The Neu Project

An Event Professional's

Guide to Neuroinclusion

Google

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Module 1

The Neu Project

Welcome!

The Neu Project is a group of #eventprofs, divergent thinkers, leaders, planners, strategists, designers, creators, writers, parents, and advocates, working together to make the world more welcoming and productive for all neuro types.

Starting with event spaces and then moving to partnerships in workplaces and beyond, our goal is to amplify existing methods while encouraging new practical approaches to inclusion.

Inclusion is a journey. While neurodivergent voices take center stage in everything we do, The Neu project is also a safe space for neurotypical people to learn, ask questions, and try without fear of getting it wrong.

Join us as we design a world that helps overcome neuroinclusive challenges, empowers diverse voices, and creates a sense of belonging for neurotypes.

Use **#neuproject** on social media posts when planning neuroinclusive events. We'd love to follow along and share your actions!

About this guide

This guide was developed in collaboration with a diverse, global community and explores the topic of neurodiversity, its benefits, and the significance of creating events that consider neuro differences. The format works to deepen understanding regarding neurodivergent needs — which are often not accommodated in mainstream event spaces — while providing practical how-tos on hosting neuroinclusive experiences.

Neurodivergent communities have been using some of the methods enclosed to self-serve for many years; The Neu Project unifies and raises these practices. Others are new suggestions intended to connect the expertise of event and hospitality professionals and the needs of neurodivergent communities.

The Neu Project acknowledges that event professionals will always work with and against different circumstances and barriers; not every situation lends itself to all recommendations. While we encourage implementing as many practical strategies from this guide as possible, creating neuroinclusive events is a journey. Applying a few suggestions, to begin with, can still make a difference.

An Event Professionals Guide to Neuroinclusive Events is an evolving, collaborative resource, updated regularly through feedback, focus groups, and other engagement tools.

We are always learning and looking to improve.

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Language & Identity Matters

Language shapes how people understand and interact with the world. Therefore, the language we use matters. Likewise, how someone identifies and the language they use is very personal.

Neurodiversity, stemming from the social model of disability, recognizes two brain variations: *Neurotypical* and *Neurodivergent*.

Neurotypical refers to people whose brains function typically. In contrast, neurodivergent, coined by Kassiane Asasumasu (formerly Kassiane Alexandra Sibley), a Hapa and Asian American autistic rights activist and blogger, refers to "neurologically divergent from typical." Common neurodivergence includes ADHD, autism, dyslexia, epilepsy, and Tourette Syndrome.

Language and terminology preference is up to each person and how they choose to identify. As shifts happen within society around these topics, so will the language and how people describe themselves. For example, neurodistinct, a newer term coined by Google employee and autistic advocate Tim Goldstein, offers an alternative to neurodivergent. Other examples include reframing neurodivergence using words like difference or condition instead of disorder, thus moving away from pathologizing neurodivergent people.

From interactions with multiple focus groups and ongoing engagement with a diverse community of consultants, many of whom are non-neurotypical individuals, The Neu Project uses the term "neurodivergent" as it is most widely recognized and understood.

To support readers, we've created an accessible, easy-to-understand glossary at the end of the guide for reference, alongside additional educational resources.

Key Takeaways

- **Try to be culturally sensitive in all language and actions.**
- **Language and terminology preference is up to each individual.**
- **The Neu Project leans into widely recognized terminology but holds space for all preferences.**

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Module 2

The Win Win of Making Space

We All Win

Demonstrable inclusion and embracing diversity can create belonging — boosting engagement, value, and outcomes. Designing experiences that support and empower all brain types has many benefits; the more attuned we become to others, the more everyone wins.

For example, an executive told The Harvard Business Review that one organizational benefit of neurodiversity is better communication. Neuroinclusive communication is more direct, clear, and concise — things we all appreciate. Applying neuroinclusive design principles enables nearly limitless opportunities for the "curb-cut effect."

Diversity, inclusion, and belonging also boost creativity by encouraging different perspectives and experiences to come together in one space. For events, this could translate into increased engagement, new ideas, and opportunities for enhanced learning and innovation by limiting groupthink.

However, the benefits of creativity are not limited to attendees only. Some have said creativity is one of the top future skills due to its inability to be replicated by machines. By adopting creative approaches to events, event professionals upskill and differentiate themselves.

Most importantly, inclusive events can lead to more people feeling heard, understood, and cared for — an outcome many now place at the highest value. Two of the most prevalent generations in the workforce — Millennials and Gen Z — say diversity and inclusion are vital. Event professionals can expect these values to spill over into business events by extension. For these groups, respect and belonging are everything. As a result, performative measures are no longer satisfactory.

When people feel they belong, they feel they have a voice. This experience, in turn, could help build communities where attendees become ambassadors for brands and event communities because they feel included.

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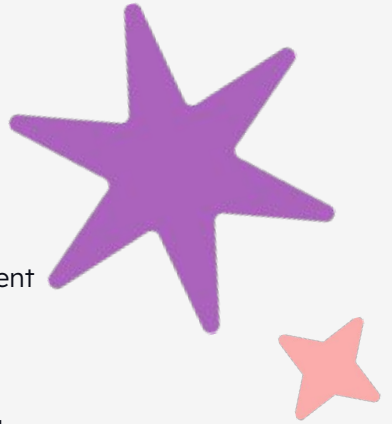
Module 3

No Two Minds Are Alike

No Two Minds Are Alike



"Neurodiversity is a biological reality for humanity; like stars, no two minds are alike."
— The Neu Project

This section explore terms such as neurodiversity, the neurodiversity paradigm, movement, and neurodivergent experiences.

An Introduction to Neurodiversity and Experiences
A critical part of event design is understanding the audience. Without this, event professionals risk delivering experiences that reduce inclusivity, decrease attendee returns, or cause harm.

Neurodivergent people have always been present at events. But in the past, professionals may have overlooked or been unaware of their needs. Understanding the language and experiences of brain variations is an essential step toward implementing neuroinclusive event design.

What is Neurodiversity?
Neurodiversity encompasses all neurotypes — both neurotypical and neurodivergent. The term was first used and conceptualized in the late 1990s by sociologist Judy Singer alongside autistic advocate and journalist Harvey Blume and refers to naturally occurring neuro, brain, or mind variations in people.

Neurodiversity is not an individual trait; a person cannot be neurodiverse or have neurodiversity. It is also not a set of beliefs, values, morals, identity, or social movement. To illustrate, a group of one brain type is not neurodiverse. A neurodiverse group would consist of many different minds.

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No Two Minds Are Alike

What it Means to be Neurodivergent
Every brain is unique. One variation is no better than the other. Instead, these variations affect how someone senses, experiences, and engages with the world. Society, however, primarily caters to neurotypical needs, often disregarding the neurodivergent experience.

Being neurodivergent is not a mental illness or disease; a person is still neurodivergent with or without the presence of other mental health challenges. Sometimes it is a developmental condition that occurs in the womb before birth. Other times, it can develop through brain-altering experiences like trauma. A neurodivergent person will always be neurodivergent.

Well-known neurodivergent brain types include:

- ADHD
- Autism
- Dyscalculia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Epilepsy
- Hyperlexia
- Obsessive-compulsive (OCD)
- Tourette syndrome (TS)

Further, people are starting to recognize sensory processing disorder (SPD), prosopagnosia (face blindness), and aphantasia (the inability to form voluntary images in your mind) as neurodivergent conditions.

Neurodivergent people make up approximately 15 to 20 percent (one in five) of the global population, while some put the number closer to 30 to 40 percent due to significant rates of underdiagnosis.

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No Two Minds Are Alike

The Neurodiversity Paradigm and Movement
Developed by Nick Walker, Ph.D., the neurodiversity paradigm is a specific perspective on neurodiversity. Essentially, it shapes neurological diversity like other diversity forms, such as ethnicity, and is subject to the same social dynamics of power and oppression.

The paradigm suggests that neurodivergent people do not need to be cured, treated, or characterized as abnormal. Instead, neurodivergent people should be supported, understood, valued, and included based on these fundamentals:

1. Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.
2. The idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of brain or mind, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture.
3. The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power inequalities and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential.

The neurodiversity movement is the paradigm in action. It is a social justice movement seeking rights, equity, respect, and inclusion for neurodivergent people across all areas of society.

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No Two Minds Are Alike

Neurodivergent Experiences
Being neurodivergent, one still experiences the highs and lows of life, but with added layers of complexity; no two neurodivergent experiences are the same. Therefore, it is vital to avoid common misconceptions, biases, and stereotypes.

With autism, for example, people assume being autistic means being highly analytical and introverted, which may be true in some instances. But the opposite also applies — many autistic people are creative and extroverted.

Neurodivergent people often mask their authentic selves to fit in with societal norms and avoid emotional or physical harm. Being stereotyped, underserved, and excluded could be some of the reasons many neurodivergent people deal with depression and anxiety or have trouble with executive functioning.

When a neurodivergent person's system becomes too overwhelmed, this can lead to meltdowns and shutdowns. In general, meltdowns are physical reactions resulting from stress or sensory overstimulation (visual, auditory, and tactile overload). For those with Tourettes, any form of heightened emotion, or suppression can trigger a tic-seizure. This can be positive or negative emotions. A tic seizure can last hours and is a collection of intense body tics with no space in between them- just constant tics.

Extreme exhaustion, emotional regulation challenges, abrupt changes, and masking can also trigger and contribute to meltdowns. Meltdowns vary from person to person. Some people cry while others may have angry outbursts or yell. A meltdown is not a tantrum; some neurodivergent people cannot control meltdowns and often feel deep shame for losing control afterward.

Shutdowns, in contrast, are less obvious to others. At times, a person may withdraw from what is happening around them and disengage, unable to move from a safe space. Shutdowns can result in a speaking person becoming non-speaking, which can be painful to navigate at an event. Either way, both meltdowns, and shutdowns are signs of extreme distress. Understanding can help event professionals hold space, support, and accommodate people in the event of either of these scenarios.

No Two Minds Are Alike

Neurodivergent Experiences, continued
Neurodivergence also comes with strengths like attention to detail, honesty, empathy, creativity, innovation, enhanced memory, hyperfocus, and expertise in areas of focused interest. For example, some leading architectural firms hire dyslexic people, given their spatial abilities, and LinkedIn recently added dyslexic thinking under their user-profile skill sets.

Neurodivergent experiences overlap with all other identities, such as race, class, gender, social class, and sexuality; these overlaps are known as intersectionality. Coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality describes "how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories."

For example, regarding intersectionality and autism, two studies by the University of Cambridge suggested that autistic people are more likely to identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Like any marginalized identity, being neurodivergent is not a trend but a neutral part of someone's identity. Many neurodivergent conditions are considered disabilities. Living with a disability does not mean someone is broken or defective — often, societal expectations are what defines a person as disabled or not. The social perspective of disability means seeking to change societal accommodations, not the individual.

It's important to note that while many neurodivergent people identify as disabled, others do not. Therefore, it is best to seek guidance from each person.

Understanding these concepts and experiences explains how people move through the world. As an event professional, this means having insights into how best to include a significant portion of attendees and meet their needs.

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Key Takeaways

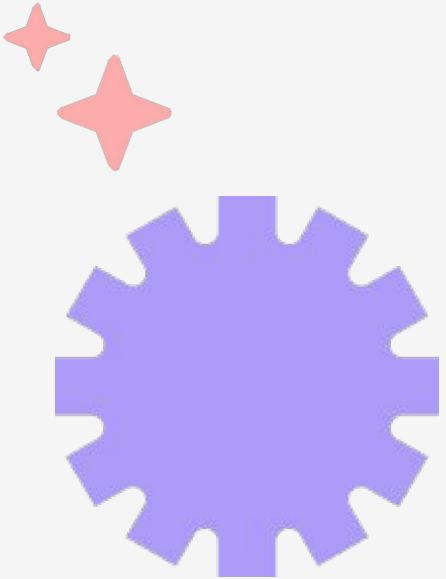
Neurodiversity encompasses all neurotypes — both neurotypical and neurodivergent.

- **Every brain is unique.**
- **Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.**
- **Neurodivergent people comprise an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the global population.**

Society primarily caters to neurotypical needs, which can lead to:

- Exclusion
- Masking
- Meltdown
- Shutdown
- Suppression
- Trouble with Executive Functioning
- Emotional and/or physical harm

- **Neurodivergence also comes with strengths.**
- **Neurodivergent experiences are highly intersectional.**
- **Being neurodivergent is not a trend but a neutral part of someone's identity.**



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Module 4

The A-Z of Neuroinclusive Events

Attending an event can be a stressful process for neurodivergent people.

Preparation can start weeks in advance, with after-effects, such as sensory overwhelm or burnout, lasting days after the event has ended.

With an understanding of the needs and experiences of neurodivergent people, event professionals can start designing event spaces strategically, helping ensure people receive the maximum benefits of attending while helping to minimize negative event impacts.

Here, we provide a solid foundation for creating neuroinclusive events, A-Z. Along the way, we've highlighted key takeaways and tips.

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Acceptance

“Awareness is easy. Acceptance requires actual work.”
— Kassiane S, Hapa and Asian American autism rights activist and blogger

When designing neuroinclusive events, the process must always begin with humility and a willingness to learn. Part of this journey is moving from a space of awareness to acceptance.

While awareness is passive, acceptance, in contrast, welcomes a person, engages, includes, and offers a seat at the table. **Acceptance is understanding in action. It is the most important thing we can all do to be more inclusive.**

Acceptance means having open, supportive dialogues about neurodiversity, confronting biases, engaging respectfully with the neurodivergent community, and being open to feedback. Education is also critical to dispelling myths and combating stigma on the journey of acceptance. Correct information helps shift perspectives, reducing othering within spaces.

Regardless of which route, or multiple routes, event professionals choose, conversations surrounding neurodiversity and creating more inclusive event environments must be honest and supportive.

This process can bring up discomfort and uncertainty; feeling overwhelmed is okay. Event professionals don't need to be experts to be more inclusive. By taking the first step, professionals can create more accepting, welcoming experiences for everyone.

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Cancellation

When offering cancellation policies, most event professionals think of refunds only when cancelling an event. However, when designing neuroinclusive experiences, professionals could offer a cancellation refund or policy to support neurodivergent people. One of our consultants with Tourettes shared, “sometimes when preparing for an event, my tics get so bad I have to miss it. I'd love the option of a refund as I'm often forced to miss things, but I've already paid.”

This approach safeguards attendees should attendance not be possible or cut short for reasons such as sensory overwhelm.

Implementing these measures could mean offering a 48-hour full or partial refund, credits for the next event, or the option to switch at short notice from in-person to virtual attendance.

A cancellation policy doesn't have to be only for neurodivergent people; it could also extend to neurotypical attendees. Attendee cancellation policies such as this, in turn, demonstrate to all attendees that events value their well-being. Potential outcomes of policies like this include a positive impact on brand recognition and long-term community building.

Color

Numerous studies continue to explore the impact of color on mood and emotion. Bright colors, such as red and yellow, may have energizing effects, while blues and greens are typically more calming and rejuvenating.

Neurodivergent people can be more sensitive to colors in the external environment due to enhanced sensory responses. Some studies indicate autistic children are 85 percent more influenced by color in the external environment than neurotypical children.

Use non-stimulating colors when designing neuroinclusive spaces, such as blues, greens, pinks, and browns, with yellows and oranges, used minimally for event areas requiring energy bursts. Red seems to be one color to minimize as much as possible or avoid entirely, with studies showing this high-intensity hue may trigger sensory overwhelm and increase hyperactivity.

Further, opting for stark, white, bare walls may increase anxiety because of their cold appearance.

For sensory or quiet spaces, Nanoleaf is an innovative and cost-effective solution. They're also a lot of fun.

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Key Takeaways

Acceptance means having open, supportive dialogues about neurodiversity, confronting biases, and being open to feedback.

- **Awareness is passive; acceptance is active.**
- **Acceptance is the most important thing we can all do to be more inclusive.**

There is no wrong way to try to be more inclusive.

Flexibility with cancellation policies for neurodivergent attendees is a kindness.

Colors impact mood and emotion, which can be heightened in neurodivergent individuals.

- **Flexibility with cancellation policies safeguards neurodivergent attendees.**
- **Use primarily non-stimulating colors with designing spaces and visual content for neurodivergent audiences.**

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Communication

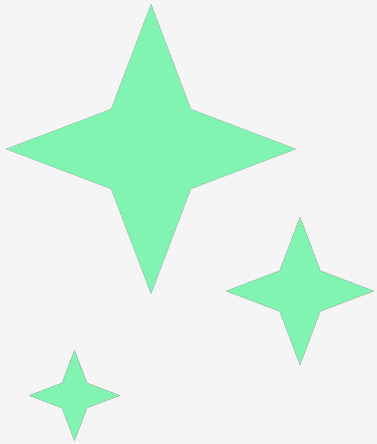
Neurodivergent people often communicate differently from neurotypical people. Accommodating these needs means event communications should be comprehensive, direct, informative, and accessible.

Neuroinclusive communications should include a call welcoming any specific accommodation or sensory needs during registration. Pre-event communication should be detailed and explicit, empowering neurodivergent attendees to prepare and know what to expect. Know-before-you-go packages should include, at a minimum, full agendas, policies (like cancellation), dress codes, venue maps, and instructions about receiving additional clarity or support in preparing for the event.

During the event, simple venue signage and wayfinding, speech-to-text communications, closed captioning, informing attendees of changes ahead of time, and trained in-person support personnel can all make a significant difference for neurodivergent attendees.

It is best to tell attendees, organizers, and sponsors that an event supports neurodivergent people or is neurodiversity friendly in pre, during, and post-event communications and content to show solidarity and create a welcoming environment.

Use The Neu Project Event Planning Checklist to help develop neuroinclusive communications before, during, and after your event.



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Content

Processing differences vary from person to person, as do *Executive Functioning* and strengths. Neurodivergent people can take longer to process information. Slower processing does not mean someone is unintelligent, uninterested, or rude. Instead, in a world where people often expect immediate responses, this shows the budgeting of cognitive resources and thoughtful processing of new information. Making accommodations for event content enables more access across these differences.

For instance, visual content should use single-color backgrounds, avoiding distracting background patterns, pictures, and motion graphics. Event professionals can achieve optimal readability by ensuring consistent contrast between background and text, using dark-colored text on a light background while avoiding green and red/pink. Stark white backgrounds, however, can impede readability; a better option is using cream or a soft pastel. These recommendations apply to all mediums, including display screens, paper, computers, and visual aids like whiteboards and flipcharts.

For layout, aligning text left without justification works best. This format makes it easier to find the start and finish of each line, ensuring an even spacing between words. Other considerations include avoiding multiple columns and writing short, simple sentences — 60 to 70 characters is optimal. Professionals can use blank space to remove clutter near text and group-related content. In long documents, break up the text with regular section headings and include a table of contents. Other alternatives to text, such as diagrams, infographics, and images, also work well.

Further, consider sharing content overviews or summaries in advance to create ample opportunities for consumption, processing, small group conversation, and reflection. Attendees should provide the option to print written content whenever possible. These alternative interaction options allow people to engage meaningfully, in their own time, without pressure.

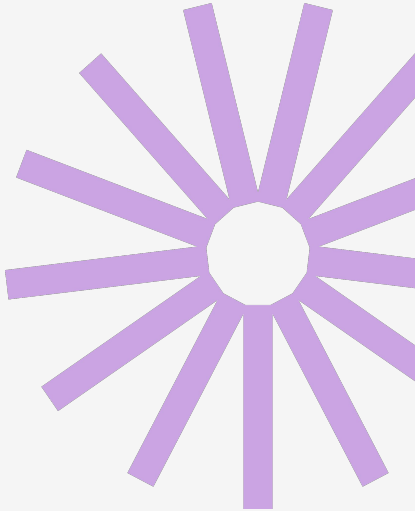
Key Takeaways

Neurodivergent people often communicate differently from neurotypical people.

- **Event communications should be explicit and comprehensive.**
- **Welcome neurodivergent attendees to share accommodations and sensory needs in registration communications.**
- **This checklist can help with inclusive communications!**

Neurodivergent people can process information differently and have different learning and engagement needs.

- **Provide options for content consumption (on-demand, in-room, post-event, etc).**
- **Allow interactivity options so attendees can engage in their own time without pressure.**
- **Use visuals such as diagrams, infographics, and images to communicate.**
- **Keep text short and to the point with attention to colors, line spacing, and font *(Arial or Lexend, at least 12-point font - 1.5 spacing).***



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Diet

Food is an often underrated element that can make or break an event. For some neurodivergent people, however, food can be challenging due to sensory aversions and potential allergies. It is important to provide advance notification of F&B options and offerings to neurodivergent attendees to help them prepare.

Most event professionals already offer special meals that align with dietary preferences and restrictions, so it's a matter of simply expanding the language to include neurodivergent needs. Event professionals should welcome requests for *Safefoods*, *Samefoods*, or *Sensory Meals* during pre-event registration and onsite event check-in. Preferred foods may vary from person to person and can be incredibly comforting to attendees during an event.

The taste (too sweet, salty, or sour) and textures (passive touch) of certain foods can produce adverse sensory reactions such as gagging, potentially leading to anxiety. Generally, this response occurs because we process food through soft tissues in the mouth. These soft tissues, in turn, connect to the vagus nerve, which sends sensory signals to the brain. Soft tissues can be more sensitive in neurodivergent people, triggering a gag reflex.

Food and beverages containing caffeine or high in preservatives and artificial ingredients can heighten hyperactivity and anxiety. Studies have shown a possible link with neurodivergent people experiencing more food allergies or intolerances to components such as gluten and dairy. It's also considerate to offer an alternative to glass, preferably with lids, for drinks for those with physical tics.

For an extra touch, you can have safe/same foods, snacks, and beverages readily available during breaks, in sensory spaces, or if an event is overnight, delivered to sleeping rooms.

If personalized meals are not an option, allow people the choice to bring or arrange their own meals, and consider providing fridges and microwaves in adjacent spaces.

Feedback

Creating safe mechanisms for providing feedback is an essential element of advocacy, inclusive design, and developing a deeper understanding of opportunities or gaps.

Event professionals can achieve this through pre and post-event surveys, suggestion boxes, help desks, or an event app. Appropriate feedback loops allow neurodivergent attendees and community members to engage with event professionals and help shape future events. This way, feedback becomes a collaborative learning experience for everyone involved and expedites the journey to solutions that work for you and your audiences.

The Neu Project has found hosting virtual focus groups and live feedback sessions with our neurodivergent communities incredibly helpful and insightful. We learn something new in every conversation.

Sample Questions:

- *How was your overall experience?*
- *What changes or accommodation would you like to see at the next event?*
- *What are our key opportunities for improvement?*
- *How could we have been more supportive of your needs before the event? During the event?*

Format

Some neurodivergent people prefer to minimize social interaction, while others prefer face-to-face engagement to observe social and communication cues in person. Some neurodivergent people prefer to consume content and information digitally, in their own time, and others prefer live consumption.

Hybrid event formats and on-demand content are a must when providing a more inclusive event environment with the option to attend either in-person or online.

While there has been some debate in the industry surrounding hybrid events, professionals cannot deny the inclusivity and access they offer. The choice and flexibility these event formats provide are great for many, like neurodivergent people, parents, those on a budget, etc.

Providing on-demand content (pre, during, and post-event), transcripts, and session recordings create optionality, ensures accessibility, and empowers agency. Further, sharing online content pre-event allows more time for consumption and processing, which is strongly encouraged.

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Key Takeaways

For some neurodivergent people, food can be challenging due to sensory issues and/or predictability, preparation, and strong preference.

- **Welcome requests for sensory meals, safe and/or same foods, and incorporate them into menus upon request.**
- **If personalized meals aren't an option, plan for 'deconstructed' menus that allow for customization.**
- **Be open and flexible to neurodivergent attendees bringing or arranging their own meals.**

Feedback from neurodivergent attendees is INVALUABLE to DEIB strategies.

- **Call for and welcome neurodivergent feedback before, during, and after your event.**

Provide optionality related to event formats for content consumption and social interaction.

- **Hybrid Events can be the most inclusive event formats — giving attendees a choice to attend in-person or from home.**
- **Where possible, share on-demand content before, during, and after the event.**

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Language

"Disability is not a bad word, being disabled is not shameful."
— Devon Price, Ph.D. and Author of Unmasking Autism

As mentioned, language matters; being thoughtful and intentional about how we use language is essential to creating inclusive spaces.

No two neurodivergent experiences are the same, and how people speak, think, and communicate about their neurodivergence, strengths, and disabilities also vary. Allies and advocates must hold space for all identities and amplify the idea that, regardless of preferences, discussing neurodivergence and being neurodivergent is not taboo.

For instance, some neurodivergent people will prefer person-first language (PFL) — a person with autism. Other times, people feel their neurodivergence should not be removed from their personhood because the two cannot be separated and adopt identity-first language (IFL) — an Autistic person. Most neurodivergent people prefer IFL, with research showing it is usually considered the least harmful.

When relevant and appropriate, it's okay to use other common language to include people who may not be aware of their neurodivergence. Example: introvert vs. extrovert. It's important to know that there are barriers to diagnosis and that access to medical evaluation and formal diagnosis is a privilege. It's important to avoid laughing at or replying to verbal or physical tics.

Event professionals should avoid language comparisons such as high functioning and low functioning; what the outside world observes is only a portion of a person's experience. Instead, when needing language to estimate or communicate accommodations, try high or low support needs as an alternative. Further, event professionals should always avoid dehumanizing language and ableist terms like special needs, differently-abled, and handicapable. The word normal, whatever that means, should also never be used to describe a neurotypical person, just like abnormal or weird should never be applied to anyone.

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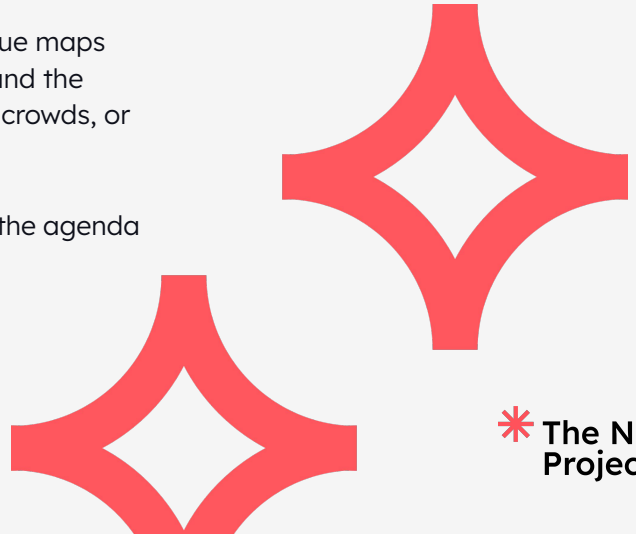
Preparation & Predictability

Preparing to attend an event as a neurodivergent person can be time-consuming.

While professionals can never anticipate every moment, such as attendee interactions, they can influence and provide a degree of predictability to reduce potential anxiety and help neurodivergent attendees feel informed and prepared. This approach, in turn, can also help minimize event day uncertainty for all attendees.

One way to support this process is by providing access to all relevant event information beyond typical pre-event communications containing the agenda, dress code, and general know-before-you-go items. Other pertinent information can include F&B offerings, venue maps (preferably denoting wayfinding and exits), locations of quiet spaces and help desks, and the identification of moments where there may be loud music, strobe lights, high traffic or crowds, or surprises.

We suggest also sharing a plan for communicating any deviations from elements, like the agenda or location changes, during the event.



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Representation

The media often portrays neurodivergent people in stereotypical ways, such as Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory, who is meant to be autistic, or making Tourette's a punch line by portraying only excessive swearing. While television and movie representations may reflect real experiences in some instances, often, they do not.

Neurodivergence is highly intersectional; neurodivergent people represent every facet of humanity — different races, genders, religions, social classes, and cultures. Diverse representation matters in avoiding harmful stereotypes and perpetuating stigma.

Event professionals can overcome this barrier by understanding the spectrum of neurodivergent conditions and experiences while amplifying a diverse range of neurodivergent voices at events through speaker selection and staffing.

Neurodivergent speakers don't only need to speak about neurodiversity — many are experts in a wide range of fields and can bring different perspectives and styles to all content. Should neurodiversity and inclusion feature as an event topic, it is best practice to include neurodivergent people in the line-up and conversation.

Key Takeaways

Language matters, and because no two neurodivergent experiences are the same, it's important to hold space and respect personal preferences and choices regarding language and terminology.

- **Avoid assumptions. If you don't know the preferred language, ask.**
- **Avoid comparative language such as high and low functioning.**
- **Avoid ableist language like special needs, handicapable, and differently-abled.**

Neurodivergent people require more information, clarity, and time to prepare for an event. It isn't uncommon to begin preparing days or even weeks in advance. Anything event professionals can do to help attendees feel informed and prepared is a kindness.

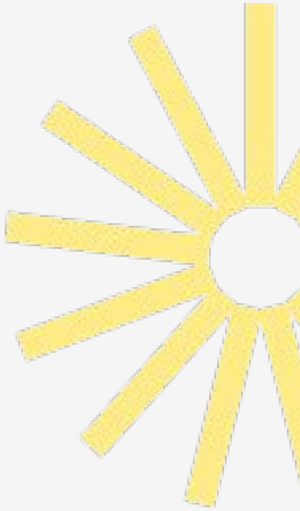
- **Go above and beyond to make messaging explicit and comprehensive in registration and pre-event communications.**

This checklist can help!

Beware of neurodivergent stereotypes — neurodivergence is highly intersectional.

- **Hire neurodivergent staff and speakers when possible. If DEI is a part of the content strategy, neurodivergent voices should be present.**

Senses



Brains receive information every second of every day. Generally, this information transmits signals to the brain through the senses — touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste — with the brain filtering out what is irrelevant. But with neurodivergence and sensory differences, a person's brain may struggle to filter everything happening in an external environment alongside the information intake.

This experience could mean delayed processing and reactions to external stimuli (sights, smells, lights, colors, sounds) in a way that can be deeply uncomfortable, sometimes even painful. For example, if a brain cannot filter out many different voices in a room, a space can become incredibly overwhelming. Fluorescent lights can feel very harsh and create visual overstimulation, headaches, and other physiological pain. If extreme lighting is unavoidable, providing adequate warning can allow people to move away from the space. Tourette's Syndrome can make people incredibly sensitive to high frequency sound (when a mic crosses a speaker), and it can trigger tics or even cause seizures.

Sensory tools such as sunglasses, noise-filtering headphones, and fidget toys can also help reduce overstimulation. Fidget toys are generally used for stimming, otherwise known as self-stimulating behavior. Anyone can stim, like biting nails or chewing on a pencil. However, with neurodivergent people, stimming can help support emotional and sensory regulation. Examples of stimming include fidgeting, rocking, snapping fingers, bouncing, skin rubbing, and repetitive blinking. When providing fidget toys for an event, opt for fidgets that are not visually or audibly noisy, as conflicting needs may arise. To support meeting multiple stimming needs, have a plan around this process, like providing scripts to negotiate between one's fidgeting needs and another's quietness needs.

Other ideas include no-fragrance zones, sensory menus or safe food options, and quiet/resilience spaces away from noise and overcrowding.

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Spaces

While event professionals can take measures to minimize noise, harsh lighting, heavily crowded areas, and other potential triggers, sometimes this may not be possible.

In these instances, resilience and recovery spaces like quiet rooms can offer a break away from the main event. These rooms will often feature muted colors, soft lighting, minimal noise, and other supportive tools such as fidget toys and headphones with access to refreshments and event content.

Beyond quiet rooms, professionals can also provide designated spaces for other purposes, such as prayer rooms, no-tech zones, and gaming areas. This way, all attendees benefit and can choose what works for their needs at the moment.

If sensory spaces need to be added to an existing venue or a modular option is preferred, Nook offers solutions for purchase or rental.

Nook Sensory Pod

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Social Interaction

"If a person's behavior doesn't make sense to you, it is because you are missing a part of their context. It's that simple."
— Devon Price, Autistic Ph.D. and Author of Unmasking Autism

Live events can be an overwhelming experience for anyone. But for some neurodivergent attendees, event environments, rigorous event schedules, and social interactions can be significantly more challenging.

For instance, people often think eye contact indicates a person is paying attention and showing respect to another in conversation. However, for an autistic person, eye contact can be incredibly uncomfortable and requires masking or significant effort to maintain. Most also see interrupting someone as rude. But for someone with ADHD, interruptions can happen because of feeling afraid to forget a shared point. People with Tourette Syndrome may struggle with socializing due to verbal or physical tics.

Event professionals can offer quieter, more intimate options adjacent to larger networking or social events. Or create zones where socializing and interaction are not expected. Creating opportunities for topic-based conversations can help neurodivergent attendees prepare in advance. Inviting suggestions or ideas enables people to discuss and share their focused interests.

By implementing a buddy system, like coupling neurodivergent attendees or trained support staff, people can tap into this support structure throughout an event as needed.

Using iconography and visual shortcuts, such as badges, can help neurodivergent attendees identify safe people who are either trained or are happy to connect during a social event. For badge examples, check out The Neu Project badge system.

Above all, offer options and embrace individual preferences; forced fun is never fun.

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Key Takeaways

Neurodivergent reactions to external stimuli (sights, smells, lights, colors, sounds) can be deeply uncomfortable, sometimes even painful.

- **Avoid prolonged exposure to harsh lighting and strong smells, and warn attendees in advance about sound or light activations.**
- **Create sensory recovery spaces —like quiet rooms, prayer rooms, and lounges.**
- **Offer sensory aids like sunglasses, fidgets, and sound filtering headphones to make spaces more comfortable.**

Social functions can be particularly ‘energy expensive’ and overwhelming for neurodivergent attendees.

- **Offer quieter, more intimate areas for conversation during social functions.**
- **Use conversation cards and/or pre-seed topics to lessen the cognitive load of networking and social interaction.**
- **Implement a buddy system and use visual identifiers (badges, lanyards) to make it easy for attendees/ buddies to find one another.**

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Structure

The beliefs around attention and neurodivergence are often misleading. For example, many assume ADHD means someone cannot focus. People with ADHD do not necessarily have challenges paying attention but instead regulating attention, as seen through an ability to hyperfocus on exciting tasks. The challenge exists when ADHD people are asked to complete things that could be uninteresting or routine.

Autistic people can also have high levels of focus. However, when experiencing sensory overwhelm or autistic burnout, executive functioning (which controls attention) can diminish, resulting in the redirection of attention to external stimuli like bright lights or the sound of a clock ticking.

Because of these different ways of focusing, event professionals can take a unique approach to event structures to help people get the best out of an experience. These could include shorter sessions (no more than 30 minutes), more breaks, and access to on-demand content to catch up on anything missed.

Rigorous and packed schedules don't really work for anyone but can be more harmful to some neurodivergent people.

Teams & Training

Ensuring alignment, buy-in, and foundational understanding around neurodiversity and neurodivergent needs are table stakes for neuroinclusion.

Acceptance requires awareness, and diversity training can be a supportive environment to develop inclusive language and identify opportunities for improvement. Another way to achieve understanding is by leaning into what many talented neurodivergent industry colleagues and creatives are saying, learning from those with lived experience.

Having trained in-person support at an event isn't something that every budget can accommodate, but it makes a significant difference. While The Neu Project can't verify or endorse methodologies, there are, however, established organizations, like EventWell, Kulture City, and Take This, offering plug-and-play operating models and customized training for your event or team by providing trained staff on event days.

Lastly, be prepared with talking points for attendees on how to respond to unmasked neurodivergent behaviors, similar to having conversation starter cards and scripts. Many people, both neurodivergent and neurotypical, want to be inclusive but do not know how.

What Not to Do (or say)

"Nothing About Us Without Us."
— Anonymous , but South African disability activists Michael Masutha & William Rowland popularized this phrase

Event professionals may have heard of the term microaggressions. Coined in the 1970s by Harvard University professor Dr. Chester Middlebrook Pierce, the term currently translates to "indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group." Examples of microaggressions against neurodivergent people include saying everyone is a bit autistic, calling ADHD a myth, or social exclusion.

Many neurodivergent people have had their experiences minimized or dismissed throughout their lives. Event professionals must never gate resources by requesting evidence of a diagnosis or disability; another microaggression example. Barriers to diagnosis often exist — formal diagnosis is a privilege, and self-identification is valid.

The role of an event professional is to be supportive and provide access to accommodations and resources as needed. People should not have to self-identify actively or passively to receive resources; resources should be available to anyone who asks for them. For example, don't just react to tics, don't stare (seems obvious, but we hear it happens a lot). Do your best to move others along if they are staring. It's great to ask guests with Tourette's how they would like you to respond. Some say laugh, others say ignore etc. It's different for everyone but, being prepared is important in creating a safe environment.

Most people will commit a microaggression at one time or another — doing so does not make someone a bad person; often, microaggressions are unconscious responses. However, it is still the responsibility of a person to fix it when it happens, and being aware of the nature of microaggressions provides an opportunity for growth.

In addition to avoiding microaggressions, consider switching out ableist language with alternatives, as listed in this post.

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Key Takeaways

Rigorous and packed schedules don't really work for anyone but can be more harmful to neurodivergent individuals.

- **Offer unscheduled time and ample breaks. Encourage people to step away as needed.**
- **Keep sessions as concise as possible.**
- **Offer on-demand content wherever possible.**

Education is vital for event teams, staff, stakeholders, and attendees around the language and acceptance of neurodiversity. This process enables them to serve as advocates and allies before, during, and after the event. Most people want to be neuroinclusive, but many don't know how.

Be aware of microaggressions and help teams understand words and actions considered offensive and harmful by neurodivergent people.

- **Avoid ableist language.**
- **Avoid comparing one neurodivergent person, or condition, to another.**
- **Always include neurodivergent people (when present) in circles and decision-making.**
- **Never ask for 'proof' of a disability or ask a person to identify a diagnosis to receive support or accommodations.**

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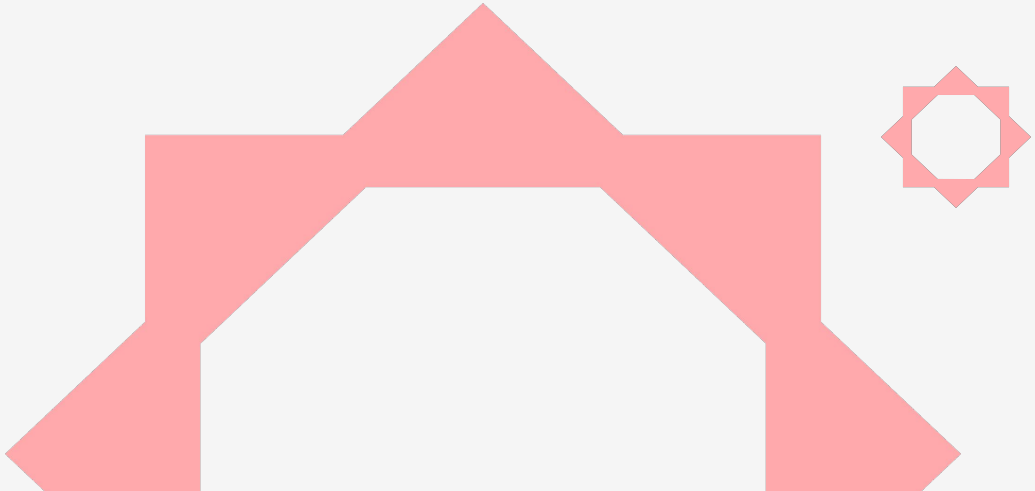
Module 5

Final Thoughts

“A world that is accepting of difference is a safer and more nourishing place for everyone.”

— Devon Price, Autistic Ph.D. and Author of Unmasking Autism



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Events are the business of people and bringing them together in meaningful ways. **At their best, events are human-centric.** While some view events as separate microcosms, events are a direct representation of society. Experiences and identities are not left at the door — they join people in sessions, training rooms, exhibit halls, etc.

Roy Gluckman, a DEI specialist, recently said the future of inclusion is through a better understanding of space. So often, we view space as neutral. But, as Gluckman explained, even with events, space is never neutral. **Space tells a person whether they are safe or not, and how people perceive an event space will inform and impact their entire experience.**

Gluckman added that it is sometimes necessary to define event limits in terms of budgets and time constraints. However, these decisions must be made with consciousness and kindness, approaching each event by endeavoring to improve on the next experience.

In doing so, neuroinclusive experiences may act as conduits for change and help solve collective challenges, facilitating the birth of a more compassionate and welcoming world for everyone.

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Module 6

Glossary & Resources

The glossary includes terms used in context with this guide alongside definition origins, such as Oxford Languages and Wikipedia, among other resources, with some words defined by The Neu Project.

Ableism

Oxford Languages Dictionary

Discrimination in favour of able-bodied people.

#actuallyautistic and #AdultAutistic

The Neu Project

Hashtags used to amplify the voices of autistic people on online and social media platforms. They are considered social movements within the community.

Allist

A non-autistic person. A person without autism is allistic.

Aphantasia

Oxford Languages Dictionary

The inability to form mental images of objects that are not present.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Oxford Languages Dictionary

Abbreviation ADHD

Any of a range of behavioural disorders occurring primarily in children, including such symptoms as poor concentration, hyperactivity, and learning difficulties.

Autism

Oxford Languages Dictionary

A developmental disorder of variable severity that is characterized by difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behaviour. A person with autism is autistic.

Autistic Inertia

@theautisticlife

Difficulty starting and/or stopping an activity, or changing course. As an umbrella term, it encompasses difficulties with movement initiation, task planning, making transitions, and attention regulation.

Coprolalia

Oxford Languages Dictionary

The involuntary and repetitive use of obscene language, often associated with Tourette's Syndrome.

Cultural Sensitivity

American Psychological Association

Awareness and appreciation of the values, norms, and beliefs characteristic of a cultural, ethnic, racial, or other group that is not one's own, accompanied by a willingness to adapt one's behavior accordingly.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Oxford Languages Dictionary

Abbreviation DEI
Initiatives that promote the inclusion, representation, and participation of different societal groups, such as various races, genders, abilities and disabilities, and sexual orientation; representing the diversity of humanity.

Disability

A physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities.

Disorder

Oxford Languages Dictionary

An illness or condition that disrupts normal physical or mental functions.

Dyscalculia

Severe difficulty in making arithmetical calculations, as a result of brain disorder.

Dyslexia

Oxford Languages Dictionary

A general term for disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters, and other symbols, but that do not affect general intelligence.

Dyspraxia

Oxford Languages Dictionary

A developmental disorder of the brain in childhood causing difficulty in activities requiring coordination and movement.

Executive Functioning

The group of complex mental processes and cognitive abilities (such as working memory, impulse inhibition, and reasoning) that control the skills (such as organizing tasks, remembering details, managing time, and solving problems) required for goal-directed behavior.

Extreme or Pathological Demand Avoidance

PDA Society

Abbreviation EDA/PDA
PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) is widely understood to be a profile on the autism spectrum, involving the avoidance of everyday demands and the use of 'social' strategies as part of this avoidance. A PDA profile is also a spectrum and presents differently in different people.

Fidget Toy

Wikipedia

A fidget toy is typically a small object used for pleasant but purposeless activity with the hands (manual fidgeting or stimming). Some users believe these toys help them tolerate anxiety, frustration, agitation, boredom, and excitement. They are also commonly used by those with sensory difficulties.

Hybrid Event

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An event that includes both in-person and remote attendees, which triggers the need for event technology and production support. This event format intends to optimize the in-room and virtual experiences for participants and presenters.

Hyperlexia

Healthline

Hyperlexia is when a child can read at levels far beyond those expected for their age. "Hyper" means better than, while "lexia" means reading or language. A child with hyperlexia might figure out how to decode or sound out words very quickly, but not understand or comprehend most of what they're reading.

Identity

Thesaurus.com

The fact of being who or what a person or thing is. A close similarity or affinity.

Identity-first Language

Thesaurus.com

The term *identity-first language* refers to wording about a person that leads with a description of them in the context of a disability, medical conditions (including mental health conditions), or other physical or cognitive differences. Examples include terms like *deaf person*, *blind person*, and *autistic person.*

Intersectionality

The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

LGBTQIA+

An inclusive term that includes people of all genders and sexualities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and allies. While each letter in LGBTQIA+ stands for a specific group of people, the term encompasses the entire spectrum of gender fluidity and sexual identities.

Masking

Wikipedia

Masking is a process by which an individual changes or "masks" their natural personality to conform to social pressures, abuse or harassment.

Meltdown

Understood

A neurodivergent Meltdown is a strong emotional response to feelings of intense overwhelm, not a tantrum or a manipulative action. It has no end goal other than to communicate frustration and to help the neurodivergent person survive.

Mental Health

Oxford Languages Dictionary

A person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being.

Microagression

Oxford Languages dictionary

Indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group.

Neurodistinct

Tim Goldstein

An alternative term to neurodivergent.

Neurodivergent

Oxford Languages Dictionary

Differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical (frequently used with reference to autistic spectrum disorders); not neurotypical.

Neurodiversity

Oxford Languages dictionary

The range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population (used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders).

Neurominority

Collins Dictionary

Any group, such as [autistic] people, that differs from the majority of a population in terms of behavioural traits and brain function. An additional alternative to neurodivergent.

Neurotypical

Oxford Languages dictionary

Not displaying or characterized by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour.

Obsessive-compulsive Disorder

Oxford Languages Dictionary

Abbreviation OCD
A personality disorder characterized by excessive orderliness, perfectionism, attention to details, and a need for control in relating to others.

Person-first Language

Wikipedia

People-first language (PFL), also called person-first language, is a type of linguistic prescription which puts a person before a diagnosis, describing what condition a person "has" rather than asserting what a person "is".

Positionality

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Refers to how differences in social position and power shape identities and access in society.

Prosopagnosia

Oxford Languages Dictionary

A neurological condition characterized by the inability to recognize the faces of familiar people.

Safefood

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Safefood is a food that brings a neurodivergent person (most commonly autistic) joy, comfort, and peace when they eat it.

Samefood

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Samefood is a food that a neurodivegent person has grown attached to and can, or do, eat every day.

Sensory Meal

The Neu Project

A personalized meal that eliminates heightened sensory issues triggered by qualities of certain foods such as taste, texture, temperature and smell.

Sensory Processing Disorder *Psychology Today*

A collection of challenges that occur when the senses fail to respond properly to the outside world. Though the condition has gained recognition in recent years, it is not currently an official *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* diagnosis.

Shutdown *The Neu Project*

A shutdown is a dissociative response to overwhelm where a neurodivergent person may partially or completely withdraw from the world around them. They may not respond to communication and need to retreat from the environment.

Spectrum *Oxford Languages Dictionary*

Used to classify something in terms of its position on a scale between two extreme points.

Stereotype *Oxford Languages Dictionary*

A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

Stigma *Oxford Languages Dictionary*

A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

Suppression *Oxford Languages Dictionary*

Intentionally holding in or trying to manage tics. Each person with Tourette's Syndrome can suppress to a degree, but it's a lot of work and can be painful to the individual.

Tics *National Health Institute*

Sudden and difficult to control rapid and repeated movement or vocal sounds.

Tourette Syndrome *Oxford Languages Dictionary*

A neurological disorder characterized by involuntary physical tics, and vocalizations.

Neu Project Resources

Join us to help make event spaces and programming more inclusive! Send us a message at xi@google.com to let us know how you'd like to get involved.

The Neu Project Website

The Neuroinclusive Event Planning Checklist

The Neu Project Badge System

The Neu Project

Meet The Neu Project Team

The Neu Project

The Neu Project has been the most enriching experience of my career. Bringing together this community, and learning form the incredible people that are a part of it, has made me a better event professional, leader...and mom to my brilliant and beautiful Autistic son.

The work has not only empowered me to be a better advocate for others, but it has given me such permission to be a fuller and more authentic version of myself. My dream for The Neu Project is that it gives those gifts to many others.

Megan Henshall
The Neu Project Lead
Events Strategic Solutions Lead, Google
LinkedIn

The Neu Project

Being able to bring my whole self to this project from my ADHD and severe dyslexic background has been an awe-inspiring experience for me. My greatest hope for this work is that people will make this a starting point to their own journey in what events can be.

Take this guide as an invitation to be brave: to listen to the community, to learn and strive to make events that help all of us feel welcome & safe.

Amanda Marcus
The Neu Project Manager

The Neu Project

As a parent to neurodivergent children, and a late-diagnosed autistic ADHDer myself, The Neu Project has felt like a homecoming. Here, I have connected with the most remarkable people while creating some of the most meaningful work of my career. This experience has helped me overcome aspects of the crippling self-doubt and feeling of 'other' I have often endured in life.

Why events? Events connect people in ways few industries can. They are stories in motion. Even on a small scale, actions people take here can make a difference. My wish for this work is to open others to the humility and opportunities neurodiversity brings. And more compassionate, inclusive spaces are born from it.

Lisa Jade Hutchings
The Neu Project Writer

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The Neu Project Partners & Friends

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Courtney Stanley
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DAHLIA + Agency
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International Association of Accessibility Professionals
Samantha Evans
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Maritz Global Events
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Skift Meetings
Miguel Neves
Website

Take Up Space
Paff Evara
Website

The Community Factory
Liz Lathan, Nicole Obidisu
Website

UnMasked
Ellie Middleton
Website

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Creating space
for every mind
to shine