**How Quarantine Accommodations Benefit Neurodivergent People**

**Free from the “Culture of Normal”**

For divergent thinkers, the pandemic provided an unexpected and unprecedented opportunity to thrive. Radical changes on campus and in the workplace were implemented across all sectors of the economy in response to the nationwide shutdown. With a sigh of relief, neurodivergent (ND) students and employees experienced the benefits of finally having their needs accommodated.

They no longer had to try to fit the mold that often caused them anxiety and stress, a mold that reduced their productivity. This mold was the ‘Culture of Normal’.

The ‘Culture of Normal’ forces neurodiverse thinkers to fit into a work culture that is often in conflict with the way their brains work. The sensory overload of open office environments, noisy communal areas, poor acoustics in classrooms or conference rooms, and large noisy cafeterias are exhausting and stressful. This mismatch to their neurodivergence reduces productivity.

It’s no secret the pandemic has had devastating consequences. It only takes a few seconds of scrolling the internet to discover dooming statistics of the coronavirus outbreak.

Yet the pandemic showed us that humans have an incredible ability to adapt to extreme circumstances. From moving to a virtual workspace to adapting various safety strategies, society has proven its ability to make accommodations when it needs to.

Many of these accommodations are ones that neurodivergent folks have been asking for throughout the years. Teachers or employers rarely felt these accommodations were fair or appropriate, let alone possible.

The pandemic showed us the opposite; accommodations are fair, and everyone benefits from the flexibility these necessary changes allow. Quarantine accommodations were fundamental because we had no other options. And contrary to what the decision-makers believed; they were possible.

Things that we were told were impossible were now imperative to continue doing business.

Let’s take a look at how the primary pandemic-induced accommodation of working from home has benefited neurodivergent thinkers.

## Going Virtual: Sensory Relief for Neurodivergent Students and Workers

For ND individuals, the most significant impact of the pandemic has been in the way they attend school or work. Moving to a virtual environment was an accommodation that was difficult for a lot of people, but many ND students and workers have thrived.

Going virtual through remote learning or workspaces allows the neurodivergent person to do their work in an environment in which they are comfortable. While change and adaptability can be extremely difficult for ND people, certain aspects of the move proved to be quite helpful.

## Sensory Overload

Sensory environments can more easily be controlled at home. At school or work, background noise, bright lights, and chatter are next to inevitable. What can be even more frustrating is that these stimuli cannot be controlled.

In a home environment, however, it is easier for ND individuals to create a space that suits their personal needs. For example, they can have dimmer lights or quiet study space.

## Social Interaction

There is a certain subsection of ND thinkers who find social interaction to be a challenge.

In a virtual space, neurodivergent folks are much more in control of when they take breaks, whether they’re called on to speak, and when they choose to interact with their peers. Of course, it’s not wise to become completely isolated, but regaining a sense of independence and personal power in social situations can make a world of difference for divergent learners.

The ability to turn one’s camera on or off as desired allows those who struggle with eye contact and body language to do what’s most comfortable for them. For those who need to constantly monitor their own facial expressions and body language, it can be onerous to do so while concentrating in a school hall lecture or a workplace meeting. Virtual spaces allow ND thinkers to take breaks from social self-monitoring.

What is “social self-monitoring” and why is it necessary?

Consider stimming. Stimming is a common form of self-expression attributed to the autistic community. But did you know that we all stim? We all do repetitive behaviors to calm ourselves. For some of us, it’s shaking our leg. For others, it’s biting our fingernails or twirling our hair.

Stigma still exists around stimming, unfortunately, and ND people often feel judged if exhibiting these behaviors in public. Most of us can pick up social cues to let us know when our behavior is disruptive or annoying but for people with autism, picking up social cues and being able to stop is a challenge, if not impossible.

Going remote creates a private space and removes physical barriers for stimming.

## Physical Comfort

There are other behaviors that may not be socially appropriate in the school or work environment but are natural and soothing for a ND thinker. These have to do with the actual physical comfort of the person and their ability to focus.

A university student, for example, may choose to pace around while listening to a lecture. This is a self-stimulating behavior that many in the autistic spectrum find calming. Pacing around while listening to a lecture would be quite impossible, or at the very least, difficult, in the confines of a classroom.

Working remotely also allows divergent thinkers the ability to choose how and where they sit or stand to work. Standard desks can feel like a cage to an ND person. Having the freedom to decide how to work allows a neurodivergent student or worker a better range of motion and the freedom to meet their physical needs.

## Focus and Attention

Finally, in a virtual workspace or classroom, those with attention difficulties have the freedom to take short brain breaks without fearing judgment or unpleasant consequences. For those with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), with or without hyperactivity (ADHD), these breaks can include leaving their workspace altogether if needed. Ultimately, this space to rest the brain and refocus helps some ND folks be more productive.

On the flip side, autistic people or those with AD(H)D, often hyperfocus on projects. When this happens, they keep going for hours on end, sometimes without even stopping to sleep. Breaking this focus is disruptive to their flow and productivity. Yet, in most university settings or corporate spaces, it’s impossible to hyperfocus for twenty consecutive hours.

Remote learning and virtual workspaces are the perfect accommodation for ND students and workers who face challenges with the “culture of normal” when it comes to their individual way of focusing.

## A Silver Lining for Neurodiverse Thinkers

The pandemic has forced everyone to shift focus and reassess their priorities. We have seen the development of greater empathy for humankind and human differences. As the world changed, our perspective changed.

As we all wrestled with reorganizing our lives, even the most neuro-typical “normal” person found themselves in need of certain accommodations.

Many of us needed extended deadlines or flexibility in school or work attendance. Considering the circumstances, university professors and workplace supervisors were more willing than ever to allow accommodations that support people’s success.

The unprecedented challenges of the pandemic have led business and academic leaders to understand that those accommodations once thought unfair, inappropriate, or impossible are indeed feasible. Many of those quarantine-induced accommodations that benefit neurodivergent thinkers have become normalized.

Post-pandemic, it may be more socially acceptable to ask for the help that we need. There’s less stigma to being different. With the new “normal” of creative accommodations, we are all more successful in reaching our goals, whether it’s at the university level or in the corporate space.

When everyone realizes that accommodations bring out the best in us, it reduces the stigma and labeling that often results when they are requested exclusively by neurodivergent individuals.

## A New Post-Pandemic Reality for the Neurodivergent Community

The pandemic forced us to break down the “It’s always been done this way” barrier to accommodations.

In the post-pandemic hybrid approach that universities and corporations are considering, it will be useful for divergent thinkers to have the option to choose between learning or working from home or in person. Such flexibility will allow the neurodivergent community to regain a sense of control and agency in their coursework and careers.

Overall, the pandemic has offered an opportunity for all of us to learn. It’s shown us that we can create a world in which all types of neurodivergence are welcome and accommodated. The world has proven its incredible ability to adapt. The time is now to create a future that is inclusive to all.

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## **Definitions as Referenced in this Article:**

The following definitions were created by Nick Walker, of neurocosmopolitanism.com.

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurotypical, often abbreviated as NT, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

[Neurominority, any group, such as people with autism\*, which differs from the majority of a population in terms of behavioral traits and brain function](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/neurominority)

\*preferred language … such as autistic people, which…

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