Neurodiversity & Psychological Health and Safety for HR Professionals and Leaders

Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a social movement. Recognizes and values different ways people's brains work, such as in autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc., viewing these as natural variations rather than deficits.

Emphasizes unique strengths and abilities, the impact of environment and social factors, and the importance of inclusivity and support. Shift from "inclusion for all, instead of "accommodation" for some.

Four Most Common Neurotypes

- · Autism Spectrum: Nontraditional communication and interaction, deep learning abilities, attention to detail.
- · ADHD: Challenges with working memory, impulsivity, prioritizing, focusing, and organizing, coupled with strengths in dynamic and creative thinking.
- · Dyslexia and Dysgraphia: Difficulties in word recognition, spelling, and decoding, alongside strengths in creative thinking and problem-solving.
- · General Learning Disabilities: Difficulty processing information, but not an inability to learn.
- • Other conditions include: Tourette's, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome, Acquired Neurodiversity (Traumatic brain injury, stroke). Some with mental health issues (i.e. PTSD or OCD may strongly identify with neurodiverse experience, but may not identify as neurodiverse)

Diagnosis can be important for some, but it isn't everything:

- • It is common to have cooccurring conditions (i.e. Autism & ADHD)
- • Person may not see it as a disability and may not have a diagnosis.

Responding to Disclosures in a Supportive Way

- • Take what the other person is sharing at face value, take it seriously
- • Thank them and acknowledge the courage and their trust in you.
- • Assure them their disclosure will be kept confidential.

- Don't minimize ("I'm totally ADHD too...I can't get anything done.")
- Be curious and listen to understand how it affects their work, such, as
  - "I want to understand what you're sharing. What is important for me to know?"
  - "What accommodations or adjustments do you think would help you do your best work?"

Most Important Question to Ask Every Employee: "How do you work best?"

May are simple and low-cost adjustments that benefit all employees.

Environment

Consider your work environment and roles and ask employees what will make them more comfortable. Examples include:

- Flexibility with location of work
- Adjusting hours of work based on ability to focus or energy levels
- Sensory conditions (lighting, smells, textures)
- Avoid gifs, busy screens, bright colours
- In clinical areas –tinted glasses, discrete ear plugs or ear defenders
- Use more visual condensed form of presentations
- Sign on door (busy working or please knock and come in)
- Noise cancelling headphones
- Break spaces in quieter zones
- Consider touch and taste, meals for business purposes may be awkward and unpleasant
- Team activities that don't rely on sensory heavy environments
- Sensory sensitivity might also be about 'change', not just noise and brightness in a room
- Designated quiet spaces for decompression during breaks (even a small dimly lit room)
- Alternative uniforms or PPE options (e.g., softer fabrics, modified face shields for those with sensory sensitivities)
- Ergonomic tools (e.g., padded straps for heavy equipment, noise-canceling headsets for dispatchers or EMS workers, ergonomic microscope adjustments)

- Minimizing alarm fatigue (customizable notification settings, use of vibrating pagers instead of loud tones)

Communication

Clarity is helpful to all of us, and especially when someone might have a tendency to miss implications, be [sensitive to rejection](#), or take things literally. Being open to the different ways of communicating. Other examples include:

- Minimize the number of meetings
- Use a communications preferences document when new team members join
- Flexibility with communication and meetings (messenger, email, hybrid meetings)
- Schedule breaks, staggered breaks
- In shift work –adjustment to shift start and end times
- Written hand off tools instead of verbal handoffs in noisy areas
- Written workflows that reduce task switching
- Social activities are optional – "easy exits" and 'tap out' rooms
- Cameras 'off' is acceptable
- Assign a notetaker
- Send agenda in advance
- Communicate as clearly and unambiguously as possible– direct feedback (which neurotypical people may not provide, as it feels 'rude')
- Train team members to avoid making assumptions about behaviour, create team agreements with the team
- Pre-shift briefings in multiple formats (written summaries, visual aids for those with processing differences)
- Simplified documentation templates to streamline charting for those with ADHD or dyslexia
- Speech-to-text software for documentation
- Color-coded or icon-based reminders for key procedures in high-stakes settings
- Designated quiet spaces for decompression during breaks (even a small dimly lit room)

- Minimizing alarm fatigue (customizable notification settings, use of vibrating pagers instead of loud tones)
- Allow asynchronous collaboration for data analysis vs. hands-on work.
- Assign detail-oriented vs. big-picture tasks based on individual strengths. Example: Someone with high focus could handle data analysis, while another thrives in collaboration and handles protocol development.
- Offer remote work options for data-heavy or literature review tasks.
- Use visual project management tools (e.g., Trello, Asana) to keep track of lab experiments without overwhelming emails.
- Implement digital route planners with optimized paths to reduce stress for couriers.

Task Management and Organization
- Set longer, reasonable deadlines, spread out deadlines
- Ensure tasks are divided among teams in ways that balance strengths, allowing nurses to focus on their areas of skill or comfort
- Task switching
- Clear, specific directions on tasks
- Visual step by step of complex procedures
- Offer simulation training in lower stress environment
- Many tools are free and built into Microsoft products and Zoom
- Spell check and grammar check
- Grammerly has a 'tone' checker
- Text to speech software
- Flexible scheduling options (e.g., shorter shifts, reduced night shifts, split shifts, or predictable rotations)
- Task reallocation (e.g., minimizing non-essential paperwork for those with executive function challenges)
- Offer task-switching options (e.g., rotating between fieldwork and lab work).
- Allow task variation scheduling so employees alternate between high-focus work (e.g., microscopy) and lower-intensity tasks (e.g., administrative updates).

- Built-in recovery time (e.g., extended turnaround time between shifts for those with sensory overload or fatigue)
- Buddy system or mentorship pairings to provide support on cognitively or physically demanding tasks
- Offer speech-to-text tools for documentation-heavy roles (e.g., pathology transcription).
- Introduce micro-break policies for technologists processing high volumes of diagnostic samples.
- Balance operational with well-being: Create space lab workers can discuss stressors in a structured, non-clinical setting. For example, have a brief check in team meetings.

Resources

[Accessible Employers BC](#) Many resources and courses available.

"[How To Build An Inclusive Recruitment Process That Supports Neurodiversity In The Workplace](#)" by Jennifer Polumbo. Discusses strategies and practices for creating a recruitment process that is inclusive and supportive of neurodiverse individuals, ensuring a diverse and capable workforce.

"[Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage](#)" by Robert D. Austin and Gary P. Pisano This article discusses how neurodiverse employees can be a significant asset to companies and the importance of creating supportive environments.

"[Autism Doesn't Hold People Back at Work. Discrimination Does](#)." This article addresses the challenges that neurodivergent individuals face in the workplace, including the practice of masking.

"[Stop Asking Neurodivergent People to Change the Way They Communicate](#)" This piece highlights the importance of understanding and accommodating different communication styles rather than expecting neurodivergent individuals to conform.

"[How to Make Job Interviews More Accessible](#)" by Rebecca Knight