

MODULE 1

Foundations of Neurodiversity

Facilitator Guide

Understanding Neurodiversity · An Educational Initiative of God's Diamonds
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FACILITATOR OVERVIEW

This guide is designed for facilitators leading Module 1: Foundations of Neurodiversity. This 90-minute session serves as the cornerstone for the entire Understanding Neurodiversity curriculum. Its primary purpose is to establish a shared, respectful, and evidence-based language for discussing cognitive differences. Participants will move from a traditional deficit-based or medical model of disability to a more accurate and functional strengths-and-supports paradigm.

The module is intentionally broad, introducing the core concept of neurodiversity as a form of human variation, much like biodiversity in an ecosystem. It defines key terms—neurodiversity, neurodivergence, neurotypical—to ensure all subsequent conversations are built on a common understanding. We will survey the landscape of common neurodivergent profiles, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, not as a diagnostic exercise, but to illustrate the breadth of human cognitive experience.

A central theme is the critical distinction between legal compliance (accommodation) and cultural change (belonging). While accommodation is the necessary floor, the ultimate goal is to create environments where a wider range of cognitive profiles can thrive without needing to mask or burn out. This session provides the conceptual tools and initial practical steps for building such inclusive communities. As a facilitator, your role is to guide participants toward a new perspective, fostering curiosity and self-reflection rather than simply delivering information. You are laying the groundwork for every deeper conversation that will follow in this curriculum.

SESSION OUTCOMES

By the end of this 90-minute module, participants will be able to:

Define neurodiversity in one clear, non-clinical sentence.

Distinguish between neurodiversity (the variation within a population), neurodivergence (the trait of an individual), and neurotypical (the statistically dominant brain wiring).

Apply a strengths-and-supports lens to analyze a real situation within their life, team, or organization.

Identify three environmental shifts that can expand belonging for a wider range of neurotypes without requiring a formal diagnosis or disclosure.

PREPARATION CHECKLIST

TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT:

- *— Confirm projector or large screen functionality for presentation slides.
- * Test audio system, including microphones for facilitator and potentially for participant Q&A in a large room.

- * Ensure reliable internet connection if any online resources are to be shown.
- * Set up the room to support both individual reflection and group discussion (e.g., small table groups, movable chairs).
- * Adjust lighting to be moderate, avoiding harsh fluorescents or direct glare where possible. If possible, offer a "sensory-friendly" corner with dimmer lighting.
- * Post or display a written agenda with timed segments so participants know what to expect.

MATERIALS:

- *—Presentation slides for Module 1.
- * A printed or digital copy of this facilitator guide.
- * Sufficient participant workbooks or handouts, including pages for the reflection prompt.
- * Pens or pencils for all participants.
- * Fidget tools (e.g., stress balls, putty, discreet spinners) placed on tables or in a central basket for participants to use freely.
- * Name tags and markers.
- * Flip chart or whiteboard with multiple colors of markers.

FACILITATOR PREPARATION:

- *—Read this guide thoroughly at least twice.
- * Review the key reference materials, particularly Nick Walker's "Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions" and the Harvard Business Review's "Employer's Guide to Neurodiversity in the Workplace."
- * Complete the individual reflection prompt for yourself. This will deepen your own understanding and prepare you to hold space for others.
- * Anticipate potential questions or points of resistance. Consider how you will respond to comments that are well-intentioned but use pathologizing language. Prepare gentle course corrections.
- * Familiarize yourself with the principles of trauma-informed facilitation. This includes providing choice, predictability (the agenda), and prioritizing emotional safety over programmatic rigidity.

SESSION FLOW

TOTAL TIME: 90 Minutes

[0:00-0:05] WELCOME AND FRAMING (5 Minutes)

- * Facilitator introduction and land acknowledgment (if appropriate for the context).
- * Briefly introduce God's Diamonds and the Understanding Neurodiversity initiative.
- * Review session outcomes and agenda to provide predictability.
- * Establish group norms for respectful discussion (e.g., "speak from the I," confidentiality, curiosity over judgment).

[0:05-0:20] KEY CONCEPTS: SHARED LANGUAGE (15 Minutes)

- * Define "neurodiversity" as a form of human variation.
- * Contrast the neurodiversity paradigm with the pathology paradigm.

- * Define and distinguish neurodiversity (the whole group), neurodivergent (the individual different from the norm), and neurotypical (the statistical majority).
- * Briefly touch on common neurotypes (autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc.) as examples, not a comprehensive list. Reference prevalence estimates from sources like the CDC.
- * Discuss identity-first vs. person-first language.

[0:20-0:40] THE STRENGTHS-AND-SUPPORTS MODEL (20 Minutes)

- * Introduce the concept of a cognitive profile: every individual has areas of strength and areas that require support.
- * Provide concrete examples to illustrate this duality. (e.g., hyperfocus as a strength in one context, a challenge in another).
- * Interactive element: Ask participants to think of a simple, non-cognitive skill they are good at and one they are not (e.g., cooking, gardening). Use this analogy to normalize the idea of varied abilities.
- * Introduce the critical role of the environment in either amplifying strengths or exacerbating challenges. "The problem is often not the person, but the person-environment fit."

[0:40-0:55] FROM ACCOMMODATION TO BELONGING (15 Minutes)

- * Define accommodation in the legal sense (e.g., ADA, EEOC) as the reactive "floor."
- * Introduce belonging as the proactive, cultural "goal."
- * Use the key phrase: "Compliance keeps you legal; belonging keeps your people."
- * Brainstorm examples of "universal design" or neuro-inclusive environmental shifts that benefit everyone (e.g., sending agendas before meetings, offering written and verbal instructions, flexible seating).

[0:55-1:05] INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION (10 Minutes)

- * Clearly and calmly introduce the reflection prompt.
- * Emphasize that this is a private writing exercise; it will not be collected or shared.
- * Play quiet, instrumental music or allow for silence, based on the group's preference.
- * Give a gentle one-minute warning before concluding the reflection time.

[1:05-1:25] GROUP DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION (20 Minutes)

- * Transition from individual work to small group or large group discussion.
- * Use the provided Discussion Prompts to guide a structured conversation.
- * Focus the discussion on observable behaviors, systemic patterns, and actionable changes, rather than on diagnosing individuals.

[1:25-1:30] DEBRIEF AND CLOSING (5 Minutes)

- * Summarize the key takeaways for the module.
- * Reiterate the central message: neurodiversity is normal, and belonging is built through intentional environmental design.
- * Thank participants for their engagement and vulnerability.
- * Provide a brief preview of Module 2.

FACILITATOR SCRIPT

[0:00-0:05] WELCOME AND FRAMING

(Begin with a warm, calm, and grounded presence.)

"Good morning/afternoon, everyone. Welcome. My name is [Your Name], and I am a senior instructional designer with God's Diamonds. It's a privilege to be with you today as we begin our journey into Understanding Neurodiversity.

This series of modules is designed to equip us with the language, perspective, and practical tools to build communities where a wider range of people can truly belong and thrive. Today, in our first module, we are laying the foundation. Our tagline is: 'Shared language, the strengths-and-supports model, and the case for belonging.'

Over the next 90 minutes, we will define neurodiversity, learn to distinguish a few key terms, and begin applying a 'strengths-and-supports' lens to our own lives and work. By the time we finish, you'll be able to identify concrete environmental shifts that foster belonging for everyone.

To make our time together as productive and safe as possible, let's agree to a few norms. Let's practice curiosity, assuming good intent while also acknowledging impact. Let's speak from our own experience using 'I' statements. And let's hold what is shared here with respect and confidentiality. Is there anything else we need to add to feel comfortable engaging fully today?"

[0:05-0:20] KEY CONCEPTS: SHARED LANGUAGE

"To start, let's build a shared vocabulary. The first and most important term is neurodiversity. At its core, neurodiversity is the simple, evidence-supported idea that human brains vary. This isn't a theory or an ideology; it is a biological fact, just like biodiversity. This natural variation occurs in how we process information, regulate our attention and emotions, experience sensory input, learn, and communicate.

Historically, society has often viewed these variations through what's called a 'pathology paradigm.' This model frames anyone different from the majority as disordered, deficient, or broken. It asks, 'What's wrong with you?'

The neurodiversity paradigm offers a fundamental shift. It accepts this range of cognitive wiring as a normal and valuable part of the human species. It doesn't deny that challenges and disability can exist, but it reframes the question. Instead of asking what's wrong with the person, it asks, 'What does this person need to thrive?' and 'What strengths does this person's unique wiring bring?'

Within this paradigm, we use a few specific terms. It's helpful to think of it this way:

Neurodiversity is the overall spectrum of human minds in a population, like the diversity of a whole forest. A group of people—this room, our organization, our species—is neurodiverse.

A neurodivergent person is an individual whose brain functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal.' This includes but is not limited to profiles like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Tourette's syndrome. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, the estimated prevalence of autism alone has

been steadily tracked and is a significant part of our population.

A neurotypical person is an individual whose brain functions within the dominant societal standards of 'normal.' It's a statistical term, not a value judgment.

A quick but important note on language. You may hear 'autistic person,' which is called identity-first language, and you may hear 'person with autism,' which is called person-first language. Research by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and others shows a strong preference for identity-first language within many autistic communities, as they view autism as an inseparable part of their identity, not an accessory. However, language preference is deeply personal. The most respectful approach is always to ask an individual what language they prefer you use for them. In this training, we will model identity-first language to align with the preferences of many self-advocates, while acknowledging that both forms are valid.

The key here is moving from judgment to description."

[0:20-0:40] THE STRENGTHS-AND-SUPPORTS MODEL

"This brings us to our core framework for this entire curriculum: the strengths-and-supports model. The pathology model focuses almost exclusively on deficits and challenges. The strengths-and-supports model acknowledges that every single human brain—neurodivergent or neurotypical—has a unique profile of strengths AND challenges. Both exist at the same time.

For example, an ADHDer might have the incredible ability to hyperfocus, diving into a project with an intensity and creativity that is unmatched, generating brilliant work under a deadline. This is a profound strength. That same person may struggle to sit through a routine, unstructured meeting where their attention is expected to be divided. This is a challenge. The strength and the challenge come from the same neurotype. One is not 'good' and the other 'bad'; they are simply features of that brain's operating system.

Let's try a quick thought exercise. Don't say it out loud, just think for a moment. What is a simple, non-work, non-cognitive skill that you are genuinely good at? Maybe you're a great cook, you can fix a leaky faucet, or you have a green thumb with plants. Now, think of one you are not good at. Maybe you can't sing on key, have no sense of direction, or kill every plant you touch.

Did you pathologize yourself for not being a good singer? Likely not. You just accept it as part of your profile. We need to extend this same grace to cognitive skills. Everyone has a spiky profile.

The most critical part of this model is understanding the role of the environment. Most challenges are not fixed traits of the person but are a product of the interaction between the person and their environment. The ADHDer's struggle in a meeting isn't just a personal failing; it's a mismatch between their neurotype and a meeting environment that lacks structure and clear goals. A support would be an environmental change: providing a clear agenda beforehand, assigning a specific role like notetaker, or keeping the meeting short and focused.

As the saying in the disability community goes, 'It's not the person who is disabled, but the environment that is disabling.' Our goal is to build enabling environments."

[0:40-0:55] FROM ACCOMMODATION TO BELONGING

"This idea of designing enabling environments leads us to the crucial difference between accommodation and belonging.

Under laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations. These are modifications or adjustments to a job or work environment that enable a qualified individual with a disability to perform essential functions. This is critically important. It's the legal minimum. It is the floor. Examples might include noise-canceling headphones for an auditor in an open office, or speech-to-text software for an employee with dyslexia. Accommodations are often reactive—an employee must disclose a diagnosis and formally request a specific tool.

Belonging, however, is the goal. It's the ceiling. Belonging is the feeling of psychological safety, connection, and inclusion that allows a person to bring their full self to a space without fear of penalty. In an organization, belonging is proactive. It's about designing a culture and environment that is inherently more accessible to a wider range of people from the start.

Accommodation is asking, 'What do we need to do for this ONE person now that they've told us they have a need?' Belonging is asking, 'How can we build an environment where THOUSANDS of people can thrive, whether we know their diagnosis or not?'

As the Harvard Business Review noted in their guide to neurodiversity, creating a welcoming environment for neurodivergent talent often benefits the entire workforce. For instance, sending a meeting agenda out 24 hours in advance is an excellent support for someone with ADHD or anxiety. It's also helpful for neurotypical employees who want to come prepared. Offering flexible seating options helps someone with sensory sensitivities, but it also helps a neurotypical person who just needs a quiet space to focus. This is the essence of Universal Design.

Remember this: Compliance keeps you legal. Belonging keeps your people. Belonging reduces turnover, increases engagement, and unlocks the innovative potential of a truly diverse team."

[0:55-1:05] INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

"We've covered a lot of conceptual ground. Now, I want to give you some time to process this personally. In your workbook, you'll find our reflection prompt for today. We're going to take ten minutes of quiet time for you to write. This is for you alone. It will not be collected or shared, so please be as open as you're comfortable with. Don't worry about grammar or polish.

The prompt has three parts:

- * Where in your life have you seen the difference between accommodation and belonging?
- * Which of your own cognitive strengths are you most aware of? Which supports help you do your best work?
- * Who in your circle might be navigating something you've never named out loud—and what would it cost you to ask?

We'll begin now. I'll give you a one-minute warning before we come back together."

(Facilitator plays quiet, instrumental music or simply holds the silence. Visibly respect the quiet time by not checking your phone or moving around excessively. At nine minutes, give the verbal warning.)

"We'll take about one more minute to finish your thought."

[1:05-1:25] GROUP DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION

"Thank you for taking that time for reflection. I invite you now to gently shift your focus back to the group. We are going to spend the next 20 minutes in conversation, connecting these ideas to our own context—our team, our family, or our community. You are not expected to share anything from your private writing unless you feel it's relevant and you want to.

Let's start with this first question. You can discuss at your tables for a few minutes and then we can share with the larger group."

(Use prompts from the list below, starting with the first one.)

[1:25-1:30] DEBRIEF AND CLOSING

"Thank you all for this rich and thoughtful discussion. Let's take a moment to summarize what we've established today.

First, neurodiversity is a normal and essential aspect of human variation. Our goal is not to 'fix' people, but to build better systems.

Second, we are moving away from deficit-only thinking and embracing a strengths-and-supports model. Every person has a spiky profile, and the environment is a powerful lever for helping them succeed.

Third, belonging is our ultimate goal. We achieve it through proactive, universal design, moving beyond the reactive floor of legal accommodation.

And finally, you do not need a diagnosis to benefit from neuro-inclusive design. The changes we make to support our neurodivergent colleagues, friends, and family so often end up benefiting everyone.

Thank you for your incredible engagement and willingness to explore these ideas. The work we've started today—building a shared language and a new posture—is the foundation for everything that comes next. In our next module, we will be taking a deeper dive into executive functions, exploring how they show up in different neurotypes and what supports look like in daily practice. Thank you."

DISCUSSION FACILITATION NOTES

Use these prompts to guide the 20-minute group discussion. You may have them discuss in small groups first, then report out, or facilitate a full group discussion from the start, depending on room size and dynamics.

PROMPT 1: WHAT'S ONE BELIEF ABOUT 'NORMAL' BRAINS THAT THIS MODULE CHALLENGED FOR YOU?

- * **What to Listen For:** Look for participants questioning the idea of a single 'normal.' They might mention that they always thought focus was simply a matter of discipline, or that being organized was a moral virtue rather than a cognitive skill. Listen for shifts in perspective, from seeing certain behaviors as character flaws to seeing them as traits that may need support.
- * **Sample Answer/Direction:** "I used to think that if someone was smart, they should be good at everything related to school or work. This challenges that. It seems someone can be a brilliant strategist but struggle with remembering to reply to emails, and that both things can be true at once."
- * **Facilitator Guidance:** Affirm these insights. Use phrases like, "That's a really powerful shift in perspective, thank you for sharing." Gently guide the conversation away from labeling specific people and toward analyzing assumptions about how brains "should" work.

PROMPT 2: WHERE DOES OUR TEAM, FAMILY, OR COMMUNITY CURRENTLY DEFAULT TO DEFICIT FRAMING? GIVE ONE SPECIFIC EXAMPLE.

- * **What to Listen For:** Participants might bring up performance reviews that penalize someone for their communication style without acknowledging their analytic strengths. They might mention family dynamics where a child who is messy or disorganized is labeled 'lazy.' Listen for specific, observable examples.
- * **Sample Answer/Direction:** "In our weekly team meetings, we often go around the room for updates without an agenda. When someone gets off-topic or takes too long, the private chatter afterward is often about how they 'can't stay focused' or 'don't respect people's time.' We're framing it as a character flaw, not a potential mismatch with the unstructured format of the meeting."
- * **Facilitator Guidance:** Validate the observation. Ask a follow-up question: "In that scenario, using a strengths-and-supports lens, what might be an alternative interpretation? And what support could be introduced?" This moves the group from problem-spotting to problem-solving.

PROMPT 3: WHAT'S ONE ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE WE COULD PILOT IN THE NEXT 30 DAYS THAT WOULD EXPAND BELONGING?

- * **What to Listen For:** Encourage small, concrete, and low-cost ideas. Examples include: committing to sending agendas and any pre-reading 24 hours before all meetings, establishing 'camera-optional' meetings on Zoom, creating a designated quiet work zone in the office, or starting meetings by stating the goal and expected outcomes clearly.
- * **Sample Answer/Direction:** "We could agree that for the next month, all meeting invitations will include a short, bulleted agenda and state the primary goal of the meeting in the first sentence of the invitation. It costs nothing and we could see if it helps people feel more prepared and focused."
- * **Facilitator Guidance:** Champion these ideas. If several good ideas emerge, you might ask, "Which of these feels most achievable for us to try right now?" This creates momentum and a sense of empowerment. Frame the idea as a "pilot" or "experiment" to lower the stakes and encourage participation.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND ACCESS NOTES

As facilitators, we must model the principles we teach. Neuro-inclusive facilitation is trauma-informed and centered on access.

- * **Sensory Environment:** Be mindful that a physical or virtual space can be disabling. Arrive early to assess the room. Minimize sensory overload by avoiding harsh overhead lighting, strong scents, or unnecessary background noise. Announce that participants are free to stand, move, or use fidgets as needed to regulate their attention and comfort.
- * **Predictability and Choice:** Provide a clear, visible agenda at the start, and stick to the times as much as possible. This reduces anxiety by making the experience predictable. When giving instructions for an activity, provide them both verbally and in writing (on a slide or handout). Offer choices where possible (e.g., "You can reflect on this individually or quietly with a partner," "Feel free to keep your camera on or off during the discussion").
- * **Cognitive Accessibility:** Speak clearly and at a moderate pace. Pause between key concepts to allow for processing time. Define jargon. Use slides with high-contrast text and minimal clutter. The principles of universal design suggest that making materials accessible for neurodivergent participants makes them better for everyone.
- * **Participation Options:** Not everyone processes or communicates best verbally in a large group. Explicitly create space for different forms of participation. Allow for reflection in writing, discussion in pairs/small groups, and use of a flip chart where people could add ideas silently. State, "You can share by raising your hand, or by writing your idea on a sticky note for me to read, or by discussing at your table."
- * **Emotional Safety:** The topic of neurodiversity can be personal and bring up difficult memories for participants. Remind them they are in control of their own level of disclosure. If a participant becomes emotional, respond with empathy and calm. You might say, "Thank you for trusting us with that experience," and offer them a moment to step away if needed, without drawing undue attention. Your role is to facilitate, not to therapize.

DEBRIEF AND CLOSING

Begin the closing sequence with a clear transition. The goal is to consolidate learning and reinforce the value of the participants' work during the session.

"As we prepare to close, let's bring our attention back together for a final wrap-up."

Briefly restate the session outcomes and connect them to the activities. For example: "We set out today to build a shared language, and through our discussion of terms like neurodivergent and neurotypical, we've done that. We practiced applying the strengths-and-supports model directly to our own contexts."

Review the two or three most critical takeaways from the Key Takeaways list, rephrasing them slightly to reflect the conversation that just happened in the room. This reinforces the main ideas.

"If you remember nothing else from our 90 minutes together, I hope you carry these ideas

forward: Neurodiversity is the natural and valuable variation in human brains. Every person has a profile of strengths and needs. And finally, by focusing on building better and more inclusive environments, we can move beyond the floor of accommodation toward the goal of true belonging."

Acknowledge the participants' effort and courage. "These conversations are not always easy, and I want to thank you for your authentic engagement and your willingness to be open to a new perspective today."

Finally, bridge to the next step in the curriculum to create continuity. "Today was our foundation. In our next module, we'll build on this by getting very practical, with a deep dive into executive functions and the specific supports that can help everyone manage their time, attention, and energy more effectively. Thank you for your time."

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