Neurodiversity Highlights

This section provides the comprehensive details of all neurodiversity highlights. It's designed to give you a deep understanding of neurodiversity and the surrounding topics. If you need a quicker reference, a short, condensed version of this information is also available as slides.

Body Doubling

Let’s talk about it

Body doubling is when you work alongside another person to help you focus. The other person doesn't need to be working on the same task as you. Their presence simply acts as an anchor to keep your mind from wandering and keeps you on track. It's a popular strategy used by many neurodivergent people to tackle boring or difficult jobs, such as cleaning.

Body doubling lowers the mental barrier to getting started on a task. Having someone else in the room or on a video call creates a sense of accountability, stopping the feeling of isolation and reducing the urge to procrastinate.

You can try this with your colleagues by setting up quiet 'co-working' sessions. Just jump on a video call together, state your goals, and then get to work. You can also do this in the office by sitting near someone who's also trying to focus. It's all about sharing the same productive energy.

Useful links

- The ADHD Body Double: A Unique Tool for Getting Things Done
- ADHD Body Doubling
- Neurodiversity Cafe: Body Doubling

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower

Let’s talk about it

You've probably seen green lanyards with yellow sunflowers in airports, shops, or even at the office. This is the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower. While not exclusive to neurodiversity, it's widely used by the community.

Here's what you need to know:

- It's a discreet way for people to choose to be visible about having a hidden disability. This includes autism, ADHD, anxiety, chronic pain, and many others
- The wearer might need a little more time, patience, or assistance. It is a request for understanding, not a label of inability
- You don't need to ask what their disability is. Just knowing they might need extra space or time is enough
- If a colleague wears one (or uses a Sunflower background on calls), it's a helpful cue to be mindful of your communication and their environment

It is a simple symbol that promotes kindness and patience without forcing anyone to disclose their private medical history.

Useful links

- The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme
- What is a hidden disability?

Infinity Symbol

Let’s talk about it

If you've read the Puzzle Piece Symbol highlight, you might be wondering what symbol is preferred. The answer is (usually) the Infinity Symbol. It represents a spectrum of possibilities, rather than a linear scale.

Here is a quick guide to the variations you might see:

- The rainbow infinity symbol represents the neurodiversity movement as a whole. It includes everyone with different types of brains, such as ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and Autism. The colours reflect the diversity of the human mind
- The gold infinity symbol is specific to Autism. The colour gold was chosen because 'Au' is the chemical symbol for gold. It's used to show that autistic people are valuable exactly as they are
- Unlike a puzzle, an infinity symbol has no beginning and no end. It implies a continuous journey and a life that is whole and complete. It rejects the idea that anyone is 'missing' something

Adopting these symbols is a great way to show that you're up to date with the conversation and supportive of the neurodivergent community.

Useful links

- What is the Autism Infinity Symbol?

Key Terminology

Let’s talk about it

You might have heard words like 'neurodiversity', 'neurodiverse', and 'neurodivergent'. They all sound similar, but they mean different things. Using the right word is important. It shows respect and helps us be clear. Using the wrong word can be confusing for everyone.

Here’s a simple guide to these terms:

- Neurodiversity (the idea): This is the idea that everyone's brain is different. It is a fact, like how everyone has different fingerprints. It includes all people
- Neurodivergent (the person): This describes one person whose brain works differently from what society thinks is 'typical'
- Neurotypical (the person): This describes one or many people who have brains that work in the way that society considers to be 'typical'. This is a term for people who are not neurodivergent
- Neurodiverse (the group): This describes a group of people with different types of brains (i.e. a mix of neurotypical and neurodivergent people). A team can be 'neurodiverse'. A single person cannot be
- Neurotypes (the categories): This means the different types of brains. For example, 'Autistic' is a neurotype. 'Dyslexic' is a neurotype. 'Neurotypical' (or typical) is also a neurotype

This is why being mindful of our words is essential for showing respect and building an inclusive team. Simple guidelines can make a huge difference, like these:

- Do use 'neurodiversity' when talking about the concept of brain differences (e.g., 'Neurodiversity is a valuable part of our company')
- Do use 'neurodiverse' when describing a group (e.g., 'We are proud to have a neurodiverse team')
- Do use 'neurodivergent' when describing an individual (e.g., 'This is a resource for our neurodivergent colleagues')
- Avoid calling a person 'neurodiverse' (that's for groups)
- Avoid calling a person 'a neurodivergent' (it's an adjective, not a noun). Instead, say 'a neurodivergent person' or 'they are neurodivergent'

Useful links

- Cleveland Clinic - Neurodiversity

- Autism and neurodiversity

Masking

Let’s talk about it

Masking is when neurodivergent people hide their natural traits to fit in. It's often a constant performance to meet social expectations. It's like wearing a mask to hide things like stimming or social anxiety. Here are a few reasons why it's a challenge:

- It's incredibly draining to do this all day
- It'll often lead to burnout and exhaustion
- It's hard for others to see when someone's struggling
- It stops people from being their true selves

You can help to create a more inclusive space where everyone feels safe enough to take their mask off, whether they choose to or not:

- Don't judge habits like avoiding eye contact or fidgeting
- Focus on work quality rather than how someone is socialising when assessing their performance
- Make it okay for everyone to talk about their needs
- Respect that everyone has different ways of working

Useful links

- National Autistic Society: Masking
- Dropping the mask takes two

Meetings

Let’s talk about it

Meetings can be tough, especially if you need accommodations of any kind. For many neurodivergent individuals, a standard meeting format can be a barrier to contributing their best work. For example:

- Sensory overload means that a grid of faces on a video call, poor audio, or a noisy room can all be overwhelming
- Processing pace issues make it difficult to keep up if the discussion is too fast, topics change suddenly, or information isn't presented clearly
- Unclear rules like vague agendas, unwritten social rules about turn-taking, and the pressure of being "put on the spot" can create significant anxiety
- Focus fatigue means that long, unstructured meetings can be particularly draining for those with conditions affecting executive function or attention
- Cameras being required to be on means that the neurodivergent person may feel like they have to mask for the meeting, which increases exhaustion

This is why creating a more inclusive meeting culture isn't just a 'nice-to-have'. It's essential for collaboration.

Simple adjustments can make a huge difference, such as:

- Sending a clear agenda and any pre-reading at least 24 hours in advance
- Stating the meeting's purpose and goals clearly at the start (ideally in the meeting invite)
- Making cameras optional
- Normalising the use of the chat function for questions
- Sticking to scheduled times
- Including breaks for any meeting over 60 minutes
- Finishing by summarising clear action points and who is responsible for them

Consider making a neuroinclusive meeting guide, and putting a printed copy in every meeting room. It can give tips on how to make meetings fully inclusive, with a focus on people who are neurodivergent.

There's also a meeting invite template, which provides a full structure to add to your meeting description. This makes it simple for you to add information to your meeting invites and ensure that no one is missing the clarity that they need. It also allows people to prepare for the meeting in advance, which is crucial.

Useful links

- Inclusion Toolkit
- Meeting Invite Template

Neurospicy

Let's talk about it

You may have heard this word used as an informal, light-hearted way to say 'neurodivergent'. It's often used with good intentions, and some neurodivergent people use it about themselves. However, many people find the word problematic, and it can get in the way of clear and respectful conversation. For example:

- The word can make the very real, often difficult, challenges of being neurodivergent sound 'cute' or small
- It can sound childish. This is frustrating for adults who want to be taken seriously at work and in life
- It's informal slang, so using it when asking for support might cause confusion
- It's an 'in-group' word. This means many feel it's a word for neurodivergent people to use for themselves, but it can feel disrespectful when others use it about them

This is why being mindful of our words is essential for showing respect and building an inclusive team. Simple guidelines can make a huge difference, like these:

- Follow the person's lead. If someone describes themselves as 'neurospicy', that's their choice
- Don't label others. Avoid calling other people or the whole community 'neurospicy'
- Use clear terms, like 'neurodivergent' or 'a person with [insert neurodivergent condition here]'
- If you're not neurodivergent, it's generally best to avoid using this word

Useful links

- Is it OK to use the term 'neurospicy' when talking about autism and other neurodivergences?

Puzzle Piece Symbol

Let’s talk about it

You've likely seen the puzzle piece used to represent autism. While common, it is highly controversial. Many in the autistic community view it as outdated or offensive. Understanding why helps you be a better ally.

Here is a breakdown of the controversy:

- It implies autistic people are a 'puzzle' to be solved or have a piece 'missing'. This frames autism as a problem rather than a different way of being
- It was historically used by organisations focused on 'curing' autism. It represents an era where autistic people were talked about, not to
- The primary colours reinforce the myth that autism is just for children. This erases the existence and needs of autistic adults
- The community generally prefers the infinity symbol (rainbow for neurodiversity or golden for autism). See the Infinity Symbol highlight

Being mindful of imagery shows that you’re listening to the lived experiences of the community.

Useful links

- The Ableist History of the Puzzle Piece Symbol for Autism
- The History of the Puzzle Piece

Sensory Series: Light

Let’s talk about it

Harsh lighting can completely drain a person's focus without them even realising why. For many neurodivergent individuals, visual environments are often much more intense. Standard office lighting can easily trigger severe eye strain, migraines, or a state of constant anxiety.

Older fluorescent tubes are a frequent culprit because they actually flicker. While most people don't notice it, some neurodivergent brains process this rapid pulsing, which can feel like sitting under a strobe light all day. Bright glare from a window or a screen that's too bright can also become an impossible distraction. It leaves the nervous system working overtime just to cope with the brightness.

Adjusting the visual environment helps prevent the hidden exhaustion that comes from simply sitting in a brightly lit room.

Simple shifts in how workspaces are set up can offer huge relief. Letting people sit in dimmer areas or turning off overhead lights in favour of soft desk lamps makes a massive difference. It's also helpful to support colleagues who wear sunglasses, tinted lenses, or baseball caps indoors to block out the glare.

Useful links

- Autism and sensory processing
- Creating Inclusive Spaces: Lighting for Neurodiversity
- Impact of Lighting on Neurodiverse Individuals

Sensory Series: Sound

Let’s talk about it

Sound affects people in completely different ways. For many neurodivergent individuals, everyday workplace noises aren't just distracting; they can be physically overwhelming. This is often due to sensory processing differences, where the brain can't easily filter out background noise.

An open-plan office can quickly become a wall of sound. Things like keyboards clicking, loud chats, or a humming air conditioner take up a huge amount of mental energy. Some people might experience 'misophonia', where specific sounds trigger a strong stress reaction. Others might have trouble understanding speech when there's background noise, which makes collaboration extra challenging.

Creating a workspace that's comfortable for everyone's sensory needs is essential for a productive team.

Colleagues can support each other by being mindful of volume in shared spaces. It's always best to move long conversations to a meeting room or a breakout area. Respecting when someone is wearing headphones is also important, as it's often their way of creating a quiet bubble so they can focus.

Useful links

- Autism and sensory processing
- Misophonia
- Auditory Sensitivity: Signs, Causes, Overload and How to Help

Sensory Series: Touch

Let’s talk about it

Think about how many things touch your skin during a standard workday. For a neurodivergent person with tactile sensitivity, the physical world can feel 'dialled up to eleven'. The brain often can't mute these physical inputs, which turns minor textures into a source of constant distress.

It's not just about a scratchy clothing label or a stiff uniform, though those can easily derail a whole afternoon of focus. The office environment itself can present unexpected hurdles. A freezing metal desk, a rough chair fabric, or a sudden breeze from the air conditioning can feel deeply unsettling. Physical boundaries matter a lot too, since an unexpected tap on the shoulder can easily startle someone's entire nervous system.

Creating a physically comfortable workspace allows everyone to put their energy into their actual jobs instead of just coping with discomfort.

Giving people autonomy over their immediate environment is a brilliant first step. This might mean allowing casual, soft clothing or letting staff use their own desk mats and chair covers. Respecting personal space by avoiding uninvited physical contact is another simple way to help colleagues feel secure.

Useful links

- Autism and sensory processing
- Sensory - Touch
- Tactile

Spiky Profiles

Let’s talk about it

A spiky profile is when someone is really brilliant at some things but finds other things very hard. This includes things that might seem simple to other people. For example, someone might be amazing at solving tricky problems at work but find it hard to reply to a basic email.

This is not about being lazy or not trying hard enough. Neurodivergent brains are wired in a different way. Some skills, like creativity, focus, and spotting patterns, can be super strong. But other skills, like planning, switching between tasks, or doing routine jobs, can take a lot more effort.

Knowing about spiky profiles can help us be better allies. If someone seems to be struggling with something easy, it might just be that their brain works differently. Small changes can make a big difference. Try pairing with people whose strengths fill in your gaps, or think about how you share out work in your team.

Useful links

- Exceptional Individuals: Spiky Profile
- What is the definition of a spiky profile?
- What is the Spiky Profile?

Spoon Theory

Let’s talk about it

Spoon theory is a way to explain living with limited energy. A writer named Christine Miserandino created it to describe chronic illness, but the neurodivergent community uses it a lot now.

Imagine you start the day with twelve spoons, but a colleague might start with twenty. Every single task costs spoons, like getting dressed or answering an email. However, a task that takes one spoon for you might take four spoons for someone else. Once you're out of spoons, you've got no energy left for anything else. You can sometimes borrow spoons from tomorrow if you really need to, but that leaves you at serious risk of burnout.

This concept is helpful because it shows how everyday tasks drain us in different ways. For neurodivergent people, things like sensory overload or masking can steal multiple spoons at once. The theory gives people a simple way to communicate when they've got nothing left to give.

Everyone should be able to manage their energy without shame. You can help support your team by respecting when a colleague says they're 'low on spoons'. It's also best to keep meetings short so you don't drain someone's entire supply. Please remember that energy levels change from day to day.

Useful links

- Spoon theory: Understanding energy for neurodivergent people
- Spoon Theory for Autism and ADHD: The Neurodivergent Spoon Drawer
- Energy accounting: a strategy for supporting wellbeing

Superpowers Debate

Let’s talk about it

You might hear people say that being neurodivergent is a 'superpower'. While this is usually meant as a compliment, the community has mixed feelings about it.

Here are a few reasons why this word can be tricky:

- It can hide the hard parts. Focusing only on special talents risks ignoring the practical support, adjustments, and accommodations that people actually need
- It creates pressure to be amazing. People can feel like they have to be a 'genius' or 'extraordinary' just to be accepted
- It doesn't fit everyone. Many people feel that their neurodivergence is a disability, not a special power

Recognising strengths is great, but it's also important to acknowledge the barriers people face every day. Here are some ways to keep the conversation inclusive.

- Let the person decide. If someone calls their own neurodivergence a superpower, that's their choice. If they don't, don't use that term with them
- Be specific about strengths. Instead of using 'superpower', try complimenting a specific skill like great problem-solving or creative thinking
- Offer support regardless. Make sure people feel valued for who they are, even on days when they aren't feeling super

Useful links

- From Deficit To Superpowers: Is It Ableist To Focus On Neurodivergent Strengths?
- Beyond Stigmas and Superpowers: A Balanced Neurodivergence Narrative
- Musing on ableism, neurodiversity, shame and superpowers

Tourette’s Syndrome

Let’s talk about it

Tourette's Syndrome (or Tourette Syndrome, in more medical settings) is a condition that's often misunderstood. Many people think that it's just about swearing, but that's actually quite rare (it's called coprolalia). It's mostly about tics, which are sounds or movements that someone can't easily stop.

It's important to bear in mind that managing tics all day can be exhausting. Tics can increase when someone is stressed or tired, and trying to hide those tics can make it more difficult to focus. On top of this, other people can be judgmental about Tourette's, especially when they don't understand that it's not voluntary.

So how can you be a good ally to someone who has Tourette's Syndrome?

- Don't draw any attention to their tics
- Be patient if a tic happens during a conversation
- Focus on what the person is saying rather than the sounds
- Remember that tics aren't a choice or a habit, and the person can't choose how their tics show up

Useful links

- NHS: Tourette Syndrome
- Coprolalia