



Supporting neurodiversity

in the
workplace

Workplace
Health and Wellbeing **Academy**

Helping everyone **thrive at work**

It's important to empower everyone to be at their best selves at work. Yet, many traditional workplaces are not designed with neurodivergent people in mind.

In this guide, we'll explain what neurodiversity is and highlight its value in the workplace. We'll also share some ideas for 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 how you respond to information will be unique to you.

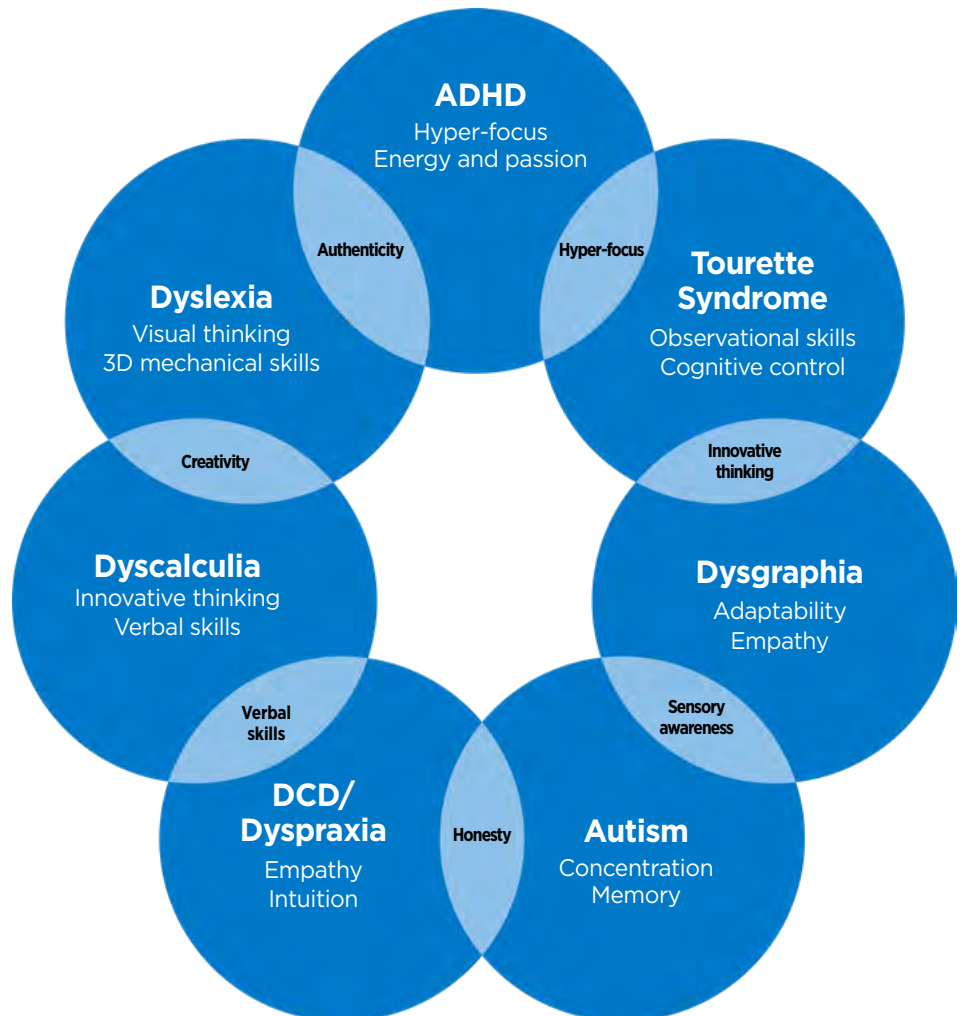
Most people are neurotypical - meaning they think and behave in ways that might be expected for their age and cultural background. But around 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent, meaning they may experience and interpret the world differently.

Traditional working practices are not designed around the needs of neurotypical people, which can make it difficult for neurodivergent employees to thrive at work.



1 in 7
people are neurodivergent

Neurodivergent differences can present in a variety of ways, with **lots of overlapping traits and behaviours.**





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
- attention to detail
- taking risks
- pushing boundaries
- seeing things from a different perspective



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 people through any individual challenges they may face at work.

It's important to know that neurodivergent differences affect people in different ways. If it substantially impacts 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 empower neurodivergent employees at work.

Just three in ten autistic people in the UK are in employment



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 lose trust in the employer for not treating their differences seriously. Consequently, they may become withdrawn and anxious at work.”

Although each neurodivergent individual will have unique needs, there are some steps you can take to offer support.

Listen first, then support

Try to learn more about your neurodivergent team members as individuals, rather than assuming their experience based on a label or condition.

Some may have a formal diagnosis while others self-identify. While some individuals feel comfortable being open, others prefer to keep things private.

Certain forms of neurodivergence have common characteristics, but these can vary widely from person to person. For example, one person with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) might struggle to concentrate in meetings or on a particular task, while another might not.

Avoid assumptions and stereotypes. Instead, focus on understanding your team members' unique strengths, challenges, and preferences so you can offer the right kind of support.

At least **1 in 17** people are thought to be **dyspraxic**



Provide a safe space

Some neurodivergent people might not ask for help when they need it, due to stigma and fear of discrimination. During one-to-one interactions, it can help to ask questions in a gentle way, like: **“Do you feel you need any support?”** **“Are you experiencing any of these difficulties?”**

Giving your employees a safe space to open up, without labelling or assuming what people need, will encourage them to answer honestly and build an empathetic connection that can help ensure you offer the right support.

A note on language

Before offering support to neurodivergent employees, it's important to understand that people have different preferences around language. Some prefer identity-first language (for example an Autistic person), while others prefer person-first language (for example a person with autism). The best approach is to ask each individual how they prefer to be referred to and respect that choice.

It's estimated that more than **3 in 100** adults have **ADHD**



Ravi Lukha, Medical Director, Bupa UK Insurance, explains:

“Being neurodivergent is a true superpower and employers should celebrate the diversity and unique talents of their workforce. Allowing neurodivergent employees to play to their strengths whilst supporting them within the working environment is key to enabling them to flourish and reach their potential.”

Offer 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 motor coordination, which can make using a keyboard or

mouse difficult. Some people with autism have limited speech, while some individuals with dyslexia might struggle with reading and writing.

To help neurodivergent employees feel more comfortable at work, you could invest in equipment such as:

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

When speaking with employees, try to use language that focuses on differences, rather than deficits or conditions. Neurodiversity is a natural part of human variation, just like being left or right-handed.

Tailor your communication

Some neurodivergent employees may have difficulty communicating with others.

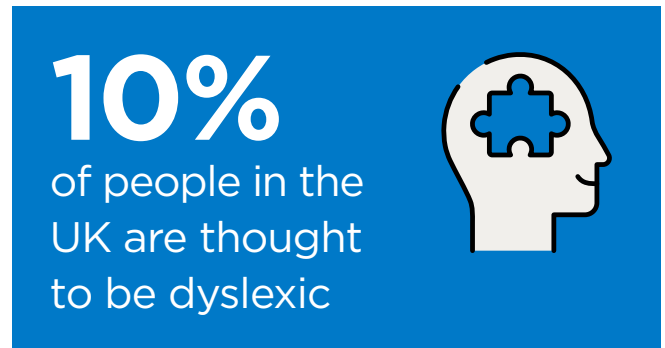
For example, someone with autism might:

- struggle to read facial expressions
- misunderstand your tone of voice
- take what you say literally
- find it hard to understand sarcasm or metaphors
- feel more socially anxious

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.

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

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.



Adapt work tasks

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 more varied role, where they can take regular breaks and work flexible hours. Or if your employee has dyslexia, consider offering more time to read and finish tasks.

You may want to help some employees organise diaries, set clear priorities, or break tasks into smaller steps. You could also record your meetings so that people 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.

Adjust physical environment

Traditional workspaces are not often designed with the needs of neurodivergent employees in mind. Bright lighting, lots of noise, and interruptions in a busy office may feel overstimulating or overwhelming for some people. The journey to the office

may cause anxiety, and the lack of personal or quiet space could also be difficult to manage.

If your employees are experiencing these challenges 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 working areas 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.

“Adapting the workplace environment to accommodate neurodivergent employees can also highlight the employer’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, and reduce the stigma around neurodivergence. It can make employees feel safe and empowered to disclose a neurodivergence, and make it more likely that they 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 employees 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 employees feel they can ask for help if needed. It will help you show support is available, 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.

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

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 employees know of their teammate’s neurodivergence. But it’s important to obtain the individual’s permission first, as they may prefer to keep this private or tell their colleagues themselves.

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.

Ravi Lukha, Medical Director, Bupa UK Insurance, explains:

“Looking after our mental wellbeing is essential for us all, and those who are neurodiverse are no different. In fact, such differences can make working life a challenge at times. That’s why it is crucial to make any reasonable adjustments, practical or otherwise, to aid a supportive environment for neurodivergent employees that nurtures their self-esteem and inner confidence as much as their productivity.”

Nurture good mental wellbeing

Although neurodiversity and mental health are two different things, they can sometimes get mixed up. Being neurodivergent is not caused by mental health. 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 doing their best to live in a neurotypical world.

Make small adjustments to support their working life 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.

“Being neurodivergent means facing challenges that a neurotypical person doesn’t have to. Especially as people with neurodivergent differences 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 give individuals a sense of purpose, helps us connect with others, and can give us a more positive outlook on life.”

Gillian Cairns and Marjorie Zambezi, Occupational Health Advisors at Bupa



Resources

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