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How workplaces can make the most of neurodiversity

THINKING *Differently*



Words: Emma Bennett

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation between human brains that make us all unique. With the number of people diagnosed with a neurodivergent condition rising, every workplace should strive to make improvements for staff, colleagues and patients.

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A growing number of people in the UK are being diagnosed as neurodivergent. The Brain Charity (2022) estimates that at least 20% of the adult population have a diagnosable neurological condition – but the real figure could be much higher. Cohort studies have found a 20-fold increase of ADHD diagnoses in adults between the year 2000 and 2018, and a 787% increase in autism diagnoses within a similar timeframe (McKechnie et al, 2023; Russell et al, 2022).

While the reasons for this rise are unknown, many experts believe it is in part down to an increase in awareness and understanding of different conditions, as well as the ever-evolving definition of what is considered neurodivergent. Professor Ginny Russell from the University of Exeter, lead author on the 2022 study into autism, recently told *The Guardian:* 'Diagnoses have increased because of ever-wider assessment boundaries – boundaries that are still moving outwards' (Hill, 2024).

Every brain is unique

'Neurodiversity is an umbrella term,' explains Kym Ward, a training project coordinator for The Brain Charity, which offers workplace training to support people who are neurodivergent. The term was coined by sociologist Judy Singer to encompass the natural variation in human brains and how we all see the world.

'A neurodivergent person is someone who has a significant difference in the way their cognitive function works from what we call a "neuromajority" or what might be classed as "neurotypical",' Kym says. 'But obviously, everyone's brains work differently. So whether there is in fact a neuromajority is also up for debate.'

A broad spectrum of neurological conditions may make someone neurodivergent, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and Tourette's syndrome.

Despite it taking years to get a diagnosis in some cases, 'some workplaces will only offer support following diagnosis,' Kym says. 'We caution against that because for people diagnosed as adults,

DYSLEXIA

affects 1 in 10 people

NHS, 2024

1 IN 2

people with ADHD also have dyspraxia

ADHD Aware, 2024

AUTISM

may affect twice as many people in the UK as currently thought – up to 1.2 million

O'Nions et al, 2023

>2 YEARS

average waiting time for an NHS autism assessment

Hill, 2024

29% **of UK adults with diagnosed autism are employed**

Office for National Statistics, 2022

>90%

of people with autism aged over 50 in England may be undiagnosed

Hill, 2024

9 IN 10

people with Tourette's syndrome also have ADHD

ADHD Aware, 2024

90%

of people who had ADHD in childhood continue to experience symptoms in adulthood

Abdelnour et al, 2022

Images: Shutterstock / Sarah Auld

Supporting patients



Jemma Bates spent nine years working in the NHS before opening her own private practice in Leicestershire, Jem's Podiatry, last March. She specialises in helping patients with autism.

I have two children with autism, which has given me real-life experience for how I can help. I also have dyslexia and dyspraxia and was diagnosed when I was studying to be a podiatrist. Without this diagnosis and the support I received from the University of Northampton, I wouldn't have passed my degree.

Everyone is different, so you have to ask patients what they need and how you can make their time with you more comfortable – whether that's having their favourite relative with them, or a device or book. We need to be as flexible as possible.

Some people don't like the instruments, or the idea that treatment might be painful. The idea of it is fearful – and because it's new, it's scary. You may have to introduce things slowly.

A person coming into their space or touching them might also be too much.

I also don't wear bright or patterned clothes because it can be too stimulating. There are lots of different factors to consider, depending on the person.

When I worked in the NHS, I had a patient with autism who needed nail surgery. We spent time talking about what it would entail, and I showed them the room where it would happen and explained how long it would take.

We tried conservative treatment first so they could get used to me and the environment. They had their mum or dad with them, could wear their pyjamas if they wanted, and could bring their phone or tablet. Even though it was an NHS appointment, they were given double time. And if they couldn't do it, that was fine. We weren't going to push them.

It took about three appointments, but once they were used to me, they were ready for nail surgery and it all went smoothly.

TOP TIP 'Don't bombard people with lots of information, and check what format works for them'

Sallyanne Lightbown

it comes with a large emotional burden. You suddenly recognise you have been working at a disadvantage for your whole life – at school you may have been told you weren't working properly, or you may have lost your job because you were unable to meet the demands of a role.

'There's a need to support that diagnosis with empathy and understanding. If somebody says: "These are my challenges and these are my skills," it's then up to a team to work holistically to support that.'

Embracing 'spiky profiles'

Sally Gates is a PhD student at the University of Southampton, and chair of the College's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion working group, which works to ensure the college is diverse and representative of its members. She was diagnosed with autism after being reassessed for dyslexia as an adult.

'I find reading really difficult,' says Sally. 'Because I have autism, which is a sensory processing disorder, I'm not a visual person. I don't enjoy beautiful scenery, I've never liked going to galleries, I don't watch TV. So when I'm reading, my brain is overloading. Text-to-speech software has revolutionised everything because I find it easier to take information in by ear.'

However, some aspects of her autism – such as her obsessive dedication to solving patients' problems – are what make her a great podiatrist. 'Some people assume autistic people have no empathy, but it's not true,' says Sally. 'Very often we have been treated badly so we want to make other people feel good. We don't always communicate it well, but we tend to care an awful lot. I'm also very organised and methodical, and now I'm in academia people know they can rely on me to keep projects on track.'

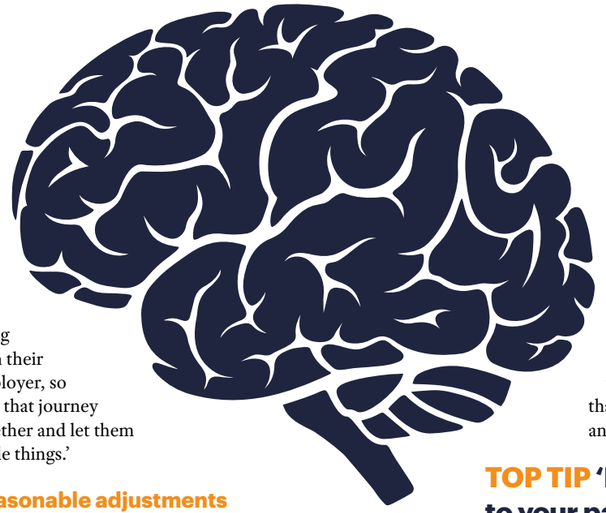
While neurotypical people may have skills at a similar level across many areas, neurodivergent people can show large differences in their abilities, with highly developed skills in some areas and difficulties in others. This is sometimes referred to as having a 'spiky profile' (see *Resources*). This can lead to neurodivergent people being underestimated if they are judged only by what they find hard, or feeling unsupported if only their strengths are considered.

'I have had work piled on me because they knew I would do it – the idea of not following the rules doesn't occur to me,' says Sally. 'And I was forced to work in a noisy clinic, despite saying I was struggling to filter out other patients. They viewed me as a problem, rather than a person who was getting the jobs done. Because autism can be wonderful, it can be a superpower.'

TOP TIP 'Appoint neurodiversity champions to be a first port of call for those looking for more support'

Kym Ward

She says it's up to employers to be open and supportive to neurodivergent colleagues' needs. 'Everyone is unique and will have a different set of challenges. It's a learning experience for the neurodivergent person along with their employer, so take that journey together and let them guide things.'



Reasonable adjustments

By offering the right support, workplaces can make the most of their diverse populations. They also have a duty of care under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments for those who need it: an individualised plan to ensure employees are not at a disadvantage (see *Resources*).

Anwar Ali, employment relations officer at the College, says there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to workplace support. 'We all have unique ways of thinking, and working arrangements really should depend on the individual and their own needs,' he says. 'For example, is there an option for someone to work flexibly, whether that's remotely at home or doing different hours? For some people, an open-plan space can be too chaotic. So, ensure there is a designated area for individuals who might be sensitive to noise or sensory stimuli to work more comfortably. The aim should be to create a more inclusive and tolerable work environment.'

For podiatrists in both the NHS and private practice, adjusting internal policies to support colleagues can also be beneficial. 'People who have autism, for example, may value having more advanced notice of staff rotas, which can help them to stay calm and focused because they know what's coming,' says Anwar. 'Being considerate about patient caseload, allowing extra time between appointments and giving colleagues more time to submit notes can also make a real difference.'

He emphasises that a failure to implement reasonable adjustments could give rise to a legal challenge against the employer: 'This "reasonableness" will depend on the size of the organisation and the resources available to them. But, if they are feasible and can be physically implemented, it is difficult for an employer to say they won't accommodate them.'

Use to view references

TOP TIP 'Listen to your patients to find out how to make them comfortable. And do your research, because whatever their condition, it will influence how you treat them'

Jemma Bates

Coping strategies

Sallyanne Lightbown, an associate podiatrist at Feetwell in Newport, uses several techniques and assistive technologies to help manage her dyslexia: a condition that makes it difficult for her to read a lot of dense text and write legibly. She uses a dictation tool to keep track of notes for continuing professional development, and to maintain patient records and write letters. She also uses practice management software that offers useful prompts to follow during patient consultations, and an advanced spellcheck tool for names of medication.

'One of the bad things about my dyslexia is that I'm not focused in my thinking,' says Sallyanne. 'I can easily go off on a tangent. If I'm reading something and I don't understand it, I'll read around the subject and dive deeper into an area than I need to. It's possibly down to a fear of being unprepared.

'The night before clinic I read my patient's notes to check I'm prepared. If I have a new patient or someone who is particularly complex or anxious, I'll allow an extra 10 minutes before an appointment to gather my thoughts.'

Sallyanne was also offered extra support while studying for her podiatry degree at the University of Northampton – from handouts to extra time during exams. 'At first I found the help overwhelming, because I was in my 40s and had my own coping strategies. But little things, like having an advanced copy of lecture slides to write my own notes, were really useful. Someone also went through my dissertation references to highlight mistakes or typos, which helped me avoid losing marks over something I simply couldn't see.'

While it's not always been easy, Sallyanne says that her experience makes her very patient-focused – for example, she strives to use accessible language because that's something she herself needs. 'I also don't take copious notes when I'm with a patient because I'm always looking for visual cues to help me. That's a real positive to bring to practice because you're always sensitive to what's not being said.'

By embracing people's differences and utilising their spiky profiles, both employers and patients can get more out of their clinicians, says Kym: 'You probably already have a neurodiverse workforce. So instead of making accommodations feel like a burden, think about your team's strengths in a holistic way. Because what benefits neurodivergent members will likely also benefit the whole organisation.'

RESOURCES

- For advice and support relating to employment law, members should contact the College: **employmentsupport@rcpod.org.uk**
- The Brain Charity supports people living with neurological conditions: **thebraincharity.org.uk**
- Information about 'spiky profiles' and how to understand the strengths and challenges of neurodiversity: **bit.ly/AutismUnderstood-spiky**
- Toolkit for managers to support staff with dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia: **bit.ly/CAVUHB-toolkit**