

Neurodiversity Guidance

For employers, managers, staff and students

CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE



Acknowledgements

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This document has been designed in collaboration with our members to ensure it meets most accessibility standards. However, if this does not fit your requirements, please contact corporate.communications@rcn.org.uk

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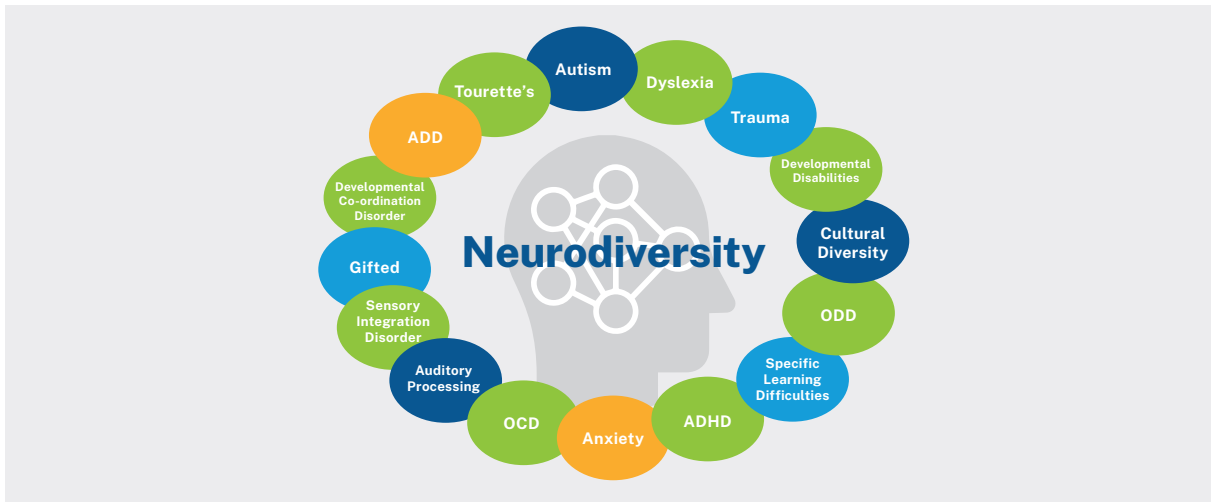
1. Introduction

Neurodiversity acknowledges that each person's brain is unique. Our brains work and interpret information differently and we all bring individual experience, strengths, and assets to a situation.

This guidance has been developed for staff and students who are neurodiverse and for the managers and employers who support them. It is intended for the health and care sector but its overarching principles will be helpful in other settings. The guidance has been produced by RCN members with lived experience and includes input from neurotypical stakeholders with an interest in neurodiversity. It should be noted that many health care professionals, including those with line management responsibilities, are neurodivergent.

2. What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the variations in the way the brain functions; it can manifest in mood, behaviour and other cognitive functions.



For the purpose of this guidance, we are including those with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD) and autism as neurodiverse but this is not an exhaustive list. Often those who are neurodivergent have more than one of these conditions.

The term 'specific learning difference' refers to a difference or difficulty that an individual has with a particular aspect of learning. The most common specific learning differences are dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADD, ADHD, dyscalculia and dysgraphia.

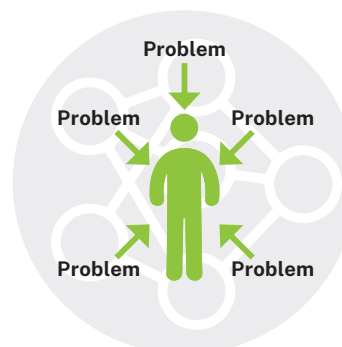
Autism is the term used within this guidance to include autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and Asperger's syndrome following consultation with members. We know that there are many terms and labels used by neurodivergent individuals, particularly in relation to autism, however we support the right of individuals to choose their own terms.

At the heart of neurodiversity is the idea that individual differences are not weaknesses, but that society imposes expectations based on a majority neurotypical population. When not met, this can lead to challenges.

By applying a social model approach, we can appreciate that individual differences are not the problem but rather external barriers. By removing these barriers, we build a more inclusive society that values individual strengths and differences.

Neurodiversity is experienced differently by different people and experiences are influenced by other factors such as race, cultural background and gender (this interplay of factors is referred to as intersectionality).

The Medical Model



The Social Model

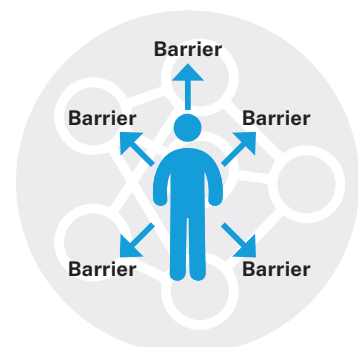


Image credit: taken from: rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/health-ability-passport

Dyslexia

Effects/difficulties

- difficulties with spelling and fluent word reading
- slower verbal processing speed
- slower reading
- reduced verbal memory and working memory.

Strengths

- can view things from a different perspective
- problem solving skills
- empathy
- creativity
- visual/ good pattern recognition

Dyspraxia/developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD)

Effects/difficulties

- poor motor control/co-ordination
- clumsiness
- poor time management/organisation
- difficulty finding the right words (Kirby et al., 2010)
- difficulties with left/right orientation.

Strengths

- can view things from a different perspective
- problem solving skills.

Dyscalculia

Effects/difficulties

- difficulty understanding numbers
- poor sense of estimate of numbers
- slow to perform calculations
- forget mathematical procedures/maths facts
- difficulty counting backwards.

Strengths

- can view things from a different perspective
- problem solving skills
- strategic thinking
- empathy.

Autism

Effects/difficulties

- difficulty interpreting verbal and non-verbal language eg, tone of voice and facial expressions
- literal in understanding of language
- difficulty reading other people
- sensory sensitivities
- repetitive/routine behaviours
- anxiety (National Autistic Society, 2016).

Strengths

- attention to detail
- good at following and developing protocols and guidelines.
- can view things from a different perspective
- problem solving skills.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Effects/difficulties

- poor attention (or hyper focus on stimulating tasks) or attention to detail
- hyperactivity or restlessness
- poor time management/prioritisation
- impulsiveness
- overworking, difficulty relaxing
- forgetfulness
- excessive talking (Katzman et al., 2017).

Strengths

- can hyperfocus on tasks and be extremely productive
- can be very creative and entrepreneurial
- can view things from a different perspective
- problem solving skills
- empathy
- energetic
- enthusiastic
- hard working
- interested in new things
- sensitive.

3. A neurodiverse workforce

10% of the population are neurodivergent (British Dyslexia Association, 2012, 2021), with this figure thought to be higher in health care organisations. Neurodivergent individuals think differently, yet this uniqueness can be overlooked through a lack of understanding in the workplace. Workplaces are mainly designed to suit the 90% of the population who are neurotypical. Rather than attempting to change neurodivergent individuals to fit with the workplace, we need to be supporting them to be the best health care professionals they can be.

There are many reasons that inclusive and diverse workforces are something to strive for. We all have different skills and experiences that can enrich workplaces. Good employment practices ensure we can access their talents.

Neurodivergent individuals are often attracted to nursing and other health care professions because of their inherent qualities, for example being good team workers, caring and compassionate, resilient, determined, creative and see different perspectives. Neurodiverse individuals often have strengths in problem solving, are empathetic and can view things differently. Identifying and developing all these strengths will bring benefits to workforce teams.

A diverse workforce helps us better reflect and serve our communities and those with lived experience of neurodiversity can better appreciate the patient perspective.

At the most basic level, employers have a legal obligation to accommodate those who meet the Equality Act 2010 (EA) definition of disability (Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland) which includes those who are neurodiverse.

The following sections of this publication have been separated and contain specific information for students and practice assessors/supervisors, staff, line managers and employers. They have been colour coded with a tab along the outside edge of the page for ease of reference.



4. Neurodiversity in education

Students

Your university will have a disability team and it is important that you make contact with them as soon as possible so that they can help you access available support. They should be able to advise on how to obtain evidence to support reasonable adjustments and to apply for Disabled Student Allowance.

Reasonable adjustments will be different for each person. Everyone will have different needs but they may include the following:

- exam and OSCE arrangements such as extra time, separate room, use of computer, use of overlays, calculators and formula charts
- text to speech and speech software, grammar and spelling software, mind mapping software (also need training in how to use it)
- dictaphones/voice recorders
- access to notes prior to lessons
- study skills support and mentors.

In practice it may involve:

- a quiet area to write up notes
- use of voice recorder for handover
- use of overlays
- adjustments to working hours and placements closer to home (within NMC requirements for 24-hour care and hours required for programme)
- additional time to process and answer questions
- use of a calculator
- use of apps for reminders
- use of a notebook.

Practice assessors and practice supervisors may not be aware of your needs for reasonable adjustments as different universities have different policies about sharing information with practice colleagues. Consider how you might want to share your strengths and reasonable adjustments in practice. The RCN *Neurodiversity Pocket Guide* provides helpful information, which is available at: [rcn.org.uk/publications](https://www.rcn.org.uk/publications). The RCN health ability passport is also a valuable source of information at: [rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/health-ability-passport](https://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/health-ability-passport)

Speak to your university if your placement will cause you difficulties due to your neurodiversity, for example a placement far away might make the commute so long that you will be unreasonably tired. This in turn may exacerbate problems associated with your neurodiversity.

Further details on disabled student allowances can be found at: England, Scotland or Wales: gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa

Northern Ireland: studentfinancenir.co.uk/types-of-finance/postgraduate/northern-ireland-student/extra-help/disabled-students-allowances/what-are-they

Practice assessors/supervisors

As a practice assessor/supervisor, you have a key role in supporting students in practice and this role is particularly important for neurodivergent students. Some students may find that they are less confident at discussing their neurodiversity in practice and this may be compounded by moving placements throughout their training. A supportive team and practice assessor can make this much easier.

Consider asking all students at the start of their placement if they need any reasonable adjustments or additional support as a matter of routine and again at a later stage, as they are more likely to confide in you once a rapport has been established. Perhaps have posters up raising awareness of neurodiversity to help break the ice and show that it is an inclusive placement. Ask the student what helps them as in most cases they will have a good understanding of their needs and compensatory strategies. A plan or passport for all students could be helpful.

Neurodivergent students may need a little bit more of your time, you might need to explain things in different ways and use things such as videos or repeat the explanation and allow them to practice more. They may want some help with things like pronouncing and spelling medical terminology or drugs or just time to process the question that you have asked them before you ask again. They may need to have access to prompts for timekeeping such as apps or to take some time out if things become overwhelming. Remember that they are students and are required to achieve their competencies, but that learning can be very tiring and stressful and this in many cases makes difficulties associated with neurodiversity worse. If you are doing assessments or observations, try to consider this early in the shift and not at the end. If you are concerned about the student, then contact the university or academic assessor.

Practical help – sources of advice and support

For case studies and further advice please visit: rcn.org.uk/neurodiversity

5. Neurodiversity in the workplace

Staff

Your line manager's responsibilities

Your line manager is responsible for the health and wellbeing of those they manage when they are at work. This includes ensuring that health and safety and equality legislation is met, and escalating when it is not, so that your employer can make necessary changes.

It is not about the normalisation of a neurodiverse individual. Major and Tetley (2019) discussed the reluctance of registered nurses to disclose dyslexia due to the stigma attached to it. Oliver (1996) referred to a person being disabled not by their impairment but by the failure of their environment to accommodate their needs. In respect of any neurodiverse individuals who you manage, a big part of the support you offer them will be in agreeing, implementing and maintaining reasonable adjustments.

Employers must also support you should you face discrimination or bullying and should avoid perpetuating differences between neurodivergent staff and their peers.

You should inform your employer about the ways they can use your lived experience to shape a more inclusive workforce and be supported to engage in these processes (eg, consider setting up or being part of a staff network for neurodiversity). The British Dyslexia Association advise that celebrating an individual's potential gifts and talents can help to remove barriers and stigma.

Employers should ensure that staff with disabilities and/or neurodiversity have equal access to training and professional development and can themselves progress to management roles.

Recruitment processes and job applications

- Consider if the job fits well with your strengths, your values and priorities as well as any difficulties you might experience.
- Read the job description and person specification thoroughly, this will help you consider what you might write on the application form and what you might need to prepare for interview.
- Ask someone to proofread your application prior to submission.
- Make sure that you have adhered to the word counts and any additional documents that need to be included have been attached to the application.
- Decide if you are going to disclose your neurodiversity and if so when. If you want reasonable adjustments, you will need to disclose these in advance of the interview to receive them. Consider the positive aspects of your neurodiversity and be prepared to discuss these and how you have overcome any difficulties in the past.

Continued

- Employers may offer a guaranteed interview scheme meaning disabled candidates meeting the essential criteria are interviewed. This is part of *Disability Confident*.
- If you want to arrange reasonable adjustments for interview and are not contacted automatically by the employer, contact the HR department or interview contact.
- If you have any gaps in your employment history or have moved on from jobs that did not work for you, consider how you will discuss these. Do not forget to mention what you learnt from these experiences and if you did any alternative training or volunteer work in any employment gaps.

Reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act, adjustments are included to help neurodivergent individuals fit workplace roles. Reasonable adjustments that support the diverse needs of all staff are both practical and feasible. The Equality Act 2010 is the legislation in England, Wales and Scotland that details employer's duties to make reasonable adjustments for people who are disabled. In Northern Ireland, the equivalent legislation is the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005. In the Channel Islands, the relevant legislation is the Discrimination (Jersey) Law 2013 and discrimination legislation will come into force in Guernsey in 2023.

In legislation, someone is disabled when they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities – this is a legal, rather than a medical, definition. Many neurodiverse individuals do not identify as disabled. However, they are still protected by this legislation.

Anyone meeting this legal definition is entitled to reasonable adjustments by law. However, we suggest considering this as a baseline for determining what support to give staff. Is the request reasonable and will it benefit the staff member at work? Can it be fulfilled, even if the legal definition is not met?

Under the Equality Act 2010, positive effects of treatment are not considered. For example, someone with ADHD should still be considered as disabled for the purposes of making adjustments, even if they take medication that helps them manage their symptoms.

Reasonable adjustments are anything that removes barriers to allow people with disabilities the best opportunity to do their jobs.

When deciding what adjustments are to be made, your line manager should objectively consider what is reasonable in terms of the role, length of contract, cost of implementation, size and resources of the organisation. A strengths-based approach to intervention and support are accepted as best practice (Den Houting, 2019).

The adjustments themselves are not always physical and can fall into the following areas:

- **equipment** - such as a dictaphone to take notes, coloured overlays
- **changes to working patterns** - such as shift patterns, working from home, working nearer home
- **changes to the workplace** - such as automatic doors, altered lighting.
- **training** - to educate colleagues and change attitudes, to help the individual develop coping techniques
- **redeployment** - which means moving to another more suited role that becomes available when the employee can't continue in their current role.
- **employer policy** - such as disability leave in addition to sick leave (to avoid triggering sickness reviews due to regular disability-related activity such as attending hospital appointments).

Further details of suggested reasonable adjustments can be found on the RCN neurodiversity guidance webpages at: rcn.org.uk/neurodiversity

We recommend a collaborative approach to establishing reasonable adjustments. Our *Health Ability Passport* guidance is a step-by-step guide to putting in adjustments in place which is available at: rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/health-ability-passport

Access to work

Access to work is a scheme in the UK (not the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man) to support you to stay in work and this is something that you may be able to use if you are neurodiverse. You may be able to get a grant for equipment to help you in your job role or support such as a job coach or mental health support. For further details please visit:

England/Scotland and Wales: gov.uk/access-to-work

Northern Ireland: nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work

Employer responsibilities

As an employer, probably the most important thing you can do to support neurodiverse staff is to ensure line managers are skilled and knowledgeable about inclusion. This includes making sure they are supported to explore creative options to retain staff (eg. Job slicing) as well as access to training. A diversity-literate HR department will further support this aim.

Ensure that staff with disabilities and/or neurodiversity have equal access to training and professional development and can themselves progress to management roles.

Share and celebrate your successes in diverse recruitment processes and the retention and progression of neurodiverse staff so these precedents can be drawn on to improve staff experience. It is also important to evaluate and learn from staff experience (both good and bad).

A network for neurodiverse staff (potentially as part of a broader disability network) can amplify voices if it is recognised and harnessed by the organisation. There should be a mechanism to allow neurodiverse staff to influence policies and processes to ensure they are inclusive. Ideally co-design enables lived experience to influence change from the beginning. A staff network is just one way to progress this.

Promote your good practice with regard to equality and diversity on your website. This will attract diverse talent. Always ensure that your website is accessible.

Line manager responsibilities

As a line manager, you are responsible for the health and wellbeing of those you manage when they are at work. This includes ensuring that health and safety and equality legislation is met and escalating when it is not so that your employer can make necessary changes.

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You must also support them should they face discrimination or bullying and should avoid perpetuating differences between neurodivergent staff and their peers.

You should be informed about the ways they can use their lived experience to shape a more inclusive workforce and support them to engage in these processes (eg. consider setting up a staff network for neurodiversity). The British Dyslexia Association advise that celebrating an individual's potential gifts and talents can help to remove barriers and stigma.

As a line manager, you should ensure that you have the skills needed to support those you manage and seek development, recognising the value of equality and inclusion related learning.

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England/Scotland and Wales: [gov.uk/access-to-work](https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

Northern Ireland: nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work

Recruitment hints and tips

- Make it clear that you welcome applications from neurodiverse candidates and those who may need reasonable adjustments. These candidates will often try to find out how inclusive your organisation is before applying so a section on your public facing website about what you are doing around equality and inclusion is a good idea to attract diverse talent.
- Make sure that the job description is clear, easy to read and ideally in a word document to make text to speech conversion easier.
- Make sure your website meets accessibility requirements and your fonts are accessible.
- Send out clear information about the interview process well in advance, considering neurodiverse candidates may require extra time to prepare.
- Ask candidates if they require any reasonable adjustments including extra time for any tests, assistive technology, or a separate room.
- Consider alternatives to traditional interviews such as work-based trials or work-related tasks.
- Allow interviewees sufficient processing time in the interview.
- Ask one question at a time and make sure that questions are worded clearly. If your question has more than one part, ask one part at a time, allowing interviewees to answer each part separately.
- Provide a pen and paper for note taking.
- Consider giving questions out in advance.
- Consider that stress and anxiety caused by the interview process can make difficulties caused by neurodiversity worse. What you see in the interview may not be a true representation of the person's ability and what they could bring to your team.

Practical help – sources of advice and support

For case studies and further advice please visit: rcn.org.uk/neurodiversity

6. Useful resources

British Dyslexia Association resources

cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/uploads/documents/Support-Us/Dyslexia-Week-2021-Adult-Dyslexia-Checklist.pdf?v=1632479950

cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/uploads/documents/Support-Us/Dyslexia-Week-2021-Intersectionality-and-Dyslexia.pdf?v=1632479955

bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexia/how-is-dyslexia-diagnosed/dyslexia-checklists

RCN resources

rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/nursing-with-a-disability-or-neurodiversity

rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/neurodiversity-guidance

rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/neurodiversity-guidance/nd-guidance-for-managers

A network for members with lived experience of disability and neurodiversity:
rcn.org.uk/peersupport

RCN Library neurodiversity reading list: rcn.libguides.com/neurodiversity

Further information

autism.org.uk

adhdfoundation.org.uk/resources

dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

neurodiversityhub.org/resources

diversityandability.com/resources

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Oliver M (1996) *Understanding Disability: from Theory to Practice*. Chatham: Mackays of Chatham.

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RCN quality assurance

Publication

This is an RCN practice guidance. Practice guidance are evidence-based consensus documents, used to guide decisions about appropriate care of an individual, family or population in a specific context.

Description

This guidance has been developed for staff and students who are neurodiverse and for the managers and employers who support them. It is intended for the health and care sector but its overarching principles will be helpful in other settings.

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The Nine Quality Standards

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Evaluation

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