



Optum

**Autism and
ADHD in the
Workplace**

Learning points

- Explore neurodiversity and understand specific conditions of autism and ADHD
- Identify challenges for neurodivergent people in the workplace
- Discuss direct and indirect neurodivergent discrimination
- Learn how to build a more neuro-inclusive culture for team members

This session has been designed to explore the ways in which a workplace can support neurodiversity and embrace all types of ways to think, learn, interact, and perceive the world.

1. What is one thing you would like to get out of this session?

What is a neurotypical person?

A neurotypical person is an individual who thinks, perceives, and behaves in ways that are considered the norm by the general population. In addition, institutions such as schools, sports leagues, and places of employment are often designed to accommodate people who fit into these norms.

Keep in mind that there is no stable, universally understood concept of "normal." In fact, "normal" perceptions and behaviors vary greatly depending on many factors such as culture and location. For example, in some cultures, direct eye contact is expected; in others, it's considered rude.

Neurotypical characteristics may be viewed as positive, negative, or neutral depending on each unique individual's perspective. While neurotypical characteristics may vary, some examples may include a person who can:

- Develop verbal, physical, social, and intellectual skills at a specific pace, order, and level
- Function well in complex social settings with large numbers of people
- Have little or no difficulty dealing with sensory information like intense light, sounds, crowds, and movement
- Find it easy to engage in team activities, including sports and games, etc
- Learn in a fast-paced, highly verbal, and competitive setting with large numbers of same-aged peers
- Perform well under pressure
- Deal with change
- Speak, move, and behave in "expected" ways, such as speaking at a certain volume or distance from others.

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiverse people have abilities that are 'out of balance', with significant differences between their strengths and difficulties. Examples of neurodiversity include:

People with dyslexia

Those who have ADHD

Individuals with autism



Neurodiversity is the idea that there are many unique ways to think, behave, and learn. This term aims to embrace differences without saying one way a brain works is better than another. When discussing an individual, in particular, the term "neurodivergent" may be used to describe the way they navigate the world. Some examples of individuals who may identify as neurodiverse include:

- People with dyslexia which is a condition that impacts the area of the brain that processes language, making reading and spelling difficult
- Those who have ADHD, which describes a cluster of symptoms that may impact someone's ability to focus and/or sit still
- Individuals with autism, who may experience social, learning, and behavioral differences that range on a spectrum



Is Neurodiversity a Disability?

“While everyone with a brain-based disability is considered neurodivergent, not everyone who is neurodivergent is considered disabled.”

“The neurodiversity movement is a celebration of the vast differences in people's thought processes and behavior. The movement advocates for acknowledging and accommodating those differences.”

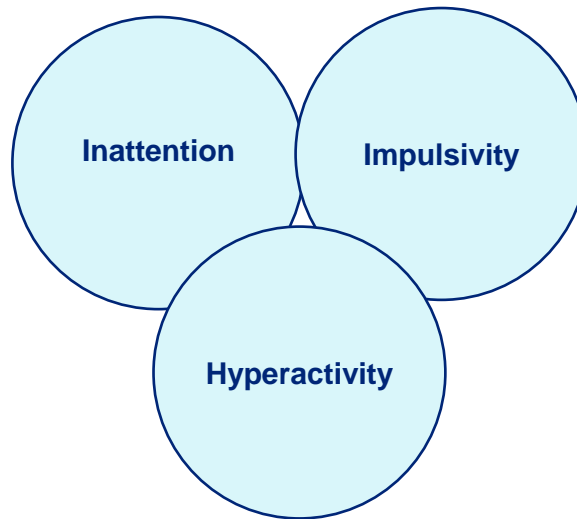
VeryWell Health, 2022

While everyone with a brain-based disability is considered neurodivergent, not everyone who is neurodivergent is considered disabled. The neurodiversity movement is a celebration of the vast differences in people's thought processes and behavior. The movement advocates for acknowledging and accommodating those differences.

The neurodiversity movement promotes the idea that all brains work differently and one way is not better than another. This movement also highlights that what some call symptoms of disorders are just typical expressions that don't need treatment.

Defining Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The core symptoms of ADHD, as defined in the DSM-IV¹ and ICD-10² diagnostic criteria are:



The core symptoms of ADHD, as defined in the DSM-IV¹ and ICD-10² diagnostic criteria, are inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.

The DSM-IV and ICD-10 are both operational diagnostic systems used globally that classify known psychological disorders according to the number of criteria symptoms.

Certain discrepancies between the criteria exist and may lead to some inconsistencies in psychiatric research. Nevertheless, despite ongoing debate, critique (and regular updates) of both diagnostic systems, they are widely used in mental health to understand and diagnose symptoms and conditions.

Symptoms of ADHD

Inattention	Hyperactivity	Impulsivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not pay attention • Avoids sustained effort • Does not seem to listen when spoken to • Fails to finish tasks • Cannot organize • Loses things, 'forgetful' • Easily distracted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fidgets • Leaves seat in class • Runs/climbs excessively • Cannot play/work quietly • Always 'on the go' • Talks excessively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks excessively • Blurts out answers • Cannot await turn • Interrupts others • Intrudes on others

Diagnosis of ADHD:

- Should only be made by a specialist, psychiatrist or other healthcare professionals with expertise in ADHD
- Full clinical and psychosocial assessment
- Full developmental and psychiatric history
- Assessment of needs, comorbidity, psychosocial circumstances, physical health
- Assessment of parental mental health and genetic predispositions

Please note that these lists is not to be used as a means of diagnosing people in the workplace, but rather to build an awareness of how symptoms may present.

How many of these “symptoms” are present in particular personality types of people you know?



How some people describe having ADHD...

“Being able to tune into 12 different radio channels all at the same time, where you are able to hear the noise from each program and can't tune out all of the others and focus on one.”

“Driving in the rain with bad windshield wipers. The windshield gets smudged and blurred as you're speeding along, but you don't slow down; you keep driving, trying your best to see.”

EARN, 2022

Defining autism

Firstly, it is important to note that autism is a **spectrum** of conditions characterized by:



Impairments in **social interaction**

Impairments in **communication**

Presence of **restricted, repetitive behaviors (RRBs)**

Autism is often a hidden disability - you can't always tell if someone has it. Also, it is essential to note that autism is a spectrum disorder characterized by the following:

- Impairments in social interaction
- Impairments in communication
- Presence of restricted, repetitive behaviors (RRBs)

Spectrum = variability within and across these areas.

Autism may be described as:

A developmental disability affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, that affects a child's performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

Autism is not an intellectual, learning, or mental health disability (though it may co-occur with any of these). It is a complex developmental condition that affects social, sensory, and communication experience and may manifest differently in men and women. Autism is a "spectrum" with many dimensions, and the specifics of navigating the world as an autistic individual are different for everyone.

Facts about Autism:

- Autism – also referred to as autism spectrum disorder– constitutes a diverse group of conditions related to brain development.
- About 1 in 100 children have autism.
- Characteristics may be detected in early childhood, but autism is often not diagnosed until much later.
- The abilities and needs of autistic people vary and can evolve over time. While some people with autism can live independently, others have severe disabilities and require life-long care and support.
- Evidence-based psychosocial interventions can improve communication and social skills, positively impacting the well-being and quality of life of autistic people and their caregivers.
- Care for people with autism needs to be accompanied by actions at community and societal levels for greater accessibility, inclusivity, and support.

- World Health Organisation, 2022

Facts about Autism

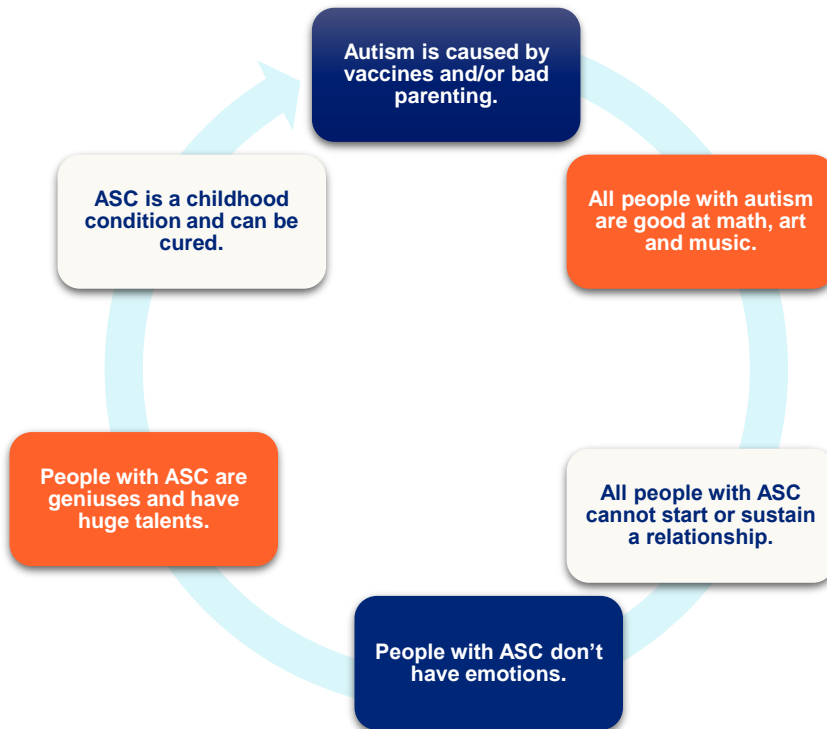


Individuals with Autistic Spectrum Conditions demonstrate a broad spectrum of ability. Autism does not come from neglect or injury. Instead, research suggests a genetic link from parent to child.

Over the last 30 to 40 years, there has been a great increase in the number of diagnosed cases globally (WHO, 2021). Research suggests that people with ASC have highly developed sensory awareness but less executive function processing.

Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the U.S (CDC, 2022). Autism prevalence has increased by 178% since 2000. According to the CDC, around 1% of the world's population has Autism – over 75,000,000 people.

Myths surrounding Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC)



Take a moment to reflect on your understanding of ASC before coming into this session. Our lived experiences often shape our understanding and knowledge of a topic. Can you identify what and/or how your opinions, views, and knowledge of this topic have been shaped or colored by your lived experiences?

Myths and Misconceptions Surrounding Autism

Autism is caused by vaccines

The biggest myth of all is that vaccines cause autism. The safety of vaccinations has been repeatedly tested across large groups of people. High-quality research studies involving hundreds of thousands of people have consistently shown that vaccinations do not cause autism.

Autism is caused by bad parenting

Autism is not caused by bad parenting. Research has proved that parenting is not to blame. We are currently funding studies to support parents and help them better understand autism. This approach can improve an autistic child's communication skills. Parenting style can certainly help an autistic child to cope with the world, but it is definitely not the root cause of autistic behavior.

Autism is a childhood condition

Autism is lifelong. Autistic adults have been overlooked in research, though, so we're supporting a number of studies to find the best ways to support them at every stage of their life. In addition, research suggests that outcomes can change for people over time if they get the right support, such as language, communication, and anxiety.

Autistic people are geniuses and/or have a special talent

Autistic adults often get asked about this, and it can be frustrating. ASC individuals have strengths and weaknesses, and autistic people are no different. Being autistic doesn't necessarily make you the next Einstein. Research suggests that around 28% of autistic people have special talents, but the why of this is less understood.

Autism can be cured

While autism is different for everyone and will present differently at different stages of the development lifespan, substantial scientific research does not support that it can be "cured" by medicine or various diets and other internet fads circulating.

Myths and Misconceptions Surrounding Autism

Continued

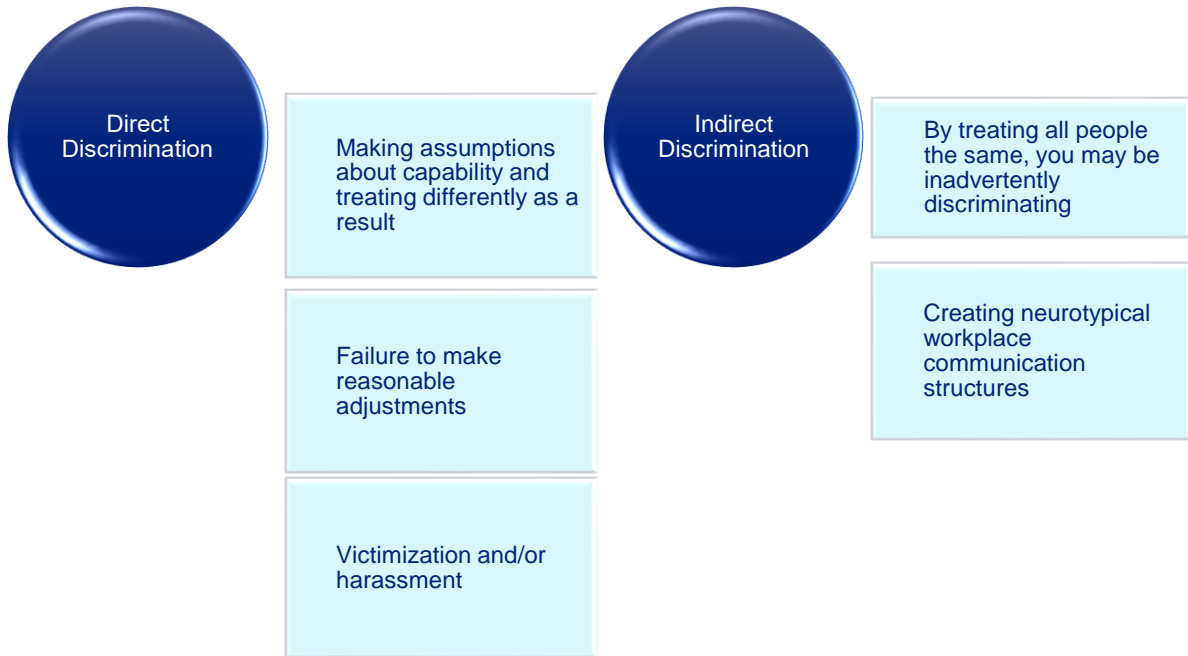
Autistic people have learning difficulties

With the proper support and a suitable environment, many autistic people are able and independent. Around 1 in 4 autistic people speak few or no words, but they can find other ways to communicate. Some autistic people take longer to process information, but it doesn't mean they don't understand. Autistic people also have strengths over those without autism. For example, strong attention to detail and a special ability to see patterns in data can bring many advantages.

Autistic people don't have emotion and/or are anti-social

Autistic people may need support with social skills or interact differently with the world around them, but most autistic people enjoy having relationships. People show their social difficulties in different ways. Some are quiet and shy or avoid social situations; others speak too much and struggle to have two-way conversations. Unspoken communication can be confusing for autistic people - body language, tone of voice, and sarcasm can be difficult for them to read. These challenges can make making friends, building relationships, or getting on at work difficult.

Neurodiversity and discrimination



Feeling excluded and invisible is often typical for neurodivergent people. Unfortunately, pop culture narratives make this worse. They are often portrayed as unemotional (almost robotic) people who love tech or struggle to overcome everyday woes triumphantly. Reducing neurodiverse individuals to stereotypes and "othering" them can further shape how they are perceived by others and by organizations. A result is an overwhelming number of autistic people who feel isolated, misunderstood, and discriminated against in life and at work.

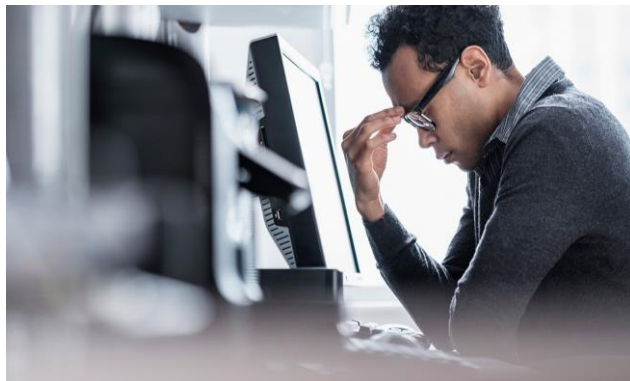
News from the UK further highlights this. Research indicates that disability discrimination cases regarding neuro-minorities are on the rise; a 40% rise for autism cases, 31% for ADHD, and 14 related to dyslexia in the last year (Forbes, 2022).

This is unsurprising given the exponential rise in cases overall, the result of better knowledge and screening in the field as a whole. However, knowing that a significant minority in some organizations will likely be neuro-minorities means businesses can plan for this. Neuroinclusion starts with a solid, evidence-informed menu of adjustments and accommodations, a well-trained HR team, and advice for managers.

Reflection point

Take a moment to consider your workplace and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 What are you/your workplace currently doing well to create/support inclusivity for neurodiverse individuals?
- 2 What is not being done so well, or what could be improved upon?
- 3 What do you see and hear to know this? (please share examples if you would like)



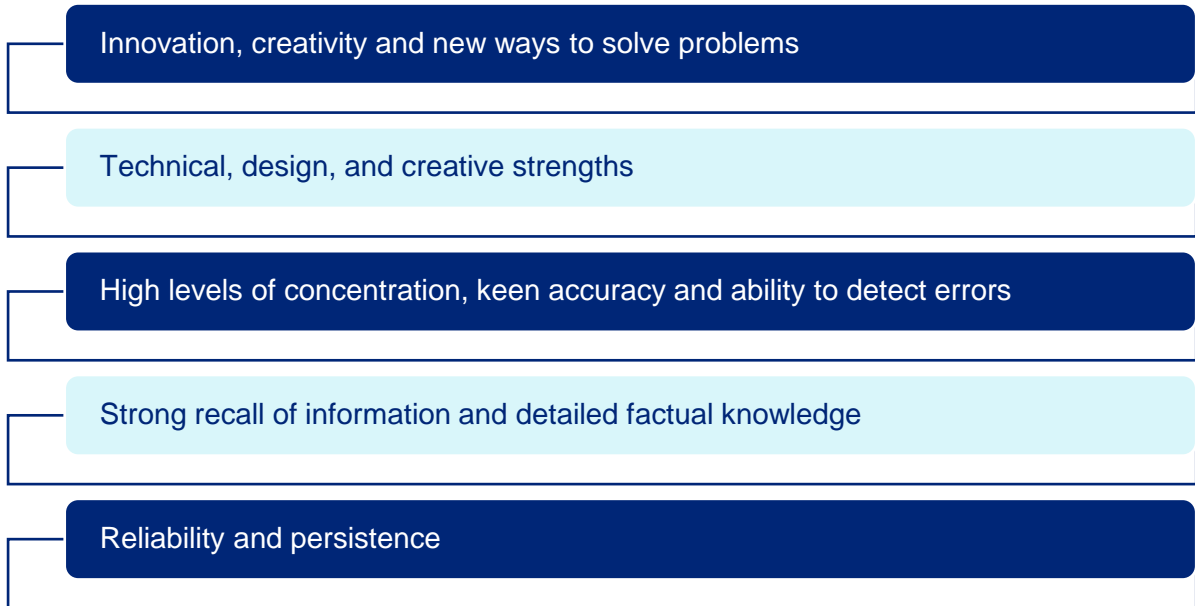
Please write your reflections here:

1.

2.

3.

Benefits of neurodiversity in the workplace



Efforts to increase neurodiversity can enhance the workplace in many ways. Neurodivergent workers can contribute their talents, skills, and perspectives in ways that can directly benefit your organization's mission and help support productivity and performance. More employers now recognize these benefits and have created hiring programs focusing on recruiting neurodivergent workers.

Organizations of all sizes in all industries can benefit from supporting neurodiversity at work and tapping into the skills and talents of neurodivergent workers. These skills and talents may include:

- Innovation and creativity
- Technical, design, and creative strengths
- New ways to solve problems
- High levels of concentration
- Keen accuracy and ability to detect errors
- Strong recall of information and detailed factual knowledge
- Reliability and persistence

Hiring neurodivergent workers can offer organizations a competitive edge, often bringing measurable financial and cultural benefits.

Supporting neurodiverse individuals in the workplace

1. Explain hidden rules and follow up with notes
2. Be specific and use feedback
3. Provide agendas and/or give alternatives to group meetings
4. Allow a break-out space
5. Be aware of external stimuli in the environment



Communication

- Explain hidden rules, and don't be embarrassed to check your understanding of things you might feel are obvious.
- Be specific with instructions.
- Use feedback that separates what was seen and heard from this interpretation.
- Give advance notice or identify when giving an instruction that might not be expected.
- Set time limits – do not use 'Give it to me when you are ready.'

For Meetings

- Give extra time before and after to review materials where possible
- Give an alternative to group meetings – update via 1:1
- Follow-up requests in meetings with written notes
- Give agenda to every meeting, identify and acknowledge when deviating from it

Awareness

- Be aware of noise, light, smell, temperature, and color – these things can overwhelm neurodiverse individuals.
- Allow the individual to have break out space and don't interrupt when this is being used unless invited and pre-agreed.
- Take a holistic view – expect highs and lows, totally focused concentration, and times of complete lack of focus.
- Listen to the individual and ask them what they would like to have happen.

Creating an inclusive workplace



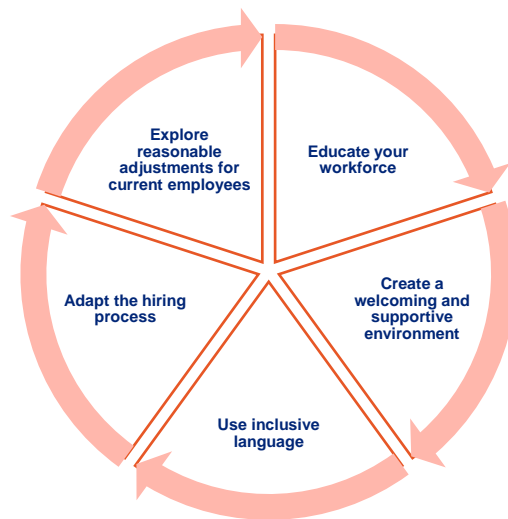
In the last decade, many organizations, including Fortune 500 companies, small businesses, and government agencies worldwide, have launched or scaled up neurodiversity hiring programs. These companies have typically designed their programs to fit the talents, strengths, skills, and needs of neurodivergent workers. Adopting these programs can allow organizations to hire talented staff and help promote greater inclusion in workplaces.

There are many ways to build an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees, including the following (but also covered in more detail on the next slide):

- Working collaboratively and take an honest culture inventory
- Communicate openly and directly
- Normalize and educate
- Include everyone in the conversation
- Create an environment of empowerment
- Make yourself hybrid ready
- Model inclusivity from the C-Suite

Five ways to embrace neurodiversity in your workplace

Everyone can play an important role in supporting workplace inclusivity...



Educate your workforce

Most cultural shifts start by making people aware of diversity, equity, and inclusion goals and explaining why they are essential. Thus, building workplace awareness about neurodiversity is a positive first step in creating lasting policies and practices that help neurodivergent employees feel welcome, productive, and successful.

Create a welcoming and supportive environment

While training can create awareness, an organization may want to take its program a few steps further by creating mentorship and professional development opportunities for all employees — including those who are neurodivergent. In addition, to build an effective training system, individuals can reach out to community groups that support people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other neurological and developmental conditions that can provide practical solutions to create a welcoming and supportive environment.

Use inclusive language

Again, there's no one-size-fits-all approach regarding preferred terminology for diverse groups, including neurodiversity and neurodivergent workers. But it's important to always be respectful when referring to people with different life experiences and specific conditions. This is another reason that partnering with local community groups and becoming educated on these topics can be helpful.

Five ways to embrace neurodiversity in your workplace

Use of inclusive language continued

It's also essential to ask questions since not everyone has the same preferences. For example, some people prefer “person first” language — such as “a person with autism” — because their neurodiversity does not define them. Other people may prefer “identity first” language — such as “an autistic person” — because they embrace their diversity, which is a key part of their identity. While identity-first language is most common in the autism community, you should note that person-first language may be more common in other communities, and individual employees may have their own unique preferences.

Adapt the hiring process

Recognizing that these stereotypes and expectations may be impeding HR/leadership's ability to hire neurodivergent talent is a critical step in developing inclusive strategies.

Explore reasonable adjustments

Remember that diversity laws do not require lowering production or performance standards, eliminating an essential job function, or providing an accommodation that would create an undue hardship. However, an organization can consider whether flexible work arrangements — such as remote work or schedule changes — would be practical and reasonable. Other accommodations/adjustments that could be considered include noise-cancelling headphones, quiet workspaces, additional breaks, and special equipment or other technological aids.

Summary of key principles

- Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways.
- There is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits.
- As we are all different, the best support for neurodivergent employees is an individualized approach.
- Don't be afraid to discuss neurodiversity in the workplace – get involved!



What are three key takeaways from this session for you?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

About professional support

You may consider seeking professional support if you experience any of the following:

- Sleep problems
- Performance issues at work
- Relationship difficulties with family or friends
- Loss of interest in hobbies you normally enjoy
- Lack of care about normal everyday work tasks
- Excessive anxiety or worrying more than normal
- Feeling overwhelmed or sad for more than two weeks
- A noticeable change in appetite, eating too little or too much
- Behavior and coping methods have become harmful to yourself or others, whether that is through aggressive behavior or unhealthy habits, such as alcohol or drug misuse
- Thoughts of harm to self and/or others

Keep in mind some of these conditions may warrant more urgent professional help and you should seek support if you are unsure.

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