



GUIDE TO NEURODIVERSITY



Royal College
of Surgeons
of England

ADVANCING SURGICAL CARE



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“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment.”

~ Harvey Blume, *The Atlantic*, 1998 ~

Statement of organisational commitment

At the Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS England), we are committed to embracing diversity by building an inclusive profession where everyone’s contribution is recognised and everyone feels welcome. For us, embracing difference is not just the right thing to do; it can inspire all of us to grow, and it will ensure that our profession and our College remain at the forefront of patient care for generations to come.

We welcome and encourage greater diversity, and we are committed to treating everyone with kindness and integrity while actively seeking to promote these behaviours in everyone.

Purpose of this guide

This guide aims to provide information, advice and support to managers and their teams to ensure RCS England is a more inclusive place to work for neurodivergent colleagues.

To ensure that our neurodiverse colleagues can perform at their best, it is important that we consider how our place of work can affect and impact them. This will allow us to adapt how we do things and support our colleagues.

In this guide, we have identified the more common neurodiverse conditions and given a definition, strengths and talents, common misconceptions and reasonable adjustments. The information we have provided is not a complete list, and we would like to highlight that neurodiversity is a spectrum and varies for each person. If you need any further advice, please contact the HR team or use the resources page in this guide.

This guide should be read in conjunction with our policies on equality, diversity and inclusion; ways of working; flexible working; sickness absence; health and safety; and mental health first aider.

What is neurodiversity?

Most people are said to be 'neurotypical', which means the way they behave, process information and the way in which their brain functions is considered the standard or 'normal'.

Thomas Armstrong, PhD, award-winning writer and speaker, said in his book *The Power of Neurodiversity*: "We need to understand that there is no standard brain."

Similar to biodiversity in the natural world, neurodiversity is the natural variation that exists within the human brain, which means that some people think, learn, experience and interpret the world in a way that is unique to them.

Highlighted below are just some of the various forms of neurodivergence:

- autism
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- dyslexia
- dyspraxia
- dyscalculia
- Tourette syndrome

A note on what it is not: neurodiversity is not a mental health condition, but neurodiverse people can have and struggle with poor mental health. Because of trying to 'fit in' or 'masking', neurodiverse people are more likely to experience depression, work-related stress and anxiety.

Benefits of a neurodiverse team

Having a team that is neurodiverse has many benefits. Neurodivergent people bring a unique set of skills and creative and analytical thinking to the way in which they handle and solve problems. Diversity of thought can help to increase the productivity and innovation that organisations need to thrive.

Research (*Harvard Business Review*, Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage, 2017) suggests that so long as the right support is in place, diverse teams in all their forms can and do have a positive impact, competitive edge and benefit to teams and the organisation as a whole.

Types of neurodiversity

Each neurodiverse employee should be treated as an individual and have their needs listened to. An employee may have reasonable adjustment requests that have not been listed in this guide, but they should still be considered. Please speak with the HR team for any further advice.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a condition of the brain that results in high levels of activity, impulsions, hyperactivity and difficulty focusing. ADHD is very common in adults and around 4% of adults in the UK have some form of ADHD.

An employee with ADHD may be better suited to a varied job role, which keeps them motivated and focused. They are more likely to be resilient to change and work well under pressure. A person with ADHD is less likely to enjoy a monotonous job where tasks are repeated. They may be better suited to roles that are focused on shorter projects.

Strengths and talents	Common misconceptions	Reasonable adjustments and support
Hyperfocus can increase productivity	Being sensitive and overreacting	Give constructive feedback and handovers that are clear and concise.
Creative and entrepreneurial	Lack of caring due to lack of focus	Review work progress and reinforce positive management and encouragement.
Good problem-solving, thinks outside the box	Only children have ADHD	Give opportunities for time in which they are not disturbed, whether that's over Teams or in person.
Hardworking, energetic and enthusiastic	Bad parenting causes ADHD	Provide a quiet place to work if they are in the office.
Sensitive and empathetic	ADHD is not serious and people just need to try harder	Agree on movement breaks to help with hyperactivity.

Autism

Autism refers to a broad range of conditions that impact social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech and nonverbal communication. Autism can impact the way people learn, think and problem-solve. There are roughly 700,000 people with autism in the UK.

People with autism will bring many exceptional skills to the job role. It is likely that they will have excellent attention to detail and are good at sticking to a routine. Autism can impact a person's senses and can lead to them experiencing sensory overload.

Sensory overload occurs when an intense sensation overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Stimulation can vary from person to person and can include different sounds, smells, sights or tastes. This may mean that a person with autism is more suited to a role working from home or away from a busy and bustling office environment.

Strengths and talents	Common misconceptions	Reasonable adjustments and support
Good attention to detail	People with autism are either high- or low-functioning.	Agree on fixed shift patterns so the employee has a routine.
Good routine and structure	People with autism are just being difficult.	Reduce sensory stimuli in the workplace; explore if they can work in a quieter location or from home.
Problem-solving skills	People with autism lack emotions and sense of humour.	Agree a clear work routine and plan meetings ahead of time.
Strong concentration skills	Autism is an over-diagnosis for people who can not read social queues.	Agree that extra breaks can be taken if the employee is feeling overstimulated and provide any additional support they may need.
Good at following procedure and process	Autism used to be rare and now it is more common.	Discuss any potential triggers, and the measures that are in place if a trigger happens.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a difficulty in understanding numbers, which can lead to difficulties with maths. It can affect how a person sees numbers, symbols or everyday maths such as finances. Around 5% of people in the UK have dyscalculia.

Dyscalculia does not just impact the ability to do maths on paper or on a computer screen, rather it can impact the ability to retain numerical information, make appointments or read timetables. People with dyscalculia are usually creative and have strong strategic thinking. They are often suited to roles that involve problem-solving, thinking out of the box, or writing and reading.

Strengths and talents	Common misconceptions	Reasonable adjustments and support
Great organisational skills	The person is not trying hard enough.	Consider what data you are presenting when you are sharing numerical data. Remove anything that is unnecessary.
Creative and artistic	They need to go back to school.	Use visual aids such as charts to display data.
Intuitive thinking, good at interpreting knowledge, signs and experiences	Dyscalculia is just number dyslexia (it actually causes challenges with number sense rather than anything language-based.)	Explain the meaning of any data or measurements.
Love of words, often with exceptional spelling and grammar	It is the same as math anxiety. (Dyscalculia is related to maths skills, not feelings.)	Use Excel sheets with integrated formulas so the math is done automatically.
Practical ability	Everyone with dyscalculia has the same experience.	

Dyslexia

Dyslexia primarily affects the skills used to read and write accurately. Dyslexia can affect people differently and is to be a continuum, rather than a distinct category with a clear cut-off. Dyslexia often causes difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Around one in ten people in the UK have dyslexia.

Dyslexia is often thought to only affect reading and writing speeds, accuracy and aptitude, but it is actually about how a person processes information. People with dyslexia have difficulty processing the information they see or hear which can then impact their literacy skills. Dyslexia can also impact other skills, such as organisation. People with dyslexia may be suited to creative jobs and working with other people.

Strengths and talents	Common misconceptions	Reasonable adjustments and support
Usually more creative and thinking with images	People with dyslexia are not able to do certain jobs. (With the right support, they are able to do any job.)	Communicate verbally as well as writing things down.
Original thinkers, good at bringing information together from different resources, making it easy to spot trends in data	People with dyslexia are just not smart and need to try harder. (Dyslexia is a neurological condition and is not linked to intelligence.)	Offer technology that can help, e.g. digital recorders or screen reading software.
Innovative thinking and ability to adapt	Dyslexia only impacts writing and reading. (It is actually about processing information.)	Present information in other formats: visual or audio.
Able to see the bigger picture and different perspectives	Dyslexia only occurs in children. (It can be inherited or developed later in life.)	Allow frequent breaks and alternate from computer work.
Strong sense of empathy and personal skills	Dyslexia can be outgrown. (It is a lifelong condition.)	Use different colour backgrounds and writing to make text more accessible.

Dyspraxia/Developmental coordination disorder (DCD)

Dyspraxia affects a person's movement and motor skills. Around 3–5% of adults in the UK have some form of dyspraxia. Dyspraxia can increase the likelihood that a person will fall over or bump into things.

Dyspraxia is often thought to just affect a person's motor skills, however, it can affect speech, planning and organisational skills as well. People with dyspraxia often demonstrate strong soft skills and may be suited to jobs that require strong leadership skills and empathy.

Strengths and talents	Common misconceptions	Reasonable adjustments and support
Finding ways of doing things differently	People with dyspraxia are just clumsy.	Reduce tasks that require handwriting.
Compassionate and empathetic	People just do not like following processes.	Allow headphones to increase concentration.
Strong leadership skills	Dyspraxia is extremely rare.	Give plenty of time for new tasks so they have time to figure out the best way of completing it.
Determined to get things done	Dyspraxia only impacts movement.	Offer working from home.
Problem solvers	There is no treatment for dyspraxia. (Occupational and speech therapy are often used.)	Allow time off for appointments for occupational or speech therapy.

For further advice concerning any aspect of this guide, please contact the HR Team:

RCSHR@rcseng.ac.uk

The College has an Access and Inclusion Network which you can get in touch with for additional support. Please contact them at:

accessinclusion@rcseng.ac.uk

Appendix – Resources

Highlighting strengths

- [JOIN THE DOTS: Empowering Dyslexic Thinking in every workplace](#)
- <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyscalculia>
- [Genius Within](#) – use the drop-down under ‘Neurodiversity’ to view each condition and a diagram showing the strengths typically associated with each.

Examples of possible accommodations

- [An employer’s guide to ADHD in the workplace](#)
- [Possible Workplace Accommodations](#) (padlet)
- <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/advice/adults/in-the-workplace/reasonable-adjustments-in-the-workplace>

Resources for meetings

- Autistica guide to [Hosting accessible online events, meetings and webinars](#)

Other resources

- BBC Three’s [Things not to say to...](#) series (includes lots of neurodiversity)

