



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Talking about neurodiversity

**Respectful and inclusive language when working with neurodivergent employees.**

## Knowing what language to use

Language in the neurodiversity space changes frequently. It's always best to ask a neurodivergent person what language they prefer.

If someone tells you they're neurodivergent, you could ask something like:

- "What kind of language do you prefer others use about ADHD?"
- "Thanks for sharing that with me. What language do you prefer around autism?"

This is because the words one neurodivergent person uses to describe themselves may differ from what another neurodivergent person uses. You can show respect when you ask about language preferences.

Language preferences can depend on if a neurodivergent person:

- sees their neurodivergence as part of their identity
- sees themselves as having a disability.

At the time of writing, the [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#) covers the neurodivergent identities we have included in this toolkit as disabilities in Australia. This protects neurodivergent people from discrimination based on their neurodivergence – even if they don't identify as disabled.

## Identity vs condition vs disorder

The medical system names and defines neurodivergent conditions, which is why they have 'disorder' in the name. For example:

- Autism is diagnosed as Autism Spectrum Disorder
- ADHD is diagnosed as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
- Dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia are diagnosed as Specific Learning Disorders
- Dyspraxia is diagnosed as Developmental Coordination Disorder.

Many neurodivergent people feel these names have negative connotations or don't describe their experience, so they may not use the word 'disorder'.

For example, some neurodivergent people may prefer terms such as 'differences' or 'difficulties' rather than a 'disorder'.

Other people may use the words 'condition' or 'identity' to describe their neurodivergence.

Whereas some neurodivergent people feel strongly they do have a disorder.

Always check with the person what language they use.

## Person-first vs identity-first language

People have different preferences regarding person-first and identity-first language.

This table shows you some examples of what the difference is:

<b>Person-first example</b>	<b>Identity-first example</b>
Person with autism	Autistic person
Person with ADHD	ADHDer
Person with Dyslexia	Dyslexic person
Person with Dyspraxia	Dyspraxic person
Person with Dyscalculia	Dyscalculic person
Person with Dysgraphia	Dysgraphic person

Some people prefer identity-first language as it acknowledges their neurodivergence as part of who they are.

It can also indicate pride and highlight to others that there is no shame in their neurodivergent identity.

You may notice other public sector resources use person-first language when discussing disability. For example, the [Inclusive Victoria: State Disability Plan 2022 to 2026](#).

In this toolkit, we mostly use identity-first language specific to neurodivergence because:

- many people we consulted on this toolkit preferred this
- many neurodiversity researchers and advocates ask people to do this.

Where we don't use identity-first language, this is because it was the preference of those we consulted.

When working with neurodivergent colleagues, ask what language they prefer. For example:

- “I know some people prefer person-first language and some people prefer identity-first language. What do you prefer?”

## Avoid functioning labels

Don't use functioning labels, such as:

- high functioning
- low functioning.

These categories aren't accurate and can be upsetting or offensive.

In some contexts, you may hear people refer to support needs. For example:

- high support needs
- low support needs.

These may be more accurate. But in the workplace, you shouldn't use these terms unless a neurodivergent employee or colleague wants you to.

## Workplace disclosure

There is no [legal obligation](#) for a person to share they're neurodivergent at work.

If an employee is neurodivergent, it's their choice if they share this with others in the workplace. An employee may tell everyone, some people or no one.

Never ask an employee if they're neurodivergent, even if you suspect this or want to be supportive.

If you'd like to be supportive, make it known that employees can disclose to you and receive support. Promote a neuroinclusive workplace and be clear you won't tolerate discrimination.

Some people may have had a negative experience sharing their neurodivergence in the past. Others may not realise they're neurodivergent or may only have a recent diagnosis of a neurodivergent condition.

How much a neurodivergent employee decides to share about themselves may change over time.

Employees may choose not to share they're neurodivergent if:

- they don't feel it's safe to share their neurodivergence (for example, some people may worry about being discriminated against)
- they don't think it's something relevant to share.

"I recently disclosed my identity publicly for the first time. It was an impulse decision and something I regretted shortly after making the disclosure. I was comfortable to speak with some trusted colleagues and my manager about my feelings. My executive director who was present at the time followed up later to check in on how I was feeling – that was a wonderful validation of how frightening it can be to share this kind of information (because once you do, you lose control over how some people will perceive and respond to you) and was a show of understanding and support." – Neurodivergent employee

## What to do when someone shares they're neurodivergent

"I think for me, how I would like the other person to respond when I disclose really depends. If I've brought it up casually I might want them to not make a big deal out of it and to be able to just move on, but if I go to my manager specifically to disclose and they go, "well, why are you telling me?", it's sort of a bit hurtful even if they mean well because obviously I'm telling you because I wanted you to know! Maybe I need adjustments or maybe I just want them to keep it in mind so they don't get the wrong impression about me." – Neurodivergent employee

When someone tells you they're neurodivergent, how you respond is important.

Always get an employee's consent if you want to share that they're neurodivergent with others.

It can be helpful if you:

- thank the person for sharing with you, as this shows you're aware the employee has shared personal information with you
- ask if you can do anything to support the employee, as this shows you're aware that neurodivergent employees may benefit from support
- check in with the employee later to see how they're feeling, as sharing one's identity can make someone feel vulnerable.

It can be harmful if you:

- praise someone for being neurodivergent and/or sharing their identity (for example, if you say "You're so brave for telling me", this can imply you feel being neurodivergent is a negative thing)
- say you thought their behaviour was because of negative traits (for example, if you say "I thought you were just being lazy")
- tell them they don't look or act neurodivergent (for example, if you say "You don't look autistic")
- dismiss what they say (for example, if you say "It's not a big deal" or "That doesn't matter to me")
- share the employee's neurodivergent identity with other employees without their consent.

"Recently, a colleague mentioned in a group email that I was courageous and brave for sharing that I have ADHD. I found this to be offensive and a little embarrassing. However, I'm sure they didn't mean anything negative by it. The next time I met with them, I spoke to them a little about ADHD, to help them better understand why I am open about my neurodivergence." – Neurodivergent employee

You won't always get it right the first time, as you won't know what response someone will prefer.

If you say something that someone doesn't like, apologise and don't dwell on it.

"I just need to know that someone is open to learning and takes my preferences or discomfort seriously. When I correct someone about how I like to be referred to I don't want them to be feeling bad about it every time we interact; I think it's best to just acknowledge it, internalise it and move forward." - Neurodivergent employee

## Where to learn more

Here's a list of resources you may find helpful:

- [Autism disclosure: Creating inclusive communities guide \(PDF, 270KB\)](#) has advice for creating a space safe for autistic people to disclose (we don't own or endorse

the content).

- [Why inclusive language matters](#) is a short fact sheet on being inclusive as a manager.
- [Supporting employees with autism to work remotely](#) is a short list of suggestions for supporting autistic employees working from home.