

SHINING LIGHT ON NEURODIVERSITY AND COACHING

Joanna Williams and David Love explore the significance of being neuro-aware as coaches, and begin to unpick what coaches can do to ensure their practice is neuro-inclusive and effective for all.

We are both coaches and came together when Joanna volunteered to be a client of David's as part of his AC-accredited Diploma in Art-based Coaching. The experience sparked David's interest in neurodiversity in coaching and Joanna's interest in art-based working.

'It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognise, accept, and celebrate those differences.' Audre Lorde

Rightly, there is a growing focus of attention on neurodiversity, both in society and in coaching. Typing 'neurodiversity' into Google Trends shows a sharp increase in worldwide interest since 2022. The term was conceptualised in 1998 by Australian sociologist, Judy Singer yet we seem increasingly curious about it. What does this mean for us coaches as we look into our own practice and notice the light every client inherently brings? What may be overshadowing our own potential and, crucially, that of our clients?

Like biodiversity, neurodiversity has always existed. As an evolving field, there are different views, research practices, lived experiences, feelings and unanswered questions. Among researchers, practitioners and neurodivergent people, there is not always full agreement, and norms and expectations continue to evolve. Nevertheless, our aim in this article is to start exploring how we coaches can be more neuroinclusive.

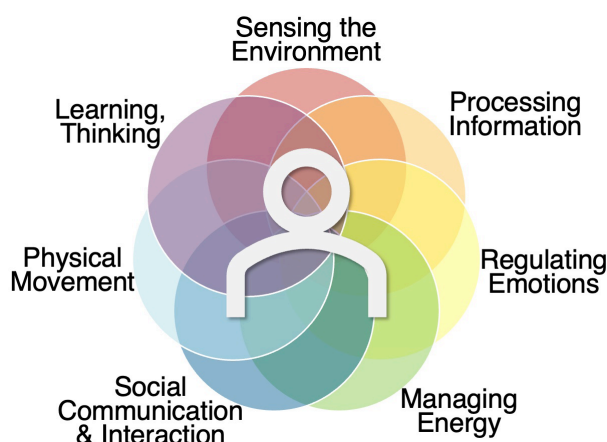
THE CENTRALITY OF LANGUAGE

Definitions of neurodiversity vary and terms are used differently, depending on context and individual preferences. In addition, what is considered linguistically acceptable evolves over time and is also determined by how individuals define their identity.

Neurodiversity

Neurological differences are the infinite, natural variations in every human brain and neurodiversity refers to the spectrum of difference in human experience and functioning. We all experience the world differently: there is no single 'normal' or correct way of living.

Fig. 1: Neurodiversity Differences



Neurodivergence / Neurodivergent / Neurominority

Neurodivergence describes how certain neurotypes deviate from a statistical 'norm' in the experiences listed above. This implies a difference from what is 'typical' (the mean), yet some view the word neurodivergent as 'othering', and terms such as neurodiverse or neurodistinct may be preferred. Importantly, no human being is truly typical or average - the mean is simply a mathematical calculation. As Temple Grandin wrote: 'difference is difference and does not mean "less than"'. Neurominority can be used to describe groups of people with specific experiences or neurotypes, indicating their distinct strengths and challenges.

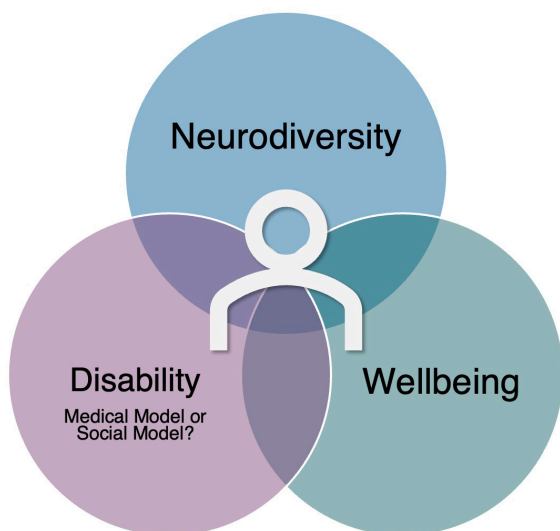
15-20% of the global population is currently estimated to be neurodivergent. **That equates to nearly 1 in 5 people.** Public life is a social construction focused on the majority, whereby a bell curve indicates the 'norm'. This can result in systems or structures being built on the average or majority, consequently excluding minorities (intentionally and unintentionally). This exclusion may be intensified when considering marginalisation and intersectional factors such as gender, age, sexuality, race, religion, disability, and social class. With multiple potential 'labels' in play we cannot make reliable working assumptions about any client – but this is surely the case for everyone we coach. This challenge to our capacity to focus on the whole person with unconditional positive regard can be mitigated by a recognition that the client is the 'expert' about themselves, and our role is to co-create the conditions for that expertise to be constructively mobilised.

The spectrum of experiences means that if you've met one neurodivergent person, you've met one neurodivergent person.

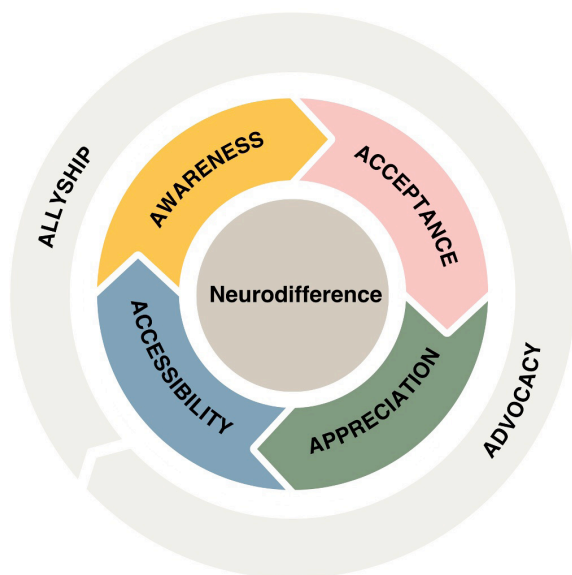
Neurotypes include, but are not limited to, autism/autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, Tourette's, developmental learning disability, acquired neurodivergence (e.g. traumatic brain injury), and highly sensitive persons. Co-occurrence is common, e.g. AuDHD (autism and ADHD). This spectrum of experiences means that if you've met one neurodivergent person, you've met one neurodivergent person.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL COACHING RELATIONSHIP

No two people will have identical lived experiences, nor the same strengths or challenges in seemingly similar circumstances. Good coaches are alert to their assumptions, biases and stereotypes, and take action to address these, and this includes our assumptions about a client's neurotype. Our client may have a diagnosis from childhood or later in life. Alternatively, they may have self-identified as neurodivergent. In addition, some clients will enter coaching with no knowledge of their neurodivergence. Uncertainty is no stranger to coaching - we cannot accurately assume what a person means, yet we can be curious about what something means to that person.

Fig 2: Neurodiversity-Wellbeing-Disability

Neuroinclusion recognises and values neurodiversity and the strengths of neurodifferences. Whether within a learning environment (e.g. coaching) or a workplace, this includes an active practice of being aware of, accepting and appreciating neurominorities, while enabling accessibility. A neuroaffirming approach which continuously pays attention to our client's wellbeing, will form a strong foundation for them to flourish in the coaching relationship. While the concepts of neurodivergence, wellbeing and disability overlap, they are not synonyms. Support, adjustments and wellbeing needs will vary greatly between individuals; some will be employed while others may experience employment barriers. A social model perspective, rather than a medical model, suggests that systemic factors in the environment 'disable' individuals.

Fig 3: 6A Model

SHADOW & LIGHT IN NEURODIVERSITY COACHING

As coaches ourselves we find that W. Timothy Gallwey's coaching equation (performance equals potential minus interference) has value in a consideration of neurodiversity coaching.

Fig 4: Gallwey Equation

As we shine light on the potential of any client, coach or coaching relationship, there can also be shadows that interfere with the performance of each – in workplaces and other settings. Important here is the significance of sustainable performance over time, as opposed to daily 'peak' or unrelenting 'high' performance, which can have damaging impacts on wellbeing. Additionally, conceptualising 'performance' is contextual and highly individualised.

Coaching, which is grounded in a holistic, person-centred approach, holds that each human being inherently has potential. 'Interference' can arise from both individual challenges (e.g. related to one's neurotype, or possible self-doubt), as well as systemic and structural barriers. Obstacles that neurodivergent people face in the workplace or society are important considerations in any coaching relationship, especially when taking into account intersectional implications. In examining any interference, the coach and client can also explore the enablers and contextual adjustments that will unlock potential and performance. The context matters – a person will have both strengths and struggles, but what will dominate can depend on the environment and their relationships with others, which will contribute to shaping their own perceptions of their capabilities.

In a UK study by McDowall et al. respondents stated their main barriers to disclosing their neurodivergence at work were stigma and discrimination. Neurodivergent employees shared a fear of stigma and discrimination from management (64.7%) and from colleagues (55%). Further, 40% of respondents stated there was a lack of knowledgeable staff in the organisation to provide support. While a smaller proportion of respondents (11.3%) reported they did not experience any workplace barriers, the likelihood of experiencing difficulties is high which may contribute to neurominorities masking or camouflaging. Considering these findings individuals may also be worried about stigma or discrimination within coaching relationships, particularly if a coaching engagement is employer-sponsored. Additionally, diagnoses or workplace feedback may have primarily concentrated on 'deficits' or gaps that need 'fixing', with limited focus on the whole person and their strengths. Common references in coaching to 'tools' and 'toolkits' may also serve to amplify a deficit model.

Spotlighting awareness is a first (but not the only) step. Which of our assumptions and biases are in the foreground, or background, of the coaching relationship? As coaches (both within and outside the coaching relationship), we can learn about and become aware of the rich variety of strengths within neurominorities. Raising our awareness does not require a psychology degree or medical knowledge. Curiosity and listening without judgement to the lived experiences of neurodivergent people increases our awareness of their specific strengths, challenges and aspirations as well as the stigma and discrimination neurodivergent individuals may have experienced, or are concerned about facing. Some clients will feel aligned with the strengths narrative, while others may find its extension into 'superpower' terminology reductionist.

ETHICS & CONTRACTING

If a person shares they are autistic, what immediate assumptions come to mind for you? If you're using absolutes such as 'works in IT' or 'only young, white boys', then stereotyping might be present. For example, a 2024 study in The Netherlands reported only 10.7% of autistic employees were working in the Dutch IT sector. However nearly double (20.2%) were reported to be working in healthcare and welfare.

If a client shares their neurotype, is your initial reaction to recommend referral to a medical professional? While coach boundaries, ethics and experience are paramount in exploring whether coaching is the right intervention at a point in time, a knee-jerk reaction may reinforce a deficit-based paradigm, rather than holding space to explore both strengths and challenges.

The Global Code of Ethics shines a light on excellence in the development of coaching, mentoring and supervision practice. While there is no rulebook for every situation, the guidelines outline the importance of factors such as context, contracting, integrity and confidentiality. Specifically, item 2.7 highlights that the setting ensures '*optimal conditions for learning and reflection*'. As coaches, we believe it can be beneficial to pay attention to factors such as different learning and thinking styles, ways of communicating and interacting, information processing preferences, physical movement, and sensory or energy management requirements as all these are at play in any coaching session. Clear contracting before an assignment starts, at the first session, at subsequent meetings and mini-contracting throughout all conversations about these factors takes on particular importance. Creating the conditions for confidentiality and psychological safety is vital, particularly as it may be the first time an individual has shared their neurotype in a work-related context.

KEY MESSAGES – OUR THINKING THUS FAR

Co-creating together has been, and continues to be, a crucial learning experience for us both. We believe that there are positive steps we, and all coaches, can take in the service of neurodivergent clients.

These include:

- acknowledging neurodiversity encompasses everyone
- raising our awareness of neurodiversity and becoming attuned to the kinds of needs and aspirations neurodivergent clients might bring to coaching
- moving from awareness to acceptance, appreciation and accessibility – and being clear about how we demonstrate our commitment in practice
- recognising there are important considerations such as the impact on client's lives of stigma and discrimination and how these might be replicated in the coaching relationship
- working with the ways individual neurodivergent clients self-identify and adopting their language preferences
- strengthening our person-centred philosophy and practices to enable neurodivergent clients to flourish
- co-creating with clients safe learning spaces which emphasise their strengths (without dismissing their challenges)
- paying constant attention to the wellbeing of our clients in different contexts, including the coaching relationship
- offering flexibility in our approaches, adapting to the needs and interests of each client

In a complementary article in the next edition of *Coaching Perspectives* Joanna and David will explore their experiences of the power of an art-based approach in a coaching relationship where a focus on neurodiversity emerged as central to their work.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



David Love is a leadership coach and coach supervisor, mentor and educator who uses art-based approaches, including cartooning, believing in the power of creative methods for generating insights and learning. His coaching clients are leaders and managers in public services and he has a strong commitment to enhancing public value for the benefit of all citizens. As a supervisor he works with teams of in-house coaches in public service organisations, and with individual coaches who work across all sectors. David also designs and facilitates coach development workshops and is *Coaching Perspectives'* cartoonist.

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Joanna Williams is a positive psychology coach, specialises in human and organisational flourishing, and coaches people of all neurological types with a focus on their wellbeing and well-doing. She is neurodivergent, holds a MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology, is an EMCC Senior Practitioner, and runs her coaching and consulting business (Flourish GmbH) in Switzerland. She also works as a Neuroinclusion Consultant for auticon Swiss AG and is committed to supporting organisations and leaders to foster neuroinclusive workplaces across multiple sectors.

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