



The shape of meetings with neurodivergence in mind

A neurodivergent meeting guide

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Neurodiversity is something the McPin Foundation has become more consciously aware of through the advocacy of people we work with and a general increase in public awareness. In this resource, we share crowdsourced tips from our staff to make work meetings more welcoming, accessible and inclusive for neurodivergent people.

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a concept that cannot be readily defined in a sentence; it has many different angles to it. Coming to life in the 1990s, the idea has readily been adopted into everyday language and culture, indicating its resonance with our time. However the pace of adoption has resulted in neurodiversity being applied without a full appreciation for the concept's original intention and use. For example, the term can be misapplied in language: saying 'I have a colleague who is neurodiverse' wouldn't be accurate. It is not a word that can be used to describe an individual. That would be like calling a tree a forest or a drop of water an ocean. So how is the term to be understood?

Neurodiversity was conceived by **Judy Singer**, an Australian sociologist in 1998. She views neurodiversity as a fact of nature. A way of understanding the diversity of human neurological functioning on planet earth.



The limitless variability of human nervous systems on the planet, in which no two can ever be exactly alike due to the influence of environmental factors."

Judy Singer

To make this easier to conceptualise, neurodiversity has been analogised to normal distribution. When drawn as a graph a normal distribution looks like a bell shape (see figure 1 below). Many things in the natural and social world conform to normal distribution – height, birth weight, test scores. Most data values huddle around the centre, the mean. The further a value moves from the mean, on either side, the less common the value is, decreasing in an even way before eventually tapering off towards the edges.

The term **neurodivergence** was coined by neurodivergent activist, **Sherlock's Flat Affect**, as 'a brain that diverges from what is considered typical'.

A brain that diverges in many ways – sensorily, perceptually, cognitively, behaviourally, communicatively...
Neurodivergent people perceive of the world in different ways.

Neurotypical is a term to describe 'typical' or most 'common' forms of neurological functioning.

Typical is defined, in this sense, by societal norms.

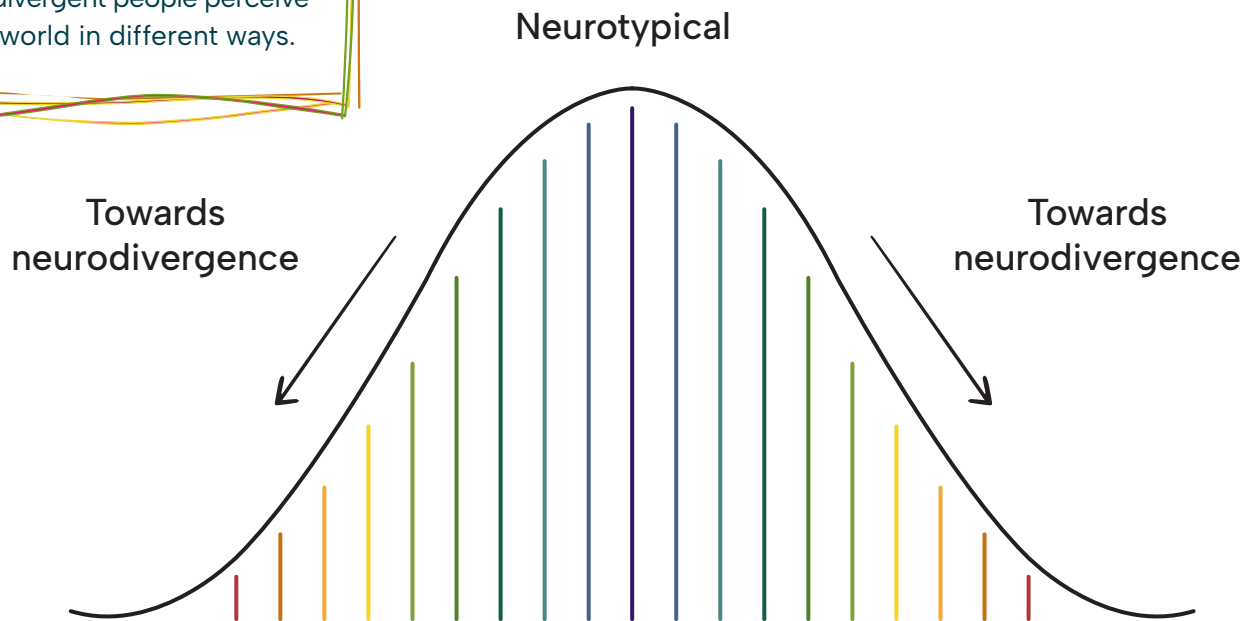


Fig 1: A visual representation of neurodiversity.

Neurotypicality would be represented at the mean and neurodivergence would become more prominent as you move away from the central point.

In spite of this analogy to a bell curve, it is important to note that in and of itself neurodiversity is not a scientific concept. The concept is rooted in the social and political, though the medical world is now embracing it.

For example, typing 'neurodiversity' and 'NHS' into a web browser yields many results for how the institution is using the term alongside a variety of medical conditions such as Attention Hyperactivity Deficit Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Tourette's Syndrome and Dyslexia. Neurodivergent activists reject this as a form of co-option in which traditional power is trying to maintain its hold over those that do not fit the norm.

As a political movement, some neurominorities or neurodivergent people reject defining themselves by deficits, as such medical labels suggest; opting to recognise and accept the strengths, skills and values neurodivergence offer and bring to the world.

As a social concept, neurodivergence sits alongside other social constructs such as disability, class, race, and gender. Often, people who have non-dominant experiences associated with these constructs are discriminated, oppressed, and marginalised.

Dr Nick Walker, an academic and author, alongside Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon and Remi Yergeau collaboratively developed the theory of Neuroqueer. Neuroqueer refers to being both queer and neurodivergent with a sense of awareness of how the two interact, and may be inseparable for some beings:



I originally conceived of neuroqueer as a verb: neuroqueering as the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously... I was expanding the Queer Theory conceptualization of queering to encompass the queering of neurocognitive norms as well as gender norms."

Nick Walker, 2021

McPin recognises the social and political elements of neurodiversity. As a mental health research charity; we advocate for those with lived experiences of mental health issues to be at the heart of research, recognising such voices and knowledge have been marginalised and excluded from the research process for a long time.

We also understand that life experiences such as gender, sexuality, and neurodivergence interact with and further compound the discrimination and marginalisation that some people face because they do not fit the 'norm'. Because of this we believe that people should be allowed to define themselves in a way that works for them and should not (unless they choose to) be described from the outside, by a medical condition for example.

Why do we need this guide?

Often, meetings are defined by neurotypical norms such as verbal communication and digesting lots of information in short time frames. This format does not work well for neurodivergent people who experience the world in different ways. This guide, conceived of by a neurodivergent staff member, intends to make meetings more welcoming, accessible, and inclusive for all.

Design and process

A survey was designed to explore how meetings could work better with neurodivergence in mind and shared with 25 McPin staff via email. The survey was opt-in. 36% of respondents (5 out of 14) self-identified as neurodivergent. Several other responders made suggestions that indicated they had an awareness of neurodivergence.

Two neurodivergent staff analysed the survey results. Using a reflexive approach, considering alongside the survey data, neurodiversity concepts and theories, and their own lived and professional experiences, they developed four themes which include practical meeting accommodations suggested by survey respondents. The findings were presented in a team meeting and shared with other neurodivergent colleagues to encourage further discussion and refinement of the accommodations.

What neurodiversity is NOT

- 🚫 **An individual.** Due to the wide-reaching dimensions of the concept of neurodiversity, ranging from the biological to the political, it cannot logically be applied to a person.
- 🚫 **A type of neurological disorder or a scientific term.** As described, neurodiversity as a movement is associated with social and political ideas directly opposed to the pathologising of the medical labels and committed to the promotion of social justice.

Note on generalisability



Meeting one autistic person is just that, meeting *one* autistic person!"

Autistic member of staff

This meeting guide is formed from the collective wisdom of neurodivergent staff and allies at McPin, but the group is small and cannot represent what would work for every neurodivergent person. Even within minority groupings there is great variation.

We want readers of this guide to keep this in mind whilst considering the following accommodations we suggest. Even if this guide cannot represent every neurominority, we think it offers useful insights and changes that can create more equitable meeting spaces.

Setting up an inclusive meeting culture

- 🕒 At the beginning of a meeting establish a set of agreements of how the meeting or set of project related meetings could run. These group agreements can be organised around values and codesigned with the group. Bringing in this awareness right from the start can help instil a sense of normalcy to often stigmatised aspects of neurodivergent ways of being.

For example, in an online or hybrid meeting, a group could agree to set a value around 'equity'. Acknowledging that verbal communication may not be preferred, or even easy, for some participants can be supportive. This can lead to a group agreement to make use of the chat function to contribute, thereby supporting fuller participation.

- 🕒 One of the best ways to achieve this is to have a neurodivergent person lead the planning and facilitation of a meeting. Using experiential knowledge and expertise can help create a more equitable space for everyone attending.

Appreciate non-verbal communication

Meetings often put a premium on verbal communication. This may not always be helpful because of neurodivergent differences in processing information. Auditory processing differences may mean that what is heard does not fully register unless it is accompanied by verbal cues, for example. Difficulty interpreting social cues such as facial expressions and vocal tone may make conversation difficult to join.

A focus on verbal communication can lead to anxiety about how contributions are received. Over-explaining, worrying about being understood, not knowing when to speak and interrupting are just a few examples. Anxiety is highly correlated with neurodivergence in general so meeting spaces that have limited accommodations can heighten this which in turn risks a person entering shutdown and becoming non-verbal as a result.

Offering alternative ways of communicating before, within and after a meeting demonstrates an understanding of such challenges and communication difference and can support people to contribute with confidence.

Accommodations our team came up with

- 👁 Write down the talking points or agenda and share them using the online chat function if meeting online, or print out papers for in-person meetings. Send out information in advance.
- 👁 Monitor the chat for written contributions and ensure points are raised and included in the conversation or use a white board/flip chart/post-its within in-person sessions.
- 👁 Reaffirm the option to send contributions beyond the meeting via email after information has time to be digested. Encourage people to phone or voice note further thoughts to the coordinator if that is preferred.



I can over-expand or over-explain out of a fear of not being understood, which I recognise can be tedious for others, which can have a knock-on effect on my confidence to contribute further down the line..."

Survey respondent

Build in extra time

'Time blindness' is a term used to describe the difference in how time is perceived and managed for some neurodivergent people. It can affect planning and recall resulting in outward behaviour that can be perceived by others as forgetfulness and lateness when this may not be the case.

Focussing attention for extended periods of time and switching between tasks can also be challenging. This is a hard-wired difference and not intentional. Accommodating these differences in how time works for neurodivergent people can support the delivery of more accessible and inclusive meetings.

Accommodations our team came up with

- 🕒 If possible, offer a longer window for arrival and settling into a meeting space.
- 🕒 Build in regular comfort breaks.
- 🕒 If the meeting is quite one directional, build in more interactive aspects that engage participants. Try nonverbal, kinaesthetic, or creative tasks that get people moving and thinking in different ways.
- 🕒 Build in quiet breaks for reflection into meetings offering people the opportunity to slow down and let things sink in.



My brain can focus for about 15 minutes and then it starts to wander. Having a micro break to do something completely different can really help me refocus. This is associated with novelty seeking behaviour and dopamine regulation in the brain."

Survey respondent

Normalise movement

Meetings can involve a lot of sitting still. This can be a challenge for neurodivergent people with busy minds. For some, physical activity can bolster concentration even if outwardly it looks like they are distracted. Stimming is a term to describe repetitive movements to self-regulate, particularly in environments that are unfamiliar.

Stimming can take many forms including rocking, clapping, spinning and tapping. These types of movement are not generally socially acceptable, and people may have learnt to modify and control stims. This can take a lot of mental energy to do. Reversing this, creating a meeting environment that says stimming is ok could do some way to freeing cognitive bandwidth for neurodivergent people.

Accommodations our team came up with

- 🕒 Provide fidget tools and allow doodling and movement in meetings
- 🕒 Build in stretching and movement breaks.
- 🕒 To allow people to feel more comfortable stimming or generally moving around.

At McPin our general policy is to keep cameras on. As we work with people who actively use their lived experience of mental health issues in their roles, we want to ensure everyone is comfortable and feels safe. Being able to see everyone in a meeting is the best way to ensure this. We do recognise that for some people having cameras on in certain contexts may heighten anxiety or the ability to contribute, such as during stimming, or when feeling socially anxious. Flexibility with turning cameras on/off during an online meeting is something that can be accommodated on a one-to-one basis. Having a conversation before a meeting about how to make sure everyone feels comfortable and is still able to contribute can support this.



I struggle with sitting still in meetings. I get an overwhelming urge to get up and move about, so towards the end I find myself clock watching."

Survey respondent

Be mindful of the sensory environment

Neurodivergence can lead to a hyper or hypo sensitivity to the local sensory environment. Hypersensitivity means being unusually and acutely sensitive to sensory stimuli and hyposensitivity means an unusually decreased level of sensitivity to sensory stimuli. Light levels, sound, touch, and smell can all be affected in meeting environments.

Hyper and hypo sensitivity could lead to feeling overwhelmed and a lack of focus. Making the surroundings comfortable for participants through collaborative discussion at the start of a meeting can support inclusion and involvement.

Accommodations our team came up with

- ④ If conducting an in-person meeting, adjust lighting, room temperature and noise levels after discussion with participants.
- ④ Use of wearable accessories such as headphones, sunglasses and earbuds can minimise disruption.
- ④ Recording a meeting, if consent is agreed by those present, may also be useful to support people where auditory processing and sensory distractions disrupt focus.



Temperature! I am very sensitive to slight changes in temperature and get extremely uncomfortable when hot – I won't be able to focus on anything else. Light less so for me, but that may also come up."

Survey respondent

Eliminate unknowns

Due to neurodivergent differences in several areas related to meetings – social communication, time perception, new surroundings, auditory processing, and information delivery – new things can feel very daunting.

There is limited capacity to intuitively predict and adapt to the environment. Robust reparatory measures by meeting organisers and participants alike can support inclusion and contribution, easing feelings of anxiety related to the unknown.

Accommodations our team came up with

- ④ Meeting organisers should send detailed agendas and meeting information in advance. Include as much as possible – slide decks, reading, questions (including any ice breaker questions), session plans, expectations and aims, tasks, and an attendee list.
- ④ Provide details of the venue if an in-person meeting, including directions, transport links and perhaps even a picture of the meeting space and layout of the room.



Knowing what sort of meeting you're going into. Brainstorming and reporting, for example, take different types of effort that it is helpful to get into the right mindset for."

Survey respondent

The resources in our 10 for 10 collection are:

1. Using lived experience in the workplace: How staff lived experiences are shaping work at McPin
2. Co-production at McPin: Reflections and learning over 10 years
3. Peer Research at McPin: Our approach, reflections and learning over 10 years
4. Public Involvement in mental health research at McPin: Reflections and learning over 10 years
5. Research Involvement Groups: McPin's models and learning, and linked resource on 'recruiting for diversity'
6. Working as a co-researcher at McPin: Shaping young people's mental health research
7. Young People meeting guide
8. Wellbeing at work: 10 things it means for us at McPin and linked resources: Mentors and mentees (podcast); Neurodivergent meeting guide: A McPin lived experience perspective
9. McPin's journey towards antiracism
10. An Ode to Peer Research at McPin: You got the Power!: Dedicated to those have crafted their pain into power (video)

We want mental health to be better understood. Our mission is to improve everyone's mental health through research informed and directed by lived experience expertise. We want the value of lived experience of mental health issues to be upheld and embraced, which is why we put it at the heart of all our work.

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