

# Our Voice Matters

## Neurodiversity Differences not deficits

July 2023

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### A note from the Engagement Team

We are proud to share this edition of our co-produced newsletter. As part of our ongoing commitment to hearing from a diverse range of people about their experiences, we are keen to share articles written by our residents which reflect a range of experiences, raising the profile of the neurodiverse community and experience in Barnet.

This June was Tourette's awareness month, and on the 18th June Autistic Pride Day was celebrated. Also in June, two Involvement Board representatives joined the engagement team to present to a group of over 70 care providers in the borough on the topic of autism. They delivered an informative presentation, dispelling some common myths, and giving some valuable tips along the way. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and our residents look forward to coproducing training for practitioners and providers on autism.

Please note: the articles reflect the opinions and experiences of the individual residents who contributed. The language might not be consistent between articles, and this reflects the individual experience and style of the writer. All articles have been anonymised.



## Myths about Neurodiversity/ Autism

### • Myth 1: Autistic people do not have empathy.

In the past it was believed that autistic people don't have empathy for others. While autistic people struggle to guess what non-autistics may be thinking (cognitive empathy), this goes both ways. Autistic people do have cognitive empathy for fellow autistic people. However non-autistic people do not have cognitive empathy for autistic individuals. This is because autistic people and non-autistic people have vastly different experiences of the world around them, and empathy relies on shared experiences.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/double-empathy>

### • Myth 2: Autism is a disease that should be "cured" or "treated"

Many people view autism as a disease, but don't acknowledge that autistic people have been pivotal in shaping the world as it is today. Many of the great inventors and scientists have been posthumously identified as autistic, such as Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Henry Cavendish. Autism is viewed as a disorder because autistic people often show signs of distress (meltdowns) and struggle to fit in to society, for example with lack of speech. When the environment is adjusted and autistic people are no longer in distress, they can think in ways that non-autistics cannot (e.g. superior pattern recognition, ability to hyperfocus on one topic), and are therefore vital to both STEM and security services.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC539373/>

### • Myth 3: Autistic people don't make eye contact

Lots of autistic people do make eye contact, despite the discomfort it causes. For autistic people eye contact is often experienced as intrusive and threatening. Autistic people learn to look at people in the eyes, to fit in socially, but it often causes the person difficulty in following the conversation and feels unpleasant. Autistic people can have meaningful conversations without making eye contact.

<https://embrace-autism.com/autistics-and-eye-contact-its-asynchronous/>

### • Myth 4: Autism is a linear spectrum from 'high functioning' to 'low functioning'

Autism affects people in many ways. Non-autistic people often categorise autistic people with a functioning level based on what they observe. This is misleading because autistic people can act like non-autistics, but still need a lot of support in other areas such as sensory regulation and executive functioning. Non-speaking autistic people are often perceived as "low functioning", however when given alternative methods of communication they show complex understanding of the world around them and with a high IQ and verbal reasoning skills.

<https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/why-highlow-functioning-labels-are-hurtful-to-autistic-people>

# Helpful Contacts



Inclusion Barnet is a peer-led charity and Deaf and Disabled People's Organisation (DDPO). Based in Barnet, North London. With a variety of services available such as Touchpoint peer support, Healthwatch Barnet, and Barnet Voice for Mental health.

**Contact details:** tel 020 3475 1314  
Text message only: 07719 105 534  
[info@inclusionbarnet.org.uk](mailto:info@inclusionbarnet.org.uk)



S4Nd is a neurodivergent member-led community-based organisation. They provide a range of member services including events and activities. All the activities are designed and planned by members. They also run a range of therapeutic activities that offer opportunities to connect with like-minded people.

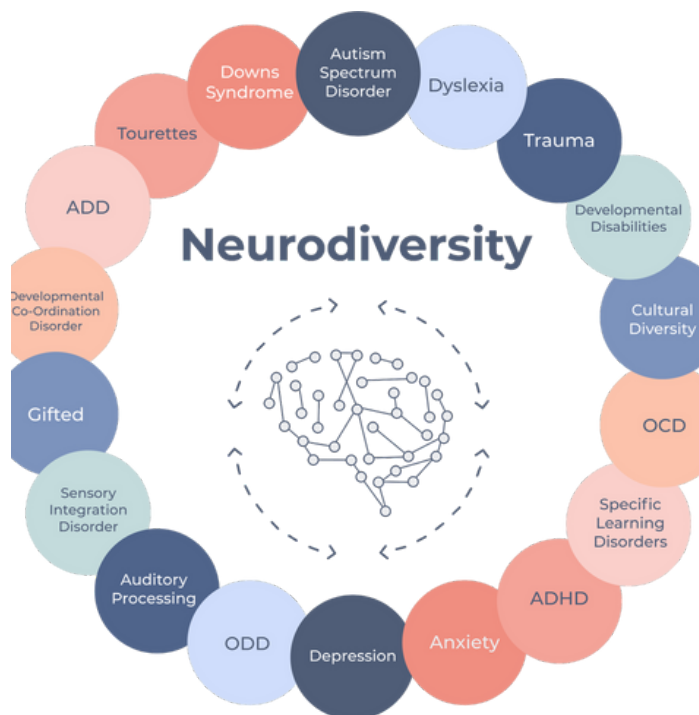
**Contact details:** [enquiries@s4nd.org](mailto:enquiries@s4nd.org)



Barnet Mencap offer a range of support and events for children and adults with a learning disability, autistic people and their families, who live in the London Borough of Barnet.

**Contact details: Tel: 020 8349 3842**  
**Fax: 020 8349 2192**  
**Email: [projectsupport@barnetmencap.org.uk](mailto:projectsupport@barnetmencap.org.uk)**

# "NEURODIVERSITY IS MY SUPER POWER"



# Through the eyes of someone with Dyslexia

## Dyslexia! is it a disability or an ability?

A lot of people have the belief that dyslexia is a negative condition and people with dyslexia are dumb or stupid, but we just think in a different way to others.

I was diagnosed with dyslexia in my early teens and was left feeling like I was going to struggle in life because of it.

In my later life I have noticed that I'm not dumb or stupid, in fact I count myself as gifted. I'm able to see things visually and picture the task ahead of me before they have even been completed. A few years ago, I did a course in electronics and realised that I was able to see the path and where it needed to go to get to the correct source and that a lot of other people couldn't visualise it the same way as me.

Looking back on my life, I can pick out many other benefits to this condition. I have always been a lover of jigsaws and puzzles. From the age of three I was completing 100-piece jigsaws, and now I can complete a 1000-piece Jigsaw within just over a day. I can also memorise the picture and can tell where each piece goes without hardly looking at the box. I love being creative and again my dyslexia helps me with this a great deal. I can visualize how I want my projects to end up and what I need to do to achieve it. For example, I enjoy and can sew. all I need is to do is see a piece of fabric and I can work out straight away what to make and the process that I need to take to achieve the final product. I sometimes struggle with my reading, but I've got into audiotapes and it's as if I'm watching a movie as I listen to them. This has led me on to writing stories and I get so absorbed in what I'm writing about and picture the character's, their family and even see them as real people and with their own lives.

One challenge I've found with dyslexia is remembering numbers and at one point I was struggling on remembering bus numbers, but I found a way round this. I quickly learnt to memorise the shape and style of the buses I needed to take. Even though I struggle remembering numbers, math's has never been a problem for me and with every challenge I can find a visual way round it. I've even developed my own type of shorthand to help me remember things and I've almost completed my A level math's with hardly any tuition.

A lot of famous or important people in this world have dyslexia and use it for their benefit in their careers, such as engineers, industrial and graphic designers, people who work in construction or architecture and even actors and actresses use their dyslexia to get into their character's role. So if you know someone of have been diagnosed with dyslexia don't worry we're not as dumb and stupid as you may think.



## **This is my story: everyone has a unique experience.**



Stephenson's Rocket Steam train located in the Science Museum

As a kid I was particularly good at drawing things from memory, particularly The Rocket steam train which I drew in intricate detail. I had lots of coping mechanisms when I was younger but did not realise at the time. When I hit my teens, I followed my social crowd, and was quite rebellious.

I was working before my diagnosis. I was good at my job and enjoyed helping people. Looking back, I was a bit robotic; I was masking all day and trying to fit in. My doctor picked up there could be something more underlying. I was referred for potential attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and when the treatment did not work, I was eventually diagnosed with autism. I also have difficulty experiencing, identifying, and expressing emotions. For example, I can know I am feeling emotional, but I am not sure what the feelings are and how to identify them. When my mum passed away, I was waiting for the 'grief' everyone talks about but did not know how it should feel. When I was diagnosed this was a relief to me and I received funding for specialist treatment which changed my life. My fears and phobias were challenged in a controlled environment. I cannot say enough how much my treatment helped me in understanding autism and coping with the diagnosis. I even got extra funding so I could mentor the Council about autism.

Having a health condition can affect your daily life. Autistic adults are often hypersensitive to pain, or conversely, might not be able to recognise and process body signals the same as a neurotypical person.

I find that people can make judgements or assumptions easily. At my GP surgery the receptionist refused to talk to me unless I took my sunglasses off. I wear these as I am hypersensitive to light. I get fed up with having to justify myself to people all the time. If you see someone wearing headphones or sunglasses it might well be because of sensory sensitivity to sound or light.

When I approach a building like the council, it feels like approaching the 'Star-ship Enterprise.' I do not know who is in the spaceship, what they do in the spaceship, and how it all works. Reporting housing issues is overwhelming, especially dealing with different people every time. I often use analogies like this to explain how I am feeling.

Over the years I have been part of various social groups and tried different services;. I found it difficult when the support was short term and finding the right support for me. There is a vast spectrum of autistic people, and we are all different, with different life experiences and preferences. One service might be the right option for some people, but might not suit others, and I feel there needs to be more options, and services and support with a sole focus on autism, rather than for it to be routinely grouped with learning disability support.

I am passionate about raising awareness and advocating for the right support. We need more varied options in Barnet for autism. I hope to continue my work alongside all the other autism advocates in Barnet.

## Key Terms and Definitions



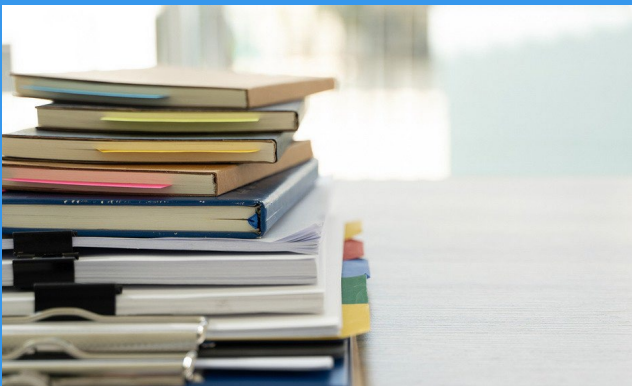
# NEURODIVERSITY NEURODIVERGENT NEUROTYPICAL

**Neurodiversity is the term used to describe a variety of ways that people's brains process information, function, and present behaviourally. Rather than thinking there is something wrong or problematic when some people don't operate similarly to others, celebrating neurodiversity embraces all differences.**

**Neurodivergent is the term for when someone's brain processes, learns, and/or behaves differently from what is considered "typical."**

**Neurotypical, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of "normal."**

## LEARN MORE ABOUT NEURODIVERGENCE



### Books

- **Thinking in Pictures**
- **Funny, You Don't Look Autistic**
- **Avoiding anxiety in autistic adults**
- **Neuroqueer heresies**
- **Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently**
- **Can You See Me?**

Nonfiction books about neurodivergence and the future of neurodiversity include "**NeuroTribes**," "**Neurodiversity: Discovering the Extraordinary Gifts of Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia and Other Brain Differences**," and "**Divergent Mind**."

### Podcast

There are podcasts on the topic for those who prefer to listen to materials. These include **The Neurodiversity Podcast**, **Neurodiverging**, and **Sensory Matters**.

