



MOVING FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

A Guide to Neuroinclusive Language

Created for **Neurodiversity Celebration Week** to inspire meaningful conversations and promote inclusive communication for all.



Introduction to Neuroinclusive Language

Before we dive into how we can use inclusive language to raise awareness around neurodiversity and support those who are neurodivergent, it's important to first understand what neurodiversity means and some of the important key terms associated with it.

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in human cognition, much like diversity in race, gender, or culture. It includes both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals.

Neurodivergence, on the other hand, refers to innate differences in brain function and cognitive processing. It's a term encompassing a range of neurotypes such as:

- ADHD
- Autism
- Dyslexia
- Tourette Syndrome

(Head to the back of the guide for more details on the different neurotypes).

Neurodivergence involves lifelong differences in how one experiences the world, generally present from a young age, but it is not a form of illness like a mental health issue. We like to think of neurodivergence as a unique "Cognitive Operating System."



Did You Know? Approximately 20% of the world's population sits under the neurodivergent umbrella – that's 1 in 5 of your colleagues!

Key Terms For Neuroinclusive Language

Understanding key terminology is essential in fostering an inclusive environment.



Neurodiversity Refers to the collective variations of neurological operating systems.

Neurodiverse We are all “neurodiverse.” Just as humanity is racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, no human being falls outside the spectrum of neurodiversity.

Neurotypical Describes individuals whose neurological cognitive development and functioning are consistent with societal standards of ‘typical’. The neurotypical population is sometimes referred to as the ‘Neuro-majority’.

Neurodivergent Describes those with a neurotype that diverges from what is considered to be the ‘typical’ neurocognitive function. The neurodivergent population is sometimes referred to as the ‘Neuro-minority’.

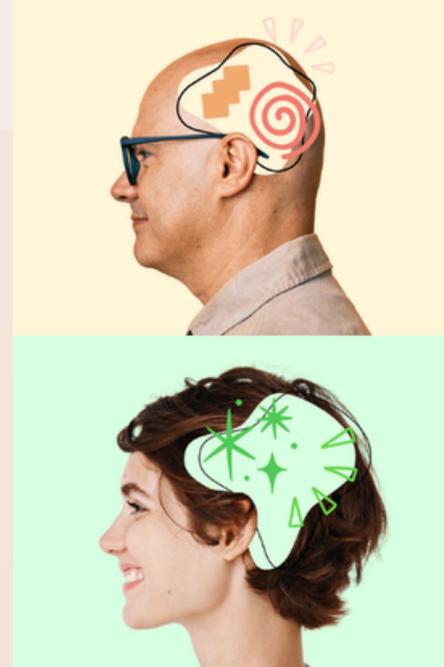
Disorder A term used in medical fields to describe traits and behaviors that do not conform to societal standards of “typical.” This word is heavily contested, with many neurodivergent individuals rejecting the use of ‘disorder’ to describe another variant of the human nervous system.



Did You know? The term “Neurodiversity” was first coined in the late 1990s by Australian sociologist Judy Singer, who is herself autistic. While the concept of cognitive differences had been discussed since the 1960s, it was Singer who formally introduced the term neurodiversity to highlight the natural variation in human brain function and cognition.

The Importance of Neuroinclusive Language

Words shape the way we perceive and treat others. By avoiding outdated, stigmatising, or inaccurate terms, we contribute to a culture where everyone feels valued.



Different Cognitive Operating Systems

A helpful analogy is to think of neurotypical minds as akin to a 'Windows' operating system and neurodivergent minds as 'Apple OS'. Both systems have their strengths and unique ways of processing, yet both are capable of incredible results.

Lose the Term Disorder

As mentioned on the previous page, the term Disorder is often associated with neurodivergence, and appear in a lot the names:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactive **Disorder**
- Autism Spectrum **Disorder**
- Obsessive Compulsive **Disorder**
- Bipolar **Disorder**

However, labelling these neurotypes as "**disorders**" implies that they are inherently problematic or deficient, which can perpetuate stigma and overlook the unique strengths and perspectives that neurodivergent individuals bring.

To begin your journey to neuroinclusive language, start by reframing these conditions as "cognitive differences" rather than disorders. This perspective acknowledges that neurodivergent brains operate differently, much like alternative operating systems in technology, each with its own strengths and capabilities.

By shifting our language to terms like "cognitive differences," we can foster a more inclusive environment that values diverse ways of thinking and reduces the stigma associated with neurodivergence.



Thought Provoker: Reflect on how the term "disorder" influences your perception of neurodivergent individuals. How might adopting the term "cognitive differences" change your interactions and attitudes?



The Do's and Don'ts of Neuroinclusive Language

Language shapes culture. The words we choose influence how people feel, how policies are interpreted, and how belonging is experienced at work.

Adopting neuroinclusive language is not about perfection. It is about progress. If you recognise phrases you have used before, that is part of the learning process. Language evolves. So does our understanding. What matters is the intention to improve and the willingness to listen.

Do use...

- ✓ **Identity-Affirming Language**
"Autistic Person" instead of "Person with autism"
This respects how individuals choose to describe themselves.
- ✓ **Strength-based framing**
Unique thinker instead of suffers from
Focus on capability and contribution, not deficit.
- ✓ **Neutral descriptions**
Experiences challenges with instead of struggles with
Describe experiences without attaching judgement.
- ✓ **Inclusive phrasing**
Neurodivergent or neurotypical instead of normal
Remove implied hierarchies in how we describe people.

Avoid using...

- ✗ **Ability labels**
High functioning or low functioning
These oversimplify lived experience and ignore context.
- ✗ **Pathologising language**
Disorder when referring to identity
This can imply something is broken rather than different.
- ✗ **Deficit-based framing**
Suffers from or battles with
This positions neurodivergence as inherently negative.
- ✗ **Binary comparisons**
Normal or abnormal
These create unnecessary division and reinforce stigma.



Thought Provoker: What are some words or phrases in your workplace or personal life that could be reframed to be more inclusive?

How to use Neuroinclusive Language

Every interaction carries a message. The way we speak, write and respond shapes how others experience us and the culture around them. Thoughtful, neuroinclusive language helps ensure neurodivergent individuals feel respected, understood and included across verbal and digital communication.

Verbal Communication

60%

report being interrupted when needing time to express their thoughts.

52%

regularly experience microaggressions in the workplace.

1 in 5

experienced harassment or discrimination due to their neurodivergence.

Throughout the workday, we engage in conversations in various settings, whether in meetings, casual chats by the coffee machine, at our desks, or even when arriving and leaving the workplace. Every interaction is an opportunity to foster inclusivity.

Here are some best practices for using neuroinclusive language in person:

➤ **Use Clear and Direct Language**

Opt for short, simple sentences and avoid jargon, metaphors, or idioms that may be confusing or exclusionary.

➤ **Respect different communication styles**

Avoid correcting natural neurodivergent behaviours such as avoiding eye contact, stimming, or needing extra processing time.

➤ **Frame Language in an Affirming Way**

Instead of focusing on deficits, use strengths-based language that respects individual differences.



Thought Provoker: Think about a recent conversation you had at work. Were there moments where your language may have unintentionally excluded someone? How might you reframe that interaction using clearer, more inclusive, and affirming language?

How to use Neuroinclusive Language

Digital Communication

Just as we communicate in person throughout the workday, digital communication plays a major role in how we connect, whether through emails, instant messages, presentations, or social media. Being mindful of how we communicate digitally ensures that neurodivergent individuals feel respected and included.



Here are some best practices for using neuroinclusive language in digital spaces:

➤ Be Clear and Direct

Use simple, concise language and avoid unnecessary jargon, metaphors, or ambiguous phrasing. When communicating changes, structure information into 'what, when, where, why, and how' categories to reduce overwhelm. Deliver updates as early as possible, and reinforce written messages with verbal follow-ups, ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to ask questions and process information in different ways.

➤ Provide Multiple Ways to Engage

Where possible, offer alternative formats such as text summaries, bullet points, or video captions to accommodate different processing styles. Using neuroaffirming language and visual aids in emails or presentations can make information more digestible.

➤ Consider Sensory Accessibility

Be mindful of flashing visuals, excessive emojis, or high-contrast colours that may be overwhelming for some neurodivergent individuals.



Thought Provoker: Reflect on a recent email, was the information presented clearly and accessibly for everyone? How could you adapt your digital communication to ensure it's more inclusive and easier for neurodivergent colleagues to engage with?

Language is a Tool for Inclusion

Inclusive language is more than just words – it's about reshaping society to ensure everyone feels valued and empowered. Small changes in how we communicate can lead to big shifts in belonging and inclusion.

Here's how you can contribute to building an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent individuals:



Commit to Continuous Learning

Stay curious and open-minded. Embrace opportunities to expand your understanding of neurodivergence and inclusive practices.



Listen to Neurodivergent Voices

Prioritise the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals. Their insights are invaluable in shaping truly inclusive environments.



Spread Awareness and Help Break Stigmas

Share what you learn with others to challenge misconceptions and create a more accepting and informed workplace.



Encourage Open Conversations

Foster a culture where everyone feels safe to express themselves and discuss their needs without fear of judgment or stigma.

By using neuroinclusive language, we take one step closer to a truly diverse and welcoming world.

Every word matters. Choosing inclusive language helps create a space where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

Glossary

Different Neurotypes

ADHD <i>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</i>	A neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in attention regulation, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.
ASD <i>Autism Spectrum Disorder</i>	A neurodevelopmental condition affecting communication, social interaction, and sensory processing, with a wide range of presentations.
AuDHD <i>Autism + ADHD</i>	A term used when an individual is both autistic and has ADHD, recognising the overlapping traits and unique experiences of those who have both conditions.
Bipolar Disorder	A mood disorder characterised by alternating periods of elevated (manic) and low (depressive) moods, affecting energy levels and daily functioning.
Dyscalculia	A learning difference affecting mathematical understanding, number sense, and problem-solving involving numbers.
Dysgraphia	A neurological condition that affects writing skills, including handwriting, spelling, and organising thoughts on paper.
Dyslexia	A learning difference that affects reading, writing, and spelling due to differences in processing language.
Dyspraxia	A condition affecting motor coordination, movement, and spatial awareness, often impacting fine and gross motor skills.
OCD <i>Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder</i>	A condition characterised by persistent intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviours or mental rituals (compulsions) aimed at reducing distress.
PTSD <i>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</i>	A condition that can develop after exposure to a traumatic event, leading to flashbacks, anxiety, and hypervigilance. PTSD can also be linked to neurodivergence when past experiences of exclusion or masking cause distress.
TSD <i>Tourette's Syndrome and Tics</i>	A neurological condition that involves involuntary motor or vocal tics, which can range from mild to severe.



THE POWER OF WORDS

A Guide to Neuroinclusive Language

This guide was created in honour of Neurodiversity Celebration Week, a time to recognise, embrace, and celebrate the diverse ways our minds work.

It's more than just a week of awareness; it's a call to action to create environments where neurodivergent individuals feel seen, heard, and valued every day.

By using neuroinclusive language, we can all play a role in building workplaces and communities that support and uplift everyone, regardless of how they think or process the world.



Created by NeuroBridge® for Neurodiversity Celebration Week –
inspiring meaningful conversations and promoting inclusive
workplaces.

