

EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY: Cultivating Inclusive Workplaces and Services



Samantha V. Kolkey, LCSW





Comprehensive mental health services, without the wait

Our Admission Specialists are available to take your call seven days a week, including evenings.

Compass Health Center offers immediate access to:



Mental health assessments within 24 hours of initial inquiry to prevent ER and inpatient admission



Specialization in treating complex diagnoses for children, adolescents, young adults, and adults



Psychiatric evaluations within 24-48 hours of starting program & Psychiatric medication management throughout treatment



Same or next day starts



Programs that fit your needs and preferences: In-person and Virtual, Daytime, Afternoon & Evening



Scan Me to Learn More!

We Accept Most Commercial Insurance

Specialties

Ages 5 through Adult

Trauma

OCD

Anxiety

Depression

School Anxiety & Refusal

Mental Health & Substance Use

Mental Health, Chronic Pain and Illness

Levels of Care

Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP)

Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

Therapy Modalities

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) • Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) • Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) • Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) • Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)



Illinois | Maryland | Washington D.C. | Virginia | Wisconsin | Minnesota (Coming Soon)

Learning Objectives

- The current use of the **language**, who is considered neurodivergent, and the **history and context** of the **neurodiversity movement** and approach.
- Increase awareness of the **perspectives** of neurodivergent experiences.
- Describe and differentiate **autistic burnout** and neurodivergent burnout from occupational burnout and mood disorders.
- Considerations and strategies to support neuroinclusive workplaces and **clinical environments**, and **recruiting, hiring, and onboarding processes**.

Defining Neurodiversity

- **Neurodiversity** is another form of human diversity. It is a biological fact, part of human evolution, and natural, and valuable; the diversity among minds.
- **First used in 1996 by autistic folks in online forums.** Entered into the clinical field by Judy Singer in her 1998 thesis. Then, further popularized when mentioned in an article in *The Atlantic* by Harvey Blume.



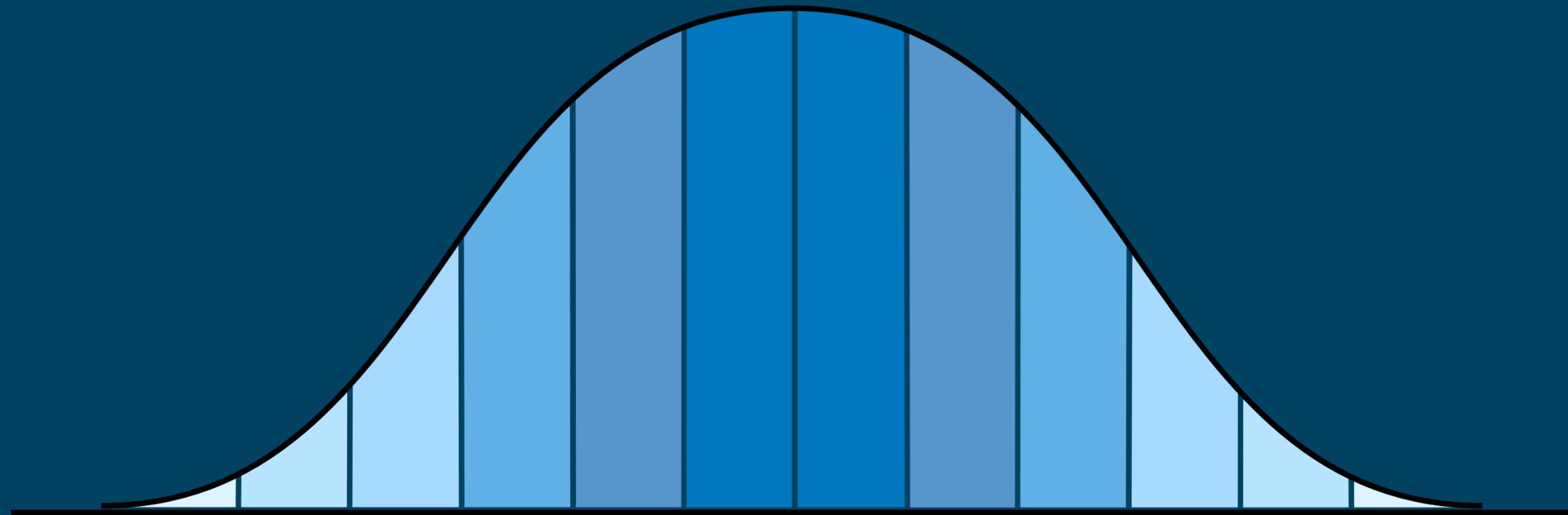
Defining Neurodiversity

“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?”

Defining Neurodiversity

Neurodivergent (adj)

A Visual Understanding: The Bell Curve



Individuals that are neurotypical fall within the center of the bell curve, and individuals that are neurodivergent fall on the edges.

Neurodiversity

There are two broad neurotypes within the neurodiversity of the human population:

Neurodivergent

Neurodivergent individuals have brain function that is different to the predominant neurotype. This includes thinking patterns and behaviours that can be a strength but which can create challenges within a society where the majority of people are neurotypical. Examples include autism, ADHD, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and dyslexia.

~ 20%

Neurotypical

Neurotypical or predominant neurotype individuals have thinking patterns and behaviours that are perceived as normal by the general population. Individuals who are neurotypical can display the same traits as those who are neurodivergent but not to the same extent, frequency, or intensity as experienced by neurodivergent individuals.

~ 80%

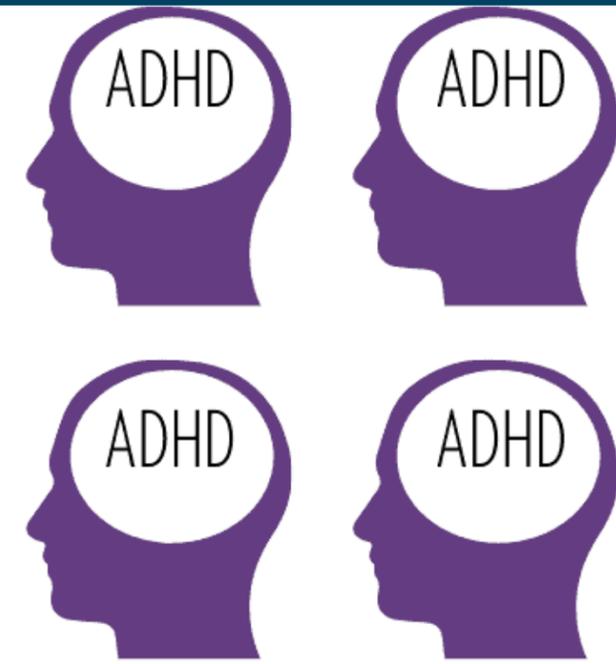
All traits are human traits



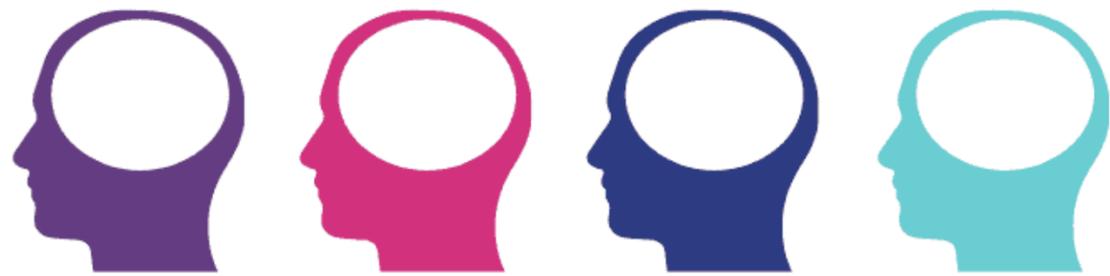
Each of these people are neurodivergent



This person is neurotypical



These people are each neurodivergent, but individually they are not neurodiverse



This group is neurodiverse

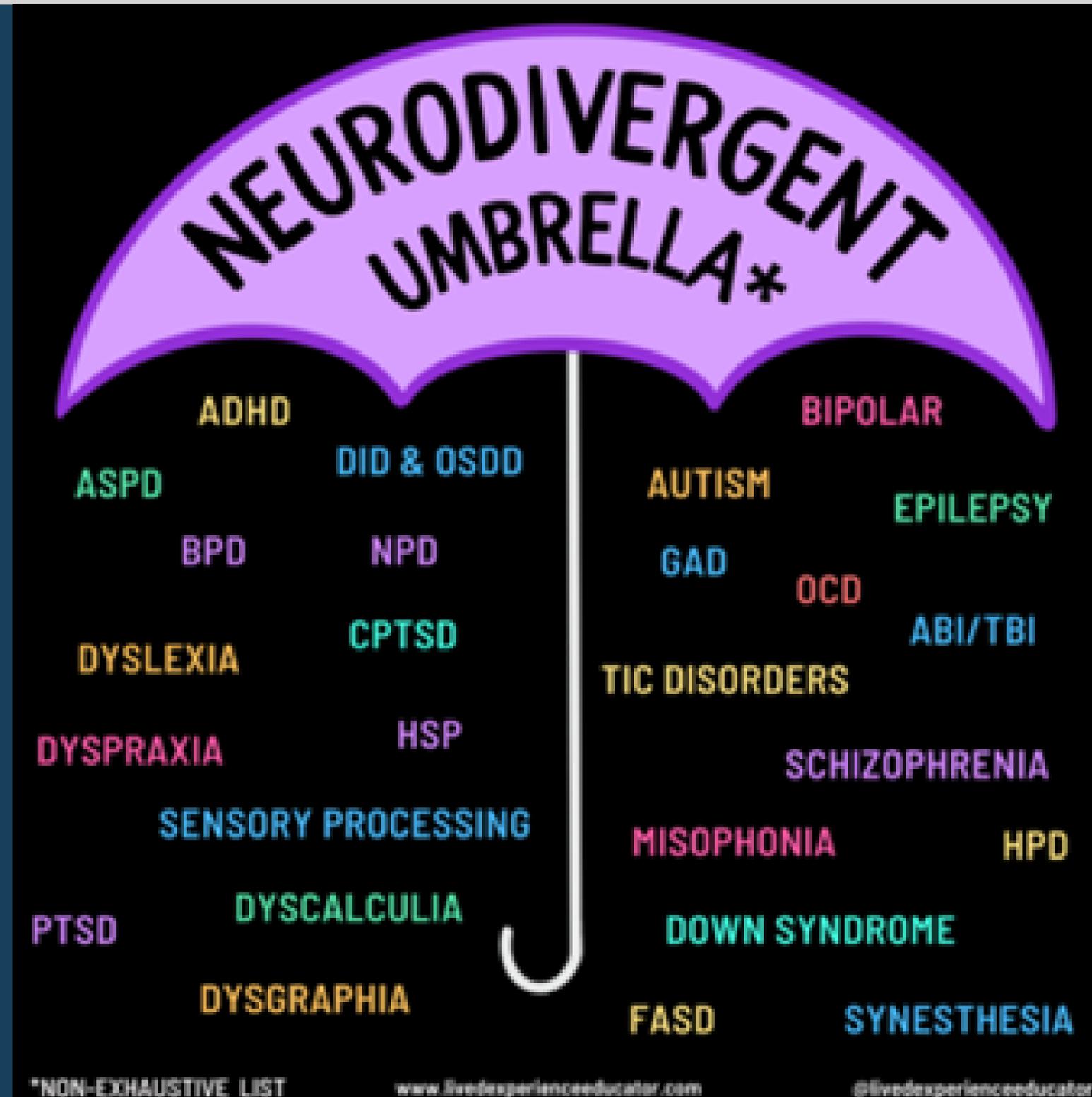


This person is multiply neurodivergent

Only groups of people can be described as neurodiverse.

Individuals are not neurodiverse, but can be neurodivergent

The Neurodivergent Umbrella



The Impact of Language



Words are directly related to the way we view and treat others.



Words can reinforce negative stereotypes, or it can challenge them.



Supports destigmatizing disability and promoting inclusion.



Accurately reflects the lived experience of disability, and challenges the belief that disability is inherently “bad.”

The Impact of Language

“Functioning”

Functioning labels are static, and therefore are assumed to be fixed and permanent. They undermine the nature of a person’s capabilities by overemphasizing the challenges a person faces.

“Support Needs”

Support needs can be fluid and context-dependent. “Support needs” allows us to be specific about **what supports, tools, or accommodations may be needed** based on the environment, situation, and other factors.

AUTISM SPECTRUM

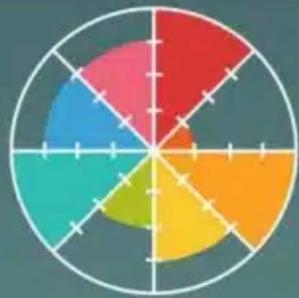
The Autism Spectrum is NOT linear



Less autistic

Very autistic

The Autism Spectrum
looks more like:



- Red: Social differences
- Orange: Interests
- Yellow: Repetitions
- Light green: Sensory sensitivities
- Teal: Emotional regulation
- Light blue: Perception
- Light blue: Executive functioning
- Pink: Other

Terms like "high functioning" &
"low functioning" are harmful and
outdated

Person First or Identity First Language

Service providers and teachers are taught to use “person first” language to afford disabled people respect. However, there has been a **shift in what the disabled community prefers**. Many autistic folks prefer identity-first language.

Autism is a fundamental aspect of a person's identity, akin to race, sexuality, and gender. The autistic community generally prefers the term "autistic person" over "person with autism" similar to how one would not say "a person with heterosexuality."

JUST ASK. Similar to how we ask what a person's pronouns are, simply ask if they use person first or identity first language.

A Social Justice Movement

The neurodiversity movement has its roots in the disability rights movement around the early 20th century.

It is a social justice movement that seeks equality, respect, civil rights, and societal inclusion for neurodivergent individuals.

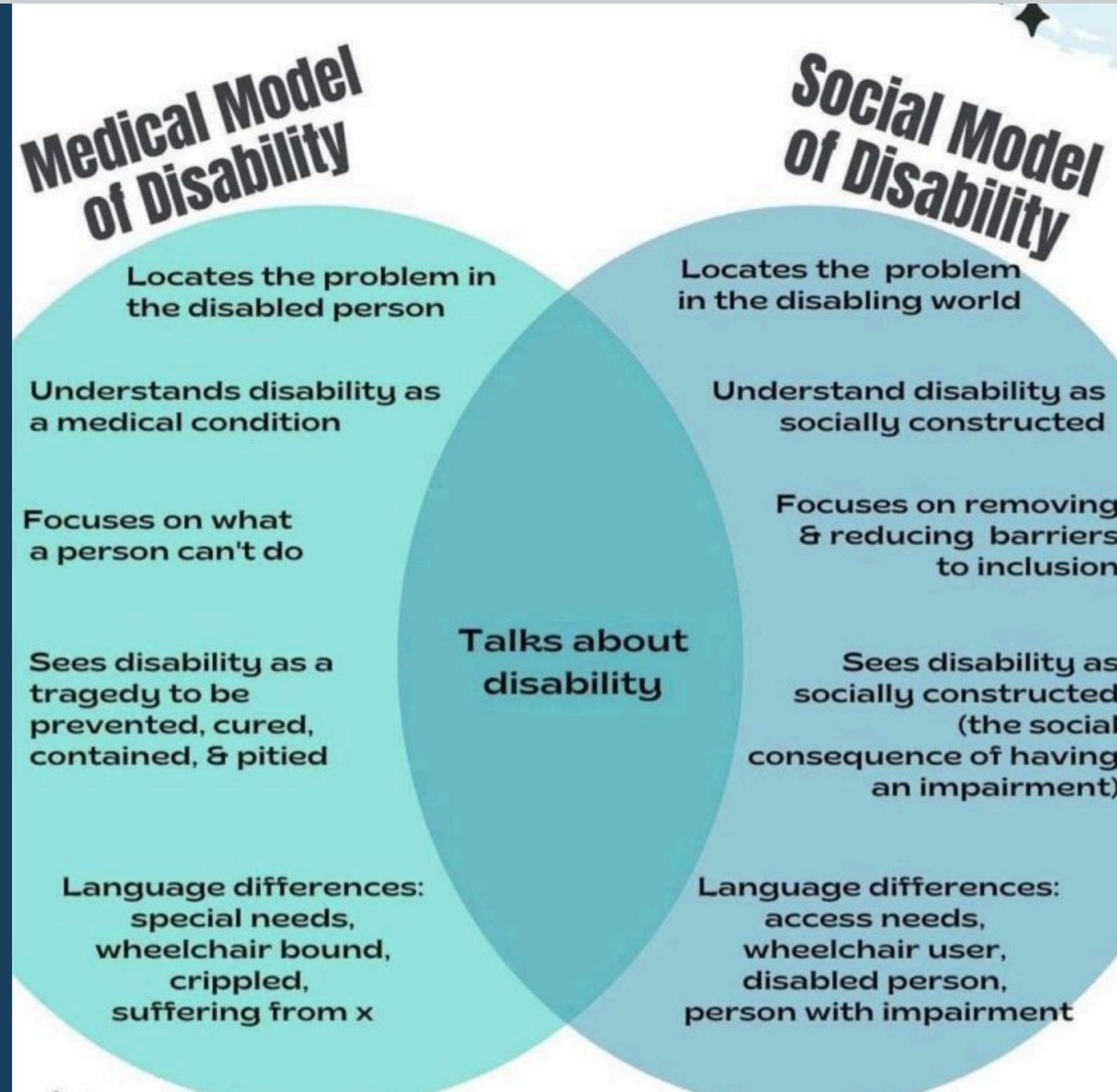


Disability justice advocate, Judy Heumann, protesting at the Center for Independent Living in San Francisco, 1980.

Goals of the Neurodiversity Movement

- Acceptance
- Framing Disability through a Diversity Lens-Paradigm Shift
- Empowerment and Expansion of Opportunities
- Justice-Oriented Framework
- Education and Awareness as Mechanism for Change

Shifting Paradigms



Shifting Paradigms

The neurodiversity paradigm's **fundamental principles** include:

1

There is **no “normal” or “right”** style of human mind, any more than there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture.

Therefore...

2

No one type of brain function is “right” or “best.”
Ideal neurocognitive function is a social construct.

And so...

3

Like other forms of diversity, neurodiversity is **subject to social inequity** but is also a **source of creativity and empowerment.**

The Neurodiversity Approach

The neurodiversity approach is grounded in the **the social model of disability** and informed by the **neurodiversity movement**.

ACCEPTANCE

Embrace neurodiversity by viewing developmental disabilities as differences, not deficiencies.

LEADS TO...

LANGUAGE

Moving away from pathologizing language.

SO WE CAN...

SUPPORT

Acknowledge the true root causes of a neurodivergent person's suffering and help them find ways of living that are attuned to their natural brain wiring.



Not glorifying neurodivergence as a "superpower"



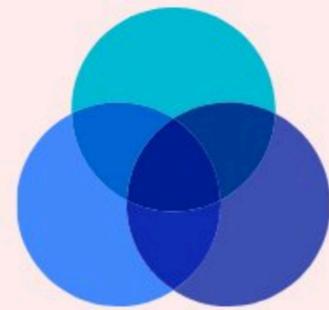
Avoiding pathologizing language



More support talk, less "cure" talk

Embracing Neurodiversity

Looks like



Considering intersectionality



Confronting internalized ableism



De-centering neurotypical narratives about neurodivergence



Neurodivergent Experiences

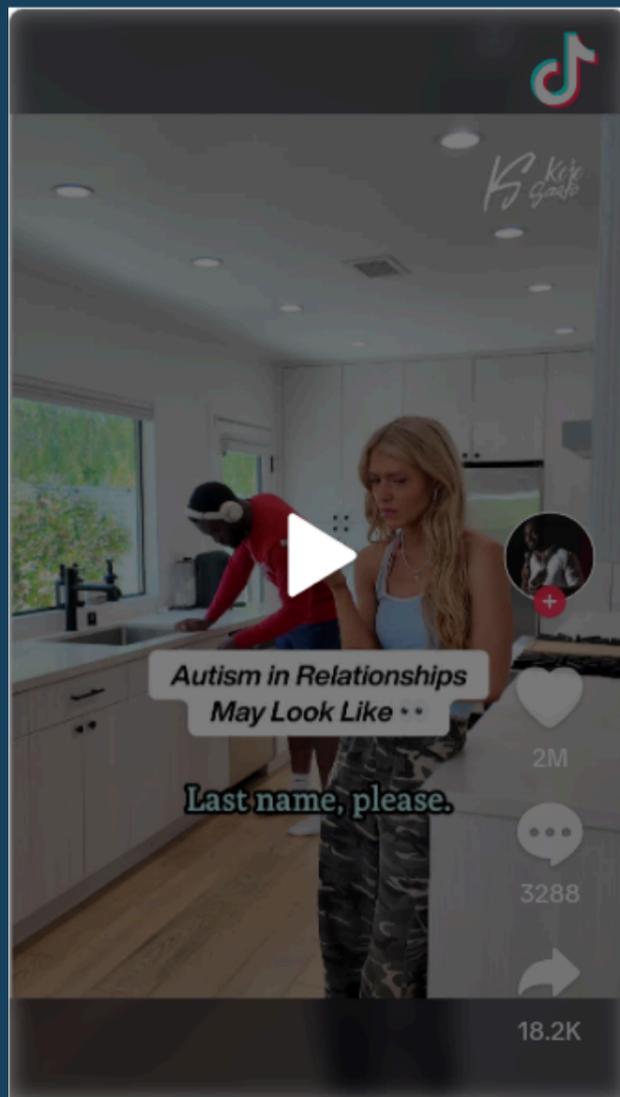
I don't really understand why it's considered normal to stare at someone's eyeballs"

– John Elder Robison, Look Me in The Eye

I have autistic friends who are not able to use a letter board because no one taught them how... Have any of you gone to a country where you can't speak the language? It's awful to feel like you can't explain your ideas to anyone. For autistic people who are nonverbal, they must deal with this isolation all their lives. Worse is that too many people assume that autistic people can't understand because they can't speak, so they use baby talk or weird phrases like "go car" or "no big noise."

-Ido Keller, Ido in Autismland

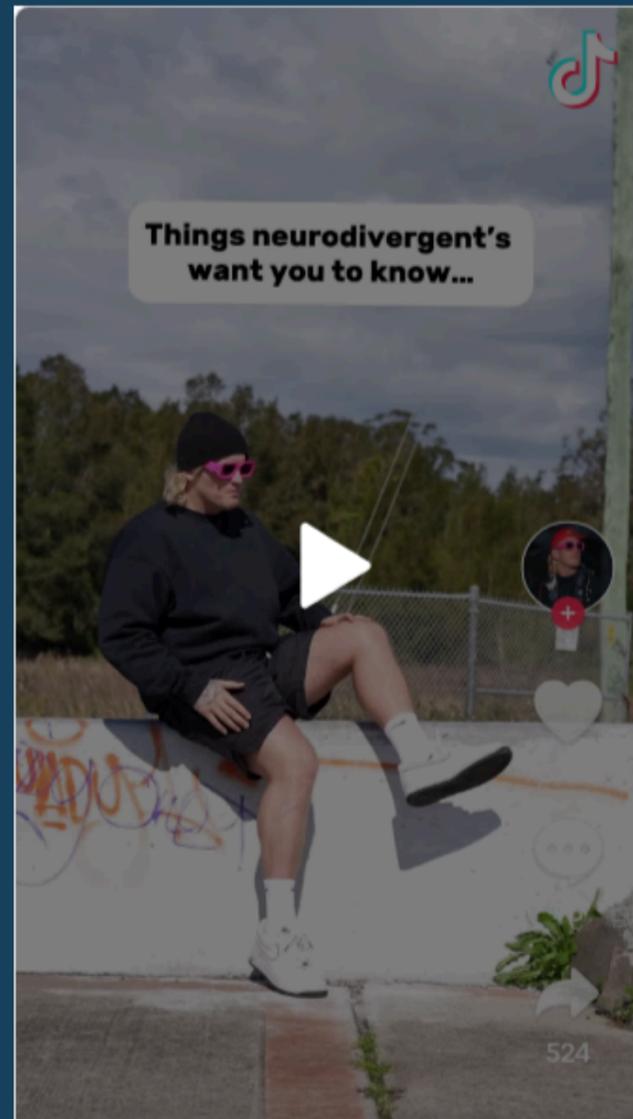
Neurodivergent Experiences



on TikTok Watch now

@dr.kojosarfo

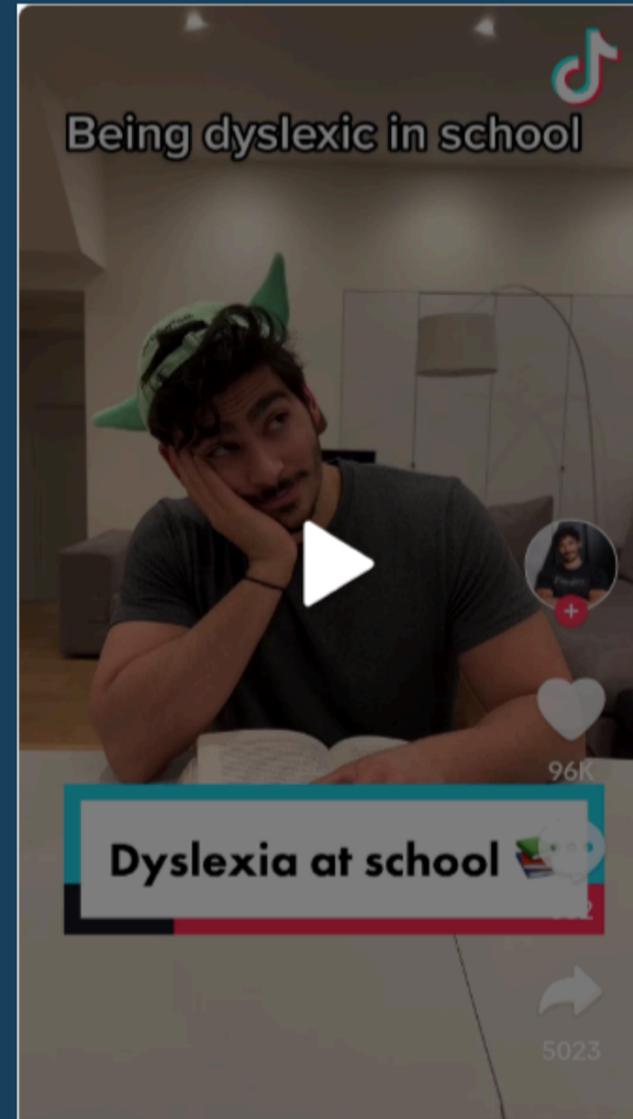
The way you communicate with your neurodivergent partner is key. ...See more
original sound - Dr. Kojo Sarfo - Dr. Kojo Sarfo



on TikTok Watch now

@cobywatts_

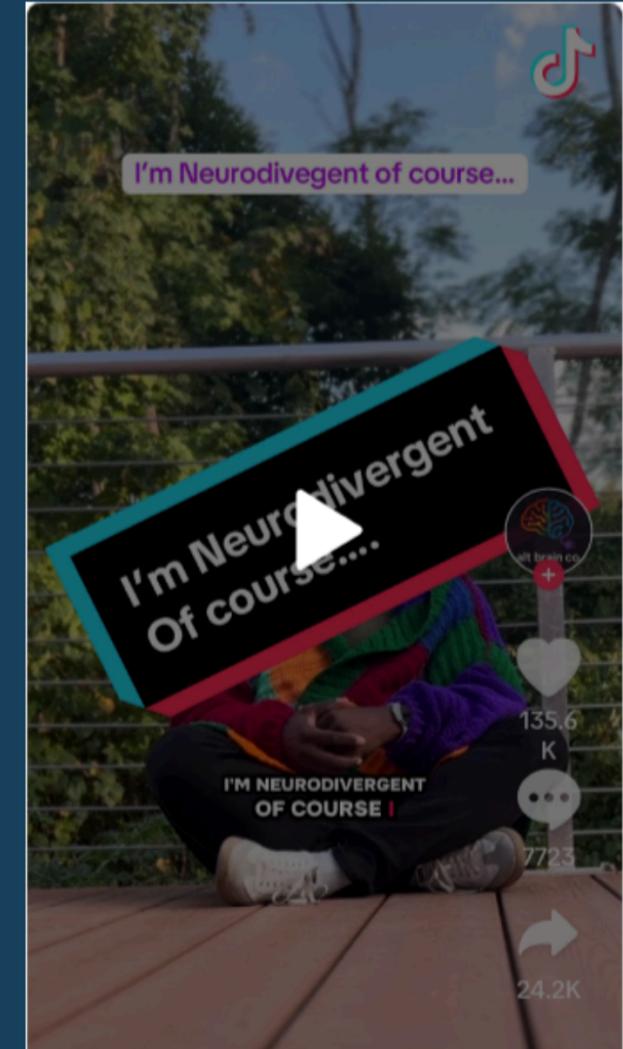
Shout out to all the Neurodivergent's
Mad World (Piano Instrumental) - Piano Queen



ore exciting videos on T Watch now

@cliffweitzman_

Being dyslexic at school #dyslexia #foryou #dyslexiasquad #dysle ...See more
Read to You - Speechify



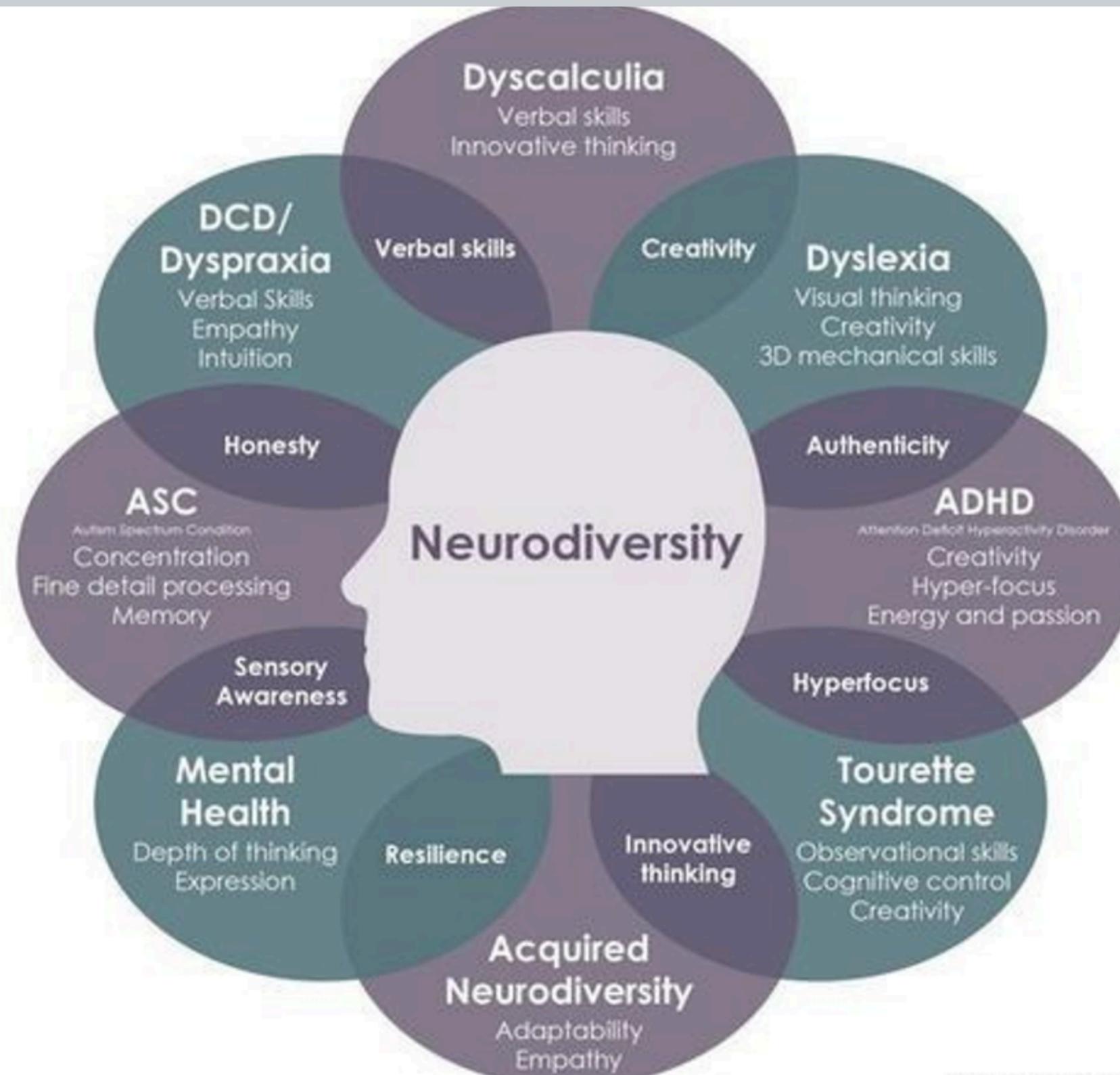
on TikTok Watch now

@phil.belight

I'm neurodivergent..... explained. #audhd #neurospicy #neurodivergent ...See more
original sound - Phil BeLight - Convo Curator

Eligible for commission

Neurodivergence in the Workplace



Supporting Neurodivergent Employees

Accommodations

**ENVIRONMENTAL/
SENSORY**

WORK TIME

**COMMUNICATION AND
LEARNING STYLE**

Supporting Neurodivergent Employees

Environmental /Sensory

Noise Canceling
Headphones

Use of Fidgets

Freedom to Move in
Meetings

Lighting
Temperature

Supporting Neurodivergent Employees

Work Time

Flexible Schedule

**Uninterrupted Work
Time**

Extra Time

Supporting Neurodivergent Employees

Communication and Learning Style

**Closed Captioning
and Recorded
Meetings Visual Aids**

Executive Function Support

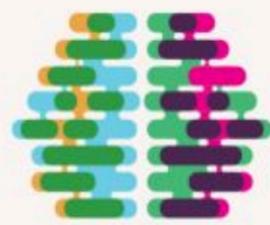
**-Written and Concise
Instructions**

-Prioritization Tools

**-Direct and Clear
Expectations**

**-Email/Calendar
Organization**

**Job Coaching and
Mentorship**



Communications Checklist

Verbal

- Incorporate short pauses
- Check for comprehension
- Be Direct and concise - avoid "dancing around the topic"
- When miscommunication occurs, take ownership where possible
- Converse in sensory-friendly spaces



For Managers

- Maintain a cadence of check-ins
- Deemphasize nonverbal cues and expectations
- Know each employee's preferred communication mode
- Be concrete and transparent
- Offer visual aids



Written

- Follow the Dyslexia Style Guide
- Avoid sarcasm, euphemisms, idioms, innuendo, and jargon
- Understand each team member's preferred mode
- Offer written instructions and expectations



Groups

- Allow cameras off
- Turn closed captions on
- Send meeting agenda before
- Send notes and action items after
- Offer multiple modes of communication to participate



Sensory Design Checklist

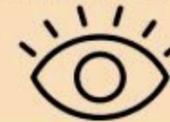
Auditory

- Permit noise-cancelling headphones
- Designate a low-noise/traffic break area
- Avoid workstation placement near high-traffic areas if possible
- Suppress noise emanating from workplace equipment



Visual

- Have color overlays available
- Install adjustable lighting if possible
- Include visual elements on signs
- Minimize glare emanating from windows or shiny surfaces
- Avoid bright/bold colors and busy patterns in websites and offices



Odors

- Minimize workplace fragrances
- Avoid workstation placement near lunchrooms if requested
- Purchase low-to-no-odor food options for meetings/events
- Limit potent cleaning materials and painting during the workday



Preventing Overwhelm

- Allow for privacy when needed
- Install adjustable thermostats
- Supply fidget devices
- Offer "Walk and Talk" meetings
- Permit movement breaks
- Communicate changes to routines proactively



Neuroinclusive and Neuroaffirming Social Service and Clinical Settings

Neuroinclusive Environments and
Available Tools in these settings can
support most brains, not just
neurodivergent brains.

Interview/Hiring Process

- **Talent can be easily missed** when recruiting, interviewing, and hiring follows the standard procedure
- **Inclusive and Neuro-affirming recruiting, interviewing, and hiring procedures** offer a job seeker insight into the workplace culture, and ensures that talent is not missed.

These procedures and practices may include:

- *Offering alternative interviewing platforms to support communication differences.
- *Offering interview questions in advance.
- *Clearly outlining what to expect during their interviews.

Interview Checklist

Before

- Provide plain-language information on interview format and schedule.
- Set expectations in multiple modes (e.g., verbal, written, tutorial).
- Explain the process for requesting accommodations or adjustments.
- Design a skill-based project for candidates to complete in advance.



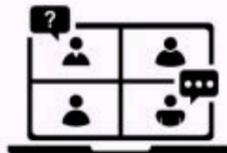
In-Person

- Minimize noise, harsh lighting, odor, and movement.
- Deemphasize body language, eye contact, and vocal cadence/tone.
- Offer multiple communication modes (i.e., verbal and written).
- Contextualize the conversation around the required skills.



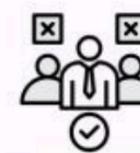
Virtual

- Open the call with a brief orientation and overview.
- Use the platform's accessibility features (e.g., captions and chat).
- Use consistent turn-taking cues.
- Normalize cameras off for tics, stimming, and severe anxiety.



After

- Communicate the decision timeframe and point of contact.
- Loop in accommodations team, mentors, and/or coaches if needed.
- Make the process a value-add regardless of the outcome through constructive feedback.



Onboarding Checklist

Before First Day

- Provide a map, directions to the office, and check-in instructions.
- Identify who they will meet with upon arrival.
- Provide a detailed description of the organization's dress code.
- Outline the schedule and agenda for their first day.



Orientation

- Make the accommodations and workplace adjustments process transparent
- Offer breaks and pace adjustments to avoid overload.
- Provide short guides and checklists.
- Clarify the "Hidden Curriculum" (e.g., Friday afternoon meetings)



First 3 - 6 Months

- Connect new hires with formal and informal mentors.
- Have a cadence of manager check-ins with two-way feedback.
- Offer opt-in executive functioning coaching.
- Maintain strict privacy around employee disclosure.



For Managers

- Understand team's unique learning style and preferences (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic).
- Check-in regarding the workplace sensory environment.
- Learn each employee's communication preferences.
- Normalize accommodations.



Occupational Burnout



“Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

1) Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion

2) Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job

3) Reduced professional efficacy.



Neurodivergent Burnout

Autistic and ADHD Burnout (Neurodivergent Burnout):

Autistic and ADHD burnout is characterized by pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus.

(Raymaker et al., 2021).



Depression or Neurodivergent Burnout?

For clinicians, other providers, and educators: Depression and Neurodivergent burnout can present similarly, and it is critical to be able to distinguish them, yet it is challenging. Researchers have identified two key differences:

1) the profound loss of interest.

2) significant sleep changes are more closely associated with depression.

Burnout Recovery Practices



**Incorporate
Sensory Soothers**



**Nourishing
Foods**



**Supportive
Movement**



**Engage
Special Interests**



**Spending Time
Unmasked**



Rest



**Engage
Rhythm**



**Spend Time
in Nature**



**Practice Good
Boundaries**

AT A GLANCE

Dr. Megan Anna Neff



Sensory Soothing

Inclusion of sensory regulation and understanding of how this influences emotions and regulation



Address Ableism

Actively address personal ableism and assist clients in identifying and working through internalized ableism

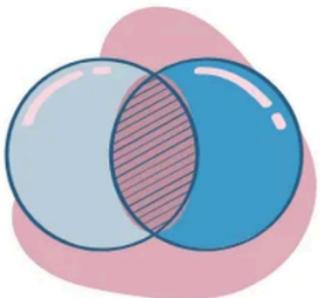
PILLARS OF

NEURODIVERGENT AFFIRMING CARE



Self-Advocacy & Executive Functioning Support

Supporting self-advocacy and skills and supporting clients in developing systems that support their basic needs



Affirm Identities

Recognize and affirm clients' identities, understanding how their intersectionality impacts their social context and life experiences



Incorporate Interests

Incorporate clients' interests and passions into therapy, utilizing them to access their inner world and enhance psychoeducation for deeper learning and engagement

Neuroinclusive and Neuroaffirming Social Service and Clinical Settings

**Counseling and Clinical Focus for Neurodivergent Individuals at this
current moment in time may focus on**

- Burnout Recovery and Prevention**
- Executive Function Skills as Mental Health and Relationship Support**
- Trauma work, considering the trauma of a late diagnosed person, as well as ND individuals that have internalized negative core beliefs due to assumptions that were made in school setting.**

AT A GLANCE

Dr. Megan Anna Neff



Self-Advocacy & Empowerment:

Cultivate the skills to voice your needs, set clear boundaries, and seek accommodations



Address Internalized Ableism:

Work to recognize and dismantle ableist attitudes you've absorbed, embracing a positive self-view



Identity Integration:

Discover how your ND identity intersects with other aspects of your life, relationships, & other identities

WHAT'S NEXT?

COMMON THERAPY GOALS FOR ADHD / AUTISTIC ADULTS POST-IDENTIFICATION



Addressing Trauma & Chronic Invalidation:

Acknowledge & heal from trauma linked to unsupported ND & chronic invalidation



Sensory & Nervous System Care:

Delve into sensory profiling to understand how sensory input affects you, and develop strategies for regulation and comfort



Unmasking & Discovering Authentic Self:

Explore & embrace the real you, finding joy in your genuine interests, movements & ways of being

Citations & Resources

Unmasking Autism by Devon
Price, PhD

Job Accommodation Network
askjan.org

Divergent Mind by Jenara
Nerenberg

Neurodivergent Insights
(website)

Autistic Self Advocacy Network
(ASAN)

**Employer Assistance and Resource
Network for Disability Inclusion:**
[https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-
in-the-workplace](https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace)

Sincerely, Your Autistic Child,
Collection of Essays, compiled and
edited by the Autistic Women and Non-
Binary Network

Neurodiversity Hub:
[https://www.neurodiversityhub.org
/resources-for-employers](https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/resources-for-employers)

QUESTIONS COMMENTS

Intellectual property rights are protected by law.
Intellectual property of Samantha Kolkey LCSW
Images are not intellectual property of Samantha Kolkey

CONTACT



skolkey@compasshealthcenter.net

Samantha V. Kolkey, LCSW

Personal: svkolkeyanderson@gmail.com