

# Sparkle\*Class

## **Communication and professional relationship skills for neurodiverse people**

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# Introduction

Thank you for coming to my workshop.

This accompanying resource pack covers everything I talked about, in greater detail. There are also lots of resources at the back, including useful tools, further reading and professional help.

I hope you find these resources informative and useful and please do share it with your colleagues. I only ask that you don't share this pack outside your organisation.

# Contents

## Section 1: Basics of neurodiverse communication

What is your neurotype?

Different people communicate with each other in different ways

## Section 2: Your unique style

Key communication strengths of neurodiverse people

The importance of meaning

Your unique style

Managing and reducing stress

## Section 3: Building relationships

Communicating with different groups

Lay the groundwork

Building techniques

Working with your team

Understanding others

## Section 4: Becoming influential

Identifying how and where you need to influence others

Influencing the public

Influencing individuals

## Summary

## **Resources**

[Glossary](#)

[Stock phrases](#)

[Reading guide](#)

[Science](#)

[Worksheets](#)

[Resources – further help](#)

# Section 1: Basics of neurodiverse communication

Common characteristics of all neurodiverse individuals:

- Very sensitive
- Empathetic
- Honest
- Creative
- Innovative
- Good at solving problems
- Mental health issues
- Difficult early experiences
- Difficulty fitting in
- At risk of manipulation
- People-pleasing
- Masking
- Differences in processing/understanding information

## Dyslexics

3 flavours

- Phonological (difficulty breaking sounds into parts)
- Surface (difficulty seeing entire words)
- Visual (visual processing and remembering words)

Main characteristics:

- Visual
- Great spatial perception
- Challenges with reading and writing
- Difficulty with verbal communication
- Sees big picture rather than details
- Trouble with sequences
- Good at problem-solving
- Good pattern-recognition

## Autistics

3 flavours [not universally accepted]:

- Visual thinkers
- Verbal/logic thinkers
- Musical/mathematical thinkers

Main characteristics:

- Sensitive
- Organised/logical
- Factual
- Difficulty understanding neurotypicals
- Clear
- Rigid
- Hyper-empathetic
- Non-judgemental
- Difficulty changing focus

## People with ADHD

3 flavours:

- Hyperactive
- Inattentive
- Mixed

Main characteristics:

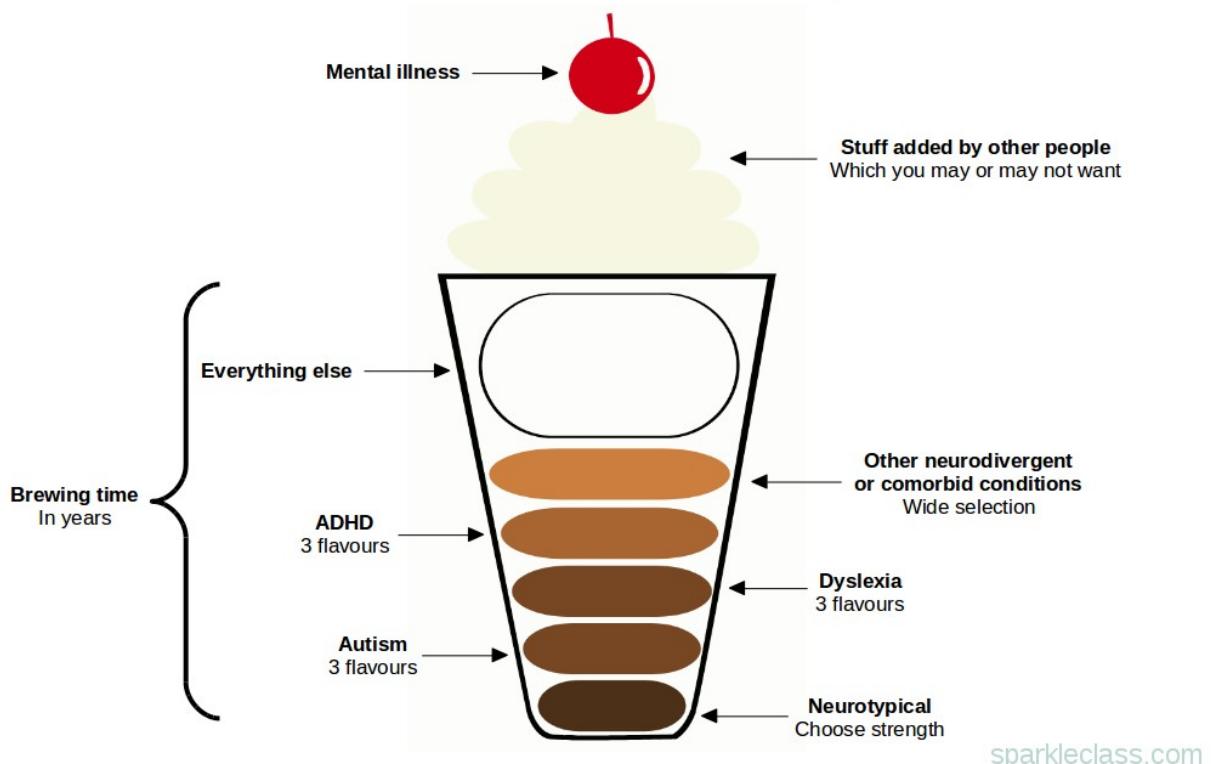
- Good under pressure
- Fidgety
- Daydreaming
- Think and speak fast
- Easily distracted
- Can multitask
- Can hyperfocus
- Difficulty completing projects

## What is your neurotype?

Aristotle was the first person to categorise the natural world. People will categorise and label you, and that's fine. It's a natural thing to do that and we all do it. You probably label yourself too! However, we need to recognise that labels and boxes never describe someone completely.

Your neurotype is your unique collection of characteristics, whether you're neurodiverse or neurotypical. No neurodiverse person will have the entire list of their condition's characteristics (referred to as "symptoms" in medical literature). They will usually have all or most of the main ones, but even here, some will be much stronger than others.

## What is your neurotype?



Your neurotype will be influenced by other experiences; for example, your upbringing, how you were taught and treated at school, social experiences and so on. About half of people with dyslexia, ADHD or autism have depression and/or anxiety. Negative experiences because of the conditions are almost universal, so almost all neurodiverse people will be carrying emotional "baggage".

## Different people communicate with each other in different ways

A bat and a ball? A bat and a boar? Or a bat (the animal) and a bore (the person)?



The Archers... blah blah...  
cakes... my toe hurts...  
blah blah

Neurodiverse people are always taught that they're bad at communicating. That's not true.

We feel confused, anxious, upset or angry when our communications go wrong, *even though it is never completely our fault*.

The other person isn't listening properly, isn't being clear or is criticising you for being too direct. Or they are getting tangled up in your "incorrect" spelling and missing the message. Or they can't keep up with the pace of your words and thoughts.

Communication is *always* a 2-way thing. Ideally you'd meet halfway in the middle, but more often one person puts more effort into talking or listening than the other. But each person still has to do their share. It's not the neurodivergent's responsibility to communicate like a normal person.

As far as autistic communication goes, this assertion (that communication issues aren't the neurodivergent's fault) was proven by a recent study. ([Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective](#)). It found that autistic people will communicate with other autistics better than with normal people. Not only was the exchange of information improved, but the rapport between the autistic subjects was better.

**“Non-autistic people too, are rather lousy at understanding the inner states of minds too different from their own – but the non-autistic majority gets a free pass because they assume that the other person’s mind works like their own, and they have a much better chance of being right.”**

Maia Szalavitz 2009

Dyslexics are disadvantaged because there are widely accepted formats for writing. There is a “right” way to spell a word. There is such a thing as “correct” grammar. And when you get it wrong, others will criticise – even to the extent they miss what you’re actually saying, or derail the conversation. And you might feel reluctant to share any written information because you can’t tell if it’s correct or not.

Spelling and grammar are social constructs. Most dyslexic writing is still readable even when alternative spellings are used, because many dyslexics write phonetically and/or because they get enough of the word right that it can still be read. But we judge the dyslexic on their “poor” spelling and grammar, rather than judging the person who picks holes for no real reason, and who ignores the contributions of others.

thiz sentence ignores meny roolz of spelng and gramar and even use the rong sword but u can stil reed it.

ADHD people often speak very quickly or are criticised for jumping from topic to topic. Anecdotal evidence suggests two people with ADHD are conversing, they are able to tolerate “rambling” and non-sequiturs (changes of topic that don’t make any sense). They can also concentrate on what the other is saying, and are able to keep up with a faster-than-average speed of conversation.

It's a meandering journey which is prettier and gives you more ideas and inspiration than if you go straight from point A to point B on the quickest – and dullest – route.

### **It's not always obvious**

The reactions of neurodiverse individuals are not always what is expected. Some dyslexics write very well and no-one knows it's taking them a long time. ADHD people will be calm in a crisis when everyone else is flapping about. Autistics can go very quiet when happy or overwhelmed.

## Communication issues can just be there, with no-one being at fault

Recognise that your communication style might be a total mismatch for the person you're talking to.

For example, if you're very autistic, or you have ADHD and talk really fast, or you deliberately word your words wrong, it can be quite hard for someone else to understand you.

That's no-one's fault, but you do have an obligation to make yourself understood if they have limited communication skills.

We do need to be mindful of other neurodiverse people (whose conditions or characteristics may differ significantly from our own). We also have to be aware that some people have disabilities that means they communicate differently from most people, such as being blind or deaf. Or they may have learning difficulties.

Neurodiverse people who want to communicate well also have to be aware of individuals who are extremely neurotypical. They may not have the capacity to understand your differences, or struggle to grasp concepts that you find easy. Some neurotypicals are also unwilling or unable to accept or understand neurodiverse people. Both neurotypical and neuroatypical people can also lack self-awareness which can cause issues in communication.

If you are communicating with someone who refuses to meet you halfway, you need to decide if you're prepared to do all the work. For a neurodivergent, this usually means masking or attuning—playing down your neurodiverse characteristics in order to fit in. This can be an option if you want to get something out of the relationship, especially if it's finite. The other option is to end the relationship if it's causing a lot of stress or other issues, and you're finding the rewards insufficient to compensate for it. Basically, it's up to you whether or not you feel the relationship or the outcome is worth it.

### Top takeaway:

**Our communication isn't normal but that doesn't mean it isn't good. Sometimes it's better.**



## Section 2: Your unique style

### Key communication strengths of neurodiverse people

Most neurodiverse people are pretty open-minded, and this can be valuable in developing diverse and inclusive teams. Diversity improves productivity and profitability in an organisation.

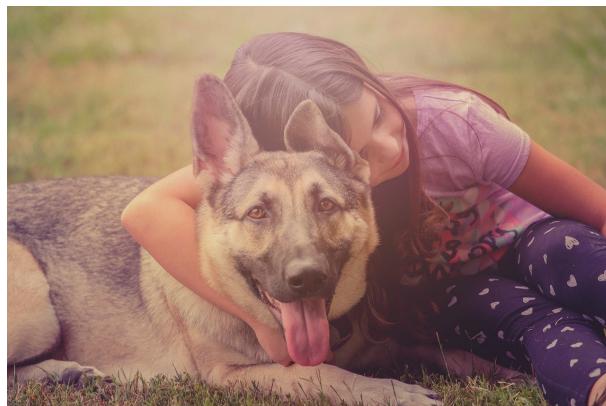
Clarity and honesty are also very common amongst the neurodiverse – which are again, very useful communication and relationship skills.

### The importance of meaning

One of the key things neurodiverse people tend to be good at is understanding the importance of “meaning”. Many things in an autistic person’s life have a very deep meaning and significance. Dyslexics rely on meaning in order to make sense of things, or to help them remember. Those with ADHD are similar; we rely on meaning to create hierarchies or to prioritise.

Meaning is critical for communication for 3 reasons.

Firstly, it’s an emotional form of communication. Telling someone you have a dog is just information. Telling them you got a dog because you had one as a child but had to get rid of it when you moved taps into the significance of dog-ownership. Why you got it, how you felt when you lost the first one, how you feel now you have a new dog, how excited you are about going on walks with the dog, and so on.



Secondly, meaning can be a form of short-hand. Whoever you’re talking to can instantly recognise those feelings of loss and excitement that you’ve shared; that sense of companionship you have now that you have a dog. You don’t have to spell it out.

Thirdly, using meaning is memorable. You probably won’t remember a picture of a dog. But with the story, with understanding the meaning behind getting a dog, you will remember it.

## Your unique style

[Use this worksheet to find out your unique communication style.](#)

Your natural style may not fit with what you want to do!

For example, you might want to do public speaking, or run meetings, or sit quietly but that's not your natural style. You don't have to completely change who you are! But you can develop your natural communication style to become a better communicator – just as you would train your body, or learn a new skill.

This isn't a thing that's exclusively for neurodiverse people to do, it's something that everyone does. Otherwise we'd still be communicating like toddlers.



## Coping with challenges

There are two things things that are worse for neurodivergents than normal people.

### The inside

One is what's going on inside. Most of us are very sensitive – we're often called “too sensitive” or “over-sensitive”. Those terms don't mean anything because they imply an appropriate amount of sensitivity which is subjective (it's just one person's opinion)!

As well as being sensitive, many of us have issues with emotional regulation. This means we tend to over-react to situations. Someone with ADHD might get really angry, and someone with autism might get a bee in their bonnet about an issue that seems unimportant but really upsets them. People with ADHD also have rejection-sensitive dysphoria, which means we over-react to real or perceived rejection – sometimes to an extreme. We can't do anything about our feelings, but we can manage our behaviour when it is damaging us. We can also learn to manage our feelings – through mindfulness, distraction and processing them.



### The outside

The second thing is what is going on outside us. This is our background, the messages that we receive, the way others react to our differences, and so on. Most neurodivergents had great difficulty at school, and many had (and continue to have) significant challenges socially and in relationships. This means we are bringing a ton of emotional baggage into every situation – baggage that others can't see or don't understand.

For example, if someone jokingly calls a colleague an idiot, that person will normally just brush it off. But if that's said to a dyslexic, it comes on top of years of being told and treated as though they were stupid, so the reaction is one of hurt, or anger, or frustration.

We can't change the way other people behave, but we can change how we react.

## Recognising emotional regulation issues

Recognising that we have poor emotional regulation can help us cope. When we ruminate or suddenly get upset or angry, we know it's because of our condition.

“The feeling might seem genuine but it isn't real.”

## Acknowledging your background

Acknowledging that we were not treated the way we should have been can also help. Understanding that we were mis-labelled and mistreated can be painful but is productive. This is a long process and many neurodivergents need therapy to understand and accept this ([mental health resources are at the back](#)).

## Managing and reducing stress

You cannot be an effective communicator, or build rewarding relationships, if you're under too much stress.

Not all stress is bad.

We need some stress to function and to innovate. So we don't look at getting rid of stress. We look at managing it.

### Sources of stress

Neurodiverse people have a really bad habit of creating our own stress! We are also more likely to get stressed over things that don't bother other people.

Recognise these sources of stress. If you look out for them, you can take steps to avoid them, although some are unavoidable (read below for managing stress when it's unavoidable).

- Change
- Adapting to new situations
- Uncertainty
- Overwhelm
- Leaving everything to the last minute is stressful
- Things outside our control
- Underperforming
- Overcommitment
- Information overload
- Discomfort
- Unhealthy coping mechanisms

## Managing and reducing stress on the Good Ship You



- Captain's log
- Control panel
- Communications device
- Mind control
- Dealing with hostile aliens
- Decompression chamber

### Captain's log

Log your mood and what you're doing (use an app from the resource pack or download this mood tracker worksheet). It will help you find out what is and isn't working for you, as it's not always obvious! Logging your mood and activities will help you identify sources of stress and how you're reacting to them.

### Control panel

Control as much as you can. Set the meeting time if you can. Have an exit strategy if you think you could get stressed or over-stimulated. Set an alarm on your phone that sounds like a ringtone to go off 10 minutes in, then pretend to answer it and you can fake an emergency and leave if you need to. (It's extreme but sometimes we need that!).

Prepare yourself for events – whether that's a meeting or a presentation or simply a chat with a colleague or networking contact. You can reduce stress by making sure you've got everything you need and you've thought through some scenarios – such as questions people might ask.

It will also reduce stress if you've got a kit with you for emergencies – a “panic pack”. At its most basic, this might simply be a spare pen! If you're using technology, back-ups and spare kit can help you feel you can cope with things going wrong.

Sort your own tools out wherever possible (request them if you can). For example, ask for a whiteboard, or request permission to record the meeting or conversation. Ask for a fishbowl-style panel (where each individual takes turns to answer) if that's going to work for you.

Preparing for “spanner time” (when a spanner gets thrown in the works) will also help mitigate (lessen) stress. You can formulate a Plan B – and write it down so you're prepared. Think through what might happen, how you might cope and what you'll need. Having a Plan B prepared helps you psychologically too – instead of thinking to yourself how everything's gone horribly wrong, you can say to yourself you're just switching from Plan A to Plan B.

## [Plan B worksheet](#)

## **Communications device**

Connecting with others is crucial in reducing and managing your stress. Someone you trust to listen to you and who will try to understand you can help in a crisis or even when you're just feeling down or confused.

This person could be:

- A colleague
- A friend
- A family member
- A counsellor
- Another neurodivergent

It's also helpful to have someone in your life who can tell you when you're being weird about things, as many neurodivergents aren't very self-aware. They can identify when you're getting stuck on the details, doing too much or simply being weird about something.

## **Mind control**

Mindfulness is proven to help alleviate depression and anxiety, and it can help with stress too.

You can learn mindfulness techniques online, through an app, with a book, or through a course where you attend in person.

At its most basic, mindfulness is experiencing the present moment. If you sit with your feelings of anger, upset or frustration and allow yourself to feel those feelings without judgement or trying to talk your way out of how you feel, those negative emotions tend to go away quicker.

When you've done that, you can reflect on what happened, and take action if you need to.

## Dealing with hostile aliens

Dealing with difficult people is something we all have to do, but it tends to be more of an issue for neurodiverse people. Micro-aggressions are particularly challenging because they're hard to spot and easy for another person to dismiss.

With difficult people, limiting your contact and allowing yourself some time to destress after dealing with them can help.

For micro-aggressions, having stock phrases prepared can help you convey the importance of how these affect you.

- “You don't decide how I feel.”
- “You cannot dictate how I should or shouldn't respond emotionally.”
- “That has negatively affected me with the result that X, Y, or Z.”
- “It wouldn't be a problem if it only happened once but it has happened X times.”
- “I know they didn't mean harm, but they have caused harm regardless and now that needs to be addressed.”
- “They were not intentionally hurtful but they were careless, and that needs to be addressed.”

## Decompression chamber

Your decompression chamber holds the coping strategies that are tailored just for you. The decompression chamber might just be an idea, or it might be an actual place you can go, like a quiet room at work.

Your tailored coping strategies will depend on what works for you, as well as where you are and what's available. Some you can do almost anywhere include:

- Deep breathing - “when in doubt, breath out”
- 5 senses grounding – find something you can touch, smell, see, taste and feel
- Be alone
- Take a walk
- Mediation and mindfulness techniques

Some that you can do when you have the resources or the right place include:

- Music – that puts you in a better mood or helps you express your feelings
- Something that lets you escape, like a book, film or podcast
- Being out in nature
- Being with people who care about you
- Exercise
- Favourite relaxation activities, such as gaming
- Creating, such as craft, cooking, writing or making videos

## Using your strengths

First of all, you need to identify your strengths. [We identified some key communication strengths above.](#)

Here are some more strengths common to neurodivergents.

- Good with words (even dyslexics)
- Funny
- Kind/empathetic
- Open-minded
- Fast learners
- More productive
- Fun
- Insightful
- Creative
- Sensitive
- Resourceful

These strengths are connected to the fact that we understand meaning and the importance of story-telling. We can communicate because we understand what things mean to others and we can craft a story.

You might not understand why people like something, but you understand how they *feel* about it.

Another key strength you have is that you can learn fast, and you're probably better at it than normal people. You aren't very good at things like picking up social cues so you compensate by learning those things intellectually.

For more, [use the VIA Institute Strengths Analysis.](#)

## Communicating your strengths

Most of us suck at understanding our strengths and suck even more at communicating them.

“I'm really good at...” is harder to say than “I'm really bad at...” and neurotypicals are as guilty as neurodiverse people of this.

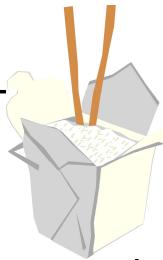
But for many neurodivergents, it's harder to absorb praise, yet we need it more! Lots of us are not used to being praised. And when we do something that's easier for us than for normal people, we don't understand why it's worthy of praise.

One way of addressing this is to work with people who understand and appreciate your strengths, as much as you can. This might not be apparent in words of praise, but will show itself in other ways, such as recommendations, or in valuing your work by paying you appropriately.

When communicating your strengths, what matters is not what you *are*, it's about what you *do*. And it's about what you can do for others.

You see this mistake all the time on CVs. An applicant will say “Excellent communication skills” instead of letting their cover letter speak for itself. Or they will say “Good at problem-solving” instead of “Automated a process that saved the company X days a month and £X a year.”

[Use this worksheet to help you understand your own strengths](#) – in a way that helps you communicate them to others.



## Top takeaway:

**As a neurodiverse person, you have a ton of strengths and lots of challenges. Managing your challenges, such as stress, will help you build on your strengths.**

## Section 3: Building relationships

Now we've identified your communication style and your key strengths, we can use them to help us build rewarding and productive professional relationships.

### Communicating with different groups

At work, there are lots different kinds of people you'll want to build relationships with.

These include:

- Investors
- Suppliers
- Prospects
- Clients
- Job-seekers
- Collaborators
- Networking contacts
- Your team

We sometimes get nervous or intimidated by certain people. We find it very hard to read people, especially if we're autistic, and this makes it hard to get instant feedback. We don't know if we're doing the "right" thing or not.

The first thing to remember is that whoever you're talking to is a person just like you. They have something – or more than one thing – that you don't have, whether that's tons of money, or self-confidence, or loads of experience. But it doesn't make them better than you. It just makes them different.

There are two ways you can improve your chances of communicating effectively and building productive relationships. Firstly, lay the groundwork by understanding and fulfilling your needs first. This will help you perform at your best. Secondly, use specific techniques to help you build the relationship that you want and need.

Normal people tend not to need this stuff but for neurodiverse individuals, thinking it through, understanding what you need and using strategies can help us understand ourselves and others. It also helps to focus our attention on what we're doing and why we're doing it.

## Lay the groundwork

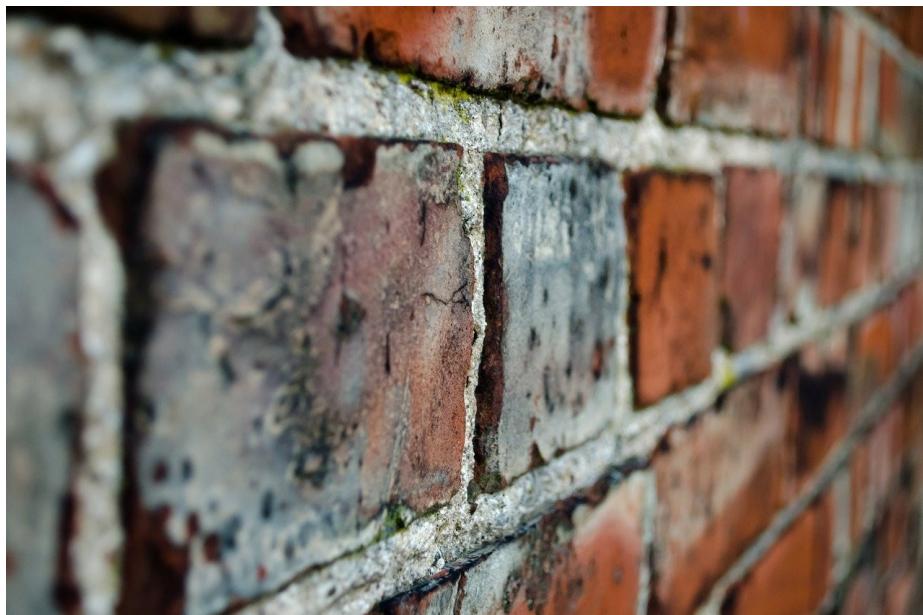


To build your relationships, try to get as much of what you need as you can. Here are 3 things that most neurodiverse people need in order to function at their best.

1. **A framework.** Routines, structure, facts, evidence, etc – anything that gives us something to anchor our thoughts, and feelings on. A solid framework can help us build and expand our ideas. It sounds counter-intuitive but a strong structure provides a firm foundation for you to be innovative and go off in crazy directions.
2. **Environment** makes a real difference to neurodiverse people and has a bigger impact on us than it does on normal people. Your ideal environment may be light years away from where you are, if you don't have a choice about where your meeting or office or event is. Lighting and noise can help or hinder concentration and comfort, plus the right environment helps it sets the vibe – which is really important for building a relationship. If you're able to influence the environment, then do so but if you can't, control the environment elsewhere, for example, at home. You might also be able to limit your time in an uncomfortable environment.
3. **Knowing what to expect.** Neurodiverse people spend a lot of time in a sea of confusion and frequently get anxious when things aren't as expected, or when we don't know what to expect. If we are able to clarify expectations – of us as well as of others – it helps us prepare, provide what is needed and start building that relationship. Often neurotypical people aren't very clear about what is expected of us, or giving enough information about the meeting or event, so it's up to us to ask.

Sometimes it's difficult for us to ask for the adaptations that we need. But don't forget – everyone needs adaptations. Most neurotypical people can't concentrate if there's too much noise. They don't like overwhelming smells either. They, too, do their best work when their environment is optimal, they know what to expect, and they feel grounded. So it's OK for us to expect people to adapt to our needs as well. Our needs might seem greater than those of others – and sometimes they can be – but most often, they're just different.

## Building techniques



Once you've laid the groundwork, you can start building those relationships. Each meeting will be different and you'll want a different outcome from each. Here are some very broad strategies that you can use in different situations.

Neurodiverse people need strategies to help us navigate situations that ordinarily might be stressful, confusing or unproductive.

Some strategies you can use in lots of situations:

- **Remember that you're there to meet a need.** You've got money to buy their stuff, or a job for them, or you have the product or service they need. At a less structured event (like networking), you're meeting the need to have people there who are willing and able to make new connections.
- **Offer all the solutions** when there's a problem. Even though some of these might be prohibitive. For example: "We could scrap it and start again and it will cost you £10,000" – they will say no, but then your next options are more appealing!
- **Ask yourself "What do you want to happen?"** in your meeting, call, as a result of your email etc. Be outcome-focused, then you won't lose countless hours to pointless discussions. If someone isn't clear about what they want before the meeting and won't say when pushed, consider not doing it.
- **Be aware that perspectives vary widely** – no more so than when it comes to money! Whether your product, service or salary is affordable or expensive depends as much on someone else's perspective as much as the cost.
- **Offer what you want yourself.** We've talked a lot about the needs of neurodiverse people and sometimes we forget to offer those things to others. Simply inviting someone to a quiet space, or offering information in more than one format, can reinforce that bond and help develop a productive relationship.
- **Build trust.** You can do this by requesting confidentiality – if you're asking for someone else's trust, it's more likely they will trust you in return.

- **Get a second opinion.** Neurodiverse people are susceptible to manipulation and gas-lighting. If your intuition is telling you something is off, talk it over with a trusted colleague or friend. Your intuition is usually pretty good if you're neurodiverse, but you must make sure you don't ignore it!
- **Ask for a favour –** especially from someone you sense doesn't like you. This is a technique Benjamin Franklin used. It's hard for someone to dislike you and do something for you at the same time, so asking for a favour helps them warm up to you.
- **Support people in your network –** be positive in public, share their events or projects, do a favour without expecting anything in return (provided you can do this without compromising your own needs).
- **Be reliable** wherever possible. Deliver what you promised, turn up when you say you will, get back to someone within the timeframe they expect.
- **Use your ability to connect.** When you remember something about a person, bring it up again – ask after their mum, or their children, or that project they mentioned before. Very few people can or will do this – but you can!
- **Give other people a break.** Neurodiverse people are inclined to black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking. Lot of us have written off relationships (personal and professional) because of something that others would consider fairly minor. Taking a step back, voicing your displeasure and allowing the other person some time to make amends or apologise can help. Getting to know and understand them better can also rescue the relationship.
- **Stop talking.** If you don't know what to do or say, just stop and let someone else fill the silence. They will. (Then they'll compliment you on what a good listener you are!)

## Working with your team

Working with diverse teams is proven to improve innovation and productivity. That means all kinds of diversity, not just neurodiversity. It's up to all of us to help improve diversity and inclusion in our organisations.

- Companies that have more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenue.
- Inclusive companies are 1.7 times more likely to be the innovation leaders in their market
- 67% of job seekers said a diverse workforce is important when considering job offers
- Teams with inclusive leaders are 17% more likely to report that they are high performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions, and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively
- A 10% improvement in perceptions of inclusion increases work attendance by almost 1 day a year per employee

Neurodiverse individuals tend to be very sensitive, so we often avoid confrontation. However, disagreement is a predictor of positive team performance. If you lay the groundwork and use the building techniques mentioned above, you and your team can create a safe space where disagreement is productive.

## Understanding others

**“Every head is a world”**

Cuban proverb

This is one of the big challenges of neurodiverse people. We spend a lot of time in our own heads, and don't always take the time to understand others.

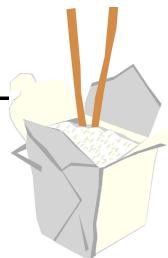
We can understand others in 2 main ways. Firstly, understanding other people's immediate needs. This is what they've come to you for – they need what you're selling, or they need you to buy what you're selling, or they need you to introduce them to someone, for example. That should be fairly obvious.

But we need to look beyond that to deepen our understanding of others. Everyone who comes to us has something else going on behind what they're saying or doing. You never know if a supplier has only a week to get their sales figures up before they get fired, and you're their last hope. You don't know if a potential client has no idea what they really need, or if they've talked to lots of companies before coming to you and is desperate for a solution.

It's impossible to know what's in someone else's head. But it's enough just to understand that there's more going on there than you're seeing or hearing. If you use your strengths – being clear, understanding that this might be important to them – you can connect with them.

### Top takeaway:

**You can build effective, productive and rewarding relationships through strategies that suit your strengths and the outcomes that you want to achieve.**



## Section 4: Becoming influential

**“There’s a recognition that world-changing ideas come from people who think differently.”**

David Joseph, chairman of Universal Music, Creative Differences

You're already ahead in being influential because of who you are. You're a creative problem-solver. You have innovative ideas. You're empathetic. Now you're learning to communicate these things to others. This section is about using your strengths and minimising your challenges so you can communicate your greatness!

How do you do that? By making a connection.

### Identifying how and where you need to influence others

There are 2 main fields where you might want to become influential:

- Professional (getting investment, developing your business, climbing the career ladder etc)
- Personal (becoming a thought leader, self-development, personal satisfaction, etc)

### The world at large and one-to-one

You'll either be communicating publicly – through the press, through social media, at a presentation, etc – or to individuals – in meetings, at networking events, at work, etc.

Both are important. Prospects and connections won't find you unless you have a public profile, and they won't buy from you without having a conversation with you.

Masking and attuning is a big issue for neurodiverse people – hiding your true self to fit in with others, and how you adjust your behaviour to be more like neurotypicals. Most of us do it without even realising it!

How much you choose to mask is up to you and what you want to achieve. You might find it easier to conceal your neurodiverse attributes until you trust people, or until they've learnt to understand you. Disclosure is a very personal decision and should be based solely on what is right for you at the time.

## Influencing the public

Here are a few general tips for your public communications:

- **Create a persona** to talk to. Marketing people call this a “pen portrait”. Think about current clients – who they are, what they need and what they understand. Having a clear picture in your mind of your ideal client as an individual, not a faceless group, will help you communicate more effectively.
- **Communicate the benefits** of what you do. Your public communications should be about how you can help the person who's reading or watching. Tap into what's important. Pull out that sense of meaning that we talked about earlier. Show people what you've done that's made a difference.
- **Be concise**. If you've got ADHD you'll know how short people's attention spans are. The shorter your message is, the easier it is to digest.
- **Tell stories**. Stories are one of the best ways to illustrate a point, they're memorable and they keep people engaged.
- **Copy other successful people**. By far the easiest way! See what other people are doing well and see what you can copy. It helps if they're in the same field and size as you – what works for a massive multinational corporation with a huge budget won't work for you.

## Website and social media

This is your public face and your brand. It's the most effective way of communicating what you're about.

Your website should say what you do and who you do it for. It should focus on the reader – the word “you” should appear far more often than “we” or “us”. Client testimonials are important because they mean so much more than your own words.

For social media, be where your ideal clients are. LinkedIn is very important for everyone and other networks depend on what you're doing and how suitable they are for your brand. You need to commit to updating and interacting on whichever network you choose, otherwise it won't be effective, so make sure you've got the time to do it before you commit.

Some neurodiverse people are really reluctant to put themselves out there as a personal brand. If that's you, just don't do it. You'll have a dead profile instead of none because you'll be too anxious to post, so don't bother. Stick to your professional accounts instead and hide behind them if you don't want to post about your personal life.

## Presentations and public speaking

Presentations, talks and public speaking – all are where you stand up in front of people and tell them stuff. This is one of the best ways of becoming influential. It's also very hard to do it well. If you want to do an OK job, that's fine, but if you want to be any good, you will need to be trained.

There are lots of opportunities to do unpaid public speaking gigs and most of these can be found through networking and meetups. Decide what you want to speak about first, write the title and abstract (a summary of what you want to talk about) and submit it. You can actually write the talk if it gets chosen.

Standing up and talking in front of a group of people can be very nerve-wracking, and lots of neurodiverse people find their anxiety can be a big problem when it comes to public speaking. One key thing to remember is that the audience is on your side. We look out over a big sea of faces and forget that those are each individuals, looking forward to hearing us talk, and being sympathetic if anything goes wrong.

## PR

Being featured in the press is a great way to get publicity for yourself and/or your company. It can be difficult but it's not impossible. Again, journalists are real people, just like you, and if you can connect with them and understand their needs, you will increase your chances of them featuring you.

Make sure you do your research and seek out journalists that have covered stories like yours in the past. You then stand more chance of being considered for a feature, profile or news story.

Think of it like a Venn diagram whereby you need to find the sweet spot. Journalists will be experts in a field such as personal finance, food or mobile and you'll be an expert in pensions, chilli sauces or productivity applications. When you know what they write about you can then tailor your message and be more relevant to them, and, most importantly, their readership.

Follow the hashtag #journorequest on Twitter to find PR opportunities. You can also follow individual journalists.

## Influencing individuals

If you are able to start building a following through social media and getting some positive press coverage, you are already on the way to becoming influential. But influencing people on an individual level is important too. These are the people who will hire you, recommend you or support you.

Individual communication can be stressful for neurodiverse people. One way of addressing this is to treat it like a game. You do this anyway – real life is like playing a game for us (one where we often don't know the rules) so you might as well adapt the strategy for your own benefit!



Here are some game ideas:

**The memory game.** Remember something about the person you want to connect with, such as the previous project, or a detail about their family. You might forget their name but you can make up for it if you remember something else.

**Spot the difference.** Request something a bit unusual. People get 20 messages a day requesting “a chat” - ask for 7 minutes instead.

**Tag.** If you're not already connected on social media, ask if they're on Twitter or LinkedIn, then ask if it's OK to be connect. Then whip out your phone and do it straight away.

**Simon says.** When asked what you do, be specific, be concise and if you can, be niche. “I help my clients get promoted” is an example.

**Duck duck goose.** Duck out of a conversation early. Leaving people wanting more is kind of manipulative but it's better than boring the trousers off someone.

**Telephone.** Use both email and phone for clarity and memorability. No-one ever uses the phone any more, so people will remember you if you do.

**Capture the flag.** In a meeting or in networking, work out what your end goal is and plan how you're going to get there.

**Texas Hold 'Em.** Have something in your hands to fiddle with, like your phone, glasses or a cup. Offer to take notes if you're able to. It makes your stimming less obvious and more socially acceptable (if you're confident to stim publicly, bring your favourite toy as that will also make you memorable).

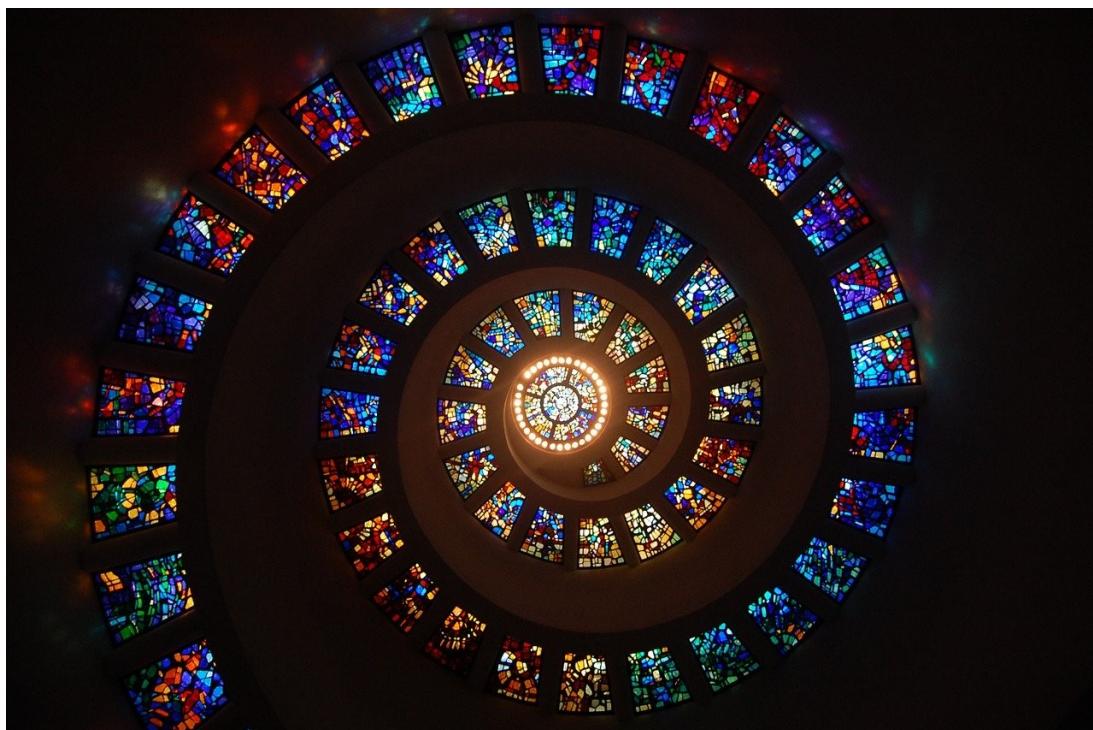
**Hungry hungry hippos.** If food is available, serve the person next to you. If it's not, have snacks packed and offer to share them. Food is an instant and basic way of connecting with others and people always appreciate being fed!

**Floor is lava.** If you don't know what to do, just keep moving. Eventually you'll run into someone you feel comfortable talking to.

After an event or interaction, leave yourself a review! Not everything will work all the time – sometimes because of you, sometimes because of other people, and sometimes no reason. Evaluating events can help you learn from them and do better next time.

[Evaluation worksheet](#) (event)

You'll get better – and more influential, with practice. And as you get better, you'll get more positive feedback, which will encourage you, creating a virtuous circle.



## Getting help

It's OK to say you're not very good at something. Or even that you're bad at something. No-one is good at everything.

You might feel uncomfortable saying to others or yourself that you're bad at something when you desperately want to be good at it. Accepting that you suck at some things can be the first step, and we're all at different places and stages, both in acceptance of our limitations, and in the things we suck at.

If you're trying to do everything, this is what happens: instead of working on something you're bad at in order to become average at it (at best), you're not working on the stuff that you're good at. So you become less productive and you're no longer innovating. Being your best self and becoming influential can mean outsourcing the things you'll never be good at, to someone else.

### Identifying where you need help

As a neurodiverse person, you're probably already familiar with the areas where you need help – because these have come up in the list of challenges, or difficulties or “symptoms” that have been repeated to you previously. You may be comfortable with your challenges or you may need to take time to examine the impact these have on your life and work, and start to accept that you need help in certain areas.

Areas where you might need help include:

- Written communication
- Verbal communication
- Organising
- Time management
- Sequencing
- Task management
- Managing emotions

Getting help is not so you can fit in with neurotypicals. It is so you can do your best work, to the best of your ability, reduce your stress and communicate your strengths effectively.

You may also need mental health help. Half of people with dyslexia have depression and/or anxiety. So do half of people with ADHD. And half of autistics. You can't work at your best if you're anxious or depressed – and if you have the symptoms that go along with those conditions, like fatigue, brain fog, poor concentration etc.

Mental health help is available but accessing it is not always straightforward, particularly if you have obstacles that might be visible (lack of time or money) or invisible (cultural or family prejudices against mental illness, unwillingness to approach things that are difficult). It's your choice. One thing to remember is that mental illness almost never goes away spontaneously so if you want to feel better, you will have to do something about it.

## Where to source help

The first port of call should be your colleagues. You are a team so it's natural to help each other to reach the same goal. Ask someone to proof-read your email. Request deadlines even if they're not technically needed. Offer a favour to a colleague in exchange so you don't always feel like the less capable person.

If you need outside help or adaptations, [apply for an Access to Work grant to pay for it](#). The grant can pay for technology or to hire people to help you with the specific challenges caused by your condition.

You may also choose to hire contractors, freelancers or even full-time staff to help you. This could be a PA, a copywriter, social media manager, brand expert, etc. Asking your contacts for recommendations would be a good first step – either in person or through social media.

For mental health help, the first port of call should be your GP, even if you are able to go private. They will be able to assess your needs and refer you to the most appropriate service, whether that's NHS or private. You don't necessarily need a neurodiverse-specialist therapy as most therapists will be able to deal with the whole person that you are.

### Top takeaway:

**You have the capability to be influential because of your unique differences – all you need to do is ensure you can communicate just how much you have to offer.**



## In summary

You've learnt that the way you communicate isn't "normal" but that doesn't mean it isn't good. Your own unique communication style isn't necessarily better or worse than anyone else's.

You've also explored your own unique communication style and discovered that you have lots of strengths and lots of challenges. Acknowledging that you probably have poor emotional regulation, can help, as can recognising that you're carrying emotional baggage from your childhood. Managing your challenges, such as stress, will help you build on your strengths.

You have discovered how you can build effective, productive and rewarding relationships through strategies that suit your strengths and the outcomes that you want to achieve. You have the capability to be influential because of your unique differences – all you need to do is ensure you can communicate just how much you have to offer.

**"Whenever you feel like criticising anyone, just remember that all the people in the world haven't had the advantages that you've had."**

"The Great Gatsby" - F. Scott Fitzgerald

# Glossary

Attuning	Fitting in with neurotypicals
Autism	A neurodiverse condition characterised by a difference in communication
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder [this term is rarely used now]
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – A neurodiverse condition characterised by inattentiveness and hyperactivity
Anxiety	A mental health disorder where worries are out of proportion and cause issues in daily life
Depression	A mental health disorder characterised by feelings of sadness or numbness
Dyscalculia	A neurodiverse condition characterised by issues with numbers
Dysgraphia	A neurodiverse condition characterised by challenges with handwriting
Dyslexia	A neurodiverse condition characterised by challenges with reading and writing
Dyspraxia	A neurodiverse condition characterised by challenges with movement and sequencing
Masking	How neurodiverse people hide their true characteristics in order to fit in (consciously or unconsciously)
Neuroatypical	Neurodiverse
Neurodiverse	Describing a specific difference in thinking; an individual with one or more specific conditions that cause this difference
Neurodiversity	The neurodiverse movement; or the concept that everyone thinks differently
Neurodivergent	A neurodiverse person, ie one with a condition causing a difference in thinking
Neurotype	Your neurodiverse condition or conditions, or absence of these conditions
Neurotypical	Not neurodiverse
Normal	Not neurodiverse
Tourette's [syndrome]	A neurodiverse condition characterised by involuntary movements or sounds

## Stock phrases

I don't want to do that.

I know it's normal/common to do X, but I don't want to/I don't feel the need to.

That's unavailable.

That's inappropriate.

I am not able to do that.

No.

That is not the term most [neurodiverse] people prefer.

That term is no longer used.

I understand you were taught that X was correct, but you were taught incorrectly.

That is incorrect.

Could I do it this way?

I could do it faster if [X]?

I would be more efficient if [X].

I find it easier if [X].

I need instructions.

I need step-by-step instructions.

I need you to explain that [more] clearly.

I don't understand [what you're asking].

Can you be more specific?

Could you explain that again please?

Could you repeat that please?

Pictures/diagrams would help me.

Colour coded information would help me.

May I record this meeting/conversation?

Will this be recorded?

[Adaptation] would be very helpful.

I would appreciate it if you could [do X].

What would you like from this [event]?

What would you like to happen?

What outcome are you looking for?

What would you be happy with?

Am I correct in thinking that [X]?

What do you need from me?

What would you like me to do?

May I have [X]?

Would it be possible to have [X]?

Is it possible to [do X]?

# Reading guide

## Book club

### **Read me – 10 lessons for writing great copy**

Roger Horberry & Gyles Lingwood

### **Practical mindfulness**

Ken A Verni

### **The Gifts of Imperfection**

Brené Brown

### **The Power of Now**

Eckhart Tolle

### **How to Win Friends and Influence People**

Dale Carnegie

### **The Four Agreements**

Don Miguel Ruiz with Janet Mills

### **The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma**

Bessel A. van der Kolk

### **Copywriting – Successful writing for design, advertising and marketing**

Mark Shaw

## Blog club

[Grammar as a social construct](#) [slideshow]

[How to do a virtual fishbowl discussion](#)

[Dave Trott's blog](#) [copywriting and storytelling]

[Dyslexia bytes](#)

# Science

“Disclosing a disability to a potential or current employer is a very personal decision, with potentially far-reaching consequences for both the employer and employee.”

“Studies have demonstrated that the majority of accommodations [for disabled] cost little or nothing and lead to improved employee productivity, attendance, attitudes and coworker interaction, as well as lower stress levels, improved coworker attitudes and increased overall organizational moral.”

[Perspectives on Disability Disclosure: The Importance of Employer Practices and Workplace Climate](#)

Sarah von Schrader, Valerie Malzer & Susanne Bruyère

“We found that autistic people share information with other autistic people as well as non-autistic people do with other non-autistic people.”

[Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective](#)

Catherine J Crompton, Danielle Ropar, Claire VM Evans-Williams, et al

“The autistic adults interviewed in our study discussed issues of care and fairness more than of loyalty, authority or purity when prompted to discuss moral transgressions.”

[Moral foundations theory in autism spectrum disorder: A qualitative investigation](#)

Erin E Dempsey, Chris Moore, Annie E Richard, et al

“After three to six months working in the Mortgage Banking Technology division, autistic workers were doing the work of people who took three years to ramp up – and were even 50 percent more productive”.

[Disability as an asset in the workplace](#)

JPMorgan Chase

“Employers surveyed by the US Job Accommodation Network found that as many as 58% of common adjustment types cost nothing for the employer.”

[Benefits and costs of accommodation](#)

Job Accommodation Network

“96 percent of creative businesses believe there’s a huge benefit in fostering an ND-friendly workplace.”

[Creative Differences Neurodiversity handbook \[PDF\]](#)

Universal Music

“Inclusiveness isn’t just nice to have on teams. Our research shows that it directly enhances performance. Teams with inclusive leaders are 17% more likely to report that they are high performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions, and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively. What’s more, we found that a 10% improvement in perceptions of inclusion increases work attendance by almost 1 day a year per employee, reducing the cost of absenteeism.”

[Why inclusive leaders are good for organizations](#)

Harvard Business Review

“Among more than 128 different practices we studied, the talent practices which predict the highest performing companies are all focused on building an inclusive workplace.”

[Diversity and inclusion – a guide for HR professionals](#)

TalentLyft

“After three to six months working in the Mortgage Banking Technology division, autistic workers were doing the work of people who took three years to ramp up – and were even 50 percent more productive.”

[Neurodiversity at work](#) [PDF]

CIPD

“Conducted by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC), in partnership with Deloitte, the study found that employee innovation levels increased by 83 per cent when said employees felt included in the workplace.”

“When employees think their organisation is committed to, and supportive of diversity and they feel included, employees report better business performance in terms of ability to innovate, (83% uplift) responsiveness to changing customer needs (31% uplift) and team collaboration (42% uplift).”

“A picture tells a thousand words: when employees think their organisation is highly committed to, and supportive of diversity, and they feel highly included, then they are 80% more likely to agree that they work in a high performing organisation...”

“If just 10% more employees feel included, the company will increase work attendance by almost one day per year per employee.”

[Waiter, is that inclusion in my soup?](#) [PDF]

Deloitte

“Over the past two years HPE’s program has placed more than 30 participants in software-testing roles at Australia’s Department of Human Services (DHS). Preliminary results suggest that the organization’s neurodiverse testing teams are 30% more productive than the others.”

[Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage](#)

Harvard Business Review

Disagreement is a significant predictor of positive team performance.

[Team Combat Identification: Effects of Gender, Spatial Visualization, and Disagreement](#)

Sage Journals

Companies that have more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenue.

[How diverse leadership teams boost innovation](#)

Boston Consulting Group

Inclusive companies are 1.7 times more likely to be the innovation leaders in their market.

[Why Diversity and Inclusion Has Become a Business Priority](#)

Josh Bersin

Racially and ethnically diverse companies outperform industry norms by 35%.

[Why diversity matters](#)

McKinsey

Catalyst research shows that companies with more women on the board statistically outperform their peers over a long period of time.

[Report: The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity](#)

Catalyst

67% of job seekers said a diverse workforce is important when considering job offers.

[What Job Seekers Really Think About Your Diversity and Inclusion Stats](#)

Glassdoor

“98% of parents and teachers think that teachers need more training in how to identify and support dyslexia. 92.60% agreed there is a need for better understanding and recognition of dyslexic thinking.”

[Made By Dyslexia survey \[PDF\]](#)

“The creative sectors have many fold the number of people with dyslexia than in the general population, for example the highly competitive Royal College of Art reports that 29% of its students have dyslexia compared to 5% across higher education.”

[Academic Attainment in Students with Dyslexia in Distance Education](#)

John T. E. Richardson

40 percent of self-made millionaires have dyslexia, around three or four times the level in the general population.

[2003 survey of 300 British self-made millionaires](#)

Commissioned by BBC2 for Mind of a Millionaire

# Worksheets

[Mood tracker](#)

[Evaluation worksheet \(day\)](#)

[Evaluation worksheet \(week\)](#)

[Evaluation worksheet \(event\)](#)

[Accepting your achievements \(acknowledging your strengths\)](#)

[Your communication style](#)

[Plan B worksheet](#)

## Resources – further help

All discount offers are limited time and subject to availability. I do not receive any compensation for including them (apart from my own!).

### Mental health help

[Find a GP](#)

[The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#)

[The Cognitive Behaviour Therapy register](#)

[BAMBA](#) [for accredited mindfulness teachers]

[Online self-help courses](#)

[NHS self-help services](#)

### Professional help

[Julia Krajewska](#), voice coach

One-to-one 30-minute neurodiverse-friendly voice training

First session normally £25 but only £15 with code SPARKLECLASS

5 week block is £125 but only £100 with code SPARKLECLASS

[Samantha Crowe](#)

PR services

Rachel Morgan-Trimmer, neurodiversity coaching services

[Click here for my secret page](#)

## Stuff

### Self-care backpack

Self care resources – free for online, pay what you want to have them sent.

Autism alert card – print at home

Government facemask exemption card – print at home

Government face mask exemption card – for your phone

Sunflower lanyard (for hidden disabilities)

Various sunflower products, starting at 55p.

Workshop tactics card deck

Get 20% off with code SPARKLECLASS

## Online tools

VIA strengths analysis tool (free; paid versions also available)

Ayoa, neurodiverse-friendly tools (mind-mapping, project management etc)

Get 10% off with code SPARKLECLASS

Focusmate

Site that pairs you with a remote accountability partner, for whichever hour slot you book.

## Phone apps

### Block

Blocks apps at certain times or after a time limit has been reached. It also shows you how much time you're spending on different apps.

[How to block apps on Apple devices](#) [instructions]

### Stay on task [Android]

Simple app that just dings to remind you you're supposed to be focusing.

### Forest [iOS] and Forest [Android]

Mindful productivity app that uses gamification.

### Complex timer [Android] and Periodic timer [iOS]

Set timers for work and breaks – you can use this for a classic Pomodoro (25 minutes' work, 5 minutes break) or choose your own work and break times.

### Daylio [mood tracker]

Log your mood twice a day and note what you were doing at the time. You can track your mood over a period of time.

### Flaredown

For chronic illnesses/conditions