

LEARNING MADE EASY



Neurodiversity

for
dummies[®]

A Wiley Brand



Empower students,
colleagues, and yourself

Understand ADHD, autism,
dyslexia, and other neurotypes

Learn to thrive as a
neurodivergent person

John Marble
Khushboo Chabria
Ranga Jayaraman

A neuroinclusive team of experts
committed to empowering
individuals and families



Neurodiversity

**by John Marble, Khushboo Chabria,
and Ranga Jayaraman**

**for
dummies[®]**
A Wiley Brand

Neurodiversity For Dummies®

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Introduction

You made it! If you're holding this book, or listening to it online, you probably have some big questions. Maybe you're wondering what being neurodivergent means, or if it applies to you or to someone you know. If you're a parent with a neurodivergent kid, you may be looking for tips on how to be the best parent you can be. And for those who are a spouse, friend, coworker, or anyone else close to someone who has a neurodivergent mind, you may be looking for ways to better understand their world.

Neurodivergent individuals often bring unique perspectives and problem-solving skills to the table. In fields such as technology, arts, and science, these diverse perspectives can drive innovation and lead to breakthroughs that may not happen in a more homogenous thinking environment. Embracing neurodiversity can be a significant asset in workplaces and communities.

The neurodiversity movement, however, emphasizes that regardless of the economic contribution potential, every human deserves to be seen, understood, and appreciated with respect and dignity as a unique creation of the universe. Learning about neurodiversity helps us challenge stereotypes and biases against people who think differently. It's a step toward creating a world where people aren't marginalized or misunderstood because their brains work differently. Understanding and accepting neurodiversity can lead to fairer, more equitable treatment for everyone.

It's completely normal to feel a mixture of curiosity, uncertainty, and even anxiety when it comes to understanding how the mind works. After all, no one gives you a handbook — but that's sort of why we wrote this book.

Neurodiversity For Dummies is your friendly guide to understanding the big, bold, beautiful world of neurodiversity. Throughout these pages, we explore what neurodiversity means, why it's important, and how it impacts you. We keep it simple, with clear explanations, useful tips, and real-life stories. And if you look closely, there's even a mention of Cher!

If you're wondering what Cher has to do with neurodiversity, well, then this book's for you. And she's not the only familiar face that shows up. You see, your life is filled with neurodivergent people, whether you realize it or not. Wouldn't it be amazing if you could understand and appreciate those people more? About 20 percent of us have brains that work differently in how we think, act, and experience the world. But until recently it was assumed that everyone's brains worked pretty much the same.

You're about to see how wonderfully complex our world truly is, and we explain it all in an easy and straightforward way. No need to stress over complicated words or theories; we've made everything simple and easy to understand. Feel free to read straight through or skip to the parts you find most interesting. So, find a cozy spot to sit, and let's get started!

About This Book

This book wasn't meant to sit on the shelf; it's a hands-on guide full of helpful tips, insights, and understanding. It's yours to really use. Go ahead and bend the pages, write on them, and highlight the parts that get you thinking. If you're listening to the audio version, feel free to just wave your hands, but be ready to write down the bits that strike a chord with you. Keep a pen close by — you may find a lot of things you want to remember. We explore key topics such as autism, dyslexia, ADHD, but we also demonstrate how neurodiversity extends way beyond these famous Big Three. There's lots of ins and outs of the human experience we get to explore.

If you're one of those parents or people who feel all alone, we acknowledge that pain. That's because we've felt that pain too. This book is a creation of neurodivergent people and family members working together. We've lived the expressions of joy, the moments of frustration, the feelings of triumph, and the tears of isolation that come from existing in a world that doesn't always get you.

We answer lots of questions, help you discover new things, and hopefully share some moments of laughter and self-reflection along the way. But this book isn't an information dump. It's not just a pile of facts. We mean it to be a conversation. No, we can't hear you. But we see you all the same.

Even if you picked up this book by mistake, let's still have that conversation. There's not a person on our planet whose life is not shaped and affected by neurodiversity in some way. Consider the phone you use, the songs you love, and the connections you have with family and friends. Every part of life is touched by our varied ways of thinking, shaded in subtle ways that aren't always immediately seen.

Neurodiversity is what happens when our colors blend together. It's a natural part of life; there's no changing that fact. We can't make more of it or wish it away. We only need to look around to see that it's there. Once we understand that neurodiversity is all around us, we need to choose how to respond. Should we be afraid of it, or welcome it with open arms? It may challenge us to think about how we act and treat others, including our friends, our children, and ourselves. But remember, this book is about moving ahead, not getting stuck in the past. It reminds us that we always have the chance to grow and change.

Foolish Assumptions

None of us are dummies. You're reading this book to get a clear, jargon-free understanding of neurodiversity. We don't talk down to you. We are especially cautious because many of us grew up being called names just for thinking differently.

Don't assume that your brain isn't normal simply because of the way that it thinks. And don't assume that other brains, which work in ways much different than yours, aren't just as normal. This book is your guide to understanding that all of us are equal. Our brains aren't problems to be fixed, nor are our different ways of thinking somehow "superpowers" to be praised. They're differences, that's all. They simply are what they are.

We don't assume that being different doesn't bring challenges. Lots of neurodivergent people live life in ways that are tough. But they also laugh, giggle at silly things, lose their train of thought, and hope for future things. To put it bluntly, they're just like everyone else. And if you're not one of these folks, what are the things that cause you pain? Is it feeling left out, struggling with your own problems, or sometimes worrying about the future? See? We're all the same.

Some parts of this book are written for specific groups, such as parents, teachers, or neurodivergent individuals. However, the lessons in these chapters are useful for everyone. We all want to be recognized, understood, and valued for who we are. To achieve this, we need to show the same understanding and appreciation to others that we hope to receive ourselves.

We also recognize that the language we use to describe neurodiversity is always evolving and varies across cultures. So, we've chosen to use words that are clear and easy to understand for readers from many different backgrounds. We've specifically opted for neutral words like *condition* to avoid negative connotations and to foster a more inclusive and understanding approach to all humans. No matter who you are, or why you're here, we hope you'll take away a better understanding and appreciation of neurodiversity by engaging with this book.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, we have used a set of icons in the margins to highlight the most critical things we want you to take away.



REMEMBER

When you see this icon, you know that the information that follows is important enough to read twice! Information in these paragraphs is often conceptual.



TIP

This icon indicates practical information that often translates key concepts into actionable advice.



WARNING

This icon highlights information that may be detrimental to your understanding and actions if you ignore it. We don't use this one much, so pay attention when we do.

Beyond the Book

Keep in mind that neurodiversity is a wide-ranging topic. We cover as much as we can in this book without overwhelming you. But no one book can cover every detail about neurodiversity and individual neurodivergent conditions. But don't worry! In addition to the abundance of information and guidance we provide in this book, you get access to even more help and information online at Dummies.com. Just go to www.dummies.com and search for "Neurodiversity For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

We recommend that you start by browsing the detailed table of contents and then going straight to the chapters you are drawn to. You don't need to read this book from start to finish. Think of it as a buffet — you're free to pick and choose what interests you most. If you're in a rush and need some quick takeaways, the final part of the book is ideal. It neatly sums up main ideas and practical tips. But, if the concept of neurodiversity is new to you, we suggest you start from the beginning.

As you become more and more familiar with neurodiversity and venture into practicing the suggestions and recommendations from the book, you may want to return to different sections of the book to re-read them. We promise you will discover new information and experience many eureka moments along the way. However you choose to read this book, we hope you'll use it to discover that life is much more varied and beautiful than you think. We thank you for letting us be a part of your journey toward neuroinclusion.

1

Understanding Neurodiversity

IN THIS PART . . .

Understand that neurodiversity is normal and has always been part of human history.

Discover how neurodiversity and disability overlap and that disability is nothing to be feared.

Deepen your appreciation for the neurodivergent people around you — and if you're neurodivergent, understand that there are many others out there like you.

Examine the common barriers to forming a completely neuroinclusive world where every human thinking style is understood, appreciated, and accommodated, and how to help overcome them.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding that neurodiversity is normal
- » Seeing how neurodiversity, our human family, and our planet intersect
- » Looking at neurodivergent conditions
- » Understanding how the neurodiversity movement helps to build a better world

Chapter 1

What Is Neurodiversity?

You probably have a lot of questions if you picked up this book and turned to this chapter — whether those questions are about yourself, your child, or someone you love. Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed, or confused, or perhaps you're struggling to learn how to empower yourself. We get it. Life is a complex, often bewildering, experience.

There is something big happening in the world, and you're right in the front row to see it. What we long thought we knew about humans — how we think, act, and form connections with others — turns out to be an incomplete picture at best. That perspective had a lot of good intent, but it also had faulty misconceptions, stereotypes, and misguided ideas. It also did a lot of damage to a lot of people along the way.

Thankfully, we're now entering a world that has a better understanding of the complexities of our human species. In that understanding, the concept of neurodiversity plays a big part. We don't know everything just yet, but we're learning new things every day. And here you are, right at the front of it all — witnessing, participating in, and interacting with these new breakthroughs in human understanding. These new discoveries come as humanity wakes up from our long-held assumptions, as we begin to figure out who we truly are as a species and what our intricate complexities really mean. We're so glad you're here.

In reading this book, we hope you begin to understand *yourself* more deeply — whether you are neurodivergent or not. Perhaps you turned to this page as a parent. Maybe you're a teacher, a health care professional, a service provider, or a spouse. Perhaps you're a neurodivergent person yourself.

Of course, you may not be any of these things. You may have flipped to the first page of this chapter because you've long thought that "there's just something about my spouse (or my friend) that neither of us quite get, but we want to figure it out." You could also be one of many (many) others who may be reading this chapter and thinking, "Look, I don't know exactly what's going on inside me. All my life, certain things have been confusing and I don't know why." If things haven't clicked for you in life, the pages that follow could be your key to understanding why. No matter why and how you found this page, this book is for you.

There's a lot to discuss as we talk about neurodiversity. As we have this conversation, we share our insights and expertise on this topic. But we also press a bit further than most books typically do. We share with you our own experiences of living as neurodivergent people and raising neurodivergent children ourselves. We are honest about the worries and fears we've lived through, the obstacles we faced, and the many things we now wish we did differently because we know that many of you live through them too.

We also talk about the joy that we've found in accepting neurodivergence. We share how that acceptance has empowered us. And we discuss how that empowerment has improved our lives dramatically, allowed us to thrive, and has pushed us to continuously grow.

But first, we're going to take it slow. This is a big topic to wade into. So, we begin with this most crucial point, the one insight above all that we hope you take away from reading this book: Neurodiversity is normal, and so are you.

The Normalcy of Neurodiversity

Pause for a moment. Think about any family you may know. It could be the one you grew up in, the one you have now, or the family who lives across the hall or the street. Each member of that family is quite different — in age, in family role, and also in personality, quirks, and traits.

This mishmash of people all living together each has different talents, different challenges, different tastes, different personalities, different hopes, different dreams, and incredibly unique ways of perceiving and experiencing the world. Yet,

each of these very different people forms part of one unit. Despite all their differences, they connect through similarities. Within the family unit, they cooperate, communicate, nurture, and support one another (and yes, often fight and disagree) as they learn, discover, and grow.

Just as with any family who lives together under one roof, every person on this planet forms a crucial part of our human family as well. We've always been a cooperative species, meaning that we've always needed each other and our differences throughout time. And living alongside one another, and benefiting from our differences, we have learned, discovered, and grown.

It doesn't matter whether you're a painter or a mechanic, whether you are short or tall, or whether you make your home in the Arctic or in the Amazon; we're all members of our human family. Actually, wait a minute. Strike that. It *does* matter whether you're a painter or a mechanic, it *does* matter whether you are short or tall, it *does* matter whether you make your home in the Arctic or in the Amazon or anywhere else. It matters because *you* matter. You're not just an equal part of the human family; you're essential. Your friends need you. Your family needs you. We need you. The rest of humanity needs you too.

Your differences aren't a bug, they're a feature. Having differences is a normal part of being human, even if those differences are sometimes experienced as challenges.

Variations in the human condition

We guarantee that you're not alone in reading this book. A bunch of other folks are flipping through these pages too. Each of these readers varies in height, skin tone, eye color — you name it. But unless you're just a terrible person (and we like to think that you're not), you don't look at variations in height or eye color and think, "Whoa, that's super weird." These are just differences, that's all, and everyone has them.

We don't see these differences as bizarre because we've come to accept these variations in the human body as quite normal. But, here's the thing: It wasn't always that way. There were times in our human history when various members of our species encountered unfamiliar eye color, or height, or hair texture (or freckles!), and it really weirded us out.

The reason that many of us in the past found red hair, or green eyes, or dominant left hands disturbing is because humans are hardwired to be wary, and cautious, and slightly suspicious of the unknown. Throughout much of our history, this served us well at times. This instinct kept us from picking up snakes, eating

potentially poisonous berries, or running up and hugging a lion with his cute, fluffy face. In fact, this evolutionary survival tactic is so deep rooted that we still carry it with us today.

But, here we are in the modern world. This instinct that we relied on for so long now seems to get in the way much more than it helps. It's the root of much of our prejudice and our exercises in discrimination, bullying, stereotyping, and many other cruelties we as humans tend to regularly do.

So, why do we no longer fear eye color or the number of freckles a person has on their skin, yet so many of us humans still fear conditions such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia? What's the difference here? Again, it's familiarity. There's nothing inherently bizarre about autism, ADHD, or dyslexia. It's in not knowing or understanding them that we fear. Part 2 of this book looks at each of these neurotypes in detail.

In the classes we teach to our neurodivergent students, we like to share a quote from two-time Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie (who herself expressed numerous neurodivergent traits). And here it is:

There is nothing in life to be feared, it is only to be understood.

That's a key part of what we mean when we say "neurodiversity is normal." All humans have variations in the way that they think, feel, and experience the world — this is neurodiversity. Neurodivergent conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia (and dyspraxia, and dyscalculia, and many others) have been part of our human family for a very long time. While evidence suggests that some (even many) societies in the past did not fear them, our modern society — built on modern fears and modern preconceptions — is just beginning to understand these variations now.

As a society, we're slowly shaking off our prejudices to understand neurodivergent conditions as a normal part of the human experience. With each new insight we learn, each new discovery we make, we fear these conditions less and less. More importantly, the more we understand about them, the more we appreciate their necessity, how they enrich our society, and how they help our human family thrive. None of these conditions are to be feared — they're only to be understood.

Variations in the human brain

Think about the human brain. Now, there's no reason for us to expect that these couple of pounds of gray matter that are inside our head is going to be exactly the

same from one person to the other. Thank goodness it's not. If it was, the world would be an extraordinarily boring place. Can you imagine if every one of us thought the same, learned the same, and acted in the exact same way? How dull! So, let's be grateful for that marvelous variety in how our brains function; it's an important part of what makes the human experience so rich and vibrant.

It's true that variations in the human brain are a normal aspect of our biological diversity. However, a lack of understanding about these variations has led to a lot of fear and anxiety around them. This fear often leads to stigma, isolation, and other barriers that those with these variations (which studies suggest are at least 15 to 20 percent of us) must face.

When we begin to recognize, accept, and respect these variations in human thinking as a normal, we begin to align with the concept of neurodiversity. And the impact of that alignment can be huge! It's like unlocking a door to a more inclusive and understanding world. We start to see neurological differences not as something to be fixed, but to be supported. It allows us to accept those neurologically different than us, enables us to understand their needs, allows us to include them more deeply in our lives, and helps us assist them in securing the accommodations and support they need.



REMEMBER

Our lives are filled with neurodivergent people, whether we recognize that or not. We can't see their neurological differences the way we can see eye color or the freckles someone may have. But what we can notice is how these brain variations manifest in people's behavior and cognitive traits, such as how they communicate or socialize, how they deal with numbers and letters, or even how they react to light and sound. When we start paying attention to these things, that's when we can truly appreciate the full range of human neurodiversity.



WARNING

Don't assume you can determine someone's neurodivergent condition just by casually observing their behavior or thinking patterns. Much of what you perceive in others is shaped by your own biases and incorrect assumptions. Making such judgments can result in stigmatization, reduced empathy, and missed opportunities. These consequences can not only harm both individuals involved, but also weaken the overall relationship between them.

"People often say to me, 'You don't look autistic!'" said video producer and fashion writer Rian Phin. "But, that's because your perception of what you think autism looks like is wrong." Phin — who is Black, known for her sustainable fashion aesthetic, and who has been profiled in both *Interview* magazine and *Vogue* — pressed the point further: "Think about it. How many autistic people who look like me have you seen in the media?"

Rian Phin hits a critical point. People have these preset ideas about what various neurodivergent people look like or act like. This is often shaped by limited or stereotypical media portrayals. (For how media representation can more accurately reflect the experiences of neurodivergent people, see Chapter 24.) This kind of narrow viewpoint presents a huge challenge for neurodivergent people and their families as they have sought to secure the understanding and support they need.

GETTING TO KNOW SOME HELPFUL TERMS

Throughout this book, we use the following terms. Their definitions are pretty easy to pick up as you go, but we thought it may be helpful to provide them all in one place.

- **Neurodistinct:** An alternative way of describing people who are neurodivergent. *Neurodivergent* and *neurodistinct* can be used interchangeably; although, *neurodistinct* places a stronger emphasis on the neurodivergent person's unique strengths.
- **Neurodivergent:** Having a brain that functions differently from the majority of people.
- **Neurodiversity:** The range of differences in brain function and behavior among all humans.
- **Neurofamily:** A family in which one or more members are neurodivergent.
- **Neuroinclusive:** An approach or environment that actively includes and accommodates people with diverse brain functions.
- **Neurological:** Related to the nervous system, including the brain and spinal cord, and how it influences behavior and functioning.
- **Neurotype:** A classification for a group of people whose brain functioning and associated traits are similar to each other. Examples of neurotypes include ADHD, autism, and dyslexia.
- **Neurotypical:** Having a brain that functions in a way that is similar to the majority of people.
- **Spectrum condition:** A neurotype category that includes various brain traits under one label, each person having a unique mix. It's not a straight line from a little to a lot, but more like a galaxy of stars (traits), where each individual has some of those stars but not all. Examples include autism and ADHD. The following figure illustrates a linear condition versus a spectrum condition.

Linear Condition

Low				Typical				High		
5.0	5.2	5.4	5.6	5.8	6.0	6.2	6.4	6.6	6.8	7.0

Dimension

Spectrum Condition

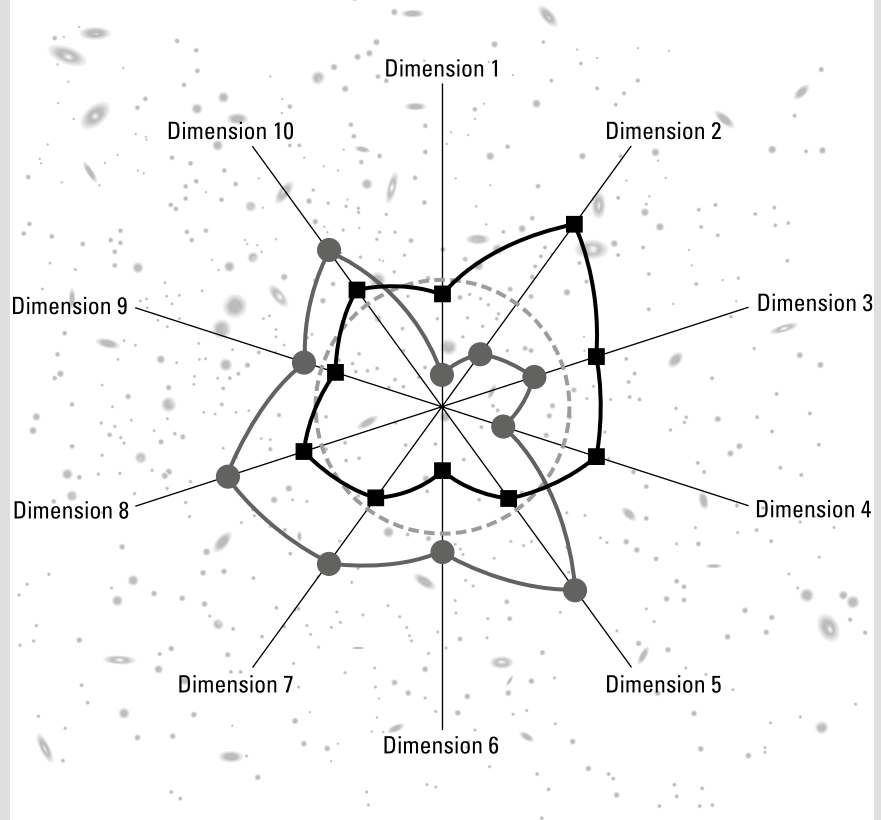


Illustration by John Wiley & Sons

How biodiversity informs neurodiversity

We've talked about how neurodiversity is an essential part of human diversity. Now, guess what? That diversity itself is a crucial part of the larger system of biodiversity that makes Earth the vibrant, living planet it is. While the term *biodiversity* itself was coined in the 1980s, the underlying concept has a much longer history rooted in the scientific understanding of biological diversity.

Our planet is *filled* with life, yet that life is not all the same. Scientists don't know exactly how many species of living things are around us. Estimates are all over the map, ranging from around 2 million to a staggering 100 million different types of life forms. Life on Earth is so incredibly diverse that pinning down an exact number is pretty much a guessing game.

What is understood is the general breakdown of the types living things which call our planet home. Most are insects (about 50 to 60 percent of all living things). Yep, we're a planet of bugs. Meanwhile, plants make up about another 17 percent of planetary species, and fungi — such as the mushrooms you put on your pizza or the yeast in your bread — clock in with a respectable 4 percent. Us noble mammals? Well, we only represent about 0.3 to 0.4 percent of life on Earth. Hey, size isn't everything.



REMEMBER

A diversity of lifeforms is necessary for life to exist. Earth may be a bug's world, but if *every* living thing on our planet were an insect, life would collapse. Without this diversity, we could be sweltering under thick blankets of sulfuric acid like Venus or we may find ourselves a cold and rocky place like Mars. Thanks to life, and it's mindboggling diversity, we can proudly say that we're better than that!

The rich variety of life that makes Earth a thriving planet is called *biodiversity*. And it is desperately needed. Why is it so essential? Well, a diverse set of species helps ecosystems be resilient. If one species goes down, others fill that niche and pick up the slack. Biodiversity also makes ecosystems more productive; they can grow more food, purify more water, and store more carbon. But that's not all! It's like an insurance policy against disasters and diseases. The more biodiversity there is, the better life on this planet can adapt and recover from challenges. So, maintaining biodiversity isn't just about saving the whales or the bees; it's about creating a stable, resilient planet for everyone.

Now, just because you're a mammal and in the minority of biological species on our planet, don't feel too glum. Our Earth needs you and your fellow mammals just as much as it needs the 50 to 60 percent of planetary life that are insects. You're just as normal as any bug. In fact, we know that you have many amazing traits that "typical" life on our planet do not have. We're not only supporters of neurodiversity, we're big fans of *biodiversity* as well.

The benefits of embracing neurodiversity

Just as biodiversity contributes to a healthy, resilient ecosystem, neurodiversity adds value and adaptability to human societies. Here are some key benefits:

- » **Problem-solving:** Different ways of thinking mean that problems can be approached from multiple angles. This increases the chances of finding innovative solutions.
- » **Creativity:** Neurodiverse individuals often have unique perspectives that can fuel creativity and artistic expression, enriching culture and even driving technological advancements.
- » **Specialized skills:** Some neurodivergent individuals may excel in specific tasks that others find challenging. For instance, an autistic person may be exceptionally good at pattern recognition, which could be invaluable in fields such as data analysis or programming.
- » **Resilience:** A neurodiverse community is better equipped to adapt to changing circumstances. Just as an ecosystem is more resilient when it's biodiverse, a human society is more robust when it includes a range of cognitive abilities and styles of thinking.
- » **Social development:** Neurodiversity can drive social change by challenging conventional ways of thinking and promoting empathy and understanding. This can lead to more inclusive communities that better serve the needs of all individuals.
- » **Efficiency:** When people are allowed to leverage their natural talents, regardless of neurotype, it often leads to greater productivity and efficiency in various kinds of tasks and projects.
- » **Quality of life:** Understanding and appreciating neurodiversity can lead to better mental health services, educational strategies, and career paths for neurodivergent individuals, improving their quality of life and ability to contribute to society.



REMEMBER

Neurodiversity includes everyone, not just people with neurodivergent conditions. If you're neurotypical, meaning your brain functions in a way that's common for most people, you're still a crucial part of human neurodiversity. Your way of thinking and experiencing the world is just as important as the perspectives and participation of neurodivergent individuals. So, don't think this topic doesn't concern you; we all need each other and we're all on this wild, wonderful ride through life together.



REMEMBER

Just as biodiversity is crucial for the health and stability of our planet, neurodiversity is beneficial for the well-being and progress of human societies.

Understanding Neurodivergent Conditions

Give or take, about 67 million people live in France. All are quite different from each other, yet all are quite alike. Each individual has their own strengths, their own personality, their own way of moving about the world. The life of a fashion designer living in Paris may appear quite different than that of a nun living in Marseille or a farmer outside Bordeaux. At first glance, you'd think, "Wow, they couldn't be more different!" But when you get down to it, they all share something in common: They're quintessentially *French*.



REMEMBER

A neurodivergent condition is kind of like being French. It's a label that groups together people who share many similar traits. But just as no two French people are identical, neither are no two people who share a neurodivergent condition. Each expresses traits associated with their condition differently and experience the world in their own unique way. That's totally normal. We're all individuals after all.

What is a neurodivergent condition?

To put it simply, a *neurodivergent condition* is a common variation in the human brain that's present in a large number of people. Those who share a neurodivergent condition have a different way of processing information, emotion, and stimuli compared to the majority of people (those with this typical brain type are often referred to as *neurotypical*).

Neurodivergent conditions include autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia that are present from birth and are part of a person for the rest of their life. These life-long variations in the brain are sometimes referred to as *neurotypes*.

Think of it this way: You know how computers have different operating systems — Windows or Mac? Well, neurodivergent conditions can be thought of as different forms of human operating systems. Some naturally run Windows while others run Mac. All humans process information, generate thoughts and feelings, and interact with sensory input and social situations. We all do those things, but our neurological operating systems may do them in different ways — and that's okay!



REMEMBER

It's not a bad thing to be neurodivergent; it's just a different way of experiencing the world. And often, that difference comes with special skills and viewpoints that enrich our society in countless ways (for more on that, see Chapter 18).

Being neurodivergent isn't about being broken or needing to be fixed. It's a normal part of human diversity. Just as biodiversity makes ecosystems resilient and adaptable, neurodiversity does the same for human societies.

An older way of looking at neurodivergent conditions

You may be familiar with older terms for particular neurodivergent conditions. These include autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and so on. If you are, you may have noticed something about these terms which stick out. Take another look: autism spectrum *disorder*, attention-*deficit*/hyperactivity *disorder*, *dys*lexia, *dys*calculia, *dys*praxia, and so on. Notice the *disorder*, *deficit*, and *dys* (originally from the Greek language, *dys* refers to something “difficult” or “bad”) in these terms. Each of these terms suggests that something is broken, lacking, or defective.



REMEMBER

It's important to understand that these terms are not meant to stigmatize people. They originated in the medical field to describe specific challenges that neurodivergent individuals encounter, especially in a world that isn't always accommodating of different brain operating systems. However, these terms are increasingly considered outdated and limited, as they don't fully capture the entire experience associated with a neurodivergent condition.



WARNING

Now, we're not for a moment suggesting that the medical view of neurodivergent conditions is not valid. Nor are we suggesting that people with such conditions don't face difficulty or disability (for a deeper understanding of the intersection of neurodiversity and disability, see Chapter 2).

As with anyone else, neurodivergent people may face a wide range of health challenges, whether they are physical, psychological, or emotional. While some challenges may be linked to their neurodivergent condition, others arise from the stress of a person living in a world that is not readily accommodating of their needs. In addition, many neurodivergent people experience trauma because of misunderstandings, stigmas, and negative behaviors such as isolation, bullying, and abuse from those around them.

On our author team, John recalls a meeting of neurodivergent adults he once attended where the topic focused on addressing trauma. There, a retired military veteran asked that gathered group, “Why is it that the Veterans Administration provides me care for the trauma I experienced in combat, but no one ever talks about — let alone provides care for — the micro trauma that autistic people like me must experience and then deal with day, after day, after day as we go through life?”

So, when we say that traditional ways of describing neurodivergent conditions “are increasingly considered outdated and limited,” we’re not denying the particular medical challenges that neurodivergent people must face. What we’re saying is that there is *much more* to a neurodivergent condition than the challenges a neurodivergent person faces by living in someone else’s world.

Switching out our lenses to form a clearer perspective

As you go through life, how you view the world around you is called your *perspective*. It’s extremely important. How you look at things informs your values, which then influences the actions you take. So, not only does your perspective affect your own experience, but your actions based on that perspective also influence how others experience the world.

On our author team, Ranga loves to share how humans often view the world around them through a pair of lenses. The first lens is *expectation* and the second one is *judgment*. Expectation refers to the preconceived notions or beliefs we have about how someone should behave, speak, or react in a given situation. Judgment involves forming an opinion or evaluation about someone based on their actions or words. Viewing people through expectation and judgment can cause unfair assumptions and missed opportunities for real connection. Often, we don’t even realize we’re doing it!

A neurodiversity mindset requires us to switch out those lenses. Instead of seeing people through the lenses of expectation and judgement, we begin to see people instead through the lenses of *inclusion* for abilities and *acceptance* for differences.

Including someone for their abilities means recognizing and valuing the unique skills, talents, and experiences a person brings to the table. It’s about appreciating what someone can do, rather than focusing on what they can’t. Part 5 explores how people with neurodivergent traits can thrive in all types of settings, including in education and the workplace, as well as in relationships and communities.

Accepting someone for their differences means embracing the unique qualities that make a person who they are, even if those qualities don’t conform to societal norms or expectations. It’s about appreciating the full range of human diversity, rather than trying to fit everyone into a one-size-fits-all mold.

Brain injuries, aging, and mental health

While the term *neurodivergence* is often associated with innate neurological differences such as autism or ADHD, it can also encompass conditions that arise later in life, such as traumatic brain injuries or the neurological changes that come with

aging. This broadens the scope of neurodivergence to include anyone who experiences life with a brain that functions differently than what is considered typical, regardless of the origin of those differences. By including conditions such as brain injuries and age-related cognitive changes, the neurodiversity movement emphasizes the inherent value of all neurological experiences, not just those present from birth.

The term neurodivergence can also be applied to conditions that are not fully understood in terms of their origins or how they manifest, such as bipolar disorder, Tourette's, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Even though the root causes and full range of symptoms for these conditions are still subjects of ongoing research, they are part of the human neurological experience. By incorporating these conditions under the umbrella of neurodivergence, we acknowledge that there is a range of "normal" when it comes to neurological function, and that understanding and acceptance should extend to all forms of neurodivergence.

Exploring the Neurodiversity Movement

The *neurodiversity movement* refers to anyone who values the acceptance, inclusion, and accommodation of neurodivergent people in daily life. There's no global headquarters, no political party, no organized ranks. It's simply made up of people who believe that all people are an equal part of the human family.

A concept emerges

The neurodiversity movement has its roots in the late 20th century, but it really gained momentum in the early 2000s. Originally, it was closely associated with the autism community. Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, is credited with coining the term *neurodiversity* in the late 1990s. In 1999, Kassiane Asasumasu coined the term *neurodivergent* to describe individuals whose neurological functioning is different from neurotypical people. Singer's and Asasumasu's work set the stage for a broader understanding and acceptance of neurological differences. And it continued to be shared, shaped, and formed by all sorts of people who recognized that our world should be accepting, inclusive, and accommodating of people regardless of their neurotype.

A growing community

The Internet played a significant role in the growth of the neurodiversity movement, providing a platform for neurodivergent individuals to connect, share experiences, and advocate for themselves. In 1999, Asasumasu coined a second

term, *neurodivergence*, to include neurological development and functioning that are atypical, diverging from the societal standards of “normal.” Neurodivergence included far more than autism, and conditions like ADHD, dyslexia, and Tourette’s, among others were added to the conversation. Online forums and social media became spaces where people could discuss the challenges and joys of being neurodivergent, often outside the medicalized narrative that dominated mainstream conversations. The movement began to influence academic discourse, public policy, and even employment practices. Companies started to recognize the unique skills and perspectives that neurodivergent individuals bring to the workplace, leading to specialized recruitment programs.

In recent years, the movement has been pushing for systemic changes in education, health care, and employment to be more inclusive and accommodating of neurodivergent individuals. (See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the disability rights movement.) This includes debunking myths and stereotypes and challenging stigmatizing language and practices. It has also developed stronger connections between neurodivergent individuals and parents of neurodivergent children — pushing for policies and practices that enable neurodivergent families to thrive.

Despite the progress, challenges remain, including stigmatization, lack of adequate resources, and unequal access to opportunities. But the movement continues to grow, driven by a committed community that values the positive contributions of neurodivergent individuals.

The goal of the neurodiversity movement

The neurodiversity movement aims for better representation of neurodivergent people in all areas of life, including in the media, in education, and in the workforce. It also fights for antidiscrimination laws and practical accommodations. The goal isn’t just policy changes but also shifting how society views neurodivergence — from disorders to part of human diversity. It’s all about inclusion and valuing different kinds of minds.

To put it simply: The neurodiversity movement hopes to shape a world where neurodivergent people and their families are accepted, integrated, and supported in all aspects of daily life. It’s treating neurodivergent people, and those who care for them, like the normal people that they are.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the fear around disability
- » Looking at what disability means
- » Discovering how neurodivergence and disability intersect
- » Exploring the disability community

Chapter 2

Disability Is Not a Dirty Word

Is neurodivergence a disability? Answering that question is not as straightforward as you may think. That's because there are widespread misconceptions about what disability actually means. These misconceptions often generate anxiety and fear.

Many people find the word *disability* to be scary or taboo. But we can't talk about neurodiversity without understanding its connection to disability. In this chapter, we show you that disability is nothing to be feared. We discuss the misconceptions and fears that surround this word, define what a disability actually is, and then show you how neurodiversity and disability overlap. We also explore the disability community and how it empowers both the neurodivergent individual and those who may be caring for someone who is neurodivergent.

First Things First: Why We Fear Disability

Here's a quirky human trait: When we encounter the unknown, we tend to freak out. This tendency served us quite well in our ancestral days when encountering the unknown often represented a predator, a poisonous plant, or a rival human

group. Fast-forward to today and this survival instinct shows up in some pretty amusing ways.

Consider that heart-stopping moment when you catch a glimpse of a garden hose from the corner of your eye as your brain initially mistakes it for a snake. Or why the shadows inside ordinary children's bedrooms suddenly transform into monsters at night. It's the same reason why some people get anxious about flying, even if they've never set foot on a plane, and why others enjoy the thrill of a scary movie or the adrenaline-fueled eeriness of Halloween. We're hardwired to fear the unknown.

So, what does this have to do with disability? It turns out, a lot. Just as with other unfamiliar things, it's not uncommon to find an irrational fear of disability among nondisabled individuals. That unease, which we refer to as *disability anxiety*, stems from a lack of understanding of what disability means.

Disability anxiety can make folks act . . . well, kind of weird. Here are some common ways disability anxiety manifests:

- » **Overcompensation:** Nondisabled people may go to great lengths to offer help, even when it's not needed or asked for.
- » **Infantilization:** People often speak to disabled people in an oversimplified manner, sometimes with a singsong voice (like how some people speak to toddlers and puppies).
- » **Fear:** Many people fear becoming disabled, which can lead to treating disabled people with pity, talking about disability in hushed tones, or avoiding the subject altogether.
- » **Fear of offending:** People may have a heightened worry about saying or doing the wrong thing, leading to awkwardness or hesitation in interactions.
- » **Overemphasis on disability:** A person's disability may be focused on to the exclusion of their other qualities, reducing them to a single characteristic.
- » **Underemphasis on disability:** Conversely, a person's disability may be downplayed with such phrases as "I don't even see you as disabled!"

What Disability Actually Means

When most people think of the term *disability*, they're actually referring to two distinct yet related concepts: disability and impairment. It's important to understand the difference.

Understanding impairment

An *impairment* refers to a variation in the body or brain that limits a person from doing certain activities. An impairment can be the loss of a limb, reduced vision, or a developed mental health condition. Some people are born with impairments and others develop impairments later in life.



REMEMBER

Impairments can be temporary, or they can be long term. A broken arm is an example of an impairment because it requires you to limit certain tasks, and a sprained ankle is an impairment because it limits your mobility. Mobility can also be impaired through conditions such as spina bifida or multiple sclerosis, or through a spinal cord injury. A body after giving birth is impaired because it needs time to heal. Anxiety can also be an impairment when it limits life activities. We all experience impairments at various points throughout our lives. It's a part of being human.

Understanding disability

A *disability* arises when a person with an impairment is prevented from fully participating in their community due to their impairment or due to how society is structured around them. The following example examines how someone may be *disabled by an impairment*.

Imagine two coworkers, Olivia and Gary. Olivia is blind and Gary is not. Olivia and Gary have been working for the past month on an important presentation that they are to give to their team. They've nailed the details, checked the tech, and know their stuff. They are prepared.

The night before their meeting, Gary emails Olivia to say that his doctor has told him that he has the flu. Gary's body aches, he's nauseated, he's exhausted, his head is pounding, and he's running a high fever. There's just no way Gary's condition will allow him to come into work. Olivia will have to do the presentation without him. "No problem!" Olivia replies. She's prepared and can cover for him. The presentation goes great, and Olivia credits Gary for his contributions.

In this situation are two people who each have impairments. Olivia's impairment relates to her vision, and she's had that impairment since birth. Gary's impairment relates to the illness he is experiencing this week. In this case, which one of these two coworkers was disabled — or *not able* to complete the presentation due to the impairment they were experiencing? It was Gary. (Get better, bud!)

We'd argue that individuals are more likely to be disabled by how society is structured around them than by their own impairment. This view is shared by many disabled people and advocacy groups. It's also expressed in the Preamble to the