

## Neurodiversity at work

### Understanding neurodiversity

Neurodiversity describes the natural differences in how people's brains behave and process information.

Neurodiversity refers to the fact that we all:

- think, learn and act differently
- have different strengths and things we find challenging

### Terms used in this advice

The language around neurodiversity changes over time. Some people might not like terms that other people are comfortable with. There's no term that everyone will prefer.

In this advice, we use neurodivergent to describe someone whose brain works differently to what is considered more typical. We also use the terms neurodivergence and neuroinclusive.

We sometimes use condition to refer to different types of neurodivergence.

Where possible, we use identity-first language. For example, we say someone 'is autistic', not 'has autism'. This is because a lot of people see neurodivergence as part of who they are, not something they have.

### Whether neurodivergence is a disability

Some neurodivergent people do not see themselves as disabled. However, being neurodivergent will often amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010. This law gives rights and protections to disabled employees. For example:

- the right not to be discriminated against because of a disability
- the right to reasonable adjustments

Disabled employees might also be able to get support from Access to Work. This is a government scheme to help people get or stay in work.

Find out more about:

- [reasonable adjustments](#)
- [how to write a letter requesting reasonable adjustments](#)
- [how to write a letter confirming reasonable adjustments](#)
- [what disability means by law](#)
- [Access to Work on GOV.UK](#)

## Types of neurodivergence

Neurodivergence is still being researched and understood.

However, some well-known types of neurodivergence are:

- ADHD
- autism
- dyslexia
- dyspraxia

Other types of neurodivergence include:

- dyscalculia – a specific and persistent difficulty in understanding numbers
- Tourette's syndrome

There's disagreement about whether mental health problems are types of neurodivergence. However, neurodivergent people can often experience mental ill health.

People can often experience their neurodivergence differently. The strengths and challenges that come with a condition will not be the same for everyone.

## Co-occurring conditions

It's common for someone to have more than one type of neurodivergence. This is sometimes called 'co-occurring conditions'.

### Example of co-occurring conditions

Alex is autistic and also has ADHD. Autism might mean Alex prefers routines, finds social situations challenging, and is very focused on details. ADHD might mean Alex struggles with attention, gets easily distracted, and has bursts of hyperactivity.

When these two conditions occur together, Alex might:

- focus strongly on specific interests (linked to autism) but also jump quickly between tasks (linked to ADHD)
- need clear structure but find it hard to stick to it because of attention challenges

This combination creates a unique experience that's different from having just one condition.

## ADHD

ADHD stands for 'attention deficit hyperactivity disorder'. It sometimes affects someone's behaviour. Someone with ADHD might refer to themselves as an 'ADHDeR'.

Someone with ADHD might:

- find it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- struggle with time management and organisation
- have trouble following instructions
- have times of hyperfocus – where they're entirely focused on a task
- be good at thinking creatively
- have lots of energy

For example, Lou is a bus driver and has ADHD. Lou finds printing out their daily itinerary improves their timekeeping and focus. Lou finds it difficult to concentrate in team briefings. But they take notes, and find it easier when people speak clearly. One of Lou's strengths is memorising different routes. This means they're very efficient when driving through rush hour traffic or diversions.

[Find out more about ADHD from the Brain Charity](#)

## Autism

Autism affects how people communicate and interact with the world.

Autism is sometimes referred to as a 'spectrum condition'.

Someone who's autistic might:

- take things literally
- react differently to senses like sound and smell
- get anxious about social situations
- have difficulty interpreting social cues – for example, facial expressions and body language
- like a consistent routine
- seem rude without meaning to
- have a keen interest and expertise in particular topics
- have good attention to detail
- be good at problem-solving and thinking creatively
- have a good memory

For example, Sasha is autistic and works in a bar. Sasha can get overwhelmed when it's very loud and busy in the bar. When this happens, Sasha uses noise-reducing earplugs and focuses on tasks like glass washing and restocking fridges. Sasha is passionate about the preparation and stock control tasks that most staff find boring. This makes Sasha popular with other workers.

[Find out more about autism from the National Autistic Society](#)

## Dyslexia

Dyslexia mostly affects reading and writing skills. It can also affect how someone processes information more generally.

Dyslexia is sometimes referred to as a learning difficulty.

Someone who's dyslexic might:

- read or write slowly
- find it difficult to listen and concentrate
- forget things easily
- have difficulty with spelling
- be good at problem-solving and thinking creatively
- have strong verbal communication skills
- be good at tasks involving 3D shapes and spaces

For example, Chris is dyslexic. Chris takes longer than other people to write emails and reports. However, Chris is good at explaining things when talking to others. Chris moves from their separate office to the open plan work area with their team. They find their written tasks easier because they can talk them through with the team.

[Find out more about dyslexia from the British Dyslexia Association](#)

## Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia affects movement and co-ordination. It is sometimes called 'developmental co-ordination disorder'.

Someone who's dyspraxic might:

- have poor balance
- have difficulty pronouncing some words
- take longer to do some tasks
- have strong verbal communication skills
- be good at thinking creatively

For example, Jaz is dyspraxic. They work best by talking things through. But they find it overwhelming to have lots of meetings in one day. They agree with their manager to block out time each week where people cannot book meetings. This gives time for Jaz to focus on tasks they find more difficult.

[Find out more about dyspraxia on the NHS website](#)

## Masking

Neurodivergent workers might mask their condition at work. Masking means hiding parts of a condition to fit in better. Someone might not be aware they're doing it.

Masking can cause mental health problems. It can make someone feel:

- exhausted
- isolated
- like they cannot be themselves

People might not need to mask as much if they feel comfortable at work. Employers can help by:

- taking steps to [make their organisation neuroinclusive](#)
- thinking about how they [talk about neurodiversity](#)

For example, Jem is autistic. In previous jobs they masked their autistic traits. Jem starts a new job where people speak openly about neurodiversity. Jem shares with their team that they're autistic. Jem is great at big presentations but finds them exhausting. The team appreciates Jem's presentation skills and supports Jem with other tasks to help with their tiredness.

[Find out more about masking from the Brain Charity](#)

## Disability discrimination

An employer must not discriminate against disabled workers. This includes neurodivergent workers if their condition meets the definition of a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

### Example of disability discrimination

Sam is disciplined for quoting offensive terms during an equality training session. The employer has a zero-tolerance policy for this type of behaviour.

Sam is dyslexic. Their dyslexia can cause them to lose their train of thought when focusing on complex questions. This leads them to say things impulsively.

Sam's employer is aware that Sam is dyslexic. But having 'zero tolerance' in their policy means they cannot take this into account. This is likely to be disability discrimination.

Sam's employer could have handled this situation more effectively if they had updated their policy. They could have replaced 'zero-tolerance' with wording that allowed them to consider all the factors, including Sam's neurodivergent behaviour.

[Find out more about disability discrimination](#)

## **If someone experiences unwanted behaviour**

Unwanted behaviour related to neurodivergence is likely to be disability discrimination. For example, it could be harassment.

A worker could also:

- receive unwanted comments because someone incorrectly thinks they're neurodivergent – this can be a type of disability discrimination called 'discrimination by perception'
- experience bullying that's not classed as discrimination – this could still cause legal issues, for example [constructive dismissal](#)

For example, Mo is autistic and has shared this with people at work. Mo finds wearing headphones helps them focus and avoid sensory overload. Mo struggles to keep eye contact when talking to people. Other workers make comments that Mo is weird and rude. They exclude Mo from work social events. This is likely to be disability discrimination.

Employers should also take steps to prevent bullying and harassment related to neurodivergence. Making an organisation more inclusive can help with this. For example, by raising awareness of neurodiversity through training and events.

If a worker has experienced unwanted behaviour, they should raise it with their employer as soon as possible.

Employers should take complaints seriously and look into it as soon as possible.

Find out more about:

- [types of disability discrimination](#)
- [making and handling complaints about disability discrimination](#)
- [making your organisation neuroinclusive](#)