# **The Language of Neurodiversity**

## Terms and Definitions in the age of Inclusivity

In my work to help businesses and educational organizations develop and implement strategies that optimize learning and productivity in a neurodiverse world, I have come to realize that there is quite a bit of confusion out there about the simple terminology and vocabulary we use to discuss neurodiversity and the neurodivergent community.

## **An AHA Moment in a Podcast**

This lack of clarity really came into focus for me during an [interview](https://insightatwork.libsyn.com/22-susan-fitzell-leading-and-managing-a-neuro-diverse-workforce) I did recently with Ken Blackwell on his Insight at Work podcast. When he asked me to explain the difference between neurodivergent, neurodivergence and neurodiverse, we found ourselves discussing prejudice, intrinsic bias, and how we define (and what is considered to be) normal. My conversation with Ken got me thinking about how our use of language influences both our individual and collective sense of reality, particularly when it comes to how we see, interact with, and regard the people closest to us. Whether it be in the workplace, in the classroom, or in the home, intentionally choosing our words is one of the most impactful steps one can take towards creating the inclusive world we are striving for.

So, what are the terms and definitions we should be using in this age of inclusion? When it comes to the “language of neurodiversity,” what are the words we should be using?

In most of my articles I often include a brief description of the terminology I use, but I thought it would be worthwhile to dig a little deeper into this subject. These terms, after all, are describing concepts that have only come into existence within the last 35 years or so. When it comes to advocating for neurodiversity and inclusion, we have to be speaking the same language.

Inspired by my interview with Ken, I decided to put together this little primer on the terms and definitions we are hearing more and more often in conversations about diversity and inclusivity.

# **The Key Terms**

The following are organized based on the frequency they appear in the media. They are not alphabetically sorted.

**Neurodiversity**: this term refers to a general diversity of minds. It includes people who are neurotypical *and* neurodivergent. When I talk about promoting neurodiversity in the workplace, for example, I am referring to creating a diverse workforce representative of the broad spectrum that exists when it comes to ways of thinking, processing information, communication, and learning. Some employees may be “normal” or neurotypical while others may have ADHD, Dyslexia, Autism, or trauma impacted ways of thinking. I am not referring to any particular label or diagnosis, but rather, the concept of an environment where a diversity of minds coexist.

**Neurodiverse**: This word is pretty much the same as *neurodiversity*, but should be used as an adjective. You can say, for example, that your workplace is neurodiverse.

Be careful though, because you should never describe a *person* as being neurodiverse. Individual people should be described as *neurodivergent*.

**Neurodivergent**: This word describes an individual whose way of thinking falls outside of society’s defined version of normal. Oftentimes you will see it abbreviated as ND.

Many times, neurodivergent people will have a diagnosis or label you may recognize, like autism, dyslexia, or ADHD. But neurodivergent people are also those with epilepsy, different kinds of brain trauma, or simply a unique way of thinking that may not have a specific diagnosis.

**Divergent Thinkers:** This is a term I prefer to describe neurodivergent people. It refers to those whose ways of thinking diverge from the norm.

**Neurodivergence**: This is a general term that describes the different manifestations of neurodivergent thinking in a neurodiverse world. It is literally the “state of being neurodivergent.” You could say, for example, that dyslexia and dyspraxia are specific types of neurodivergence.

**Neurotypical**: People who are neurotypical are what society would generally deem to be “normal.” Oftentimes you will see it abbreviated as NT.

**Neurominority**: This term is used to refer to a specific group of individuals who can be grouped together based on the shared similar characteristics of their neurodivergence. What is interesting to note here is that the neurodivergence this group shares is often discriminated against. One could say that autistic people are a sizeable neurominority. People with OCD are also a neurominority, with many individuals choosing to take dramatic measures to blend in with their neurotypical counterparts to avoid judgements and misunderstanding. This effort to hide one’s neurodivergence is an example of masking. If they are not successful, they are frequently discriminated against and socially excluded.

**Masking:** It’s what neurodivergents do when they don’t want others to know they are ‘different.” When a neurodivergent person is masking, they are hiding their autism traits or learning disabilities.

**Neurodevelopmental Condition:** This is a condition, usually referred to as a disorder, that develops before birth, in infancy or early childhood. It references differences in cognition that develop differently than ‘the norm.’ Examples are ADHD, Autism, Speech and Language disorders, and Tourettes. This differs from mental illness. Note that these conditions are classified differently in various countries.

I choose to align with definitions that do not focus on disorders or label atypical cognitive function as a mental illness or disorder. After decades of working with neurodivergents, I understand all too well the damage those classifications cause because of stigma and stereotypes.

Members of the neurodiversity movement have been working for a long time to create consistency in the correct usage of the words I’ve described above. When we can accurately describe the world around us and the people that inhabit it, we can develop the collective mentality necessary for a world free of discrimination.

# **A Word About Diagnoses and Labels**

One thing I want to touch on when we talk about the language of neurodiversity is the concept of neurodivergence as a disorder. The neurodiversity movement makes it clear that individual neurodivergence does not equate to a neurological *disorder*. That word, *disorder*, fundamentally implies that something is wrong with a neurodivergent person.

I suppose that this is what is really at the heart of the issue — neurodivergence, while in certain occasions may be the result of a physical illness or trauma and may need to be treated medically, does not necessarily need fixing.

***Neurodivergent people do not need to be fixed.***

There is no ideal kind of mind. There is no right or wrong. The diversity of the human mind is just as valuable as the diversity of human culture.

Unfortunately, many divergent thinkers have grown up defined by the labels placed upon them. These labels often carry stereotypes, misconceptions, and outright discrimination. So while diagnosis and labels can be a useful tool, they just as often create mental roadblocks for the neurotypical person. This can lead to subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination against the divergent thinkers of the world.

# **Embracing the Language of Inclusivity**

I invite you to take the time to listen to the conversation I had with Ken on the [Insight at Work podcast](https://insightatwork.libsyn.com/22-susan-fitzell-leading-and-managing-a-neuro-diverse-workforce). And if you want to dig a little deeper into the specifics of the vocabulary of neurodiversity, I recommend [this piece](https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/) written by Nick Walker of neurocosmopolitanism.com.

Chances are, whether you know it or not, you have neurodivergent people in your life. If you want to do your part to create a more inclusive world for them, and everybody really, make an effort to learn and embrace the vocabulary of the neurodiversity movement.