



# Neurodiversity Celebration Week

*Every brain a gift. Every mind a world.*

Dr Chloe Farahar | Aucademy CIC

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# What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human brains and minds – a natural, healthy, and valuable form of human variation. No brain is 'wrong'.

*The Autistic community, inLv server (early/mid 1990s) | Walker (2014)*



## Population concept

Neurodiversity belongs to groups and species – all of humanity is neurodiverse, just as all of humanity is biologically diverse.



## Not a condition

Neurodiversity is not a diagnosis or a disorder. It is simply the recognition that brains vary, just as bodies do.



## A natural spectrum

There is no single 'normal' brain. What we call 'typical' is a statistical majority, not a standard to aspire to.

# An Important Distinction

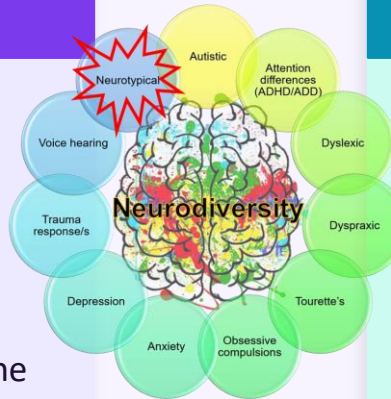
## NEURODIVERSITY

**A property of groups and populations.**

All humans are part of the neurodiverse tapestry of our species.

*Think of it like biodiversity* – it describes the variation across a whole ecosystem, not an individual organism.

**⚠ You cannot be 'a neurodiverse person' in the same way you cannot 'be biodiversity'.**



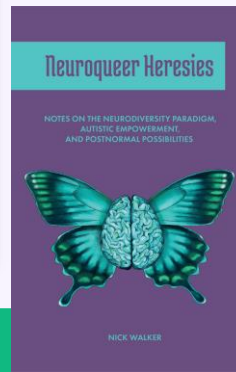
## NEURODIVERGENCE

**A property of individuals.**

A neurodivergent person is someone whose brain works in ways that differ significantly from what is considered neurotypical or neuronormative.

*Term coined by Cassiane Asasumasu (1999/2000).*

**Simply put:** neurodivergence refers to a person; neurodiversity is a characteristic of a group.



# Innate Neurodivergence

*Present from birth – a fundamental part of how a person's brain is wired.*

## Autistic

Differences in sensory processing, communication, thinking, and social interaction. A neurodevelopmental identity, not a disorder.

## Dyslexia

A difference in how written language is processed. Often paired with strong verbal reasoning and creative thinking.

## Dyscalculia

A difference in number processing and mathematical reasoning, distinct from poor maths teaching or low effort.

## Synaesthesia

A blending of senses – for example, hearing music and seeing colour, or reading words and tasting flavours.

## ADHD / Polyennic

Attention works differently – not a deficit, but a different motivational and attentional system driven by interest and novelty.

## Dyspraxia / DCD

Differences in motor planning and coordination, sometimes affecting sequencing, organisation, and spatial awareness.

## Tourette's / Tic disorders

Involuntary movements or vocalisations (tics). Highly variable – many people with Tourette's live rich, full lives.





## Congenital Deafness / Blindness





From birth, shaping an entirely different sensory world and often a distinct cultural identity.

# Acquired Neurodivergence

*Brain differences that develop after birth – through injury, illness, experience, or intensive practice.*

Neurodivergence is not only something you are born with. Life itself can reshape our experiences of and interactions with the world and others – and this is neither a weakness nor a failure.

-  **Traumatic Brain Injury**  
Changes in cognition, memory, personality, or sensory processing following head trauma.
-  **Post-Traumatic Stress**  
PTS reshapes the nervous system's threat responses, attention, and memory processing.
-  **Chronic Pain**  
Long-term pain physically changes brain structure and affects cognition and mood.
-  **Depression & Psychosis**  
Mental health conditions can fundamentally alter perception, cognition, and experience.

-  **Stroke**  
Can affect language, movement, memory, and executive function in lasting ways.
-  **Acquired Deafness or Vision Loss**  
Sensory change after birth leads to significant neurological reorganisation.
-  **Neurodegenerative Conditions**  
Including Parkinson's, MS, and dementia – progressive changes in neurological function.
-  **Meditation Practice**  
Intensive practice changes brainwave patterns and sensory processing – acquired neurodivergence!

# Being Autistic

**Autistic** people have a neurodevelopmental difference – Autistic brains work differently to non-Autistic brains. **There is no one way to be Autistic.** (*Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2020*)

## Sensory world

Often processes sensory input very differently – sounds, textures, lights, smells may be experienced more intensely or in entirely different ways.

## Monotropism

A tendency to focus deeply on one thing at a time – like a powerful spotlight rather than a diffused lamp. This creates expertise, passion, and depth.

## Bottom-up processing

Starting with details and building to the 'big picture', rather than the top-down processing typical of non-Autistic people.

## Communication differences

Not deficits – differences. Autistic communication is direct, detailed, and honest. The 'double empathy problem' (Milton) reminds us this is a two-way gap.

## Autistic ≠ distress

Being Autistic is not the same as suffering. Distress arises from environments that do not accommodate Autistic ways of being – not from autism itself.

## Masking costs

Unconsciously suppressing natural Autistic traits to meet neurotypical expectations is exhausting and harmful. It leads to burnout, anxiety, loss of identity, and for many, suicidality.

*Always use identity-first language: Autistic person, not 'person with autism'*

# ADHD – or Polyennic Minds

'**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**' is a misleading name. The attention is not missing – it is *everywhere at once*. Polyennic (from Greek: many thoughts) is a more accurate framing.

## Attention is different, not absent

Polyennic people give intense, deep attention to things that interest them – hyperfocus is real. The challenge is attention regulation, not absence.

## Dopamine-driven

The brain is wired to seek novelty, interest, challenge, and urgency. Tasks without these qualities are genuinely harder – not a character flaw.

## Executive function

Planning, starting, stopping, and switching tasks can be genuinely difficult. This is neurological, not laziness.

## Rejection sensitivity

Many Polyennic people experience RSD (Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria) – intense emotional responses to perceived criticism or failure, likely due to real experiences of being rejected.



# Spiky Profiles: Strengths AND Challenges

*Every neurodivergent person – indeed, every person – has a unique combination of strengths and difficulties. This is a spiky profile.*

## ✘ The myth

The 'spectrum' is a straight line from 'mild' to 'severe'. A person is either 'high-functioning' or 'low-functioning'.

This is harmful. It flattens complexity, denies support to those labelled 'high-functioning', and denies capability to those labelled 'low-functioning'.

## ✓ The reality

A neurodivergent profile is multi-dimensional – with strengths in some areas, challenges in others, and everything changing over time and context.

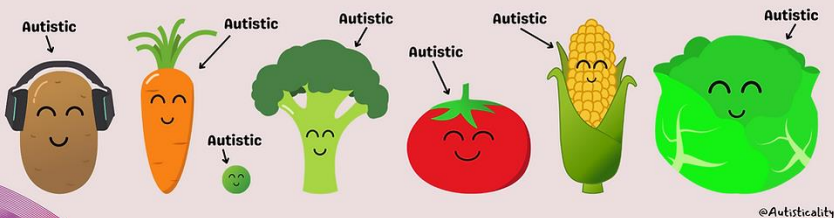
The 'rainbow sausage' (Dr Chloe Farahar): our profiles are not static lines but dynamic, ever-changing shapes across time and environment.

## The Rainbow Sausage

Instead of the linear spectrum, Dr Chloe Farahar imagines the spectrum as a 3D rainbow sausage, with the start of an Autistic life at one end and the end of their life at the other. This implies Autistic spikey profiles change throughout the Autistic person's lifetime.

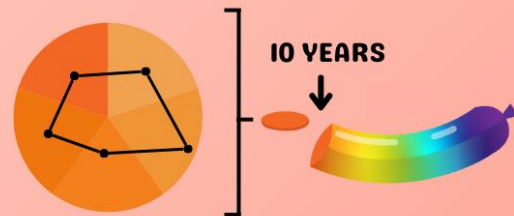


Every Autistic person is different.  
Every Autistic person looks, acts, and experiences the world differently.  
There is no one way to be Autistic. Scrap the stereotypes. Be your own weird.

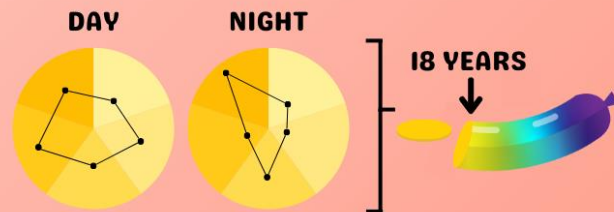


## Changing profiles

The idea of the rainbow sausage shows a snap shot of an Autistic person's profile at different ages, as shown on the right:



This extends to the fact that even on the same day an Autistic person's profile can alter from morning to night.





# Know Your Profile (need help? Start here!)

[aucademy.co.uk/building-your-autistic-profile-brief-starting-page/](https://aucademy.co.uk/building-your-autistic-profile-brief-starting-page/)

*Understanding your own neurological profile is the foundation of self-advocacy. You cannot ask for what you need if you do not yet know what you need.*

## 01 Map your senses

Which environments help you focus?  
Which overwhelm you? Consider sound, light, temperature, texture, smell. Write it down.

## 02 Track energy and time

When do you do your best thinking?  
What drains you quickly? What restores you? Patterns matter.

## 03 Identify your strengths

What do you find easy that others find hard? Where does deep focus come naturally? What do you notice that others miss?

## 04 Name your challenges

Without shame – what is genuinely harder for you? What tasks take twice the energy? Where do you need support?

## 05 Consider context

Your profile is not fixed. Stress, sleep, environment, and relationships all shift what you can do. Context is everything.

## 06 Seek community

Connecting with others who share your neurodivergence is powerful. Lived experience is the richest source of self-knowledge.



# Your Rights as a Neurodivergent Person

**Equality Act 2010 (UK):** Neurodivergent experiences are frequently classified as disabilities under this Act, requiring employers and service providers to make reasonable adjustments.



## Right to reasonable adjustments

Employers and educational institutions must make changes to remove substantial disadvantage – this is a legal duty, not a favour.



## Right to request assessment

You have the right to seek a formal diagnosis or assessment. This may unlock support, reasonable adjustments, and self-understanding.



## Right to disclose on your terms

You are not legally required to disclose your neurodivergence to employers. Disclosure decisions are yours alone.



## Right to accessible information

Information should be available in formats you can access – plain English, Easy Read, audio, visual, or other formats.



## Right to advocacy

You may bring a support person or advocate to meetings with employers, healthcare providers, or educational institutions.



## Right to be free from discrimination

Direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of neurodivergence is unlawful. Harassment and victimisation are also prohibited.

# Reasonable Adjustments: What Do They Look Like?

## Environment

- Reduced lighting or window blinds
- Quieter workspace or noise-cancelling headphones
- A predictable, consistent physical space
- Fragrance-free workplace policy
- Flexible seating options including standing desks

## Time and structure

- Flexible start and finish times
- Clear, predictable routines
- Advance notice of change
- Chunked tasks with clear deadlines
- Protected planning time

## Communication

- Written agendas sent in advance
- Information in plain English or Easy Read
- Extra processing time in meetings
- Email or written communication as default
- No expectation of eye contact

## Assessment and learning

- Extra time in exams or assessments
- Alternative formats (oral, practical, written)
- Assistive technology access
- Notes provided in advance
- Feedback in writing, not only verbally



# Communicating Your Needs

Knowing your rights is the first step. Communicating them clearly is the next. Here are practical strategies – you do not have to disclose everything to ask for what you need.

## The 'I work best when...' frame

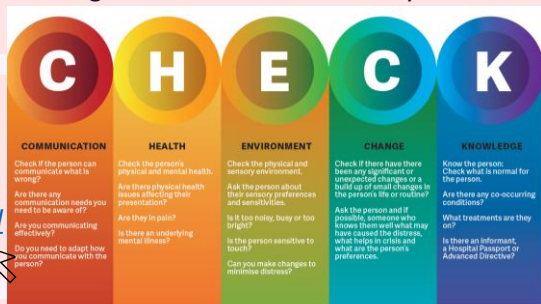
'I work best when I have written instructions / advance notice / a quiet space.' You are describing needs without necessarily disclosing a diagnosis.

## Use tools to Communicate

[CHECK healthcare tool](#)

[CHECK employment tool](#)

[CHECK education tool](#)



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## Bring support

You are entitled to bring a friend, colleague, or advocate to meetings where your needs will be discussed. Use this right.

## Put requests in writing

Writing protects you. Submit reasonable adjustment requests in writing (email is fine), keep a copy, and ask for written confirmation of any agreement.

## Name the barrier, not just the diagnosis

'Bright overhead lighting affects my concentration significantly' is often clearer and more actionable than 'I am Autistic'.

## Know what 'no' looks like

An employer refusing a reasonable adjustment without evidence that it causes 'disproportionate burden' is likely unlawful. Seek advice from ACAS, the Equality Advisory Service, or a union.

# Stimming Is Valid – Respect the Stim

Stimming (“self-stimulatory behaviour”) describes the repetitive movements, sounds, or sensory-seeking behaviours that help neurodivergent people – and all humans – regulate their nervous systems. It is not a symptom to be eliminated.

## Types of stimming

- Movement: rocking, flapping, spinning, bouncing, pacing
- Sound: humming, singing, echolalia, internal sound stimming (echolalia)
- Visual: watching patterns, glittery objects, lights
- Tactile: squeezing, fidgeting, stroking textures
- Smell/taste: strong or specific sensory inputs
- Everyone stims – doodling, hair-twirling, leg-bouncing



## Harmful stimming: a clinical distinction

When natural stims are suppressed – through shame, stigma, or behaviour programmes – they can become harmful (skin-picking, head-banging, hair-pulling).

Harmful stimming is clinically distinct from self-harm. It is a distress signal – not a behaviour to punish, but an indication that the person's environment is not working for them.

Source: Kapp et al. (2019); Marsden et al. (2025)



# Creating Neuroaffirming Environments

*When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment – not the flower (Alexander Den Heijer)*

## Presume competence

Never assume a person cannot understand or achieve. Support people to show what they can do, in the way that works for them.

## Reduce sensory barriers

Quiet spaces, adjustable lighting, reduced fragrance, fidget tools, and permission to move all reduce cognitive load for neurodivergent people.

## Communicate clearly

Use plain language. Give written instructions. Offer advance notice. Avoid metaphor, sarcasm, or ambiguity as a default mode.

## Build in flexibility

Flexible attendance, timing, format, and communication styles benefit everyone – not only those with identified neurodivergences.

## Centre lived expertise

Neurodivergent people are the experts on their own experience. Include them in decisions about their care, support, and environments – and pay them.

## Interrogate your assumptions

Many 'professional norms' – eye contact, small talk, a linear working day – are neurotypical/neuronormative norms, not universal human standards.



# This Week, I Pledge To...

## Use affirming language

Autistic person. Dyslexic person. Not 'suffers from', not 'has autism'. Words carry power.

## Challenge a stereotype

When I hear 'all Autistic people are good at maths' or 'they don't look neurodivergent' – I will gently push back.

## Ask, not assume

Rather than guessing what support someone needs, I will ask. I will listen. I will not make it awkward.

## Make space for difference

I will not penalise stimming, non-standard communication, or different ways of being present.

## Learn something new

I will read one article, watch one video, or have one conversation that deepens my understanding of neurodivergence.

## Share this knowledge

I will pass something from what I have learnt today on to one other person this week.



# *Everybody's weird.*

*You just have to find your group of weird.*

## **Aucademy CIC**

[aucademy.co.uk](http://aucademy.co.uk)

Free education on Autistic experience.

YouTube & Facebook: @Aucademy

## **If You're Autistic or experience a Learning Disability ...**

Get involved & up to date on the improvement work co-developed with Dr Chloe Farahar for Kent & Medway Mental Health NHS Trust

## **Autisticality**

[autisticality.co.uk](http://autisticality.co.uk)

Neurodivergence-affirmative resources

including ADHD/Polygenic education

## **Equality Advisory Service**

[equalityadvisoryservice.com](http://equalityadvisoryservice.com)

Free advice on your rights under the Equality Act 2010

## **ACAS**

[acas.org.uk](http://acas.org.uk)

Workplace rights guidance including reasonable adjustments

## **Dr Chloe Farahar**

[linktr.ee/docfarahar](https://linktr.ee/docfarahar)

Research, speaking, training, and the Autistic Discovery Journey

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# Sharable Resources...

EVERYBODY'S weird,  
you just have to  
find YOUR group of  
weird

(HLOE)

Quotes Creator

## DESIGNING SPACES WHERE AUTISTIC PEOPLE THRIVE



### 1. COMMUNICATION INCLUSION

All modes welcome: speech, AAC, typing, silence  
No pressure to mask or perform neurotypical norms  
“Let people speak in the language of their nervous system.”



### 2. SENSORY AWARENESS

Lighting, sound, and texture consideration  
Quiet zones and stim-friendly items  
“Comfort isn't a luxury – it's access.”



### 3. BOUNDARIES & CONSENT

Respect for personal space and sensory  
boundaries  
Clear opt-in/out for social interaction  
“No is a complete sentence – and a kind one.”



### 4. IDENTITY AFFIRMATION

Use identity-first language if preferred  
Celebrate Autistic culture, not just accommodate

Design with Autistic people, not just for them.

[@Aucademy](#) | [@AutisticDesign](#) | [#NeurodivergentAccess](#)

## Neurodiversity terminology & chronology

**Neurotypical(ity)** = the condition from which neurodivergent people diverge from **neuronormativity** (Autism Network International newsletter in 1992/1993).

**Neurodiversity** = the diversity of brains, and body-minds. A property of groups (the Autistic community in the inlu forum/server, early/mid 1990s).

**Neurodivergent(ence)** = individual body-minds that function in ways that diverge from ideals of neurotypicality (Kassiane Asasumasu, 1999/2000).

**Neurominority** = group who share the same divergence (e.g. Autistic; dyslexic; voice-hearer; etc.; Nick Walker).

To **neuroqueer/be neuroqueer** = to distort the performance of neuronormativity & heteronormativity (Nick Walker; Athena Michaels-Dillon; Remi Yergeau, 2008).



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# Sharable Resources...

Neuroqueer is an action.

To neuroqueer or be neuroqueer is to actively diverge from the typical & the normative:

- \* actively diverge from neurotypical expectations;
- \* actively diverge from heteronormative (cis & straight) gender or sexual expression;
- \* actively diverge from expectations of what it means to be Autistic

Be Autistic in *your* way, not the stereotype or even community expectation of who you should be.

\*Neuroqueer Life & Literature: Nick Walker on Aucademy educating with Chloe\*  
<https://bit.ly/3lTC1lW>



## 6 common reactions during the Autistic discovery journey



The model was created by Autistic people, to help other Autistic people feel heard & validated that whatever thoughts & feelings they have about discovering they're Autistic, others have experienced them too. All reactions, responses, thoughts, feelings, & stages when you discover you're Autistic are valid. Keep in mind these reactions are not linear, & you may experience one, many, all of them, or none, & at different times, or reactions simultaneously (for more information please use the link below). Let us know at Aucademy where you are in your journey and what has helped you in your discovery.

Farahar, C. (2021). Six common reactions during Autistic discovery. <https://bit.ly/3sbhvRb>

## HEALING FROM THE 'CULTURE OF AUTISM'

<p> <b>THE PROBLEM</b></p> <p>"Culture of autism" = deficit labels</p> <p>"Low functioning"</p> <p>"Disordered"</p> <p>"Symptoms"</p> <p>"These labels seep into our skin like Sharpie tattoos."</p>	<p><b>THE SHIFT</b></p> <p> Reframe as Autistic identity</p> <p>Difference, not disorder</p> <p>Neurodivergent, not broken</p> <p>"We scrub away the stigma, together."</p>
<p> <b>THE SPACE</b></p> <p>Autistic spaces = healing</p> <p>All communication modes welcome</p> <p>Sensory needs anticipated</p> <p>"I imagine an Autistic planet... where we don't have to feel weird,"</p>	<p><b>THE OUTCOME</b></p> <p> Community = wellbeing</p> <p>Belonging improves mental health</p> <p>Identity protects against stigma</p> <p>"Everybody's weird — you just have to find your group of weird."</p>



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