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Neurodiversity in the workplace

Supporting your employees mental and
emotional health.





Neurodiversity is a movement with equality at its core; the concept looks at conditions like ADHD, dyslexia, Autism and Dyslexia through a new lens.

Neurodiversity looks at the brain differences at the core of these conditions as normal—and simply an alternative way of interacting with the world. This accepting perspective celebrates the variety of human minds and considers ways we can all adapt as and when needed to meet the needs of those around us.

By learning about neurodiversity and its effects on the workplace, you will see how supporting employees on an individual level greatly benefits your teams—and your organisation as a whole. A happy, healthy workspace is one where employees feel comfortable in their environment, considered by their managers and confident with their responsibilities. The neurodiversity approach can help you to achieve this.

In this guide, we'll walk you through what neurodiversity is, how it impacts the workplace and how you can support neurodiverse employees.

Research suggests that **1** in **5** people are neurodivergent¹

That's **one** in every **five** of your employees who might need some support.



What is neurodiversity?

The concept of neurodiversity aims to reduce the stigma around learning and thinking difficulties. It's a way of viewing differences in the brain as mere differences rather than defects, challenging misconceptions around learning difficulties and shining a positive strength-based light on these differences.

Neurodiversity considers the whole range of human minds and discourages viewing one style of brain functioning as right or normal.

Instead, the view focuses on the advantages of these differences rather than the challenges. The term describes several different conditions including:

- ✓ Autism
- ✓ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- ✓ Dyslexia
- ✓ Dyspraxia
- ✓ Epilepsy
- ✓ Intellectual Disability
- ✓ Other learning disabilities

Confidentiality concerns

People with neurodiverse brains view the world differently and tend to process information in alternative ways. Sometimes, it's difficult for others to understand these differences, and this misunderstanding can lead to communication problems that make it hard for individuals to discuss their needs, feelings, and thoughts.

Normal is what we're used to, but it doesn't always mean it's the right or wrong way to do something; neurodiversity challenges our preconceptions, encouraging us to consider alternative pathways and broaden our perspective. These brain differences can also be a strength in their own right. We'll look at some of these strengths in more detail below.



Neurodiversity at work

Neurodiversity doesn't have an off switch. And work makes up a big part of daily life. So it's understandable that some neurodivergent conditions impact employees' working lives. Employers must understand these cognitive variations and how they can occur in the workplace.

It's important to embrace the concept of neurodiversity as you think about these impacts. Some of these conditions might hold a stigma. But these neurological differences have benefits too.

Many global brands have recognised how thinking differently can breed success. Organisations like Microsoft, Apple, Google, Sony, and Tesla argue that thinking differently is at the root of their competitive edge and profitability².

With this in mind, let's look at some of the different conditions and how they can impact working life.

Autism

Autism affects around **1 in 100** people², and symptoms can vary between individuals. Some key indicators include social communication and interaction challenges, repetitive behaviour and highly focused interests or hobbies.

In the workplace, this could look like a dedicated, hardworking employee who is committed and highly engaged with tasks but struggles in big meetings or connecting with colleagues.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The symptoms of ADHD include hyperactivity, impatience and impulsivity. But this difference in thinking and behaving has its benefits too, especially in the workplace.

An employee with ADHD might appear impatient with long-term projects and find it difficult to sit still for a long time. However, they may also be inventive with new ideas and have a meticulous focus on the task at hand.

Dyslexia

The condition affects language processing, causing issues with reading, writing, and spelling. Dyslexia in the workplace might mean an employee has difficulty taking notes, avoids reading and writing or makes spelling mistakes. Yet, dyslexic people are often extremely creative and think outside the box, which can lead to success in other areas.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia affects around **2-4%** population seriously³. The condition impacts physical coordination. So people with dyspraxia may seem clumsy, disorganised, and have trouble learning new practical tasks.

Most adults with dyspraxia have developed their own strategies for dealing with these symptoms. But some might need a little more support organising their workload and using technology. Employees with dyspraxia are often hard-working and strategic problem solvers.

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a neurological disorder causing seizures, fits and uncontrollable shaking. If someone has epilepsy, you must carry out a safety risk assessment to ensure their wellbeing.

You might need to make reasonable adjustments in some cases to ensure the employee can complete the role safely. But many people with epilepsy won't require any adjustments to their roles at all.



Mental health and neurodiversity

There is often a link between neurodivergent conditions and mental health problems. For example, Mind finds that people with ADHD are more likely to experience mental health issues such as anxiety and depression and have increased susceptibility to substance abuse and sleep problems⁴.

Research also shows that individuals with learning disabilities like dyslexia may be at higher risk of depression, anxiety, loneliness and substance abuse⁵.

Many symptoms associated with neurodivergent conditions impact mood, behaviour and thinking. We must recognise these increased risks to mental health issues and try our best to support people who need it.

As an employer, you must consider how you approach mental health in the organisation and what you can do to support your employees.

Mental health issues cost employers **£33-42bn** per year in productivity, absenteeism and employee engagement⁶

By supporting your employees with their mental health, you help improve their lives—but your organisation benefits too. Absences drop, turnover reduces, and employees are more engaged in their roles. We'll look at how you can do this in more detail below.



How to support neurodiverse employees

Neurodiversity brings both benefits and challenges. It's also very common in our world. So we must learn effective ways to support people around us. It's about leveraging the strengths of all your employees and finding ways to assist them with any challenges that they might be facing.

But keep in mind, that employees' needs may vary; there's no one size fits all approach. Neurodiversity affects people in different ways, so it's always best to provide support on an individual basis. Here are some tips to get you started.

Making communication work

One of the main areas neurodiversity can impact is communication and social interaction, particularly for employees with ADHD and Autism. So a key focus here should be on conversations and communication—how can you make them work?

Try to talk in a quiet place with minimal distractions. Use accessible language—avoid jargon and long words. Follow their lead and let the conversation flow at their pace. Speak slowly and take your time. If you're unsure if you've understood them correctly, check your understanding rather than just guessing.

Empathise

We're all different. And sometimes these differences can be hard to understand and make sense of; they even cause tension in some areas of our lives. For example, emails can be a frustrating task for people with dyslexia—and it might take them a little longer than others. Sometimes when we are going through challenges, it can feel like we're alone in our struggles.

If someone opens up about their experience with neurodiversity, take the time to validate their emotions and put yourself in their shoes. Listen carefully and try to make them feel heard and understood. This empathy helps to build them back up and boost confidence levels.

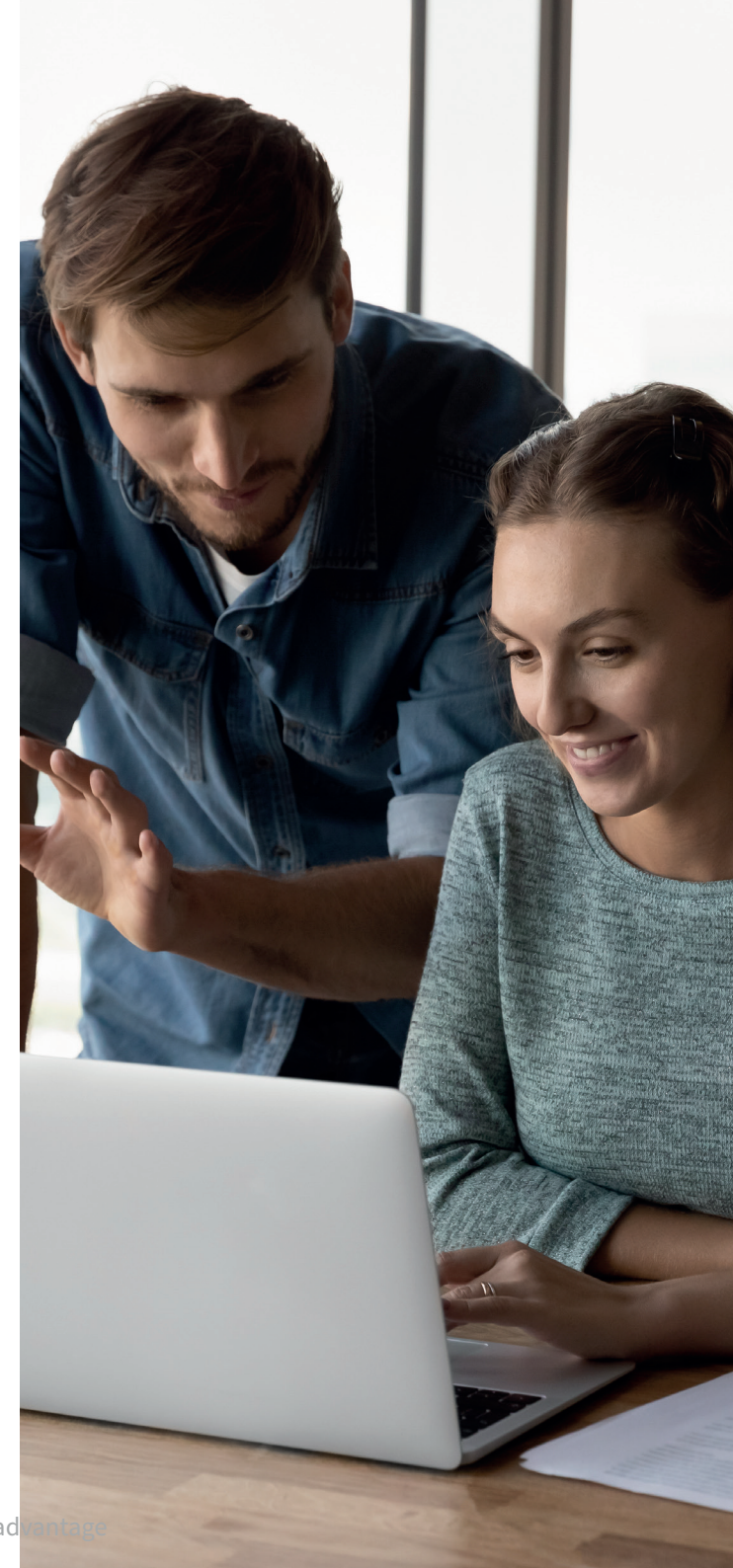
Ask about their needs

Blanket approaches to wellbeing at work often fall short of fully addressing the needs of your employees. Everyone has their individual needs in relationships and life. If you want to support someone with a neurodiverse condition, try to listen to understand their needs. Listen openly and ask open questions that help you get to the bottom of how best you can support them, whether it's at work, at home or with a loved one.

When employees disclose any neurodiverse conditions, it's worth having a meeting to understand exactly how their working life is affected. This conversation provides an open space for you to work out any helpful adjustments and supportive measures that might be of benefit. When employees feel heard and understood in this way, it encourages a pathway for future communication.

Making documents neurodiversity friendly

When you're creating documents such as policies, notices or communications, try to make them dyslexia friendly. Using clear fonts, soft mild colours, and concise language is a small step—but it can go a long way. Making these changes to your policies also encourages other colleagues to adopt the neurodiversity mindset.



Neurodiversity support with Health Assured

As part of your EAP with Health Assured, you can access a variety of support for Neurodiversity.

- ✓ Free counselling support for your employees
- ✓ A management support line that provides support for situations at work
- ✓ The My Healthy Advantage App and online portal
- ✓ Resources on how to manage work life and neurodiversity

How can you make the most out of your Health Assured EAP?

You have an EAP in place with Health Assured. So you are well on the way to supporting your employees. But we often find that the tips below can help you to get the most out of your EAP.

- ✓ Speak with your Relationship Manager to see how you can increase service usage
- ✓ Encourage managers to use the dedicated manager line
- ✓ Promote features of the service such as our app, portal and Spotify



¹ ADHD Foundation: <https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/about-us/>

² Neurodiversity: An expert opinion Dr Tony Lloyd. (March, 2022) SFI Health [PDF]

³ Foundation for people with learning disabilities, Dyspraxia: <https://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/d/dyspraxia>

⁴ Mind, ADHD and mental health: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/adhd-and-mental-health/>

⁵ Code Read. Dyslexia Network, Dyslexia and Mental Health Fact Sheet: https://codereadnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Factsheet_Dyslexia_and_Mental_Health.pdf

⁶ Deloitte, 2022. Mental health and employers: The case for investment – pandemic and beyond: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-report-2022.pdf>

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