

# Neurodivergence in the Workplace: A session for HR practitioners Session 2

## Feedback, Performance and Culture



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# Course aims

2

- Creating supportive environments that set neurodivergent employees up for long-term success – what does it mean to be neurodivergent-affirming?
- Feedback, Performance & Culture
- Good Practice examples & Top Tips: Practical strategies and real-world examples of what works.

# Neurodivergent-affirming core principles

## MENU

This page can be used to navigate this document.



Click on the subheading for more information

### Prioritise

- Lived-experience
- Intersectionality
- Accepting difference

### Support

- Self-advocacy
- Autonomy
- Adjustments

### Adapt

- Processes
- Communication
- Environment



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# Prioritise

## Lived experience

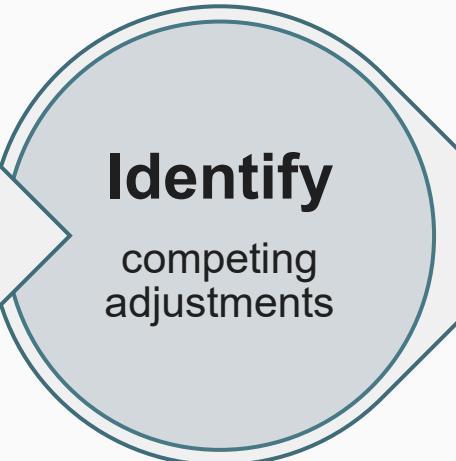
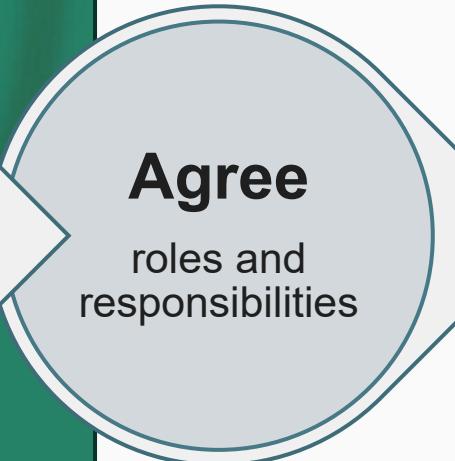
- Assign senior leader role-modelling and visibility
- Appropriately empower employee resource groups and networks
- Provide inclusive options for participation

### Thinking point

Do you think that HR presence/monitoring of network discussions supports or inhibits open and meaningful discussion?



# Managing competing needs



UP NEXT:  
Staff Networks Film



# Staff Networks film

**2 minutes  
21 seconds**

Link to full version of film <https://youtu.be/L1DyH2G72To?si=M7Esyd3KGjPwnuAZ>

6



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Empowering organisations so that autistic people can thrive



Return to menu



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# Prioritise

## Intersectionality



- Consider specific cultures and community
  - Consider mental health
  - Consider physical disability



# Autistic and neurodivergent mental health

Re-examining empathy in autism, Autism Research (2022), doi: 10.1002/aur.2794

Association of Amygdala Development with different forms of anxiety in Autism Spectrum Disorder, Andrews et Al (2022)

Anxiety in Asperger's Syndrome: Assessment in Real time (Hare 2014)

Autistica 2030 Anxiety Plan.



Return to menu

8



Autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions aren't 'mental health' conditions

7 out of 10 autistic people have co-occurring mental health difficulties

Autism diagnosis later in-life (21+) is associated with poorer mental health

# Common anxiety triggers –

**\*Alexithymia exacerbates anxiety symptoms (difficulty identifying and/or communicating others and /or own feelings)**

Psychiatric Co-occurring Symptoms and Disorders in Young, Middle-Aged, and Older Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Psychiatric disorders in children with ASD: prevalence, comorbidity and associated factors in a population-derived sample.

Sensory-inclusive spaces for autistic people: We need to build the evidence base.

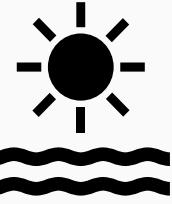


Return to menu

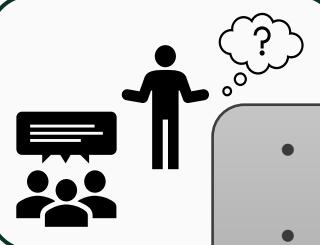
9



- not enough time
- too early
- late
- too long



- no escape to quiet room or to outside
- unable to use sensory equipment



- being misunderstood
- needing to mask
- misunderstanding
- bullying & exclusion



- not enough information
- vague timings
- ambiguous expectations
- incomplete instructions



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# Strategy for supporting someone to recognise when they are anxious and offering support



Return to menu

10

“

How do I know, if you can't tell me, when you are struggling and need support?

What will I see or hear from you?

And when I notice that, then what's the best way to support you?”



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## Accepting difference

- Raising awareness through training campaigns, communications and events
- Visible role-models, accessibility information and reasonable adjustments 'pledge'
- Respect neurodivergent culture

### Video Resource Links

[YouTube - Autistic Culture](#)



Return to menu

12

Support

Self-advocacy

## THE ADJUSTMENTS PLEDGE

**'let us/me know if there is anything that will  
help you participate or to request any  
reasonable adjustments'**



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## Case Study:

Zainab uses a shared workspace.

When they joined the organisation they asked their line manager, Paul, if it was okay for them to use headphones as it helped them to concentrate.

Paul refused this request on “Health and Safety grounds” and not being able to hear the phone ring.

Zaineb is having some real challenges in the office due to noise levels and the lighting. They told Paul last week of their problems.

Paul told Zaineb not to “be so daft” and then went on to challenge them about the quality of their work and failing to get work in on time.

**What should Paul have considered and at what point?**

**How should this situation be handled properly?**





# Case Study: Best-practice approaches

## Adjustments pledge

Please get in touch with (named person), email address, telephone number, to discuss any reasonable adjustments we may be able to make for you.

- sensory plan, showing quiet room, should be provided for all before starting work, with pre-tours of any shared spaces
- any request for a different way of working should prompt a supportive conversation about any other adjustments that may be needed, and the line manager requesting the support of HR
- any refusal of an arrangement by a line manager in isolation shouldn't occur, but instead be referred to HR for support and the input of senior managers, budget holders, decision makers, EDI specialists and external specialists sought. There are many ways to mitigate for not hearing a phone, eg, flashing light, call on computer with visual notification, noise cancelling headphones never fully cut-out noise, adjusting role duties so no phone answering is required – and also for any health and safety implications such as bespoke evacuation plan/buddy in emergencies etc.
- Paul telling Zaineb not to “be so daft” is potentially harassment which is a criminal act, and challenging performance in this case will likely trigger a complaint/grievance against Paul and undue suffering for the employee – no improvement notices or plans should ever be introduced without checking first if the employee has all the training and any relevant reasonable adjustments.
- All issues would have been prevented with an adjustments pledge on the job advert, all induction/new starter information and also with an onboarding conversation about how to support and best ways of working from the start.



# Support

## Video resources

[YouTube - Monday morning  
- working styles](#)

## UP NEXT: Film

[YouTube - Remote working](#)



# Autonomy

Empowering through choice, for example..

- Working arrangements
- Communication and interaction

## Thinking point

How can you ensure that your RTO mandate doesn't negatively affect your disabled employees' rights?





## Downloadable Resource

[https://www.autentic.uk/  
workplace-reasonable-  
adjustments-passport-  
w-r-a-p](https://www.autentic.uk/workplace-reasonable-adjustments-passport-w-r-a-p)



## Reasonable adjustments



Return to menu

17

Create a **reasonable adjustments process** including **flexible ways to request** them - and **ensure that everyone is aware** of it - in much the same way that you do for complaints.

### Thinking point

Is there fit-for purpose training and support in place for decision makers?

Is decision making transparent and time-bound?



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Disclosure/Knowledge:

template is needed

A template to request  
adjustments to LM

Guidance for LM's/employees is  
developed once the process and  
policy has been agreed

# So what should a best-practice reasonable adjustments process look like?..



Return to menu

Supportive conversation:

Guidance /template is needed

Meeting should incl. line manager  
and/or representative from HR

Develop guidance on structuring  
these conversations if necessary

Refer to in-house/external  
specialists to identify adjustments  
and document employee self-  
reported effective adjustments

A template should be developed  
to document identified reasonable  
adjustments

Decision making: Guidance /template is needed

Requests considered by LM and documented.

Where the LM declines a request refer to panel

Panels include the LM, HR and business leader

Panels refer to specialist when assessing efficacy/and  
employee's self-report.

Template to inform the employee of what adjustments  
can be taken forward, and what will be referred

Decision timelines : 14 days from request to LM, further  
14 days for panel meeting, additional 14 days to gather  
expert input etc.

Inform outcomes, clearly and in writing, with decision  
making rational



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# Additional specialist support for identifying reasonable adjustments



Return to menu

“

My autistic colleague and I both had workplace assessments carried out by the organisations' occupational health provider. Both of our assessments recommended the exact same adjustments, but we are completely different autistic people and the adjustments we need are also completely different!.” (Autistic charity worker)

- **Access to work** – depends on the assessor, can be inconsistent or not specialised (carrying out a ‘tick-box’ exercise that potentially harmfully stereotypes the person a recommends ineffective adjustments or doesn’t consider other co-occurring conditions)
- **General Occupational Health Providers** – inconsistent in the quality or level of specialism and person-centred approach (same as above)
- **Specialist Occupational Health providers**
  - Lexxic - neurodivergence specialists
  - Exceptional Individuals – autism specialist
- **Independent specialist autism workplace assessors** – may or may not be able to consider other ND conditions, health conditions, mental health conditions etc.
- **We recommend ThinkDIF for workplace assessments**



<https://thinkdif.uk/>



# HR Case Study



[Return to menu](#)

Paul, who line manages Zainab, has contacted you for advice and guidance, and sets out his issues with Zainab's performance - which is causing Paul a great deal of additional stress, as well as meaning that he is unable to meet his KPI's without placing a lot of additional work on other members of the team.

Paul is open and expressing that he is feeling very frustrated towards Zainab for not putting the effort in that other team members do and expecting special treatment.

Paul explains that he feels that the role Zainab is currently performing is outside of Zainab's capabilities, even though they performed well in the interview.

Zainab's recent sickness absence records show that they are increasingly missing days in work, and self-reporting that this absence is due to 'exhaustion'. Zainab has emailed you around the same time as Paul's contact, to ask for support and reporting that they are being harassed by Paul and being unfairly treated.

**What actions would you put in place to support both Paul and Zainab, with the aim of resolving this situation?**

# HR Case Study Recommended action



[Return to menu](#)

- **Don't waste time getting assessments done or referring to occupational health to 'ratify' the adjustments that have been requested by the employee.** Zainab has reliably identified an adjustment that works for them and explained why it works and the issue it overcomes.
- **Decide whether the adjustment is reasonable** according to the 4 legal tests (employer code 6.28):
  - Is it possible
  - Do you have the time, money and people
  - How effective is it
  - Is the disruption it causes acceptable
- **Mediation isn't appropriate in this situation**, although formal acknowledgement of the poor handling of the situation may prevent Zainab from raising further complaints. We recommend that the decision is made about the adjustment ASAP and communicate clearly with the employee the reason why the adjustment can't be made if that is the case.
- **Paul needs training or retraining urgently.**



## Recommended action

The following is a list of specialist services and therapists that may be helpful to explore:

<https://neurodivergenttherapists.com/>  
<https://www.thrivingautistic.org/>  
<https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-and-human-rights/mental-health-and-autism/>  
<https://www.authentistic.uk/>

- **Zaineb needs support for their well-being and mental health** - traditional EAP may not be adequate to support them, and more specialist autism accessible and adapted therapy should be procured and paid for by the employer if the EAP programme is not appropriate. Ask Zainab if they have had any therapy before, to try and ascertain whether phone/video 'talking therapy' helps. Modified DBT (Dialectical behavioural therapy modified with good visual supporting material and supportive structure put in place) and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprogramming) are all better approaches for poor mental health i.e. strategy/plan based approaches.
- **Develop a reasonable adjustments request process** and brief it out so that line managers aren't making decisions in isolation.
- **Suspend or do not start any formal performance improvement plans or competency measures** until the reasonable adjustments request has been addressed formally - and if the adjustment is deemed reasonable, then allow 3-6 months to see an improvement in performance



- **Carry out language and accessibility reviews**, on all written and visual information, including about policies and processes, for example, a competency framework document or sickness absence policy
- **Review the procedure or process itself** to ensure that is accessible for all



# Employee feedback:

## THINK

Not every complaint warrants a discussion with the employee to correct behavior.

It may be that the culture or attitude of the person complaining needs adjusting

OR

It may be that the organisation is at fault for not providing clear policies or guidance to employees on the matter complained about.



[Return to menu](#)

- **If addressing unacceptable behaviour, challenge yourself** – has there been clear communication to the person that the specific behaviour is not acceptable (referring to policies, processes and written information supplied to the person) – are they worded in a clear and literal way so as to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding? If not, then your conversation will likely include explaining that the information wasn't clear and that you are providing further clear communication around what's expected for the person.
- **If asked to address 'unacceptable' behaviour, challenge yourself** – is this a clash of autistic versus non-autistic culture? A good guide is if the behaviour is 'inappropriate' but not unacceptable, then this is likely a clash of culture and doesn't warrant addressing but rather an offer of support to the person complaining.



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# Revisiting effective communication adjustments in the HR context



[Return to menu](#)

- **Prepare written and visual information explaining clearly and literally what the conversation is about** – this may include redundancy notice, addressing unacceptable behaviour etc.
- **Avoid using ambiguous and vague phrases and words** such as ‘we would prefer that you’, ‘appropriate/inappropriate’ when addressing behaviour – and avoiding all ambiguous communication in general. Clear and direct messages can and should be delivered sensitively, but with no room for them to be misinterpreted or misunderstood.
- **Ask the person what their preferred way to receive your message is** (often this is in writing for difficult and sensitive conversations).
- **If a verbal conversation is taking place, offer to schedule at a time that is supportive for them** wherever possible, and provide a clear agenda in advance.
- **Clarify any information that may have previously been vague or ambiguous and set out clear expectations going forward**, support any verbal messages by providing written and visual information.
- **Provide support for the person to meet the expectations that you are setting out** – this may involve referring to an internal or external specialist organisation to support the person.
- **Offer an opportunity after some additional processing time (1-2 days)** for the person to ask for any further clarifications.



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# Guidance on adapting communication for stressed autistic colleagues

Often, the first point of contact for an employee with HR, after joining is because something has gone wrong or is starting to go wrong.

Autistic employees often communicate very differently when they are stressed, and it's important to set boundaries, as well as remembering that there are different outwards expressions of anxiety in the autistic community.

These different expressions often include repeat emailing, emailing very senior staff without following a complaints process, and providing detailed and lengthy accounts in writing.



[Return to menu](#)

- **Explain clearly in writing, what you can and can't help with, and how the person will be informed if these boundaries change**
- **Explain clearly, in writing, your expected response time to communications, and how the person will be informed of any changes to this response time**
- **You may want to explain, that you will only be able to respond to communications if they ask you a direct question or specifically ask for you to action something, if the person sends repeated communication with seemingly no specific questions or requests for actions. You may also want to ask the person if they have a specific question or something they want you to action (if you are able to).**

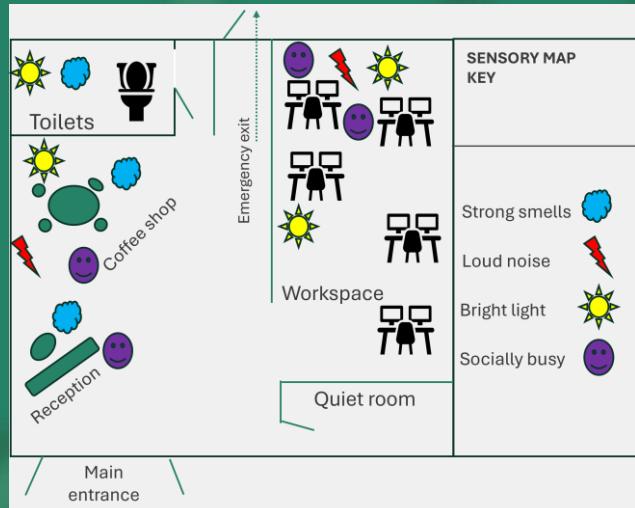


Return to menu

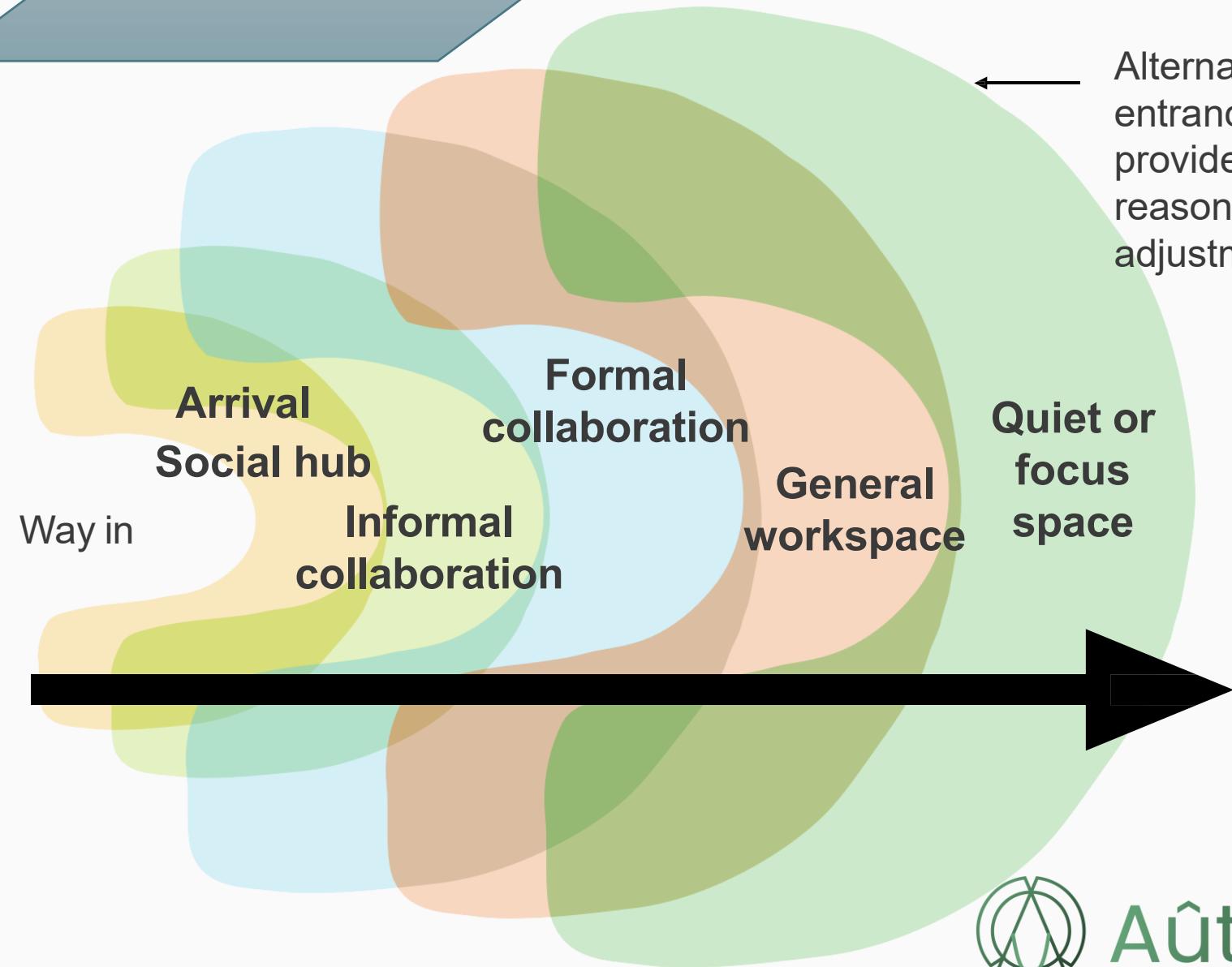
# Adapt

## Resource

[Download: quiet room design guide](#)



## Environment



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# Course summary



Return to menu

28

- Throughout this course we've explored how to create supportive, neuroinclusive and affirming environments – by working through a framework of core principles and applying universal design throughout.
- We've learnt helpful strategies and practical examples of how to give feedback when it is appropriate (including deciding whether it is appropriate), to consider performance & also to challenge and positively change organisational culture and lead by example.



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Return to menu

## Employer resources:

<https://www.autentic.uk/resources-for-employers>

Get in touch



<https://www.autentic.uk/contact>



The ThinkDif Neurofriendly pledge supports businesses to identify gaps, take manageable steps over 12 months, and be recognised publicly for their commitment.