



DNEA | Delaware Network for
Excellence in Autism

Inclusive Disability Language & Practices

April 1, 2025

Empowering Change Through Student Empowerment:
A Disability Advocacy Project for MSW Students

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Introduction

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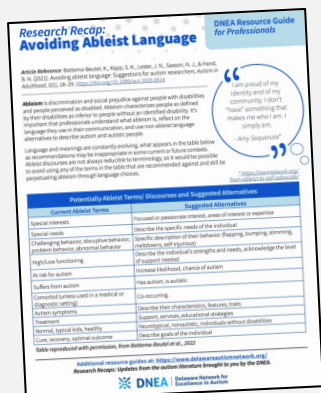
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Additional Resources That Accompany This Talk



- DNEA resource guides
- PowerPoint slides
- Look at the top for training title



<https://tinyurl.com/3jtnb8wp>

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Training Citation

Please use the following citation guidelines when referencing this training content:

Fletcher, A., Mallory, S., & DNEA CDS Teams. (2025) *Inclusive disability language and practices*. Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism.

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- Led by the University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS), the DNEA provides training, technical assistance, and information dissemination that benefits individuals with autism, their families, and the professionals who serve them.
- The DNEA leverages interdisciplinary expertise and collaboration across multiple organizations, state agencies and specialists - including the Interagency Committee on Autism and network partner Autism Delaware - to promote equity, inclusion, and access through the use of evidence-based and promising practices for individuals with autism across the lifespan.

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Training Agenda

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Overview



- Disability
- Inclusive Disability Language & Practices
- Ableism
- What is Neurodiversity?
- Neurodiversity-Affirming Tips
- Resources & Questions

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Objectives

- Review inclusive disability language and practices;
- Explore ableism and ways it is perpetuated;
- Review keywords about neurodiversity; and
- Explore basic neurodiversity-affirming practices



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NOTHING
ABOUT US
WITHOUT US


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Training Agenda



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Disability

- People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the U.S.
- Disability is not a health outcome; it's a part of how people live their lives, affecting things like hearing, seeing, moving, understanding information, and caring for themselves
- People with disabilities are an important part of all communities. Many of us know someone with a disability or may have one ourselves
- When we include people with disabilities in all aspects of life, everyone benefits (Centers for Disease Control And Prevention, 2024)



(Mills/CDC, 2011)

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Video: Disability Pride: I Am Not My Diagnosis



(Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council, 2022)

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What are Developmental Disabilities?



Developmental differences
begin before adulthood



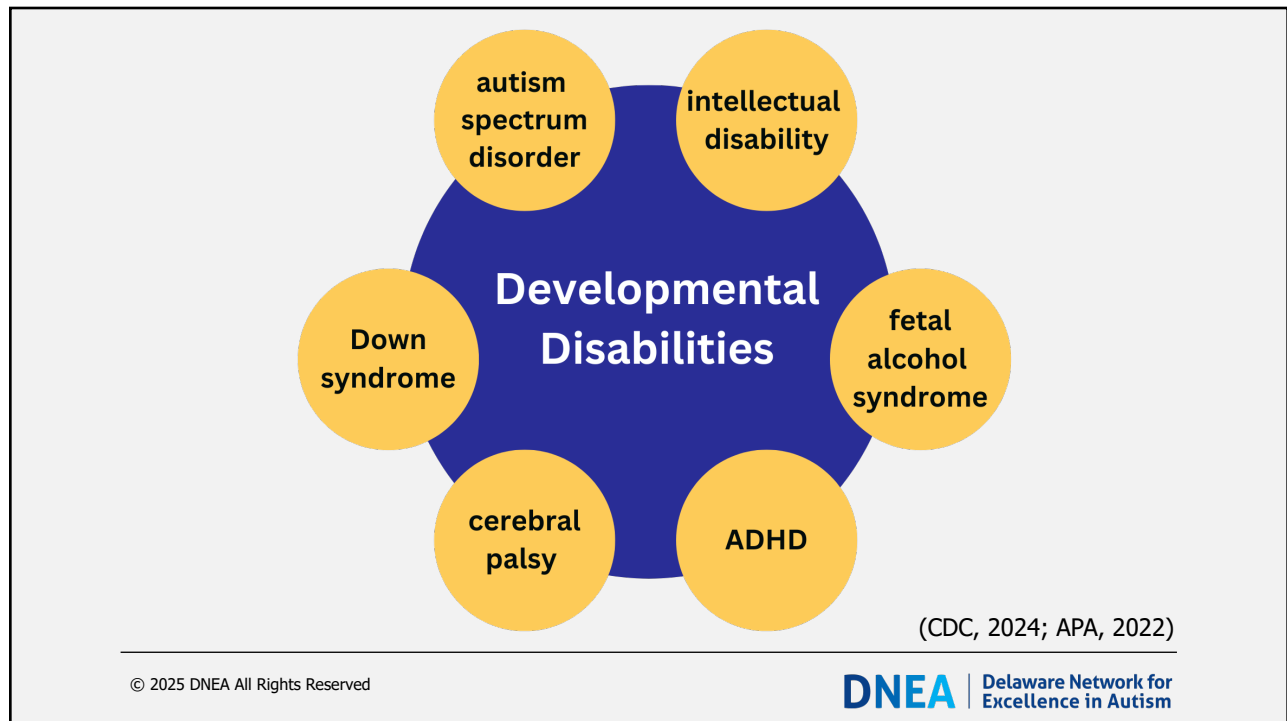
Lifelong

(American Psychiatric Association, 2022)


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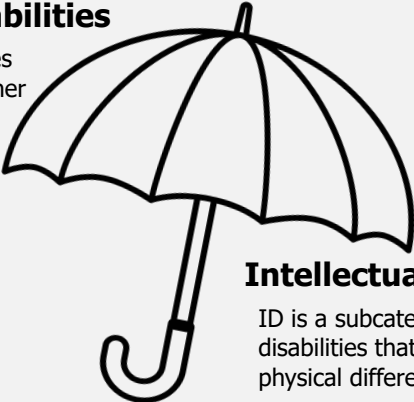
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What is the Difference Between an Intellectual and Developmental Disability?

Developmental Disabilities

An umbrella term that includes intellectual disabilities *and* other disabilities present during the developmental stages.



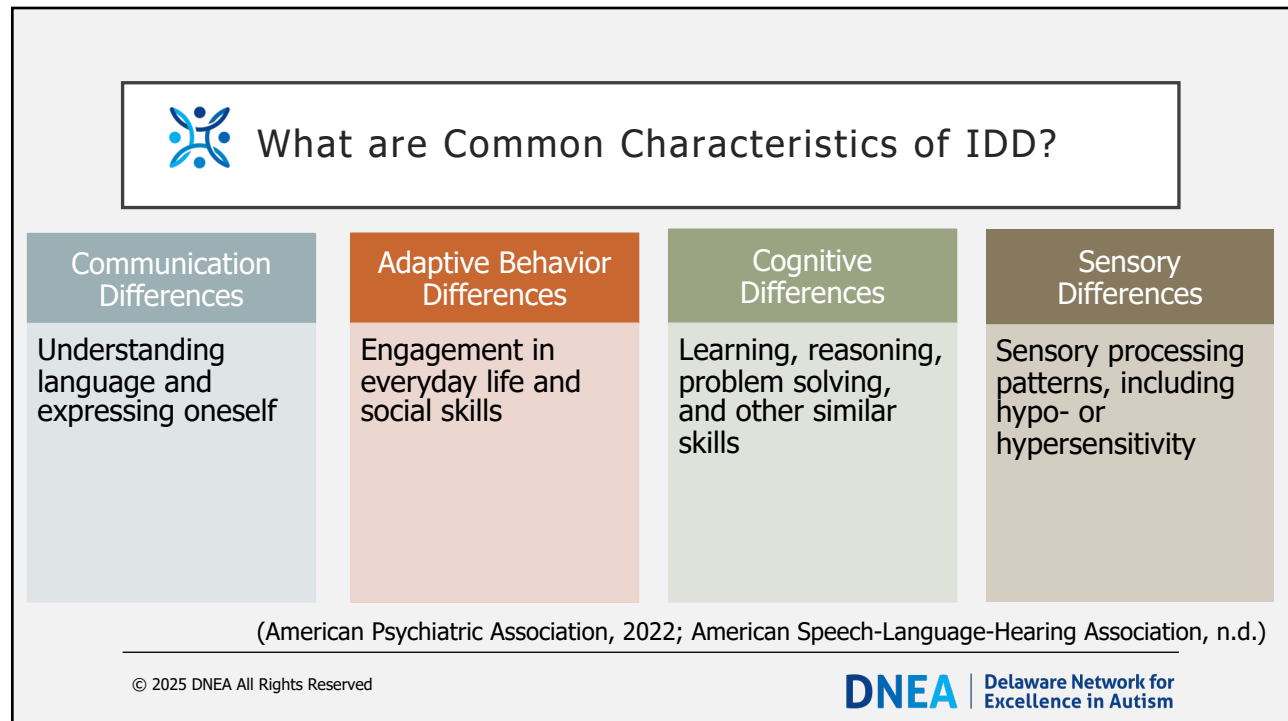
Intellectual Disabilities (ID)

ID is a subcategory of developmental disabilities that doesn't primarily involve physical differences.

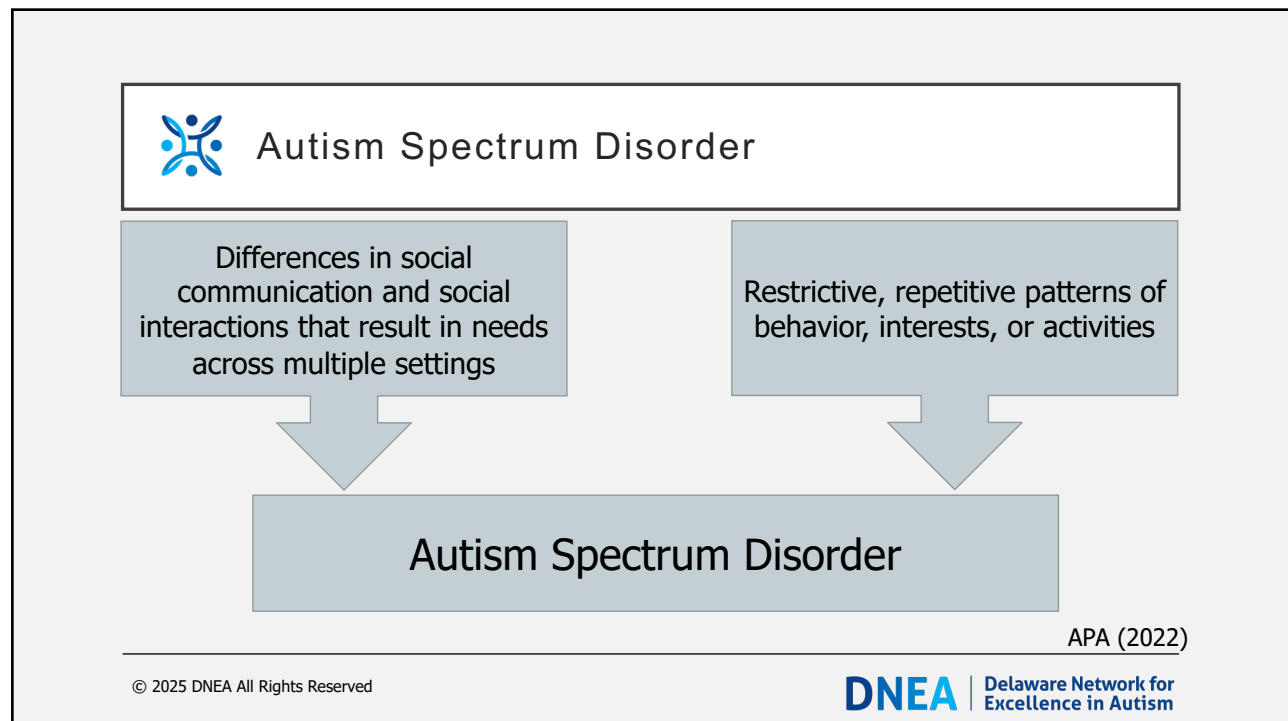
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Models of Disability

Medical Model

- The person needs to be fixed
- Clinical and medical roots
- Professionals are experts in disability

Social Model


- Disability is seen as one aspect of a person's identity
- A mismatch between the disabled person and the environment
- Change the environment and society rather than people with disabilities



“How people think about disability affects how they feel about disability.”

(Olkin, 2022)

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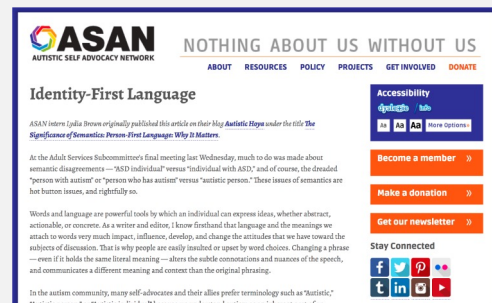
Respect Language Preferences

Person-first Language

- Person WITH a disability
- Person WITHOUT a disability

Identity-first Language

- Disabled person
- Non-disabled person



Autistic Self Advocacy Network (2022)

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Changing Perceptions and Language

Ableist Term	Preferred Language
Non-Communicative; non-verbal	Nonspeaking or describe how the person communicates
Co-morbid	A person with autism has
High/low functioning	Describe specific strengths and needs and acknowledge the level of support needed varies across areas
Autism as a puzzle	Autism as part of neurodiversity
Autism as an epidemic	Autism as increasingly recognized and diagnosed.
At risk of autism	May be autistic; increased likelihood of being autistic
Cure or treatment	Specific support or service
Special needs or handicapped	Person with a disability

(e.g., Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Monk et al., 2022)

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Phrases that should not be used

- “My People”
- “My Kids”
- “My Caseload”
- “The mom says...” or “Mom, what do you think?”
- “The Disabled”
- “Stricken with...”, “Suffers from...”



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Disability Etiquette: Social Courtesies

- Speak directly to the person, not their interpreter or companion
 - If a person is situated lower than you, take a seat or move back so the person does not need to look up
- Treat adults with disabilities as you would other adults; do not patronize, speak louder, or treat the person like a child



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Disability Etiquette: Social Courtesies

- Use plain language when speaking; do not interrupt a person when they are speaking
- Identify yourself if speaking to a person with a visual impairment each time you enter the room; it may be helpful to narrate your actions

(ASAN, 2021; PLAIN, 2011; Public Law 111-274)



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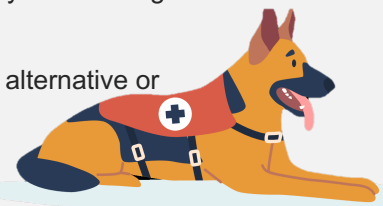
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Disability Etiquette: Devices and Support Animals

- Devices and wheelchairs should not be touched, leaned upon, or manipulated without permission
 - Provide adequate space for a person to maneuver
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; Titles II and III) requires that service animals be permitted in medical facilities
 - Service animals should not be touched or spoken to when they are working
 - Service dogs walk on the left, so you should walk on the right
- A person should always have access to their devices, including alternative or augmentative communication devices

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Communication is a Human Right!






(Astoria Film Festival, 2021)

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A Little More About Plain Language

Access is a Civil Right: Writing and speaking in plain language helps to make sure information is accessible to all people


- Plain language is a style of writing or speaking that is easily understandable by anybody
- With plain language, people can understand information the first time they read or hear it
- Complex ideas are broken down into short sentences and commonly used words



(ASAN, 2021; PLAIN, 2011; Public Law 111-274)

Slide adopted from: Steinbrecher et al., 2024

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The Power of Plain Language

Plain language is a style of writing that is accessible and easy to understand.

Join the DNEA for a **one-hour** workshop to learn about plain language and basic tips you can use to make your writing more accessible.



April 22 from
noon to 1:00pm



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Training Agenda

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Overview

- Disability
- Inclusive Disability Language & Practices
- **Ableism**
- What is Neurodiversity?
- Neurodiversity-Affirming Tips
- Resources & Questions

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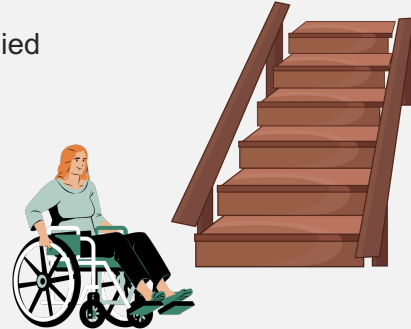
What is Ableism?

- Ableism is a type of discrimination in which a person is treated unfairly because of their disability
- Rooted in societal norms that prioritize able-bodied and neurotypical individuals
- It can be intentional or unintentional.

(Campbell, 2009; Nario-Redmond, 2020)

- Affects education, employment, healthcare, and social interactions

(Dolmage, 2017; Garcia, 2021)



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"I thought telling my classmate that she doesn't *look* disabled would make her feel better about her disability..."

Stigma

"My class had an activity where I had to wear a blindfold to learn what it's like to be blind. It was so scary! I needed to reach my hands out to feel around for everything. I feel so bad for people who are actually blind."

Activities Meant to Increase "Awareness"

"I think it takes a really special kind of person to be willing to raise a child with a disability."

Language

"I couldn't believe Barbara decided to keep her pregnancy after finding out the baby has Down syndrome – how unfair to them both!"

Culture

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DNEA Disrupting Ableism Resources

**Research Recap:
Avoiding Ableist Language**

**DNEA Resource Guide
for Professionals**



DISRUPTING ABLEISM

Disrupting Ableism Workshop: Join the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism (DNEA) as they host Dr. Priya Lalvani as she discusses ableism and what it means to disrupt it.

Article Reference: Bettina Beutel, K. Kapp, S. K. Lester, J. N. Sasson, N. J. A. Hand, B. N. (2021). Avoiding ableist language: Suggestions for autism researchers. *Autism in Adulthood*, 3(1), 18–29. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0014>

Ableism is discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities and people perceived as disabled. Ableism characterizes people as defined by their disabilities as inferior to people without an identified disability. It's important that professionals understand what ableism is, reflect on the language they use in their communication, and use non-ableist language alternatives to describe autism and autistic people.

Language and meanings are constantly evolving, what appears in the table below as recommendations may be inappropriate in some current or future contexts. Ableist discourses are not always reducible to terminology, so it would be possible to avoid using any of the terms in the table that are recommended against and still be perpetuating ableism through language choices.

Potentially Ableist Terms/ Discourses and Suggested Alternatives	Current Ableist Terms	Suggested Alternatives
Special interests	Special interests	Focused or passionate interest, areas of interest or expertise
Special needs	Special needs	Describe the specific needs of the individual
Challenging behavior, disruptive behavior, problem behavior, abnormal behavior	Challenging behavior, disruptive behavior, problem behavior, abnormal behavior	Specific description of their behavior (flapping, bumping, stimming, meltdowns, self-injury)
High/low functioning	High/low functioning	Describe the individual's strengths and needs, acknowledge the level of support needed
At risk for autism	At risk for autism	Increase likelihood, chance of autism
Suffers from autism	Suffers from autism	Has autism, is autistic
Comorbid (unless used in a medical or diagnostic setting)	Comorbid (unless used in a medical or diagnostic setting)	Co-occurring
Autism symptoms	Autism symptoms	Describe their characteristics, features, traits
Treatment	Treatment	Support, services, educational strategies
Normal, typical kids, healthy	Normal, typical kids, healthy	Neurotypical, nonautistic, individuals without disabilities
Cure, recovery, optimal outcome	Cure, recovery, optimal outcome	Describe goals of the individual

Table reproduced with permission, from Bettina Beutel et al., 2021

Additional resource guides at: <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/>
Research Recaps (updates from the autism literature brought to you by the DNEA).

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Disrupting Ableism Webinar

Research Recap: Avoiding Ableist Language Resource Guide


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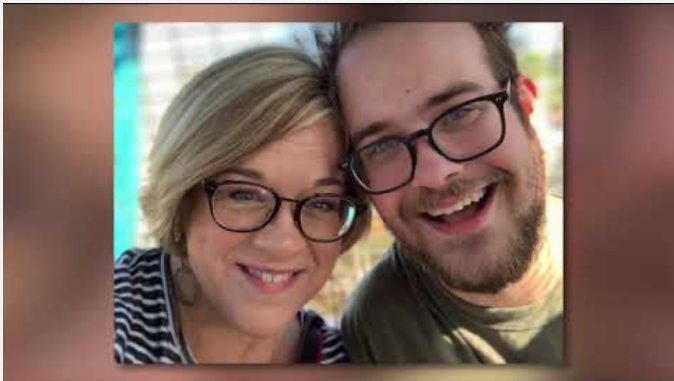
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Video: Disability Pride Living My Best Life Mason






(Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council, 2021)

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What is Neurodiversity?

- **Neurodiversity** refers to natural differences in the brain that can lead people to experience and interact with the world in various ways
 - These differences are not considered “right” or “wrong.”
 - Example use: “Our workplace values neurodiversity and works to accommodate and support all employees.”
- **Neurotypical** people generally behave and process information in ways that are considered standard or typical
 - Example use: “John’s communication skills and social interactions are typical for his age; these qualities are often associated with neurotypical people.”

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What is Neurodiversity?

- **Neurodivergent** people see and understand the world around them differently than neurotypical people
 - Example diagnoses: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD); attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
 - *Example use:* “Neurodivergent students often have unique views and strengths that can help create classrooms that are diverse and open to everyone.”
- **Self-identification** may occur when people identify themselves as being neurodivergent without having a formal diagnosis
 - May occur when a person has difficulty getting an appropriate assessment or if a person does not want a formal assessment
 - *Example use:* “Molly, who self-identifies as having autism, joined an online group for people who identify as neurodivergent.”

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- Disability
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- **Neurodiversity-Affirming Tips**
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What Does it Mean to be Neurodiversity-Affirming?

- Acknowledging and respecting the diverse ways in which individuals experience neurodivergence
- Emphasize acceptance, understanding, and support
- Recognizing and valuing different ways of thinking, learning, and processing information
- Promotes inclusivity and celebrates neurodiversity as a natural variation of the human experience.



We need to view neurodivergent people as experts about themselves.

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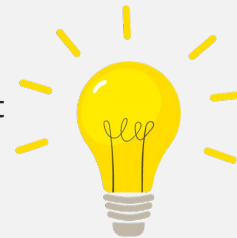
Tips for Neurodiversity-Affirming Care

- **Learn more about autistic culture!**

Read articles, books, or personal stories written by autistic people. Engage with autistic communities through online forums and social media. Attend workshops and training that feature autistic speakers

- **Partner with autistic people!**

When working on a project that involves autism, get input from autistic people – ask them what they think about your ideas



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Tips for Neurodiversity-Affirming Care

- **Respect language differences!**

Ask someone if they prefer person or identity-first language and do your best and use their preference of *someone with autism* and/or *an autistic person*

- **Use a person-centered approach!**

Focus on improving quality of life rather than trying to make a person look "less autistic" or forcing them to behave in a standard or typical way



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SUICIDE & CRISIS
LIFELINE




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Questions?

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