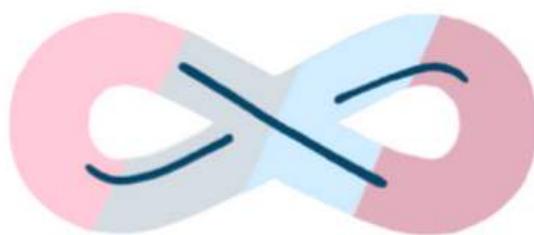




Neurodiversity

Core Concepts & Shared Language



Dr. Megan Anna Neff



A BRIEF HISTORY

"Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?"

– Robert Blume

The idea of neurodiversity begins with a simple observation: human brains vary. Just as we differ in bodies, cultures, temperaments, and ways of relating, we also differ in how our nervous systems develop and function.

The term neurodiversity is often associated with Judy Singer, who used it in her 1998 thesis. At the same time, similar ideas were already being named and discussed within Autistic communities in the 1990s. Rather than emerging from a single source, neurodiversity is best understood as a shared way of thinking that grew out of lived experience, conversation, and advocacy.

Over time, Autistic scholars and advocates such as Jim Sinclair, Nick Walker and Robert Chapman further developed this framework. What came to be called the neurodiversity paradigm challenges the assumption that non-majority neurotypes are inherently deficient. Instead, it frames autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other forms of neurodivergence as natural variations within the human population.

From this perspective, neurodivergence isn't a deviation from what it means to be human, it's part of the range of ways humans have always been.



A BRIEF HISTORY

This approach asks us to stop treating things like autism as something gone wrong, and instead recognize it as part of identity. Jim Sinclair captures this shift in the article “Don’t Mourn for Us”:

“Autism isn’t something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside. There’s no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter—every aspect of existence...autism is not something that can be separated out from the person, it’s part of the person, and so you cannot meaningfully say I love my child but I hate the autism.”

– Jim Sinclair

This shift invites us to see experiences like autism and ADHD not only as medical diagnoses, but also as parts of social identity. Alongside this shift, new metaphors and ways of understanding are emerging. Philosopher Robert Chapman describes autism as a different, but not lesser, way of life. Psychoanalyst Leon Brenner speaks of it as a mode of being. These perspectives move us away from viewing neurodevelopmental differences solely through the lens of pathology, and toward understanding it as a lived experience shaped by identity, context, and meaning.

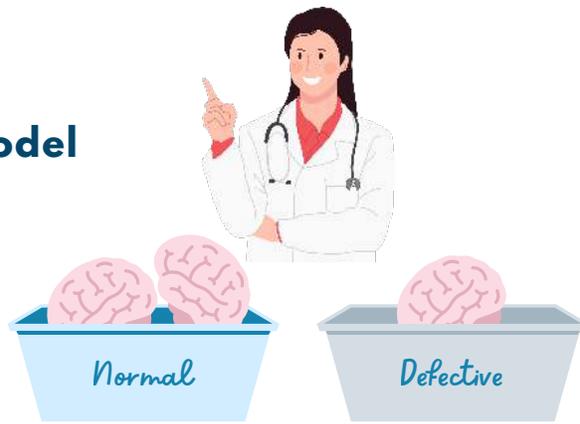




A BRIEF HISTORY

When the focus shifts from checking diagnostic boxes to listening more closely to personal experience, it creates space for deeper understanding and for recognizing the many different ways people live, relate, and make sense of the world through their particular neurologies.

Medical Model



Normal or Defective



Neurodiversity Movement



Celebrating the diversity of brains!

When neurodevelopmental differences are understood as more than diagnoses, and instead as part of who someone is, it creates space for Autistic and ADHD communities to grow around pride, belonging, and shared understanding.



THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM

Three Core Premises

The Neurodiversity Paradigm, articulated by Nick Walker, rests on a few core beliefs: (1) Neurodiversity is a natural and inherent part of human variation; (2) there is no singular "normal" brain; and (3) social and power dynamics significantly influence how neurodivergent people are perceived and treated in society (Walker, 2014).

#1: Neurodiversity Just Is

Neurodiversity is a basic fact of being human. Brains naturally vary, just as bodies, personalities, and cultures do. These differences aren't errors or deviations, rather they're part of how our species has evolved. From this perspective, neurodiversity isn't something to eliminate or correct, but a real and meaningful form of human diversity.



#2: There Is No "Normal" Brain

The idea that there's one "right" or "normal" kind of brain is a social construct, not a biological truth. People differ in how they process information, relate to others, think, feel, and sense the world. In much the same way there's no single correct gender, race, or sexual orientation, there's no single correct way for a brain to be wired. These differences can be challenging in some contexts, but they can also be sources of creativity, insight, and strength, in families, communities, and society as a whole.



THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM

Three Core Premises (Continued)

#3: Social & Power Dynamics

Neurodivergent people move through the world as part of a marginalized neurominority. Because of this, many experience discrimination, minority stress, and forms of exclusion that aren't about individual ability, but about how society is structured.

Like other people with non-majority identities, neurodivergent people experience uneven social power. This can show up in many ways: limited or stereotyped representation, unequal access to influence or decision-making, and environments that are designed with neurotypical expectations in mind. Schools, workplaces, and social norms often assume a narrow range of communication styles, sensory needs, and ways of thinking, which can create ongoing friction or exclusion.

For people who hold multiple marginalized identities, these dynamics are often intensified. Autistic people of color, queer Autistic people, and others at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and disability face layered forms of marginalization. These overlapping pressures can compound stress and make navigating everyday systems even more complex.



THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM



The Neurodiversity Paradigm In Action

You might be reading this and wondering how any of it actually shows up in practice, especially if you work in healthcare or mental health. Let's look at a few real-world ways the neurodiversity paradigm can take shape in everyday clinical settings.

Shifting From Pathology To Identity

This shift starts with language. It involves moving away from framing neurological differences like autism or ADHD primarily as “disorders.”

Within a neurodiversity paradigm, psychotherapists don't assume neurodivergence is something inherently wrong or broken. Instead, these differences are understood as variations in how brains develop and function, each with their own challenges, needs, and strengths.

Moving from “Cure” to “Embrace”

The focus shifts away from trying to fix or “cure” neurodivergent people and toward supporting identity, integration, and self-understanding. Therapy becomes a space for helping neurodivergent people live in ways that better align with their natural neurological wiring, while also unpacking the harm of internalized ableism and chronic invalidation. Rather than asking how to make someone appear more neurotypical, the focus shifts to identifying the supports that allow them to thrive as they are.



THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM



The Neurodiversity Paradigm In Action (Continued)

Understanding the Context of Suffering

Within this paradigm, neurodivergence itself isn't understood as the inherent source of suffering. Much of the strain arises from living in a world shaped around neurotypical norms and expectations. Everyday environments can feel overwhelming ~ busy, loud, crowded, unpredictable, or sensory-intense. Social rules and communication patterns are often implicit rather than clear, and frequent role-shifting can add to confusion or exhaustion.

Many neurodivergent people move through the world as part of a marginalized neurominority, which carries its own layers of stress. From this perspective, suffering often lives in the space between a person's neurology and the environments they are asked to navigate.



Neurology
+
**Environments
they're asked to
navigate**
=
Suffering



THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM



Holding Complexity: The Limits of This Framework

The neurodiversity paradigm offers a powerful reframe for many people. It also offers a much-needed corrective to older narratives of autism and ADHD. It shifts attention away from pathology and toward identity, context, and support. For many neurodivergent people, this lens brings relief, language, and a sense of being less alone.

At the same time, there is enormous diversity in how neurodivergence is lived and experienced. No single framework can hold all of that.

Some neurodivergent people, particularly those with higher support needs, don't see themselves reflected here. Their day-to-day reality may include pain, distress, or functional limitations that feel closely tied to their neurology, not only to an unsupportive environment. In those cases, identity-based or strengths-focused language can feel distant, or even invalidating.

This doesn't mean the paradigm is wrong. It means it has limits. Being neurodivergent-affirming includes honoring self-determination — letting people decide how they understand and describe their own neurodivergence. Some people find the neurodiversity paradigm deeply affirming. Others find it dismissive. And some find that it fits at certain points in their life and not at others, shaped by support needs, health, or circumstance.

Naming these limits matters. When any model is treated as universal, it can unintentionally leave people out. The hope here isn't to replace one rigid framework with another, but to offer an additional lens that can be useful when it fits, and set aside when it doesn't. Everyone deserves language that honors their reality, even when it doesn't sit neatly inside a single paradigm.



BASIC TERMS & DEFINITIONS



Stepping into neurodiversity-affirming spaces can feel a bit overwhelming at first, whether you're a newly identified neurodivergent person, a clinician, an educator, or a parent. Part of that overwhelm often comes from language. There are new terms, shifting meanings, and words that may be unfamiliar or used differently than you're used to. This section offers a brief, grounding introduction to some of the core terminology you'll encounter. For even more guidance on language you can check out the [Neurodivergent Insights Glossary of Terms](#).

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm, a concept articulated by Nick Walker, offers a different way of seeing neurological differences — as natural variations in how human brains develop and function. From this perspective, neurodivergence isn't something to be fixed, but part of the diversity that shapes human experience and community.

The Neurodiversity Movement

The neurodiversity movement is a social justice movement grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm. It grew out of the Autistic rights movement and centers the voices and lived experiences of neurodivergent people.

At its core, the movement seeks dignity, equity, and inclusion — advocating for civil rights, access, and respect across schools, workplaces, healthcare, and society more broadly. Rather than asking neurodivergent people to change who they are, it calls for systems and environments that better support neurological diversity.





Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the natural diversity of human minds. It recognizes neurological differences as a normal part of biological variation. It describes variation across all brains, including both neurotypical and neurodivergent people, therefore everyone is part of neurodiversity.

Neurodivergent

Kassiane Asasumasu coined the term neurodivergent, which encompasses people whose brain functions differ from the neuro-normative majority. ADHD, Dyslexia and Autism are all examples of neurodivergence. A person can have an innate (from birth) neurodivergence or acquired (such as in the case of traumatic brain injury or PTSD).

Neurodiverse

Neurodiverse describes a group or environment that includes a mix of different brain types. It's not a term for an individual person. For example, a family might include someone who is Autistic, someone with ADHD, someone who is both Autistic and ADHD, and someone who is neurotypical. Together, that family is neurodiverse — reflecting a range of neurological experiences within the group.

Neurotypical

Neurotypical describes someone whose brain functions in ways that fall within what a given society considers the most common or expected range. Their ways of thinking, communicating, and processing tend to align with social norms.

Because many systems are built with these norms in mind, neurotypical people often find it easier to move through school, work, healthcare, and social spaces without needing significant accommodations.





Allistic

Allistic describes someone who is not autistic. A person can be allistic and still be neurodivergent. For example, someone with ADHD who is not Autistic is both neurodivergent and allistic.

Neurominority

Neurominority refers to a group of people whose neurological differences place them outside the dominant or expected norms of society. Because of this, they often experience marginalization as they move through systems and spaces designed for neurotypical ways of being.

Neuroqueer

This term has a dual application. Firstly, it describes a person who identifies as both neurodivergent (such as Autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, etc.) and queer, encompassing a convergence of neurodivergence and queer identity.

Neuroqueer can also describe an action or way of moving through the world. In this sense, it refers to actively questioning and disrupting norms around both neurology and gender or sexuality. Someone might describe themselves as neuroqueer, or talk about neuroqueering a space, relationship, or system through making room for ways of being that don't fit neatly into dominant expectations. In this sense one does not have to be queer or neurodivergent in order to engage in neuroqueering.

Neuro-Normative

Neuro-normative refers to spaces, systems, and expectations that are designed around the assumption that people think, communicate, and process information in typical ways. When environments are neuro-normative, they often work well for neurotypical people while creating barriers for those whose brains function differently.





Cross-Neurotype

Cross-neurotype refers to interactions between people with different neurological profiles. This might include an Autistic person communicating with an allistic person, or an ADHDer interacting with a neurotypical person.

These interactions can sometimes involve misunderstandings, not because one person is communicating “wrong,” but because different neurologies often have different communication styles, processing speeds, or expectations. Becoming aware of these differences can help make cross-neurotype interactions clearer and more supportive.

The Double-Empathy Problem

The Double Empathy Problem helps explain why communication can feel hard between Autistic and allistic people. Rather than placing the difficulty on one person or one neurology, it points to something shared — a gap between different ways of experiencing, interpreting, and expressing the world.

First described by Damian Milton, this idea suggests that misunderstandings tend to go both ways. Autistic and non-autistic people often have different communication styles, assumptions, and ways of making meaning, which can lead to misattunement on both sides. This leads to a two-way communication gap.

Research supports this. Studies, including work by Dr. Crompton and colleagues, which show that people generally communicate more easily and feel more understood when interacting with others who share a similar neurology.

The double empathy problem challenges the long-held assumption that communication breakdowns are an Autistic deficit. Instead, it invites a broader view, one that understands these moments as relational mismatches between different neurological perspectives, rather than failures of one person to communicate “properly.”



Social Disability Model

The social disability model offers a different way of understanding disability. Instead of locating the problem solely within an individual, it draws attention to the ways environments, systems, and attitudes create barriers.

From this perspective, disability often emerges in the mismatch between a person and the world around them: inaccessible spaces, rigid expectations, or lack of support. The emphasis shifts from “fixing” individuals to changing conditions so more people can participate fully and with dignity.

Ableism

Ableism refers to the attitudes, assumptions, and systems that privilege certain bodies and minds while devaluing or excluding others. It can show up in obvious ways, like discrimination or lack of access, and in quieter ways, like lowered expectations, stigma, or being overlooked.

Ableism often lives in social norms and structures that center “typical” abilities ~ shaping schools, workplaces, healthcare, and public spaces in ways that leave many people unsupported. Over time, this can limit access, reduce opportunity, and cause harm at both personal and systemic levels.

Challenging ableism starts with noticing these patterns and working toward environments and relationships that make room for a wider range of abilities and ways of being.

Internalized Ableism

Internalized ableism describes what can happen when disabled people absorb the negative messages society holds about disability and turn them inward. Over time, these messages can shape how someone sees themselves, leading to self-doubt, shame, or feeling “less than.” It often develops quietly, through repeated experiences of invalidation, exclusion, or pressure to conform, and can be hard to notice because it feels personal rather than learned.





Neurodivergent-Affirming

Neurodivergent-affirming describes approaches that recognize neurodivergent identities as valid and worthy of support, rather than something to be fixed or normalized. It reflects a shift toward working with neurodivergent people, honoring their ways of thinking, sensing, communicating, and moving through the world.

In recent years, more clinicians, educators, and allied professionals have begun describing their work as neurodivergent-affirming. At its best, this signals an alignment with the neurodiversity paradigm and a commitment to more inclusive, responsive practices.

At the same time, the term is sometimes used loosely or without much depth. When the language changes but the underlying assumptions don't, it can feel confusing or even harmful, especially for neurodivergent people seeking care that genuinely understands their experience.

Practicing in a neurodivergent-affirming way isn't just about adopting new language. It involves ongoing reflection, a willingness to examine ableist assumptions, and a commitment to letting neurodivergent people define what support, safety, and respect look like for them.



FURTHER LEARNING

Want to Learn More?

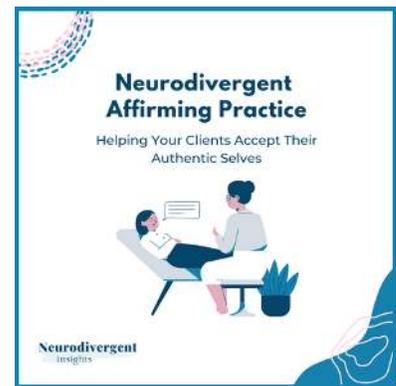
Here's a carefully curated collection of articles I've written that offer a more in-depth exploration of the topics covered in this guide:



[READ HERE](#)



[READ HERE](#)

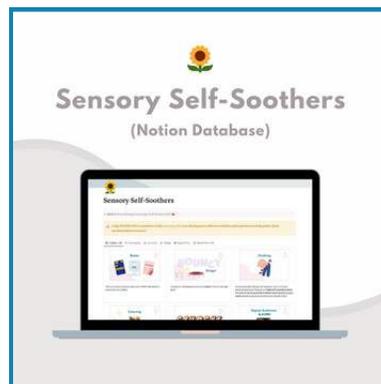


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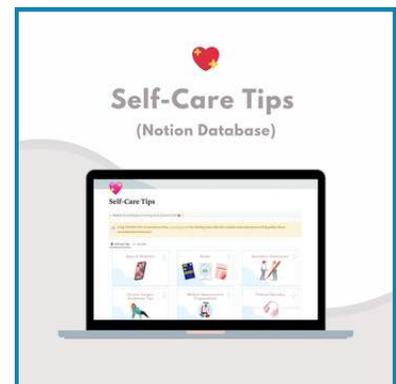
Here are several of our free databases filled with valuable resources, including our Neurodivergent Toolkit, Sensory Soothers, and Self-Care Tips:



[ND TOOLKIT](#)



[SENSORY SOOTHERS](#)



[SELF-CARE TIPS](#)

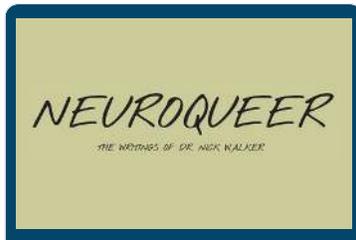


Websites



NEURODIVERGENT INSIGHTS

We are a neurodivergent-owned team offering research-backed resources and a supportive community for neurodivergent individuals and clinicians. Check out the [blog](#) and [Learning Nook!](#)



NEUROQUEER

This is the website of Nick Walker, one of the founders of the concept of neuroqueering. There are several great essays on neuroqueer theory and the neurodiversity paradigm. A great website for those who enjoy deep dives into theory.



REFRAMING AUTISM

This website is packed with valuable information and resources on Autism. There are well-organized learning pathways to guide you through the content. A good place to start is their [Welcome Packet!](#)



HOW TO BE AUTISTIC E-BOOK

This guide is designed for individuals newly diagnosed with autism, providing a compassionate roadmap to understanding and embracing their autistic identity, highlighting that autism is a fundamental part of who they are, not a condition to fix.



NEUROCLASTIC

This Autistic-led organization reframes autism as natural neurological variation, advocating for autistic rights and providing free resources for understanding neurodiversity.

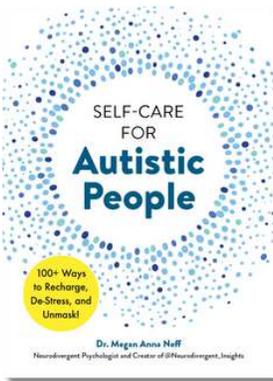


ALL BRAINS BELONG

A nonprofit organization dedicated to delivering neurodiversity-affirming healthcare, promoting social connections, enhancing employment opportunities, and providing educational resources.

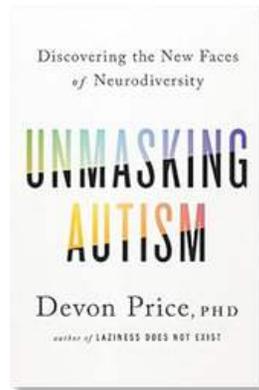


Books



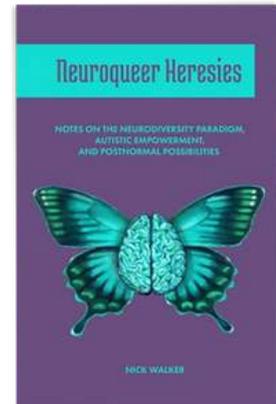
SELF-CARE FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Dr. Neff's compassionate and practical guide is designed specifically for autistic individuals who wish to cultivate their well-being through a lens of self-acceptance.



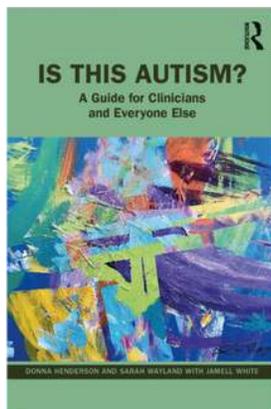
UNMASKING AUTISM

An in-depth exploration of high-masking Autism and examines its intersections with LGBTQIA+ identities, race, and neurodivergence.



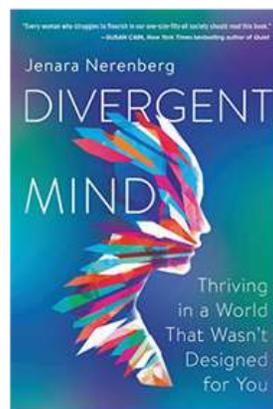
NEUROQUEER HERESIES

A compilation of essays that delves into the connections between neurodiversity, queerness, and societal expectations. It effectively examines the Neurodiversity Paradigm!



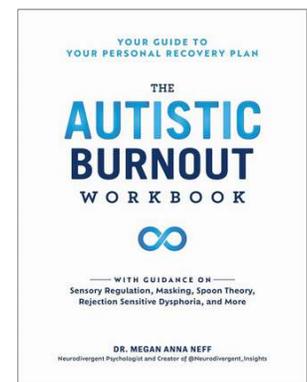
IS THIS AUTISM?

This book offers a detailed overview of diagnostic criteria, drawing insights from the experiences of Autistic girls but providing generalizations applicable to everyone.



DIVERGENT MIND

A groundbreaking exploration of neurodiversity, focusing on women and individuals assigned female at birth. An excellent resource for women exploring neurodivergence.



AUTISTIC BURNOUT WORKBOOK

Through self-reflection and engaging activities, Dr. Neff's workbook enables readers to develop tailored recovery plans and lasting self-care routines aimed at preventing autistic burnout.





RELATED RESOURCES

Check out The Neurodivergent Insights Glossary for more!



[See the \[FREE\] Glossary](#)



ABOUT US



Dr. Neff – Info & Resources



Website: neurodivergentinsights.com

A growing library of resources on neurodivergence, mental health, wellness, and neurodivergent identity.



Available at all major book outlets



Community: neurodivergentinsights.com/membership



Instagram: [@neurodivergent_insights](https://www.instagram.com/neurodivergent_insights)

Dr. Megan Anna Neff is a neurodivergent psychologist, author, and educator who founded Neurodivergent Insights after discovering she is Autistic and ADHD. She now creates visual-forward resources that blend research, clinical insight, and lived experience.

Neurodivergent Insights



Born from lived experience and gaps in clinical frameworks, Neurodivergent Insights offers reflection, learning, and care for neurodivergent people and those who support them. We create resources, education, and tools grounded in research and real life to help you make sense of your mind, story, and nervous system.

Whether you're exploring your own neurodivergence, supporting a child, or showing up as a more affirming clinician, we offer resources to help you feel more human, informed, and less alone.



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