

MODULE 1

Foundations of Neurodiversity

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Understanding Neurodiversity · An Educational Initiative of God's Diamonds

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MODULE 1: FOUNDATIONS OF NEURODIVERSITY

MODULE TAGLINE: SHARED LANGUAGE, THE STRENGTHS-AND-SUPPORTS MODEL, AND THE CASE FOR BELONGING.

OVERVIEW

This module introduces the concept of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is an idea supported by science. It states that human brains have natural variations. This is a normal and expected part of being human.

These variations appear in many functions. They include attention, learning, and communication. They also include sensory processing and emotion regulation. We all experience the world through our unique cognitive profile.

Some variations have names. These include autism, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. These conditions are not defects. They are part of the wide spectrum of human neurological development.

This module provides a framework for understanding these differences. We will move away from a deficit-focused view. A deficit view only asks what is wrong with a person. Instead, we will adopt a strengths-and-supports model.

The strengths-and-supports model acknowledges every person has unique talents. It also acknowledges that every person has areas where they need support. The environment around a person is very important. An environment can either help someone thrive or create disabling barriers.

Our goal is to create a sense of belonging. Belonging happens when a community is designed for many kinds of people. In such a community, people can participate fully without hiding their true selves. They do not have to become exhausted trying to fit in.

This first module builds a foundation. It provides a shared language and a respectful perspective. The concepts you learn here will be used in all future modules. You will gain tools to apply at work, at home, and in your community.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon completing this module, you will be able to perform these actions.

You will learn to define neurodiversity in one clear sentence.

You will learn to distinguish the differences between three key terms. These terms are neurodiversity, neurodivergent, and neurotypical.

You will learn to apply a strengths-and-supports lens to a situation. This can be a situation in your own life or in your organization.

You will learn to identify three changes to an environment. These changes can increase belonging for everyone, without requiring a medical diagnosis.

DEFINING KEY TERMS

To have a productive discussion, we need a shared vocabulary. This section defines the core terms used throughout this course. These definitions are based on established work in the neurodiversity movement. One notable source is Dr. Nick Walker's work on neurodiversity terms.

Neurodiversity is the full range of variations in human brain function. Think of it like biodiversity. Biodiversity refers to the variety of all living things on Earth. Neurodiversity refers to the variety of all minds in a population. It is a biological fact. It describes a group of people, not a single individual. The human species is neurodiverse.

A neurodivergent person has a brain that works in ways that differ from the majority. Their cognitive processing diverges, or moves away from, what is most common in their society. Autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and Tourette's Syndrome are examples of neurodivergence. Being neurodivergent is not inherently good or bad. It is simply a different way of experiencing and processing the world.

A neurotypical person has a brain that works in ways that are common to the majority. Their cognitive style aligns with the dominant societal standards. The term "neurotypical" is a statistical description. It does not mean "normal" or "correct." It simply means their way of processing information is the most statistically frequent type in the population.

These terms help us talk about cognitive differences without judgment. They move the conversation away from a model of disease or disorder. Instead, they position these differences as a natural part of human variation.

THE SPECTRUM OF HUMAN COGNITION

Neurodivergence is not a single category. It is a broad umbrella that covers many distinct profiles. Each profile has its own combination of strengths and challenges. The environment greatly influences how these traits are expressed. Below are brief introductions to some common forms of neurodivergence. This list is not complete. Human variation is vast.

AUTISM

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition. It is characterized by differences in social communication and interaction. Autistic people also often have focused interests and engage in repetitive behaviors. They may also experience sensory information differently. For example, they might be highly sensitive to bright lights or loud sounds. Or they might be less sensitive to pain or temperature.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides ongoing surveillance data on autism prevalence. This research helps us understand its frequency in the general population.

From a strengths-and-supports view, autism presents a unique profile. Potential strengths can include deep focus on topics of interest. They can also include strong pattern recognition skills, attention to detail, and a deep sense of integrity.

Supports for autistic people might include clear and direct communication. They may benefit from predictable routines and sensory-friendly environments. This could mean lower lighting or the option to wear noise-canceling headphones.

ATTENTION-DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects executive functions. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) describes it as a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity. These traits can interfere with development and functioning. ADHD affects people of all ages.

The deficit-based view focuses only on distractibility or restlessness. The strengths-and-supports model shows a more complete picture.

Potential strengths of an ADHD brain can include high levels of creativity. They may excel at spontaneous problem-solving and thinking outside the box. They often have high energy and can be very productive in short bursts, especially when interested in a task.

Supports for people with ADHD often involve structuring the environment. This can include using timers to manage tasks. It can mean breaking large projects into smaller steps. Flexible work schedules and minimizing distractions in the workspace are also helpful supports.

DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a specific learning difference. It primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. It is neurobiological in origin. Difficulties with reading are often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities.

For decades, dyslexia was seen only as a learning deficit. Now, research highlights the unique cognitive strengths associated with it.

Potential strengths of dyslexic individuals often include strong visual-spatial reasoning. They may be excellent big-picture thinkers. Many are highly creative, with strong skills in fields like engineering, art, and entrepreneurship. They often see connections that others miss.

Supports for dyslexic learners and workers focus on alternative ways to access information. This includes using text-to-speech software. It also includes providing audiobooks or verbal instructions. Allowing oral exams instead of written ones can showcase their knowledge more accurately.

OTHER NEURODIVERGENT PROFILES

Many other profiles exist within the spectrum of neurodiversity.

Dyspraxia, or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), affects physical coordination. It can cause a person to appear clumsy or have difficulty with fine and gross motor skills. Strengths can include determination, strong verbal skills, and creative problem-solving to navigate physical tasks.

Tourette's Syndrome is a neurological condition. It involves involuntary, repetitive movements or vocalizations called tics. Strengths can include heightened empathy, creativity, and a faster reaction time in certain situations.

Understanding these profiles helps us see that there is no single "neurodivergent experience." Each person's journey is shaped by their specific neurotype, their personality, their strengths, and the environment they are in.

THE STRENGTHS-AND-SUPPORTS MODEL

The strengths-and-supports model is a foundational posture for neuroinclusion. It requires a shift in our thinking. It moves us away from the deficit model that has long dominated conversations about disability.

The deficit model asks, "What is wrong with this person?" It focuses on diagnosing and fixing what is considered abnormal. This model often leads to stigma and shame. It places the burden of change entirely on the individual.

The strengths-and-supports model asks a different set of questions. It asks, "What are this person's strengths?" and "What supports does this person need to thrive?" This approach is more compassionate and effective. It recognizes the whole person.

Every human being has a profile of strengths and challenges. A neurotypical person might excel at social networking but struggle with detailed data analysis. A neurodivergent person might be a brilliant systems thinker but need support with time management. These are just human differences.

The environment is the critical third factor. A specific trait is often a strength in one context and a challenge in another. For example, a tendency to be highly analytical and question assumptions can be seen as "disruptive" in a rigid hierarchy. In an innovative team, that same tendency is a powerful asset. Hyperfocus can be a challenge if it means missing a lunch break. It is a great strength when finishing a project with a tight deadline.

By focusing on strengths, we empower people. By providing supports, we remove barriers to success. By designing better environments, we create conditions where more people can contribute their best work and feel valued. This is the core of practical neuroinclusion.

FROM ACCOMMODATION TO BELONGING

Understanding the difference between accommodation and belonging is crucial. This difference marks the shift from meeting a minimum requirement to building a truly inclusive culture.

Accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a task, a job, or an environment. This change enables a qualified individual with a disability to perform essential functions or enjoy equal employment opportunities. In the United States, accommodations are a legal requirement under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

An example of an accommodation is providing a screen reader for a visually impaired employee. Another is allowing an employee with ADHD to have a quieter workspace. These are specific changes made for a specific, diagnosed individual. Accommodations are the floor, not the ceiling. They are the minimum standard of access.

Belonging is a much deeper emotional and psychological state. It is the feeling of being seen, accepted, and valued for who you are. Belonging happens when a person feels safe enough to be authentic without fear of judgment or rejection. It is the result of an intentionally designed inclusive environment.

While accommodation is often reactive, belonging is proactive. An organization focused on belonging does not wait for a person to disclose a disability and request a change. Instead, it designs its systems, spaces, and culture to be flexible and supportive for everyone from the start.

For example, a team that values belonging might make noise-canceling headphones available to everyone. It might create shared "quiet zones" that anyone can use. It might standardize the practice of sending out meeting agendas in advance. These are principles of Universal Design. They benefit many people, not just those with a formal diagnosis.

Compliance with the law helps an organization avoid lawsuits. A culture of belonging helps an organization attract and retain talented people. When people feel they belong, they are more engaged, more innovative, and more loyal. They bring their whole selves to their work and to their community.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The words we use to talk about neurodiversity matter. Language shapes our perceptions and reflects our respect for others. Two primary ways of talking about neurodivergence are identity-first language and person-first language.

Identity-first language places the identity word first. For example, one would say "autistic person." Many autistic adults and self-advocates prefer this framing. They view their neurotype as an inseparable part of their identity, much like one's gender or cultural background. To them, saying "person with autism" implies that the autism can be separated from the person, which does not reflect their lived experience.

Person-first language places the person first. For example, one would say "person with autism." This approach was widely adopted in the broader disability rights movement a few decades ago. Its goal was to emphasize that individuals are people first and should not be defined solely by their disability. Many people, particularly parents or professionals from that era, still prefer this language.

There is no single correct answer that applies to everyone. Both forms of language are valid.

The most respectful and trauma-informed approach is to ask an individual what they prefer. If you are not sure, listen to how they talk about themselves. Use the language they use.

If you are speaking about a group, it is often best to acknowledge the diversity of preference. For instance, you could say "autistic people and people with autism." In recent years, many major advocacy organizations, guided by self-advocates, have shifted toward using identity-first language as the default. This course will often use identity-first language in alignment with that trend, while always respecting individual preference as the highest standard.

Choosing our language thoughtfully is a simple yet powerful way to show respect and create a safer, more welcoming environment.

IMPLEMENTATION: CREATING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Creating neuroinclusive environments does not always require complex or expensive changes. Many of the most impactful shifts are simple adjustments to our physical spaces, communication habits, and structures. The goal is to reduce cognitive and sensory loads for everyone.

Here are three areas where you can make changes that expand belonging for all.

FIRST, CONSIDER THE SENSORY ENVIRONMENT.

Many neurodivergent people have different sensory processing profiles. They may be over-sensitive or under-sensitive to input like light, sound, scent, and texture. Creating a more calming sensory environment benefits everyone's ability to focus.

For lighting, avoid harsh fluorescent overheads where possible. Use lamps with warmer tones. Offer options for employees to dim the lighting in their personal space. Maximize natural light.

For sound, acknowledge that open-plan offices can be distracting. Create designated quiet zones where conversation is not allowed. Normalize the use of noise-canceling headphones. Even providing a simple bowl of disposable earplugs can make a big difference.

For scents, consider implementing a fragrance-free policy. Strong perfumes, air fresheners, and cleaning products can be overwhelming and even physically painful for some individuals.

SECOND, IMPROVE THE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT.

Clear, direct, and predictable communication reduces anxiety and prevents misunderstanding. This is a support that helps neurodivergent people significantly and also benefits neurotypical people.

In meetings, provide a clear agenda beforehand. This allows people time to process the topics and prepare their thoughts. During discussions, explicitly state the goal or the question being addressed.

In written communication, use plain language. Avoid jargon, idioms, and sarcasm that can be easily misinterpreted. Use clear headings, short paragraphs, and bullet points to make

documents easier to scan and understand.

Offer information in multiple formats. After giving verbal instructions, follow up with a written summary. This supports people with different memory and processing styles.

THIRD, ADJUST THE STRUCTURAL ENVIRONMENT.

Rigid structures can create unnecessary barriers. Building in flexibility gives people more control over how they work, which can dramatically improve performance and well-being.

Consider flexible scheduling. Allow people to adjust their start and end times to align with when they are most productive. An early bird may do their best work at 7 a.m., while a night owl is sharpest at 10 p.m.

Offer flexibility in work location. Allowing for remote or hybrid work can enable people to create a sensory and cognitive environment that is ideal for them.

Break down large projects into smaller, more manageable tasks. Provide clear deadlines for each small part. This helps with executive functions like planning and initiation, which are common challenges for people with ADHD and other neurotypes.

These changes are not just for a few people. They are principles of good, human-centered design. They create a workplace and community where a wider variety of people can feel comfortable, engaged, and successful.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Neurodiversity describes the natural variation of brains across the human population.

Neurodivergent describes an individual whose brain works differently from the statistical majority.

Every person has a unique profile of strengths and challenges. The environment a person is in can either amplify their challenges or highlight their strengths.

The goal is to create true belonging. Legal accommodation is only the starting point. Compliance keeps organizations safe from legal action, but a culture of belonging is what keeps talented people.

Identity-first language, such as "autistic person," and person-first language, such as "person with autism," are both used. The most respectful approach is to ask an individual what language they prefer.

You do not need a medical diagnosis to benefit from neuroinclusive design. Changes that make environments more flexible and clearer benefit everyone.

REFLECTION

Take ten minutes to write a short personal entry. Do not worry about correct spelling or grammar. This writing is for your own reflection.

Where in your life or work have you seen the difference between a simple accommodation and a true sense of belonging?

Think about your own mind. Which of your cognitive strengths are you most aware of? What supports, tools, or environments help you do your best work?

Think about the people in your life. Who in your circle might be navigating a challenge you have never discussed openly? What would it cost you to ask them about their experience in a gentle and supportive way?

DISCUSSION

Use these prompts to start a conversation with your team, family, or community group.

What is one belief about "normal" brains that this module challenged for you?

Where does our group currently default to deficit framing? Think of one specific example where we focus on what is wrong instead of on strengths and supports.

What is one environmental change we could try in the next thirty days that would create more belonging for everyone?

How do we want to talk about neurodiversity publicly, within our organization or family? What specific language are we choosing to use, and what language are we choosing not to use?

Who are the neurodivergent people in our community or field? How can we learn from them directly, rather than only learning about them?

GLOSSARY

Accommodation: A specific modification or adjustment made for a particular person, often to address a disability.

ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder): A neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent patterns of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity.

Autism: A neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social communication, interaction, sensory processing, and a tendency toward focused interests and repetitive behaviors.

Belonging: A feeling of security, support, and acceptance. It is the state where an individual feels valued for their authentic self.

Deficit Model: An approach that focuses on what is considered wrong, abnormal, or lacking in a person, with the primary goal of fixing the perceived problem.

Dyslexia: A specific learning difference that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent reading and spelling.

Dyspraxia: A neurodevelopmental condition, also known as Developmental Coordination

Disorder (DCD), that affects physical coordination and motor skills.

Identity-First Language (IFL): Language that places the identity-related word first, such as "autistic person." It is preferred by many who see their neurotype as a core part of their identity.

Neurodiversity: The natural variation of brain function within the human species. It is a biological fact that describes a group, not an individual.

Neurodivergent: A term describing an individual whose brain functions in ways that differ significantly from the statistical majority of the population.

Neurotypical: A term describing an individual whose brain functions in ways that are statistically common or typical for the population.

Person-First Language (PFL): Language that places the person first, such as "person with autism." It is intended to emphasize the humanity of an individual over their diagnosis.

Strengths-and-Supports Model: An approach that identifies an individual's unique talents and skills while also determining what resources and environmental changes they need to thrive.

Tourette's Syndrome: A neurological condition characterized by involuntary, repetitive movements or vocalizations known as tics.

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