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What Does It Mean For a Therapist to Be Neurodiversity-Affirming?

By [Amy Marschall, PsyD](#) | Updated on November 29, 2022

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When a therapist is neurodiversity-affirming, they recognize that neurodivergence by itself is not a flaw or illness that needs to be “fixed” or corrected. They recognize that neurodivergence can come with its own set of strengths that can be fostered.

Neurodiversity refers to the naturally-occurring differences and variety in brain functioning and resulting behaviors. It is part of typical variation among humans, just like variances in height, eye color, and family traits.

Even though [neurodiversity](#), like other forms of human diversity, is natural and beneficial to society, certain neurotypes are framed as “different” and “othered” due to not following neurotypical standards for behavior, communication, and cognition. The field of psychology has traditionally prioritized [neurotypical](#) brains as the standard for mental health, which has caused harm to neurodivergent populations through over-pathologizing non-harmful behaviors and trying to enforce neurotypical standards of behavior.

In this article, you'll learn more about what neurodiversity-affirming care looks like, why it's important, and how to find a neurodiversity-affirming therapist.

What Is Neurodivergence?

Neurodiversity is a term coined by the sociologist Dr. Judy Singer to refer to how each person's brain develops differently, and how these differences impact how each of us thinks, feels, behaves, and perceives the world around us. ^[1]

While each brain is unique and there is no one definition of “normal,” the term [neurodivergence](#) was developed to reflect the experience of those whose neurodiversity falls outside of social expectations for “typical.”

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and valid.

In recent years, neurodivergence is often defined as those with [neurodevelopmental disabilities](#) as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition: learning disorders, ADHD, autism, intellectual disability, et cetera. ^[2] However, Dr. Singer has stated that the term was originally intended to include all brains that diverge from neurotypical standards, including those with any mental health diagnosis. ^[3]

If the way you perceive and interact with the world around you diverts from typical expectations and standards, you may be neurodivergent.

Related: [Awareness and Allyship: It's a New Day for Neurodiversity](#)

What Is Neurodiversity-Affirming Therapy?

Neurodiversity-affirming therapy is not a specific set of interventions or things the therapist says or does in their sessions. Rather, it is an approach to treatment and overarching philosophy that impacts how the therapist views their client and the client's experience, much like [trauma-informed therapy](#) recognizes the unique impact of trauma on an individual's experience.

When a therapist is neurodiversity-affirming, they recognize that neurodivergence by itself is not a flaw or illness that needs to be "fixed" or corrected. At the same time, a neurodiversity-affirming therapist acknowledges and affirms that neurodivergence can also be [disabling](#). If someone insists that neurodivergence is always a strength with no deficits, they are falling into the trap of [toxic positivity](#) and not honoring the full experience of neurodivergent people.

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and the bad that come with it. They let neurodivergent communities lead the way in determining the most appropriate language, treatment intervention, and resources rather than telling them what they need based on neurotypical expectations.

Related: [Introducing: Neurodivergence at Work](#)

Risks of Therapy That Is Not Neurodiversity-Affirming

Traditionally, therapy has not been neurodiversity-affirming. The medical model of mental health assumes that neurodivergence is a problem to be fixed. While this may be true of some symptoms, many neurodivergent communities have pushed back on this as a default approach to treatment.

If a therapist is not neurodiversity-affirming, they may push for their client to correct or fix behaviors simply because those behaviors are atypical, even if the behavior is not harmful.

For example, the autistic community has challenged the assumption that [applied behavioral analysis](#) (ABA) is an appropriate "treatment" for [autism](#). Through ABA, many autistic people have been taught to hide stimming behavior because it is "annoying" or "distracting" even though they may be using the behavior to self-regulate or cope with an uncomfortable sensory experience.

Essentially, the goal of the treatment is often to make them stop appearing autistic and to mask their autistic traits. ^[4] Since masking is highly stressful for autistic people and leads to burnout in the long term, ^[5] a treatment that requires masking is harmful.

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expertise are not the experts on individual client experiences, a therapist who lacks this background may have to rely on the client to teach them about neurodivergence. This puts added demand on the client in their treatment.

Essentially, neurodiversity-affirming care is a form of [cultural competence](#). Therapists who are neurodiversity-affirming have taken steps to be aware of possible biases and to gather appropriate knowledge about neurodivergent clients before working with them to avoid doing harm.

Related: [What to Know About Stimming in ADHD](#)

How Can I Find a Neurodiversity-Affirming Therapist?

If a neurodivergent individual is [seeking therapy services](#) and wants a provider who is affirming of neurodiversity, it is important to research prospective therapists. Unfortunately, a recent study showed that 46% of providers who serve neurodivergent people (including psychotherapists, speech therapists, teachers, and others) are aware of neurodiversity-affirming practices, and 58% overestimated their knowledge and competency in this area. ^[6]

Prior to scheduling an appointment, you can ask a potential therapist if they consider themselves to be neurodiversity-affirming and what they believe this means or looks like in their practice.

Many therapists who understand the importance of neurodiversity-affirming practice will make a statement about this on their website. In addition, some therapist directories allow providers to indicate this as specialized experience:

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[Inclusive Therapists](#) has a filter for therapists who specialize in neurodivergence as well.

[Inclusive Therapists](#) allows individuals to search for ND-affirming therapists as well as therapists with ND-lived experience, along with other marginalized identities.

Even if a therapist is neurodiversity-affirming, it is okay to change providers if their approach, personality, or training are not a [good fit](#) for your unique needs. As with all types of therapy, you might have to try out multiple providers before finding the right fit for you.

Read Next: [The Reality of Getting Diagnosed With ADHD in Adulthood](#)

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By [Amy Marschall, PsyD](#)

Dr. Amy Marschall is an autistic clinical psychologist with ADHD, working with children and adolescents who also identify with these neurotypes among others. She is certified in TF-CBT and telemental health.



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