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Neurodiversity in the workplace

Supporting your employee's mental
and emotional health.





Neurodiversity is a movement that *appreciates* individual differences in the way we interact with the world.

Neurodiversity looks at natural variations between how people think, learn and see 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.

Supporting every employee to perform at their best and reach their full potential means taking individual needs and differences into account. Understanding neurodiversity is a key part of this. A happy, healthy workspace is one where employees feel comfortable in their environment, considered by their managers and confident with their responsibilities. Understanding neurodiversity 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?

Neurodiversity is the term used to describe differences in learning, attention, mood, and other mental functions. Everyone has a brain that is unique to them and there are natural differences with how people experience, relate to, and interact with the world around them.

For people who aren't neurodivergent, it can be difficult to understand how others work in different ways, and this misunderstanding can lead to communication problems that make it hard for individuals to discuss their needs, feelings, and thoughts.

Neurodiversity considers the whole range of human minds and discourages viewing one style of brain functioning as right or normal; this includes conditions such as:

- ✓ Autism
- ✓ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- ✓ Dyslexia
- ✓ Dyspraxia
- ✓ Dyscalculia
- ✓ Dysgraphia
- ✓ Epilepsy
- ✓ Intellectual Disability
- ✓ Other learning disabilities
- ✓ Tourette's syndrome



Strengths of a neurodiverse workforce

Neurodiversity challenges our preconceptions, encouraging us to consider neurological differences not as 'right' or 'wrong' but simply as variations of the human mind. We'll look at some of these strengths in more detail below.

Diverse Skills

When properly supported, having a neurodiverse workforce can bring diversity of thought and a wider range of skills. This includes:

- ✓ Prolonged focus time
- ✓ Multi-tasking
- ✓ Calmness under pressure
- ✓ Thinking outside of the box
- ✓ Analytical thinking
- ✓ Attention to detail
- ✓ Depth of knowledge
- ✓ Visionary thinking

It is important to remember that individuals are different and to not pigeon-hole employees based on their thinking style.



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.

Every employee should be supported to perform their best, regardless of their thinking style. Most workplaces are set up for neurotypical ways of thinking which can put neurodiverse employees at a disadvantage.

It's also important to note that many people live with these conditions undiagnosed, whilst others might not seek a formal diagnosis. And even if they do, they may not choose to share this information with their employer. 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 perception, 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, attention regulation 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 and movement.

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 that can sometimes cause seizures, depending on the type and severity of the condition. 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.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia causes difficulties understanding numbers, which can lead to problems with mathematics. Dyscalculia can cause problems with number sense, comparison or ordering. It can occur on its own. But it often co-occurs with learning difficulties or other medical conditions.

Dysgraphia

This condition affects a person's ability to recognise and comprehend written words. This makes writing, spelling and forming words difficult. Dysgraphia doesn't affect intelligence, but it often occurs alongside other learning difficulties.

Tourette's syndrome

This condition affects the nervous system and causes vocal or physical tics. Tics are involuntary sounds and movements including blinking, eye rolling, grimacing, shoulder shrugging, whistling or tongue clicking.

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. 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

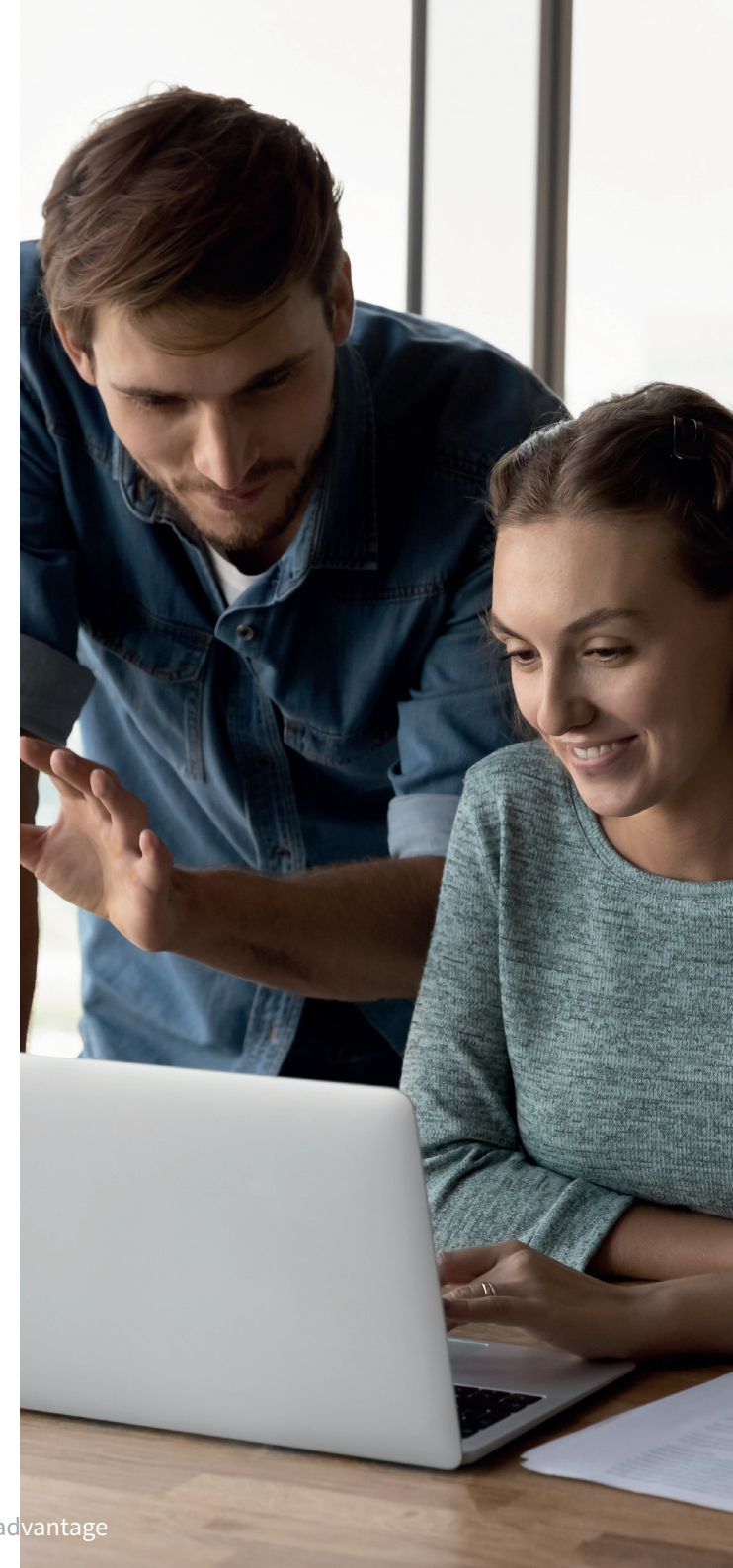
Blanket approaches to wellbeing at work often fall short of fully addressing the needs of your employees. Everyone has their individual needs in relationships and life. If you want to support someone with a neurodiverse condition, try to listen. Get to know employees as individuals by understanding their unique strengths and differences. Listen openly and ask open questions that help you get to the bottom of how best you can support them.

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.

You might also want to offer a Workplace Needs assessment. This approach will provide a professional opinion on how you can support the individual.

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 be mindful of neurodiversity.



Providing adjustments

A lot of neurodiverse conditions will be considered as a disability and fall under the protected characteristics of the Equality Act (2010).

This means that employers have a legal responsibility to make workplace adjustments for supporting neurodiversity. These can include:

- ✓ Short movement breaks
- ✓ Do Not Disturb' working time
- ✓ Office mentors
- ✓ Assistive technology (e.g., noise-canceling headphones, ergonomic keyboards, assistive text software)
- ✓ Epilepsy
- ✓ Minimising sensory distractions
- ✓ Flexible working
- ✓ Clear and specific instructions

Educate your teams

Another great way to help increase understanding of neurodiversity is by providing workshops to managers and team leaders.

Here at Health Assured, we provide a fantastic neurodiversity workshop that walks attendees through the best ways to support their teams. We've had fantastic feedback from these sessions, and we'd highly encourage them to anyone who is serious about making their workplace neurodiversity friendly.

To arrange a workshop please call: 0800 756 0893



Health Assured can support you with neurodiversity

As a service we provide non-specialist counselling support, and so if a client has concerns relating to neurodiversity, we would explore issues they are facing rather than focusing solely on their condition. This could include psychoeducation. Some other examples are worries with adjustment at work; self-acceptance; client's perception of their diagnosis/condition; self-care; coping strategies etc. Every client is different and so their needs will differ.

We can still offer in the moment support (via the helpline or digital means), structured counselling support or the CBT programme based on their needs and goals the clients might want to work on. We would just need to assess whether the support we offer is appropriate to each client at the time.

We could also look at signposting options with the clients. However, as counsellors we do not diagnose and so if the staff want to pursue mental health diagnosis, they would need to see their GP as first point of contact.

We know how important it is that wellbeing solutions for SMEs are cost-effective. That's why our pricing structure works to support organisations of all sizes. So our EAP costs as little as 37p per employee, per month—that's less than a cup of coffee. **And for this, you can start to implement an all-encompassing clinical approach that includes:**

- ✓ A free 24/7 counselling, legal & information line
- ✓ Critical incident advice & telephone support
- ✓ Access to Wisdom - our leading health and wellbeing app
- ✓ Relationship management support & usage reporting*
- ✓ Management support line & counselling
- ✓ Access to counselling sessions & CBT as required

*MI reporting is subject to the terms and conditions of contract dependent on the size of the organisation



Support mental health with an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

Health Assured is the UK and ROI's leading EAP provider. We support over 15 million lives across 70,000 organisations. And here's what they had to say:

"Simply amazing. My counsellor was so kind. Very thoughtful. Incredibly understanding. She felt like a friend to me, Listened & helped me through some really difficult times. I could not ask anymore. Thank you." – **Service user**

"Health Assured provide by far the greatest range of support and are the best value for money out there." - **Hampshire County Council**

Get in touch with one of our wellbeing consultants today to see how we can help:



0800 470 0237



<https://www.healthassured.org/request-a-demo>

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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