## A Peek at Neurodivergence Through a Pop Culture Lens

## Real-life stories of neurodivergent individuals

In working with neurodivergent people, it’s important to remember what value they bring to the table. When it comes to their value, long held stereotypes need to be identified and eliminated.

No one wants to be undermined or viewed as less-than because of what makes them uniquely human — both positive and negative. It boils down to prejudice. Humans tend to generalize to try to understand new concepts and, sadly, that includes attempts to understand other humans. Because it’s almost impossible to deeply understand an experience that we haven’t lived, most of us are unaware of what it’s like to be neurodivergent.

Let’s explore the world of neurodiverse success in the workplace through the lens of pop culture superhero narratives. Unique neurology can be a gift (or superpower) if the conditions are right.

### **Pathology or Power?**

First up, is a fictitious hero, Daredevil. Daredevil’s “powers” are his heightened senses of hearing, smell, touch, and air pressure. The origin story shows that these powers developed to compensate for a different sensory deficit. His deficit caused him to hone and perfect his hearing and other senses to such a degree that “ordinary” people classed him as a superhero, capable of performing superhuman feats.

Here’s the flip side:

“This [his superpowers] also means that loud noises have the potential to trip up the hero. Not just super loud noises that would burst an ordinary person’s eardrums, but just loud noises in general. The kind that you can’t even call the police to complain about for disturbing the peace. Among the most dangerous places for Daredevil to visit are music concerts, traffic jams, and children’s sleepovers.”

What is the link to neurodivergence? Some neurodivergents may have a social blindness but adapt to this by compensating with other skills. Things like hyper-focus, narrow interests, and the appearance of being anti-social are pathologized. However, these are the very traits that allow them to excel in other areas and develop even savant-like skills of their special interests. Similarly, a deficit in reading or writing might be compensated for with other skills and adaptations, manifesting in skills that are extraordinary.

Next, another fictitious character. Prison Break’s Michael Schofield fascinates me. The character has what is described as [“low latent inhibition.”](https://www.lowlatentinhibition.org/what-is-lli/) The website defines low latent inhibition this way:

“*With low latent inhibition, an individual almost treats familiar stimuli in the same manner as they would new stimuli. Think of the details you notice when you see something new for the first time and how it grabs your attention. From those details, all kinds of questions may arise in your mind. “What is that? What does it do? Why is it there? What does it mean? How can it be utilized?” and so on….”*

It can manifest as being unable to filter unnecessary stimuli from the stream of sensory inputs in real life. It’s like seeing and hearing things anew each time you encounter them. It can appear as being Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD), easily distractible, or even psychosis-prone.

In the Prison Break narrative, this supposed weakness is the very thing that facilitates the protagonists’ goals. The character is regarded as being strange but also, a proper genius. But are these simply fantasies created to romanticize the cognitive out-liers? Not really.

### **From Fiction to Real Life**

The link between low latent inhibition (LLI) and creativity is backed up by a study performed by Shelly H. Carson (Harvard University) and Jordan B. Peterson (University of Toronto), entitled “[Decreased Latent Inhibition Is Associated With Increased Creative Achievement in High-Functioning Individuals”](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5995267_Decreased_Latent_Inhibition_Is_Associated_With_Increased_Creative_Achievement_in_High-Functioning_Individuals).

The study focused on individuals regarded as “eminent creative achievers.” It turns out that these individuals were seven times more likely to suffer from LLI. These real-life creative geniuses may owe their skills to the constant, high definition sensory data stream into their neurodivergent brains. This stimulus-rich way of experiencing life can force such individuals to develop novel and never-before-seen solutions to complex problems. Part pathology, part superpower.

Interestingly, in 2021, Wentworth Miller, the actor who plays Prison Break’s Michael Schofield, [spoke of his autism diagnosis, and said the following in connection with his personal and career success:](https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/27/entertainment/wentworth-miller-autism/index.html)

“*This isn’t something I’d change… being autistic is central to who I am. To everything I’ve achieved/articulated.”*

Let’s consider some more real-life stories.

Entrepreneurs may also be seen as possessing unique traits that help them succeed. In the case of Virgin CEO, Richard Branson, this trait happens to be dyslexia.

[Richard Branson had this to say about it:](https://www.virgin.com/branson-family/richard-branson-blog/this-is-dyslexia)

“*I simply wouldn’t be where I am today if I wasn’t dyslexic. In the real world, dyslexia can be a huge advantage. Many people with dyslexia have great imaginations, creativity, and problem-solving skills. In fact, many of the world’s greatest entrepreneurs and inventors are dyslexic.”*

Why is this the case?

Branson says, “We have a slightly different wiring to our brains, which enables us to think creatively and differently.”

A very concise summation of the fact that different isn’t less. In fact, different neurological wiring can simply mean increased creative potential.

Charlotte Valeur , founder of Global Governance Group, describes herself i[n an interview with ICAS](https://www.icas.com/members/ca-magazine/ca-magazine-articles/charlotte-valeur-my-autism-is-my-strength): Charlotte was diagnosed with autism as an adult. But, like so many in the same boat, she expressed how the diagnosis made her whole life make sense in retrospect. She says that she was a quiet child who didn’t score highly on standardized educational assessments. As such, she viewed herself as being “stupid.”

Unfortunately, this is a common experience. Autistic boys are often labeled as problematic and are often separated from the general education classroom because of being “disruptive.” In the United States, schools were created to prepare people for democratic citizenship. That included preparing citizens to obey the social and legal rules of society. Foundationally, schools reward the individuals who fit the norm while chastising and labeling students who don’t. Interestingly, student grades do not predict real-life success after students graduate from school.

This was the case for Charlotte.

After school, she worked in the banking industry. She describes herself as being “blunt-speaking” and “one of the boys.” Charlotte says that being autistic has made her successful in her career. The ability to hyper-focus is one strength that helped her become the success that she is. She also describes having a photographic memory; a skill that allows her to win memory-based games. No doubt, this trait also contributed to career success.

In general, there is this idea that neurodivergents are better suited to technical fields like IT, engineering, and banking. However, this is another stereotype.

Consider [Michael McCreary](https://www.aspiecomic.com/), an autistic stand-up comedian. Yes, you heard that right — an autistic, on stage, as himself, making other people laugh — on purpose. To what does he owe his success? Well, he built his humor around his autistic experience and worldview. So, yes, in a way, this too is a predictor of success. In addition, his frank, self-deprecating, and disarming manner is relate-able to both neurodivergent and neurotypical audiences.

A quote by Hunter S. Thompson, on his official website, says, [*“When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.”*](https://medium.com/%40aaronbraun/when-the-going-gets-weird-the-weird-turn-pro-hunter-s-thompson-1974-e86ad04d7e28) He undoubtedly applied this to himself as a self-proclaimed “weird” person who turned pro.

When things get weird, conditions are optimal for neurodivergent thinkers to step in with creative solutions to “weird” problems.

In my own personal experience, my neurodivergence has also opened doors to my version of success. For example, I learned that being atypical invites all kinds of unjust treatment. You see it happening to yourself and you see it happening to others. Seeing others who are “different” being treated as less, bullied, and ostracized outrages me. So, I decided to use my neurodivergent powers for good and became a teacher.

I taught the students who struggled in school. I discovered that, even though they could not write well, pass a test, or read fast enough to do as well as all the other students, my struggling students were some of the funniest, most inventive, creative problem-solvers in the school.

Then I had children. My two children couldn’t be more different from each other. When my son, Ian, was diagnosed with dyslexia, his doctor explained that he must be incredibly smart to be doing as well as he was in school, given how severe his dyslexia was. I cried. Then, after evaluating me, he said, “The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.” I’ll never forget the doctor’s words to me that day.

My little boy was doing puzzles deemed for eight years old when he was only three. He was constantly exploring how things worked and how they were put together. He was that kid that we gave old appliances to so that he could take them apart and figure out how they worked. He was also the kid that was struggling to process what he was hearing to the point that teachers thought he was ADHD. He wasn’t. He processes what he hears differently than most people. His teachers told him that he wasn’t honors-level material when he wanted to take an honors English class. He saw the world with a different set of eyes than his peers and many adults. I saw his brilliance. I made it my mission to teach him 1) that he was smart and 2) he would have to learn how to learn so he could do well in school. And HE did!

It was because of my experiences as a child and a young woman being different in the world that I took on the challenge of helping others who struggle. Then seeing how my students were underestimated and discriminated against made me fight harder to change perceptions. Then my son was brilliant yet struggled with the expectations and requirements of a school system that demanded that every child be graded on a narrow set of measurable goals that didn’t recognize the whole child and their gifts. I realized that we have a problem in the world that not only hurts people who are different than ourselves but hurts us all.

Starting in early childhood, schools focus on a child’s deficits instead of their gifts. Consequently, gifts are pushed to the side while an inordinate amount of time and energy is focused on this bright soul’s “failings.” These children grow up seeing themselves as failures. They have not failed. The system has failed them.

I’ve made it my mission to change a deficit mindset to a gifts mindset for people who are neurodivergent. I’m putting every ounce of my energy and abilities into fighting this battle. We are in a struggle against this deficit mindset. A mindset that holds us back, keeps us from reaching our potential, and sacrifices innovation.

There are even more success stories than I’ve highlighted here that abound if we look in the right places. Neurodivergence comes with many challenges and successes. Every hero has their own kryptonite, but society would be remiss to ignore their talents.

### **Websites referenced in this article:**

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Susan Fitzell, M. Ed, CSP, is a nationally recognized presenter, author of nine books for teachers, trainers, and parents, an educational consultant, and CEO of Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. As an independent consultant and coach, Susan offers the personalization, continuity, and consistency necessary for true change in any organization. She works side by side with teachers, school administrators, and business leaders as a coach and trainer, employing Brain Power strategies that take learning to the next level.

For more information, visit Susan's website at [www.susanfitzell.com](http://www.susanfitzell.com/).

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PO Box 6182
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