

**Information Paper**

Common Neurodiversity Myths **in the Workplace**

Myth: *"Everyone is a little bit 'on the spectrum'!"*

Reality: People may share individual traits (e.g. enjoying routine or having strong interests), however autism is a distinct neurotype and lifelong neurological variation. Autism shapes how a person experiences, interacts with, and perceives the world, particularly how they communicate, interact socially, and process information.

It is not a matter of everyone being on a single scale to a greater or lesser degree. This myth minimises autistic lived experience and can lead to misunderstandings about supports and adjustments needed to participate fully in the workplace.

Key takeaways:

- Autism involves differences in how a person experiences and interacts with the world, not just personality traits.
- These differences are ongoing and influence communication, sensory processing, and ways of thinking.
- Autistic and non-autistic people may experience and interpret the world differently.
- Minimising autism can result in genuine support needs being overlooked.

Inclusive practice involves avoiding language that reduces autism to a shared trait. Understanding autism as a distinct neurotype supports more appropriate adjustments and better recognition of individual strengths.

This project is proudly funded & supported by:

**DELIVERING
FOR QUEENSLAND**



**Queensland
Government**

Myth: *"All neurodivergent people share identical needs and challenges."*

Reality: Neurodivergent people (like all people) are not a single, uniform group. Even when individuals share the same neurotype, their strengths, interests, communication styles, preferences, and support needs can differ widely. Assuming neurodivergent people have identical needs can lead to generalised and ineffective support and can place pressure to conform to standard approaches.

Key takeaways:

- Neurodivergent people have diverse strengths and ways of working.
- Support needs vary by person and 'one size fits all' approaches can create barriers.
- Generalising experiences can reinforce stereotypes.

Inclusive practice involves avoiding assumptions based on diagnosis or labels. Inclusive practice involves engaging with all employees in the workplace to understand what supports their work and wellbeing.

Myth: *"Neurodiversity is a fancy term for mental illness."*

Reality: Neurodiversity refers to natural differences in how human brains think, learn, and process information. Neurodivergent people have brain differences that are part of human variation. Mental illness refers to health conditions affecting mood, thinking, or behaviour and may cause distress or impact daily functioning. These are separate from neurodivergence and can occur within individuals of any neurotype. Confusing the two can lead to misunderstanding and stigma in both instances.

Key takeaways:

- Neurodiversity describes difference, not illness.
- Neurodivergent people are not unwell because of their neurotype.
- Mental health conditions and neurodivergence are different concepts.
- Some neurodivergent people experience mental health challenges, but this does not make neurodivergence a mental illness and neurotypical individuals also experience mental health challenges.

Inclusive practice involves avoiding assumptions that neurodivergent employees are unwell. Inclusive practice focuses on understanding different ways of working and providing appropriate adjustments without pathologising difference.

Myth: *"Neurodiversity is a disorder or something to be fixed."*

Reality: Neurodiversity recognises that differences in how brains function are a natural part of human variation. Neurodivergent people are not broken and do not need to be cured or fixed. Viewing neurodivergence as a problem to be corrected can undermine confidence, increase stress, and limit contribution. It can also be a significant barrier to participation and could be deemed to be discriminatory.

Key takeaways:

- Neurodivergent brains are a natural part of human diversity.
- Difference does not mean deficit. Attempts to 'fix' people can be harmful.
- Supportive and inclusive environments enable people to contribute their strengths, talents, and expertise.

Inclusive practice focuses on removing barriers rather than changing people from a human rights perspective. Acceptance, accessibility, and reasonable adjustments support participation, performance, and wellbeing.

Myth: *"Neurodivergent people lack empathy or emotions."*

Reality: Neurodivergent people experience emotions, empathy, and connection in diverse ways. Differences often relate to how emotions are expressed or how social information is interpreted, not to a lack of empathy or emotion. Differences in expression can be misunderstood, leading to incorrect assumptions.

Key takeaways:

- Neurodivergent people experience emotions and empathy.
- Different ways of expressing emotions or responding to social situations should not be mistaken for a lack of empathy or care.
- Communication differences can be misinterpreted.
- Assumptions about empathy can damage trust.

Inclusive practice involves avoiding judgements that are based on appearance or communication style alone. Clear communication and respect for different expression styles support stronger working relationships.

Myth: *"Workplace adjustments are special treatment or unfair to others."*

Reality: Workplace adjustments are about removing barriers so people can work effectively. They do not give an unfair advantage. Treating everyone the same does not always lead to fair outcomes. Adjustments support equitable participation by reducing barriers and enabling people to work in ways that suit their strengths and needs. They should be accessible by all employees.

Key takeaways:

- Fairness is not always sameness. Adjustments remove barriers rather than lower standards and viewing them as special treatment can prevent access to support.
- Many adjustments are simple and low cost.

Workplace adjustments are a normal part of inclusive practice. They support productivity, retention, and wellbeing by enabling people to work effectively.

Myth: *"If someone is performing well, they do not need support."*

Reality: Strong performance does not mean a person is not experiencing barriers or expending significant effort to navigate workplace expectations. Many neurodivergent people use considerable effort to meet expectations, often without visible signs of difficulty. Some neurodivergent people may engage in masking, where they hide or modify aspects of themselves to fit workplace norms and expectations. While masking can help people navigate workplace environments, it can require significant effort over time and may contribute to stress or burnout. Assuming support is only needed when performance declines can result in support needs being overlooked and increase the risk of burnout.

Key takeaways:

- Good performance can coexist with high effort or stress. Strong performance may sometimes reflect significant effort, rather than the absence of support needs.
- Support is not only for people who are struggling. Withholding support can affect sustainability, whereas ongoing adjustments help maintain performance.

Inclusive practice recognises that effort and impact are not always visible. Regular conversations about strengths, preferences, and support needs help sustain wellbeing and contribution over time.

Myth: "Neurodivergent people cannot work effectively in teams."

Reality: Neurodivergent people can, and do, work effectively in teams. Differences in communication or interaction styles do not prevent collaboration. Team effectiveness depends on clear roles, expectations and communication practices, not on everyone working in the same way.

Key takeaways:

- Effective teamwork does not require uniform communication styles.
- Clear structure supports collaboration.
- Different perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking strengthen teams.
- Excluding people based on assumptions limits capability.

Inclusive practice involves designing teams and communication approaches that support different ways of working. Clear roles and expectations for all enable collaboration and value contribution over conformity.

References:

Pellicano, E., & den Houting, J. (2015). Annual research review: Shifting perspectives on autism: The neurodiversity movement and its implications for research and practice. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 56(6), 671–682. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12355>

Silberman, S. (2015). *NeuroTribes: The legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity*. Avery.

Walker, N. (2014). Neurodiversity: Some basic terms and definitions. *Neurocosmopolitanism*. <https://neurocosmopolitanism.com>



Scan QR code for more resources from the Neurodiversity Works toolkit, designed to create inclusive workplaces.

**Autism Queensland is here to help—
get in touch to learn more:**



Email: css@autismqld.com.au



Phone: (07) 3273 0000



Website: autismqld.com.au

This project is proudly funded & supported by:

**DELIVERING
FOR QUEENSLAND**



**Queensland
Government**