# Neurodiversity

What it means, how minds differ,
and how to make room for your own.

*There is no one right way for a mind to work.*

A PLACE TO START

For anyone who has always felt a little out of step, and for the people who love and work with them. Plain language, based on research, with every source named. The last pages show where to continue. Written by someone who is not a medical professional.

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# Start anywhere

There is no right order. Go to the page you need today, and print only that page if you like. Every page stands on its own. On a phone, tap any line or box to type.

People use different words for themselves. I use the ones most people have told researchers they prefer, and yours are welcome here.

> If you only have energy for one page today: **A low-demand day**, page 12.

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ONE

# The words, in plain language

These words are new to many people, and they are easy to mix up. Here is what each one means.

| Word | What it means |
|---|---|
| Neurodiversity | All human minds vary, the way all living things vary in nature. The sociologist Judy Singer first used the word in the late 1990s. |
| Neurodivergent | A person whose mind works differently from what society treats as typical. The autistic activist Kassiane Asasumasu coined it. |
| Neurotypical | A person whose mind works in the ways society expects. |
| Neurodiverse | A group with different kinds of minds. A team can be neurodiverse. One person is neurodivergent. |

Neurodivergent is not a medical diagnosis. Many people use it with a diagnosis, and some without one.

*Everyone is part of neurodiversity. Some of us are further from the middle.*

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TWO

# Some of the ways minds differ

Estimates suggest that around one in five people are neurodivergent. Many people have more than one of these, and they often overlap.

| | A few things it can mean |
|---|---|
| ADHD | Attention that is driven by interest rather than importance, energy, impulsivity, time that is hard to feel |
| Autism | Different ways of sensing, communicating, and connecting, and often a love of depth, pattern, and routine |
| Dyslexia | Reading and spelling take more effort; often strong big-picture thinking |
| Dyspraxia | Coordination and organising movement and tasks take more effort |
| Dyscalculia | Numbers and maths take more effort |
| Dysgraphia | Handwriting, and turning thoughts into written structure, take more effort |
| Tourette's | Tics: movements or sounds that are hard to hold back |
| More than one | Very common. Being autistic and ADHD is sometimes called AuDHD. |

These are short, and every person is different. Some people also count brain injury, epilepsy, and some mental health conditions as forms of neurodivergence.

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THREE

# Different, difficult, or both

There are two ways of looking at a mind that works differently.

AN OLDER LENS

The problem sits in the person.

*Change the person.*

THE NEURODIVERSITY LENS

The person and the world do not fit well.

*Change the fit, and support the person.*

The neurodiversity lens does not pretend everything is easy. Some differences are disabling, and support, adjustments, and sometimes medication can help a great deal. It asks where the difficulty sits: in you, in the world around you, or in the gap between.

You may feel your difference is a disability, a strength, a trait, or all of these on different days. You do not have to choose one word.

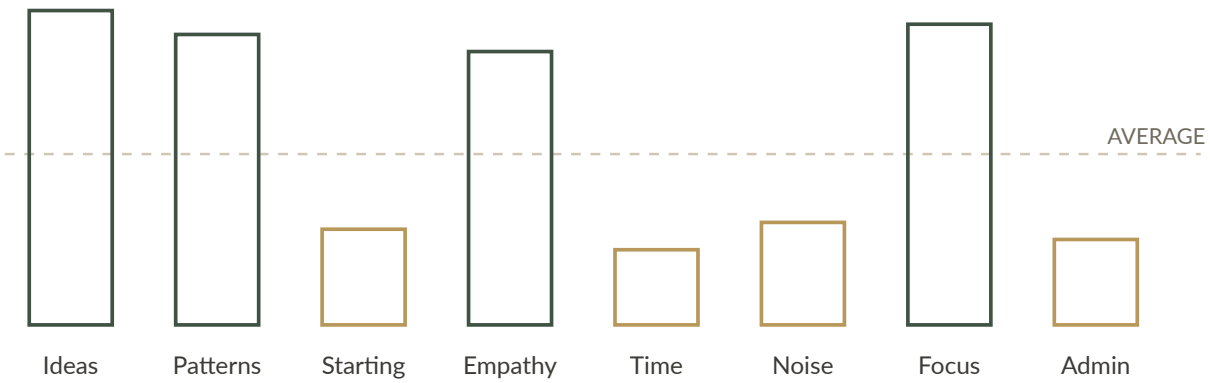
HOW I WOULD DESCRIBE MY MIND, IN MY OWN WORDS

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FOUR

# A spiky profile

Many neurodivergent people have what researchers call a **spiky profile**: some things come very easily, and some are much harder, side by side. A picture of one person's might look like this.




An example, not a measurement. Everyone's shape is their own.

This is why someone can lead a complex project and still miss a dentist appointment. Both are true.

MY PEAKS

MY DIPS

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FIVE

# What it can feel like

Being neurodivergent is not one feeling. It is a lens on sights, sounds, people, and expectations. Tick what you recognise.

### SENSES

- [ ] Lights, chatter, tags, or smells feel too much
- [ ] Needing deep pressure, movement, or background sound to feel grounded

### MASKING

- [ ] Performing all day
- [ ] Crashing when I get home

### COMMUNICATION

- [ ] Being direct, and heard as rude
- [ ] Needing time to process, and seen as uninterested
- [ ] Unspoken rules feel like a guessing game

### JOY

- [ ] Deep passions and flow
- [ ] A strong sense of fairness and justice

*The intensity that makes some things hard is often the same intensity that makes you who you are.*

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SIX

# Discovering it later in life

More and more adults recognise they are neurodivergent in their thirties, forties, fifties, or later, often after a child's diagnosis, a burnout, or perimenopause. It usually brings a wave of feelings.

1. ### Relief
   You were never lazy, broken, or too much. You were living without the right manual.

2. ### Grief and anger
   For the years of struggling without support, the misdiagnoses, and the energy spent fitting a mould.

3. ### Unmasking
   Slowly learning what you like, need, and feel when you stop performing. Freeing, and unsettling for a while.

WHAT MAKES SENSE NOW

WHAT I WANT TO STOP PERFORMING

There is more in *After the Name*, free on my site.

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SEVEN

# Masking

**Masking**, or camouflaging, is hiding or holding back the ways your mind works in order to fit in. Many people do it without knowing, often since childhood.

Research with autistic adults links masking to exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout. People with ADHD describe it too.

- [ ] Rehearsing conversations before and after
- [ ] Copying how others talk or act
- [ ] Forcing eye contact
- [ ] Hiding fidgeting or stimming
- [ ] Laughing when I do not get the joke
- [ ] Working twice as hard to look organised
- [ ] Collapsing once I get home
- [ ] Not knowing who I am without it

Masking can protect you, and sometimes you will choose it. The aim is to have more places where you do not need it.

WHERE I CAN TAKE MY MASK OFF

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EIGHT

# Misunderstanding goes both ways

For years, autistic people were described as lacking empathy. The autistic researcher Damian Milton proposed another view in 2012, the **double empathy problem**: when people with different kinds of minds meet, they can struggle to understand *each other*.




*misunderstanding goes both ways*

A 2020 study tested this. Information passed between autistic people as well as between non-autistic people. It broke down more often in mixed pairs.

So a hard conversation is not proof that you are the problem. It may be a gap to bridge, from both sides.

PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND ME EASILY

NINE

# Your energy has more than one tank

Many neurodivergent people find it helps to think of energy as several tanks, not one. You can be rested in body, and completely out of social or sensory energy. Some people call these spoons.

| Tank | What empties it | What refills it, for me |
|---|---|---|
| Senses | Noise, light, crowds, textures | |
| Social | Small talk, masking, being on show | |
| Thinking | Planning, starting, switching, deciding | |
| Body | Movement, illness, poor sleep | |

Some days the tanks are smaller, before a period, in perimenopause, when grieving, or when ill. Treat those days like bad weather: move what can wait, lean on reminders, and rest without guilt.

THE TANK THAT EMPTIES FIRST FOR ME

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TEN

# A low-demand day

When you are already overloaded, even small choices feel impossible. So decide now, while you have energy, what a bare-minimum day looks like. Then on a hard day, there is nothing to decide.

| When | An example | Mine |
|---|---|---|
| Morning | Low light, no news. Water, and a no-cook breakfast. One task only. | |
| Midday | Safe foods, easy to wash up. Fifteen minutes lying down, eyes closed. | |
| Evening | A saved message instead of a conversation. A warm shower, soft clothes, lights down early. | |

MY SAFE FOODS

---

MY ONE THING, ON A HARD DAY

---

> A SAVED MESSAGE
>
> "Low battery today. I will reply properly tomorrow."

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ELEVEN

# An overwhelm kit

Keep a basket ready, so you do not have to search for comfort when you are already overwhelmed. Tick what you will put in yours.

### LESS INPUT

- [ ] Earplugs or headphones
- [ ] Sunglasses or an eye mask
- [ ] A warm lamp, curtains closed
- [ ] Phone on do not disturb

### GROUNDING INPUT

- [ ] A weighted or heavy blanket
- [ ] Soft, tag-free clothes
- [ ] Cold water through a straw, or a warm mug
- [ ] Something to fidget with

### NO-COOK FOOD

- [ ] Oatcakes, nuts, or bars
- [ ] Electrolyte sachets

### SAVED WORDS

- [ ] To cancel plans
- [ ] To ask for quiet

Lying flat on the floor, or under a heavy blanket, for five to ten minutes gives many people steady, calming pressure.

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TWELVE

# The conditions that help

A neurodivergent mind often does its best work when the setting fits. Small changes can make a big difference.

### Clarity

Clear instructions, in writing, with the reason behind them.

### Senses

Control over noise, light, and interruptions.

### Time

Time to process, warning of change, buffers between things.

### Interest

Work that holds attention, and variety where it helps.

### Movement

Permission to move, fidget, or walk while thinking.

### Rest

Recovery time after social or sensory effort.

### Your people

People who get it, and do not need it explained.

### Understanding

Knowing your mind, so you can ask for what fits.

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THIRTEEN

# How I work best

Some people write a short "how I work best" page to share with a manager, a team, or family. It can make asking much easier.

HOW I LIKE TO RECEIVE INFORMATION

WHERE AND WHEN I FOCUS BEST

WHAT OVERWHELMS ME

THE SIGNS THAT I AM OVERLOADED

WHAT HELPS WHEN I AM

WHAT I WOULD LIKE PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT ME

> FOR EXAMPLE
>
> I take in information best in writing. I focus best mornings, with headphones. Open-plan noise drains me. When I go quiet in meetings, I am processing, not unhappy.

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FOURTEEN

# Adjustments that often help

Many countries have laws that let you ask for changes at work or in study, often called reasonable adjustments. In some, including the UK, you may not need a formal diagnosis to ask. There may also be government schemes that fund coaching or software.

| Area | Examples |
|---|---|
| Communication | Agendas in advance, instructions in writing, clear deadlines |
| Senses | Headphones, a seat away from walkways or harsh light, some days at home |
| Focus | Protected time with no meetings, flexible hours, regular check-ins, big projects in smaller steps |
| Support | Coaching, assistive software such as speech-to-text or mind-mapping |

Before you ask, write down how your traits affect specific tasks. It makes any request, or any application, much easier.

HOW MY TRAITS AFFECT MY WORK, TASK BY TASK

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FIFTEEN

# Asking for what fits

You are allowed to ask for what fits. Whether and when to share why is your choice.

### At work

Written instructions, a quieter desk, noise-cancelling headphones, flexible hours, agendas in advance.

### With a doctor

If you think you may be neurodivergent, ask about an assessment and how long the wait is.

### At home

Share your "how I work best" page, and ask for one change.

### With yourself

Stop measuring your mind against one that works differently.

> THREE SENTENCES
>
> "I process information best in writing, and I lose detail in fast verbal briefings. A short email after our meetings would help me deliver. Could we try it for a month?"

WHAT I AM ASKING FOR

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SIXTEEN

# Where to continue

This guide is a place to start. Here is where to go next.

## TO READ MORE

Your national health service's website, and your national autism, ADHD, or dyslexia charity. From me, free: *After the Name*, *Neurodivergence at work*, *Your brain*, and *Advocating for yourself*.

## TO FIND SUPPORT WHERE YOU LIVE · WORDS TO SEARCH, ADDING WHERE YOU LIVE

| What you are looking for | Words to search |
|---|---|
| Assessment | *adult ADHD assessment [your country] · adult autism assessment · dyslexia assessment adults* |
| Others like you | *neurodivergent adults group [your area] · late-diagnosed support group* |
| At work | *reasonable adjustments neurodivergent · workplace needs assessment · access to work* |
| Learning more | *neurodiversity-affirming therapist · ADHD coach · autistic-led organisation [your country]* |

## WHAT I FOUND, AND WHO I WILL CONTACT FIRST

If you are struggling tonight and cannot wait, please do not sit with it alone. In Scotland, 111 reaches the NHS 24 Mental Health Hub at any hour, and Samaritans are on 116 123, free, day or night. In the United States and Canada, call or text 988. Anywhere else, findahelpline.com lists the lines that operate in your country. In an emergency, call your local emergency number.

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# Where this comes from


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# Why it is free

So many of us spent years thinking we were failing at a life designed for a different kind of mind. This guide is yours to keep, print, and hand to someone.

I am not a medical professional. This guide diagnoses nothing and is not medical advice. If something in your body or mind worries you, please see a doctor.

Valerie McIntyre-Baird