



University of Essex



Neuro-Inclusion in the workplace: Guidance for Employees and Line Managers

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Support for employees

Disclosing your neurodivergence

If you are neurodivergent, or believe you may be neurodivergent, the decision to disclose your neurodiversity is a personal one. However, if you require support within the workplace we would encourage you to talk to your line manager so they can discuss your support needs and agree a plan that works for you and the University. If you would like to know more about our work to encourage disclosure of characteristics at the University, including neurodiversity, see our [Your Profile Counts campaign](#).

Your line manager might ask if you are happy to be referred to [Occupational Health](#). This is so that we can get more information about how your neurodivergence is likely to affect you at work, and what adjustments we can consider to support you. Together you might agree that some changes are needed to your work or work environment to help you – there's more information about reasonable adjustments in the section below.

Reasonable adjustments

If you are neurodivergent, you may be covered by the [Equality Act 2010](#). This means that we have a responsibility to try and accommodate the [reasonable adjustments](#) you need to help you carry out your job without being at a disadvantage. It may be that small, simple changes to working arrangements or responsibilities are the only changes needed. For example, allocating you a workspace away from noisier areas of the office to help with concentration or use of specific technology or software. It may be that you would like to discuss with your line manager about adjusting your working hours and working in a more [flexible](#) way.

Depending on the adjustments required, and the costs, you might need to contact [Access to Work](#), who can help towards the costs of providing equipment, software or coaching to provide you with support.

Any agreed adjustments will be regularly reviewed, and you should communicate openly about how effective the adjustments are at removing any disadvantage. It is good to be flexible in your approach, and to try out new adjustments if the current ones are not effective.

Although we will always try and say yes if we can, there may be organisational considerations that mean we can't agree to all of the workplace adjustments you may request. If a request stops us being able to deliver our organisational requirements, is disproportionately expensive or unfair or unsafe for others, we may have to say no. However, in these rare cases we will always try to explore alternatives.

Reasonable adjustment passport

You and your line manager may wish to consider completing a [reasonable adjustments passport](#). The passport acts as a live document about agreed changes in the workplace. It also means that if you change role or line manager, they have a formal record of what had been agreed previously to aid discussions about what would be helpful in the new role.

Time off for assessment

We understand that if you think you may be neurodivergent you may want to get a formal diagnosis. You should speak to your line manager who will do their best to accommodate time off work to attend any appointments you may need. Please refer to the [Special Leave policy](#) for more information.

Fidget toys in the workplace

We understand that using fidget toys may be incredibly helpful to you in the workplace as they may help you to improve your concentration, channel excess energy or serve as a calming mechanism in a stressful situation. We encourage you to use fidget toys when needed but please speak to your line manager about how this is communicated to your immediate team to ensure that it doesn't disrupt their work environment.

Further information for employees

Further information on how we support prospective, new and existing employees with health conditions or impairments, both physical and mental can be found in our Approach to [Supporting Employees with Health Conditions or Impairments](#). You can also contact [Workplace Health, Safety and Wellbeing](#).

To access our pre-recorded employee neurodiversity awareness session, and to find out more information on some of the neurodivergent differences please see our [Wellbeing Directory](#).

Support for line managers

Disclosure

Whether or not your employee discloses their neurodiversity to you is a personal decision. There is no legal requirement for employees to disclose this information to an organisation, however as a line manager it's important to be understanding and approachable so that your employees feel they can come and talk to you and ask for support should they want to.

If your team member chooses to disclose their neurodiversity, speak to your employee to understand more about it so you can best support them. You can also find supporting resources on the [Manager Wellbeing Directory](#). But remember, even though there are some behaviours or characteristics that are common to neurodivergent differences, it's important not to make any assumptions, as these will vary from person-to-person. Get to know your team member and find out how you can best support their unique characteristics, strengths and challenges. If you would like to know more about our work to encourage disclosure of characteristics at the University, including neurodiversity, see our [Your Profile Counts campaign](#).

Reasonable adjustments and access to work

Your neurodivergent employee may be covered by the [Equality Act 2010](#). This means that we have a responsibility to try and accommodate any [reasonable adjustments](#) your employee needs to help them carry out their job without being at a disadvantage. It may be that small, simple changes to their working arrangements or responsibilities are the only requirements. For example, allocating a workspace away from noisier areas of the office or working more [flexibly](#). Remember, any adjustment can only be made with your employee's agreement. It is always advisable to refer the individual to Occupational Health to ensure that you have support in understanding what support or adjustments are appropriate. There is more information on reasonable adjustments in [Our Approach to Supporting Staff with Health Conditions or Impairments](#).

Depending on the adjustments required, and the costs, your team member may need to contact [Access to Work](#), who can help towards the costs of providing equipment, software or coaching to provide them with support beyond reasonable adjustments.

Any agreed adjustments should be reviewed on an ongoing basis with your employee, and you should encourage them to communicate openly about how effective the adjustments are at removing any disadvantage. It is good to be flexible in your approach, and to try out new adjustments if the current ones are not effective.

There may be instances where you need to balance multiple requests for reasonable adjustments. In these cases, you may be required to mediate between the differing needs of team members to find a solution that best meets the needs of individuals and meets organisational requirements.

Some reasonable adjustments may involve distributing the activities of the team in a different way. This is more likely to be feasible where the employee's needs affect only the minor or occasional duties of the job. In these cases, you must consider the impact on other employees of taking on the additional duties. Ideally, you should have a conversation with those affected - but remember to get your neurodivergent employee's permission first. As with all team members, make sure to monitor workload to stop anyone feeling overloaded, stressed, or under pressure at work.

In rare circumstances you and your employee may not be able to identify or agree adjustments which will reduce or remove barriers for the neurodivergent individual. If this is the case, consideration may be

given to whether there could be a change made to the current role or whether there is an alternative role available. You should always speak to [People & Culture](#) if this is the case.

Reasonable adjustment passport

You and your team member may wish to consider completing a reasonable adjustments [passport](#) to keep a record of which adjustments have been agreed. The passport acts as a live document about agreed changes in the workplace. It also means that if the employee changes role or their line manager changes, they have a formal record of what has been agreed to aid future discussions.

Time off for assessment

If your team member thinks they may be neurodivergent they may want to get a formal diagnosis. You should do your best to accommodate time off work to attend any appointments they may need. Please refer to the [Special Leave policy](#) for more information.

Fidget toys in the workplace

Fidget toys can be incredibly beneficial for some neurodivergent employees in the workplace. For some neurodivergent individuals, having something to fidget with can enhance their ability to concentrate on tasks. It can serve as a way to channel excess energy or distractibility into a more productive outlet, ultimately improving their overall performance. For some neurodivergent individuals who may experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety in some workplace situations (e.g. during an interview process) fidget toys can serve as a calming mechanism, helping to reduce stress and anxiety by providing a sensory outlet for nervous energy.

If your employee would like to use a fidget toy in the workplace have a supportive conversation with them about when and where this would be appropriate being respectful to other members of the team so that it doesn't distract or interfere with the wider team. If they feel comfortable your employee may wish to share the reason for having a fidget toy with their colleagues, this would help to facilitate understanding and acceptance amongst the wider team. Encourage employees to use fidget toys during their break times.

Breaks

Taking short breaks throughout the day can help neurodivergent employees to relax and recharge, leading to better concentration when they return to their work tasks. Some employees may find movement breaks helpful, so may need to leave the office to walk around before returning to their desk or position. Other employees may find it helpful to take breaks and to disengage from the task they are focussing on in other ways, such as with fidget toys, listening to music, or reading a page from a book or magazine.

You should have a conversation with your team member to find out if they would find short breaks or other techniques helpful, and how this could be accommodated taking into account the nature of their role and the operational requirements. The ideal timing for breaks will vary for neurodivergent employees. Some may benefit from a break every 30 minutes for optimal focus on tasks, others may find taking a break every hour or 1.5 hours optimal. This can provide short deadlines and structure to an employee's day and prevent those individuals who are prone to 'hyperfocus' from burning out.

There are tools available for employees who may work more productively with consistent breaks. Many of these tools consist of timers that may work on an employee's phone in the form of an app. Employees should be allowed to access these apps provided they are not noisy or distracting to other employees.

Eye contact

Some neurodivergent employees, such as those with autism, may not feel comfortable with sustained eye contact which can often feel overwhelming or distracting. Neurodivergent individuals may also find it difficult to maintain eye contact while also processing verbal information. It is important therefore to not assume that a lack of eye contact demonstrates a lack of interest or honesty. Encourage your employee to communicate openly about any challenges they may face with eye contact. In a one-to-one meeting, or an interview situation, not sitting directly opposite your employee may help with this.

Office etiquette

Open office environments can be quite challenging for neurodivergent employees. The constant shift from home working to on campus office environments may cause anxiety and instability. Encourage your employee to discuss how each environment makes them feel, how it may affect their productivity and offer to help identify tools that may help with the transition. It may be that your employee would benefit from working from home when needing to focus on a particularly focus-heavy piece of work.

Some employees may wish to wear noise cancelling headphones in the office to listen to music or white noise as a way to avoid the distraction of others' conversations. Others may use conversation ear plugs that muffle the sound of others' conversations but still allow for communication if necessary. You may request noise-cancelling headphones or conversation ear plugs for your employee through Occupational Health, following a [referral](#).

Social interaction

Neurodivergent individuals may struggle with navigating office politics and unwritten rules. It may be useful, therefore, for you to provide some clear guidelines on workplace expectations. This could include things such as, 'open door' policies and their exceptions, or things that could be considered 'polite'.

Some neurodiverse employees may struggle to remember colleagues' names – especially in our new hybrid working environment when attendance may vary from day to day. This can be embarrassing and cause discomfort for your employee. A list of colleagues' names, ideally with photos of each employee where available, is a useful tool to provide each member of your team. When an employee is new to the team, find out how they would prefer to meet members of their team – some employees may struggle introducing themselves through informal meetings or chats and would prefer more structured introductions.

Be mindful of personal space and individual boundaries during interactions. Some individuals may have heightened sensitivities to proximity, especially if they are neurodivergent.

Understand that your neurodivergent employee may struggle with attending social events, (such as after work gatherings or work Christmas parties) due to sensory sensitivities, social anxiety or other factors. Respect their autonomy and right to choose whether to attend such events. Encourage open communication with your employee. Let them know that they can discuss their concerns or discomfort regarding social events without fear of judgment or repercussions. Consider alternative ways for individuals to engage such as team building activities that are less socially demanding.

Communication style

Be mindful of your language and communication style. Use clear, direct language and avoid using hypothetical questions or examples as these may be confusing for your neurodivergent employee who may think very literally. Allow time for the individual to process the information you have given them, think about providing information in a different format if that would be helpful. Be patient and give them the time they need to fully understand instructions or concepts. Create an open and supportive environment where neurodivergent employees feel comfortable asking questions or seeking clarification without fear of judgement.

You could ask your employee whether visual aids, such as charts, diagrams, or color-coded instructions, would be more helpful to them when conveying information. When having conversations with your team member be mindful of noise levels, lighting and other environmental factors that could impact their ability to focus and engage. Some neurodivergent employees may receive information better verbally, while others will find they are able to retain information more easily in writing.

Regularly check- in with the individual to ensure that the approach to communication you have adopted is working for you both or whether it requires adjustment.

Some neurodiverse people, especially those with ADHD, may struggle with providing the correct level of detail, either under- or over-explaining both in writing and verbally. For projects or reports, this can be aided by giving clear guidance on what needs to be included and an idea of length.

Routine and predictability

Maintaining a consistent routine and structured work environment can be important for many neurodivergent individuals, and unexpected changes or disruptions to their workday can be challenging. Whilst it is impossible to prevent some unexpected disruptions to the daily routine, it is important that these are minimised and managed to prevent undue stress and anxiety for neurodivergent individuals.

You can help your employee to shape their structure by giving clear deadlines for projects to be completed where possible, as this can help with prioritising workload.

Further information for line managers

Further information can be found in [Our Approach to Supporting Employees with Health Conditions or Impairments](#)

If you would like further support in this area, please contact [Workplace Health, Safety and Wellbeing](#).

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