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# THINKING DIFFERENT

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## NEURODIVERSITY & ME

**A guide for  
those who  
think differently**

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Conceived and developed in collaboration by:



## Neurodiversity at work

In the UK today, an estimated 14% of the population are neurodivergent; in creative workspaces, including healthcare communications, that figure is around 20%.<sup>1,2</sup> In short, that's one in five of us in our industry.

Yet it's not long ago that neurodivergent people were an invisible group, unacknowledged and unappreciated. As a society, therefore, we've come a long way already – though there is still some distance to go if we want our workplaces to truly welcome, embrace and celebrate neurodiversity.

And now is the time to move forward – a time when, in our industry particularly, we're facing unprecedented challenges around resourcing, time and budget constraints. There is a real need for us all to think differently if we want to meet these challenges and continue to innovate on both client and agency sides.<sup>3</sup>

To help achieve that, the **THINKING DIFFERENT** campaign aims to build better understanding and find ways for everyone to play their part.

### Neurodiversity – a definition

Neurodiversity refers to the range of thinking, learning, interacting with people that exists in the whole population. If someone is neurodivergent, they think, learn, interact with people differently from what is considered 'typical'.<sup>4</sup>

Many neurodivergent individuals become successful leaders in their fields. Studies have revealed:

- 40% of self-made millionaires in Britain had a diagnosis of dyslexia<sup>5</sup>
- There is an association between ADHD and an entrepreneurial mindsets in business successes<sup>6</sup>

## Neurodiversity and mental wellbeing

Neurodivergent people live in a world that is not structurally made for them, so we may face challenges that a neurotypical person won't. This can have a negative effect on our mental wellbeing due to:

- Insufficient support, and the stress of 'masking' - acting neurotypically in order to avoid negativity
- A lack of acceptance and understanding at work, meaning we can feel unfulfilled and develop negative thoughts that can lead to mental wellbeing difficulties including anxiety and depression, if left unresolved
- Problems with maintaining relationships, us avoiding social situations (either in our personal or work life) or, in extreme cases, self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Differences in interacting and communicating with people, leading to colleagues excluding, marginalising and isolating us due to a lack of understanding
- Anxiety at the idea of simply being at work, which could ultimately affect our performance

Our shared aim, therefore, must be to make sure that policies and processes within communications businesses are set up so that firstly, those of us with specific needs are appropriately cared for at work and secondly, that businesses benefit from those of us who think differently.

## Neurodiversity: it's good to talk

One powerful way to build better understanding across the workplace is for those of us who are neurodivergent to share our challenges that we face in society or, if appropriate, a diagnosis with our colleagues – though only if we're comfortable with doing so. Certainly, it can help some of us reduce the need to 'mask' or camouflage what are seen by others as our differences. Doing this all the time can be tiring and become detrimental to our mental and physical health.

However, if we don't feel comfortable having these work conversations directly, we could always ask managers or team leaders to run a session discussing neurodiversity in the workplace, perhaps using the HCA's Neurodiversity in Healthcare Communications resources.

Being open and upfront with managers helps in other ways too – not only is it a chance to communicate any challenges that our neurodivergence creates in terms of doing our jobs, but it will also help them understand individual needs and hopefully allow them to put adjustments in place to meet them.

Those with a diagnosed neurodivergent condition have legal rights under the "protected characteristics" within the Equality Act 2010. This means employers are obliged to put in place reasonable adjustments to make sure we can be as effective in our roles as anybody else.

30% of neurodivergent individuals do not feel able to share their diagnosis at work.

## Getting a diagnosis

For some of us who may find we think or process information differently, getting a diagnosis may help you to better understand our own characteristics. It may help you to validate your experiences, provide you with the confidence and language to talk to your colleagues/managers more freely and allow you to request and receive appropriate support.

Diagnosis isn't for everyone. You may not want to go through the process (which can be intense and intrusive). You may not want to wait long periods for an NHS diagnosis and/or cannot afford to go privately. You may have ideological reasons and feel that diagnosis pathologises normal human variation.

In short, neurodivergent individuals have really different views on diagnosis. And whatever decision you make for you is OK.

## Leading a conversation around neurodiversity

As with any topic, it's important to prepare yourself to have a conversation with your employer around neurodiversity. So we recommend that you:

1. Familiarise yourself with your company's policy and approaches to neurodiversity at work by speaking to your HR or line manager
2. Appreciate that not everyone you work with will know about neurodiversity, so you should therefore approach the conversation with an open mind
3. If you are sensitive and/or emotional talking about your condition, let the person you are speaking to know this before you start a conversation
4. If you feel comfortable to do so, emphasise your willingness to help your employer create an inclusive and supportive environment for all employees
5. You have rights to individual privacy and confidentiality regarding your neurodivergence status, so ensure that any discussions are conducted in a private and confidential setting
6. You should lead any conversation around your neurodivergence status, inform your employer what language and terms you feel comfortable with and communicate during any meetings what has helped you do your best work in the past and what/who can help now

Examples of how organisations may make reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent individuals. Each person will be different.

- Some people find quieter workspaces or use noise-cancelling headphones to minimise distractions and avoid focus.
- Dedicated workspaces, as opposed to hot-desking, for people who find change harder to manage.
- Special software, such as Government-funded spelling and grammar checking, electronic planners, reminders and task lists.

## Neurodiversity and effective communication

Some of us who are neurodivergent may also benefit from having information presented in different formats, such as infographics or illustrations rather than text only. We may also find we take in information at different speeds. It always makes sense to discuss these needs with managers and colleagues, so that they can communicate in the best way.

Find out more about Access to Work here:  
[www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

Recorded meetings on a mobile or laptop, to refer to later, can be preferable to written notes for some.

## Healthcare comms needs neurodiversity

As mentioned above, the future of healthcare communications genuinely needs greater diversity in thinking – from strategy, to creation, to delivery. This plays directly to such strengths such as lateral thinking, hyperfocus, problem-solving abilities, meticulous attention to detail, highly analytical thinking, creativity, intense expertise and innovation. If we are to thrive going forwards, this diversity is crucial.

So it's time to champion our differences – not hide them.

## And when times are tough...

Sometimes being neurodivergent can feel overwhelming and we may not feel able to have some of the conversations suggested. So, if talking to managers and colleagues or even friends and family don't feel right, there are others out there who will listen, understand and hopefully provide or direct us to the support we need.

For the UK, these organisations are a good starting point:

- ADHD Foundation, The Neurodiversity Charity [[adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://adhdfoundation.org.uk)]
- Samaritans – 24/7 phonenumber, call 116 123 free [[samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)]
- Shout – 24/7 Text chat, Text 'Shout' to 85258 [[giveusashout.org](http://giveusashout.org)]

## Additional sources of information

Organisations directly related to the **THINKING DIFFERENT** programme:

- **ADHD Foundation, The Neurodiversity Charity**, the UK's leading neurodiversity charity [[adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://adhdfoundation.org.uk)]
- **The Advisory ND** - providing a range of consultancy services for organisations in how to attract, recruit support and promote neurodiversity in the workplace to unlock its business power [[theadvisorynd.com](http://theadvisorynd.com)]

There are similar organisations in most countries and these can be identified through your local support groups.

## Other relevant organisations

- **Institute of Neurodiversity** - a global organisation aiming to give a voice to those with neurodiversity [[ioneurodiversity.org](http://ioneurodiversity.org)]
- **EUCAP** (European Council of Autistic People) - an umbrella organisation for autistic-led organisations in Europe [[eucap.eu](http://eucap.eu)]
- **European Dyslexia Association** - European umbrella organisation for associations across Europe [[eda-info.eu](http://eda-info.eu)]
- **Dyspraxia Foundation** - UK charity [[dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)]
- **The Brain Charity** - UK charity supporting all neurological conditions [[thebraincharity.org.uk](http://thebraincharity.org.uk)]
- **National Autistic Society** - UK charity [[autism.org.uk](http://autism.org.uk)]
- **British Dyslexia Association** - UK charity [[bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://bdadyslexia.org.uk)]

## Contributors

**THINKING DIFFERENT** has been co-created between the Healthcare Communications Association and Fox&Cat to help guide important conversations around neurodiversity at work.

Because some neurodivergent individuals are more prone to stress than the neurotypical people, Fox&Cat has invested in this initiative as a part of its ongoing commitment to lessen the impact of stress that affects 78% of people working in the comms industry.

The creation of this campaign also draws on the welcome expert advice and input of:

- Paul Hutchings, Founder, Fox&Cat
- Mike Dixon, CEO, Healthcare Communications Association (HCA)
- Professor Amanda Kirby, ADHD Foundation
- Antonia Katsambis, Independent HR Practitioner
- Diane Wass, Managing Director, JPA Health & Trustee of the ADHD Foundation
- Dr Emma Mahoney, Founder, The Advisory ND

## About the project

**THINKING DIFFERENT** explores the many advantages of welcoming and involving all of us in our dynamic healthcare communications industry. In doing so, not only can we enhance creativity and innovation while also fostering inclusivity and empathy, but we can also deliver more effective and impactful communication strategies.<sup>3</sup>

This guide forms part of a wider series aimed to inform and support everyone working in communications. Connected to this series are two other documents:

### THINKING DIFFERENT

A guide for employers and managers on welcoming and celebrating neurodiversity in the workplace.

### NEURODIVERSITY & YOU

Information for your whole team to encourage them to find out more about working with, and having a conversation around neurodiversity at work.

This campaign has also been reviewed and fully endorsed by the ADHD Foundation - The Neurodiversity Charity.

**Disclaimer:** we have aligned language to the current definitions around neurodiversity, but acknowledge that our choices may not reflect everyone's views.

## References

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- 3 Austin, R. & Pisan, G. (2017). Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage
- 4 Very Well Mind, 2024. Accessed via: [www.verywellmind.com/what-is-neurodivergence-and-what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurodivergent-5196627](http://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-neurodivergence-and-what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurodivergent-5196627) (Last accessed: March 2024)
- 5 Alexander-Passe, N. (2015). Perceptions of success in Dyslexic adults in the UK
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