week and how you're feeling about X." Feels much less overwhelming and more supportive, as you know you're not about to get the sack because of a terrible mistake. Having regular supervision, 1:1's & a manager who's available most days, has been useful as I know there's always plenty of opportunities to bring things up if I forget or suddenly don't feel able to.

Asking people's preferred communication methods

We all have different ways we prefer to communicate; whether over email, text or calls. As an employer it's your responsibility to ask the best way to communicate with your ND employee, and then once you know, respect this.

Keep discussions & reflections positive

Rather than asking "what do you struggle with?" or "what can't you do?," rephrase questions positively. Asking solution focussed questions can help, so saying; "what can I do to support you to be your best?" or "what time of day would be good for you to help us meet these outcomes?," and "when things are not going well, what can I do to make things

easier for you?"

Being given options to support me to make decisions when feeling overwhelmed has always helped. Starting the conversation by saying, "We can do X,YZ," when someone struggles to know what to say can help. Being questioned about what we can't do, can trigger memories of diagnostic assessments, when the emphasis is often on where we struggle, rather than what we CAN do and how you the manager can help us do it. Going through difficult parts of our medical history with a new employer can often be a sore point.

Translate training into actions

Training is useful for everyone, when done well and the actions or ideas are followed up on. If you plan to hire Neurodiversity trainers to train your team, involve those with lived experience (if they feel comfortable) to plan the training or have a say about its content. How will this training for the staff team benefit them? For neurodiversity training to make a difference, changing organisational policies or practices to fit the new learning can be empowering and make everyone feel that they matter, and that the training is much more than a



CPD exercise.

Understand power

Recognising that ND folk may have had difficult experiences of power or not feeling listened to by former managers or professionals in their life is important to create a welcoming environment. Power dynamics of the team, management and your neurodivergent employees often need to be considered when creating an inclusive workplace. Having 'power-with' can be reassuring for your ND employees and will support recruitment of a more diverse workforce. Creating a fair power balance, where views, reflections and ideas are considered by all will make everyone feel more included and valued.

Create a psychologically safe environment

We need to start talking more about how we can feel psychologically safe at

work.

How can we feel comfortable communicating our needs, preferences and support that would be helpful to our team? When can we feel safe in a space to know we can call something out if it isn't okay, and not fear our jobs? How can we feel happier? I've avoided talking too much about reasonable adjustments, as while they are important, they don't solve all of the inclusion and accessibility issues, if the workplace is not a psychologically safe place to be.

Offices are typically designed for neurotypical people, and ND brains often miss out on opportunities or progression because work doesn't feel safe, either because of a toxic work culture or because of expectations of who you must be in specific professions. Universal neurodivergent design and a welcoming atmosphere where we feel able to be ourselves can help us to feel included and psychologically safe at work.

Things to avoid

- Don't treat the Neurodivergent person as free ND consultancy. It's everyone's responsibility to learn.
- Blanket "reasonable adjustments" because that's what the last person with ADHD had or needed.
- Assuming what someone needs before they tell you.
- No breaks between & during meetings.
- Lots of information in one format.
- Pushing disclosure to other colleagues before they feel ready or equipped to do so.

DEVELOPING A WRAP OR SIMILAR SAFETY PLANS TO MITIGATE AGAINST POTENTIALLY DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

The first time I sat down with a line manager and completed a Well-being Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) was when I worked for a mental health charity. A WRAP identifies when things are going well, signs things might not be so great and support your manager can provide. It's helpful to have this written down before you experience a crisis, difficult or triggering situations, to have the tools to mitigate against any problems or challenges

It's hard having these kind of conversations for the first time, and trust needs to be in place before they can comfortably take place with honesty and be productive. Once you are in a place to discuss workplace well-being, you can plan a WRAP in anyway that suits you or your type of work. You might also want to consider having several meetings to fill it in, as doing this all in one go can be emotionally draining. When I first completed a WRAP with a manager I was in the position of working for a mental health charity with lived experience at the heart of their work, so I had a lot of support after if needed. I've also had employers complete WRAPS without the adequate training, understanding or follow up after. It felt very much like a tick box exercise and my WRAP was never visited again. Make sure you have the fundamentals of support and training in place before completing WRAP plans with your staff.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR WELL-BEING RECOVERY ACTION PLANS (WRAP)

Thinking about your maintenance kit

- How do you feel and act at work when things are going well?
- What do you need to do & when do you need to do them to maintain your well-being?
- How can a manager best support you to do your best at work?
- What changes can be made to help you improve your performance & workplace well-being?

When your day isn't so great

- What are the subtle signs when things aren't going well for you?
- What things can your manager do to help you get back on track?

Understanding trauma & triggers

- Triggers can be anything that knocks us off balance, from difficult past experiences, things related to our jobs or that colleagues or managers do. They might be related to how the system works (or fails to work!) Things that happen outside of work can also have a detrimental affect in work. Reflect on your triggers, and briefly share if you feel able to, (without going into too much detail if that is uncomfortable.)
 - How can a manager alleviate or reduce the potential of these triggers cropping up in the workplace? Are there any safety plans that can be made around specific triggers?
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Considering your mental health first aid

- What things can you do for yourself to stop what has happened getting too much?
- What things can your manager do to help you avoid or endure the triggers effectively?

When it all gets too much & overwhelming

- How can you identify when you can't cope?
- What steps can you take to access support or move towards things going well again?
- What can a manager look for that indicates you might be struggling?
- What can a manager do if they think things have reached this stage?
- How can a manager best support you going forward?

Taking time off work

- Your health and well-being is low and you have to take time off work, what are the things you can do to speed up recovery?
- What can your manager do to support you?

THINGS THAT HELPED ME

Over the years there are different things that I have found helpful, or I would if it was provided by an employer. I have collated a list of some of the common challenges I've experienced at work, and some useful ideas for support.

Challenge

Support

Orientation, spatial awareness & sense of direction: one common challenge for people with dyspraxia specifically, is worrying about getting lost and finding your way around a new place or building.

- Extra time in induction to orientate myself with a new place or building
- Traveling somewhere the day before so I can test getting there (this of course isn't always feasible.)
- Meeting someone to travel to the new place together
- Being able to get a taxi to relieve anxiety
- Directions given using landmarks rather than street names, left and rights, and roundabouts. "Go past the bank and up the hill, near the church," is much easier to visualise and remember.
- Someone physically showing me where something is in a building.
- As much warning as possible when I need to travel to a new place to prepare myself.
- Using clear signage for events.

General hand eye coordination.

- In youth settings: planning activities that do not draw attention to any difficulties or could potentially trigger trauma; for example sport or ball games with young people or in staff training.
- More time to learn new practical tasks and someone to show me 'how.' Visual reminders to aid working memory.

Challenge

Support

Concentration, attention and focus.

- Someone checking in with me regularly especially when working from home.
- Tasks broken down into smaller parts.
- Being able to go over information verbally. Talking things through often helps.
- Regular breaks to get up and move around.
- In person discussions taking place during a walk, I find that walking and talking sometimes helps.
- Things to occupy my hands, stress balls are incredibly important to focus in meetings.
- It not being seen as a big deal when someone has to get up to leave the room.

Anxiety, trauma & PTSD:
Often neurodivergent folk have accompanying trauma, anxiety, PTSD or other mental health conditions. This can be exacerbated by previous negative workplace experiences and a life time lacking recognition and understanding.

- Giving feedback in a way that is not read as 'mistakes' and triggers feelings of failure.
- Offer a lot of positive feedback – ND people can often appear to need more support than most, often because of lack of support elsewhere in their lives.
- Having a safe or named person for difficult or triggering situations who can offer support.
- Normalise leaving the room when someone needs to get out.
- Channel over thinking and worrying into something productive, talking things through has been a massive help to me.
- If comfortable and appropriate develop a WRAP and an understanding of what you can do as a line manager to support their well-being.
- Offer an open and supportive environment to discuss mental health needs.

Challenge

Executive function, processing information & short-term memory, leading to difficulties with time management, following instructions and personal organisation.

Support

- Accountability from another colleague or manager. Regular calls or messages to keep me on track.
 - Providing a routine and structure for my work day.
 - Instructions in easy to process steps backed up in writing. Either over instant message during calls or emails.
 - Having a shared to-do list to tick off tasks.
 - Allow extra time when needed.
 - Avoiding needing to listen and write things down at the same time or to take minutes in meetings. Making people aware that I will need to pause and processing times in conversations to capture important information.
 - Don't give me more than one verbal instruction at once.
 - Offer 1:1 sessions to clarify understanding.
 - Use productivity apps and other technology to record thoughts.
 - Group admin accountability time. During team meetings there is dedicated time to do time sheets and expenses. We stay on the call, and give everyone a bit of accountability to get these done. Some elements of Admin is vital in every job, but for us ADHD gang getting it done can be hit and miss. I'm so on top of my expenses these days because there is dedicated admin time built into my work day.
 - Virtual chat groups and check ins to post what you're working on that day are good to build into an organisations routine and also help with focus. I now know that before I do anything, I need to tell everyone else what I plan to do.
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FINDING A WORKING ENVIRONMENT WHERE YOU CAN FIT MEANS

- Being sent a clear time line of deadlines for the week without having to ask.
- Not having to 'explain' anything because the system supports you.
- Someone checking in with you to see if you're doing okay.
- Being told when you've done something well. The positive feedback meaning everything, because your manager actually means it.
- Having a personal development plan to revisit and monitor progression and achievements.
- Not being questioned when you say you need something.
- A presentation going well and everyone in the team saying so.
- Using virtual to-do lists to keep instructions in one place.
- Reassuring you that it's okay to ask for help.
- Building in accountability time into team meetings to get admin done.
- Calls to talk you through something when you get confused.
- Recording sessions, so your notes don't miss important information.
- Emailing a detailed travel plan when working away, so you can keep track of where you have to be and when.
- Reflection and learning forming a core part of the working day. Realising that everyone can always do things differently and knowing there are safe spaces to explore this.
- Being encouraged to keep in contact with your line manager, not for micro-management reasons, quite the opposite, to ensure you have a conversation before getting too stressed and overwhelmed.
- An inclusive, welcoming, accepting ethos embedded across the organisation, with a de-biased interview process that focuses entirely on strengths. This results in feeling valued, and part of a team, You're able to be yourself.
- Everyone, what ever their level in an organisation, listening to the whole teams ideas, feedback and reflections.

Most of what I've experienced doesn't cost very much, if anything at all. And that's the thing, being inclusive, accepting, understanding of past trauma and welcoming doesn't have to and won't break the bank of most companies or organisations. No one's going to be any worse off, just because you're made to feel that you want to be there. It's about creating a culture where this stuff is second nature, with structured time for learning and developing practices further.

I know most workplaces are much further away from the practices in my current job – but the fact that my outlook on how I see and understand 'reasonable adjustments' has changed – means it's really not hard for others to build and design an environment with and for us, not just an occasional extension we have to ask to use. And it's everyone's responsibility to be involved in that design.

This is what real change feels like. It's wanting to be there, and knowing my contributions are valued.

I don't want you to employ me because you need to meet a disability quota to show you're inclusive. I don't want you to work with me out of pity or because you think I'm less than you, needing guidance or to be "fixed". I want you to want to work with me because you recognise there's a lot you can learn from me too and that I'm very good at what I do.



KEY TAKEAWAYS TO REMEMBER

Every neurodivergent person is unique, with their own pattern of strengths and weaknesses. We might have similar challenges but we aren't the same. It's cliché if your neighbour has ADHD, you've only met one ND person. The best thing you can ask is "how can I support you right now to be your best?"

You don't have to treat a neurodivergent person as "special" or "different." It's about designing an environment and workplace practices to include. Reasonable adjustments shouldn't be necessary if we consider ND brains before they get there.

Language matters. Identity is a complicated beast and we all feel comfortable with different forms of language to describe our brain or the difficulties we may experience. I don't like to identify as disabled, but will use disability for legal and Equality Act reasons, I prefer the term difference, or neurodivergent. Similarly some people prefer identity first language so autistic rather than person with autism. Language is so complex and it's always best to just ask someone what they prefer, and how they choose to identify. Once you know, it's your responsibility to respect this.

Understand executive function and how this might affect a working environment. Reflect on the different requirements of job roles in your organisation, and then list the different executive functions required to meet specific tasks, you can then identify how a neurodivergent person might experience challenges. This learning can then be used to plan policy or structural changes across the organisation to positively support neurodivergent brains.



Recognise that hormones at different times of the month will vary how ND traits affect people who menstruate.

Depending on how open you are as an organisation, this may or may not be shared with you. Hormones can impact Neurodivergence. My ADHD medication doesn't work as well when I'm on my period, this results in appearing more chaotic, losing focus & and concentration more easily, hyperfocusing on the wrong thing and heightened emotions.

Know that Access to Work exists but understand it has limitations.

I've found navigating Access to Work has worsened my mental health, and often employers assume Access to Work will solve all of the inclusivity in their organisation. It doesn't. And often Access to Work assessments are very generic with little understanding of Neurodivergence, offering standard software or support to everyone. There is also a lot of unnecessary admin involved, and especially for ADHD or dyslexic folk this can be overwhelming. I've often had to go into Access to Work assessments with a very clear idea of what I need. The most helpful support I've had so far is Neurodivergent aware therapy and ADHD specific coaching, alongside taxi's when I worked across a lot of venues. Both the therapy and coaching I sourced myself and had to be very clear about wanting a specific person who understands my brain. Again this only comes with knowing the system. If you are an organisation able to provide productivity software across the team that can play to ND strengths, and then use access to work for any therapeutic support if needed, consider doing so. It also helps to offer support with the admin that comes with Access to Work. I haven't had to apply for Access to Work for my latest job, and I've felt more included than I have in years.

Systemic inclusion benefits everyone. Ensuring your workplace is inclusive of ND employees, whether they've disclosed to you or not, ensures that everyone is more productive, supported and valued. Designing an accessible workplace will develop a more diverse workforce, bringing new skills, talent and experiences to your team. Why would any one not want that?



WHAT IF YOU'RE A NEURODIVERGENT EMPLOYEE?

This guide is mainly aimed at an employer, line manager or a neurodivergent employee to use as a starting point to begin conversations about Neurodiversity at work.

I have stayed away from using phrases like: "if you're neurodivergent, you should do this.." This is because;

A) The onus shouldn't be on the ND person to advocate and "explain".

B) The responsibility lies with the employer and line manager to make a workplace ND inclusive.

There are a few things I wish I'd recognised or known years ago when I was starting to navigate Neurodiversity at work:

Take your time – don't feel pressured into disclosing until you feel ready

The first rule of sharing anything personal, whether online or in person is that you don't owe anyone all of you, and this goes for workplace disclosure too. If I could give my younger self one piece of advice it would be to 'take all of the time you need'. I've gone from not disclosing at work and feeling that my differences are the problem, to my lived experience being a reason I got the job and having mental health conversations with colleagues with so much ease it feels 'normal'. I was also recently open about my ADHD at an interview. There isn't a right way to have a disclosure conversation, and feeling comfortable and safe to do so takes time. You can allow yourself this time to work out what will help you. Likewise if you tell a manager, you shouldn't have to tell other colleagues too and no one should expect you to be out about your Neurodivergence until you feel ready. I've needed years to work on myself and find the language that comfortably speaks to me. I've experienced a lot of bad practice too, where I've learned how things shouldn't be done, and assumed supportive 'reasonable adjustments' had the opposite affect. This learning is important before anything else.

Write a "disclosure" document to support conversations if helpful

Start documenting what you would say when you finally disclose in writing first. Some people call this a disclosure document designed to give to your employer

when you disclose a disability. I have one that I add to from time to time but I have never given it to any manager yet. It helps me to keep track of my difficulties at work and strategies I've developed over the years. In the early days it also helped me to understand who I am, and work on my identity. If like me you process everything in words, I'd really recommend putting it all in writing first before any conversations. Or recording several voice notes to yourself. It's a massive help to organise thoughts, and to understand how my brain affects me at work, support that's helped, anything that hasn't and to record feelings and emotional regulation. Similarly, when I was titrating on ADHD medication, keeping a detailed log about how I was feeling helped me to recognise the support I really need, and why. A disclosure document can include a summary of your diagnosis, specifically how they affect you, your strengths and skills at work, any difficulties related to the workplace and how a line manager can offer support. I think of it as a bit like a Neurodivergent CV and not a list of all the things you might struggle with as on diagnostic reports, but instead a document highlighting why you're an asset to your employer and how they can help you thrive even more, whilst also being honest and dictating your own care.

Know your rights and join a union

Too many neurodivergent people, myself including, experience workplace trauma, discrimination and bullying throughout their careers. A lot of the time, especially young people in first jobs, we don't know what we're entitled to or what support to expect at work. The best advice I can give anyone is join a Union, even if you don't need it right now, having a union to ring for advice will be useful at some point in your career. Neurodivergence is classed as a disability under the Equality Act 2010, giving employees protection from discrimination, bullying or unfair treatment at work. Again a union is the best place to turn to for support with workplace bullying or when your needs aren't being met.

Get therapy

One of the best things I've done to understand myself and be able to better communicate and be honest about my needs at work is to get a lot of therapy. Finding the right therapist takes time (I often joke that it's a bit like a relationship, many of them are rubbish before you find a good one,) but when you do find someone who understands you, your neurodivergence and any trauma really does make the world of difference. Finding 'neurodivergent aware' therapy and not having to spend half the session explaining to a new person what dyspraxia is and associated complex trauma, because they just get it, has been life changing.



All employers should make Neurodivergent employees feel like they have a place at the table, without having to ask for anything that hasn't already been considered to help them sit there with the rest of the team. You wouldn't ask for a chair when you book a table at a restaurant, you would expect it to be included when you make your reservation.

