# Equity in Inquiry

## How understanding neurodiversity can enhance workplace investigations

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2026 OHIO HR CONFERENCE
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# Let's think differently about thinking differently

# ...but first, some disclaimers

# Agenda

- Threshold Concepts
- Introduction to Neurodivergence
- Implications for Investigations
- Strategies for Inclusive Practices
- Effective Interview Techniques

# Great Minds Don’t Think Alike

# Initial questions...

- Are you familiar with the term neurodiversity?
- Do you know someone who identifies as neurodivergent?
  (self, family, friend, colleague)
- Do you know that person well?

# If you've met

# one neurodivergent person,

If you've met

one neurodivergent person,

you've met exactly one.

# Neu·ro·di·ver·gence

noŏrō ˌdīˈvərjəns

**Noun: Reflects the differences in how our brains develop and function, which enable us to process, recall and communicate information in unique ways.**

**Related Term: Neurodiversity, which recognizes the infinite traits and abilities that can result from different brains working differently.**

# “Autism is an extremely variable disorder.”

**Dr. Temple Grandin** – author, professor, consultant, and person with autism



# Common Types of Neurodivergence

# Learning/Processing Differences

- Dyslexia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyscalculia

> My teachers thought I was lazy and not very clever.... I couldn't always follow what was going on... The headmaster said I would either end up in prison or become a millionaire.

*Richard Branson – Business owner*

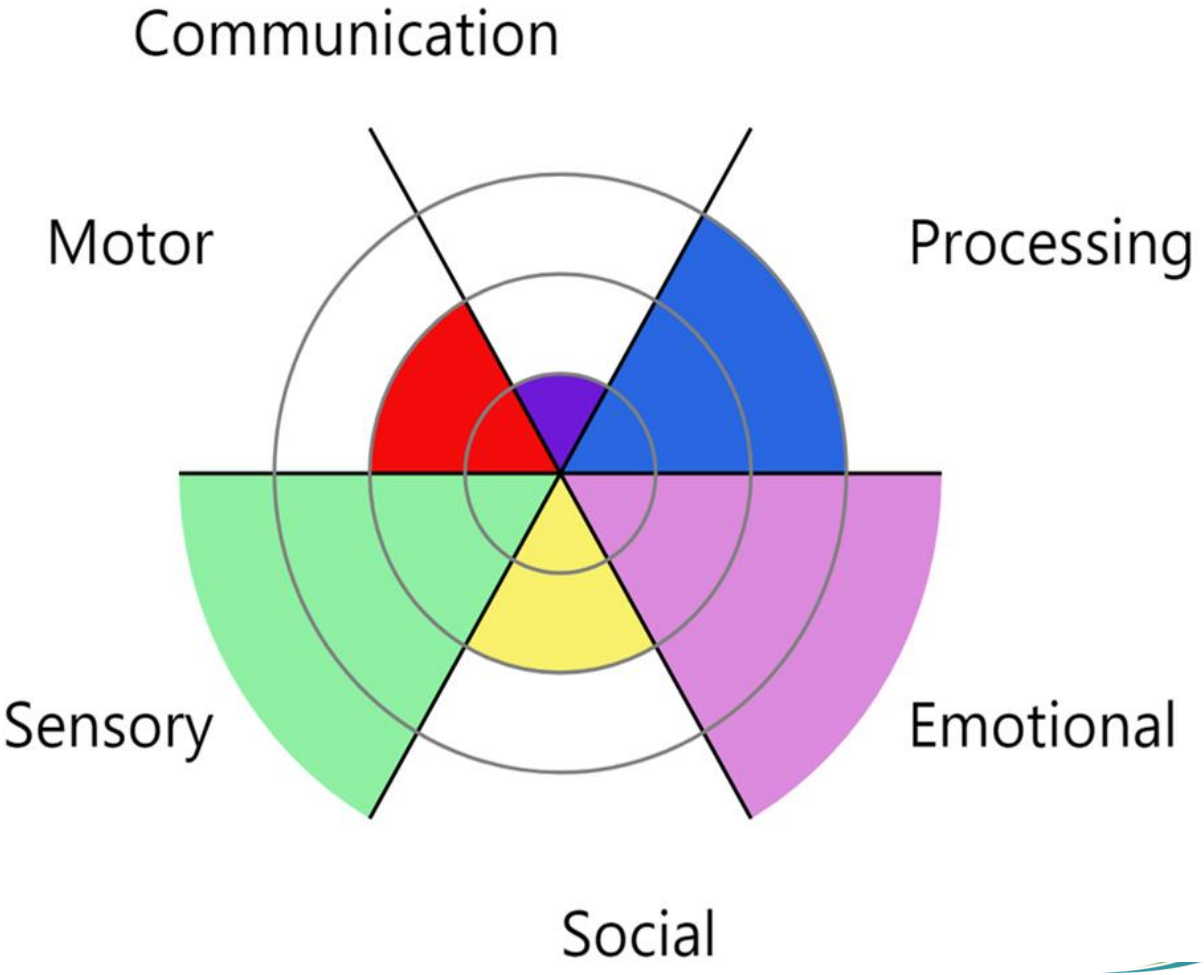
# Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

| | |
|---|---|
| Challenges | • Social communication<br>• Social interaction<br>• Across multiple contexts |
| Restrictive, repetitive patterns | • Behavior<br>• Interests<br>• Activities |

# Linear “Spectrum”



# ...or a wheel?


Communication
Motor
Processing
Sensory
Emotional
Social

# Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

**ADD**
**ADHD**

- Hyperactive/impulsive
- Inattentive
- Combined

# Assumption is the Risk

# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Sensory

- Sensitivity to sight, sound, smells, taste and touch
- Over or under stimulated
- Can trigger an emotional response, stimming or withdrawal

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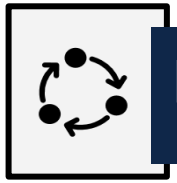
[We] do these repetitive behaviors because it feels good in some way. It may counteract an overwhelming sensory environment ...

*Temple Grandin*

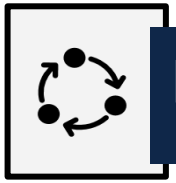
# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Processing

- Working memory
- Planning / Organization
- Task initiation
- Response Time
- Attention

# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Processing

- Working memory
- Planning / Organization
- Task initiation
- Response Time
- Attention

My diagnosis has definitely made me not follow the stream.
I think outside the box.

*Greta Thunberg*

# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Emotional Regulation

- Inflexibility
- Anxiety/Anger
- Rejection sensitivity
- Fatigue
- Withdrawal
- Restraint collapse

# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Emotional Regulation

- Inflexibility
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- Fatigue
- Withdrawal
- Restraint collapse

If I'm not careful in how I sleep, how I eat, how I manage my routine, I can become overwhelmed and it can feel like the whole world is just too heavy to bear.

*Trevor Noah*

# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Communication

- Language use
- Bluntness
- Affect
- Conversational turn taking
- Fixations

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## Communication

- Language use
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One of my symptoms included my obsession with ghosts… I became obsessed with Hanz Holzer, the greatest ghost hunter ever.
That's when the idea of… Ghostbusters was born.

*Dan Aykroyd*

# Common Characteristics and Implications



## Social Interaction

- Eye contact (avoiding or sustained)
- Social camouflage
- Masking
- Engagement

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People with Asperger's do put a barrier up because they don't know how to trust people. I try not to. I want to let people in.

*Susan Boyle*

# Why is this Relevant?

# Why is this Relevant?

| | |
|---|---|
| **Prevalence** | • 15-20% of the population<br>• Numbers are increasing |
| **Hidden** | • Underdiagnosed and untreated<br>• Undisclosed at work |
| **Bias** | • Assumptions about capacity, needs, and credibility |

# Why is this relevant for workplace investigators?

Investigation process relies on

- Communication skills
- Memory
- Social interaction
- Processing
- Emotional regulation

# The interview



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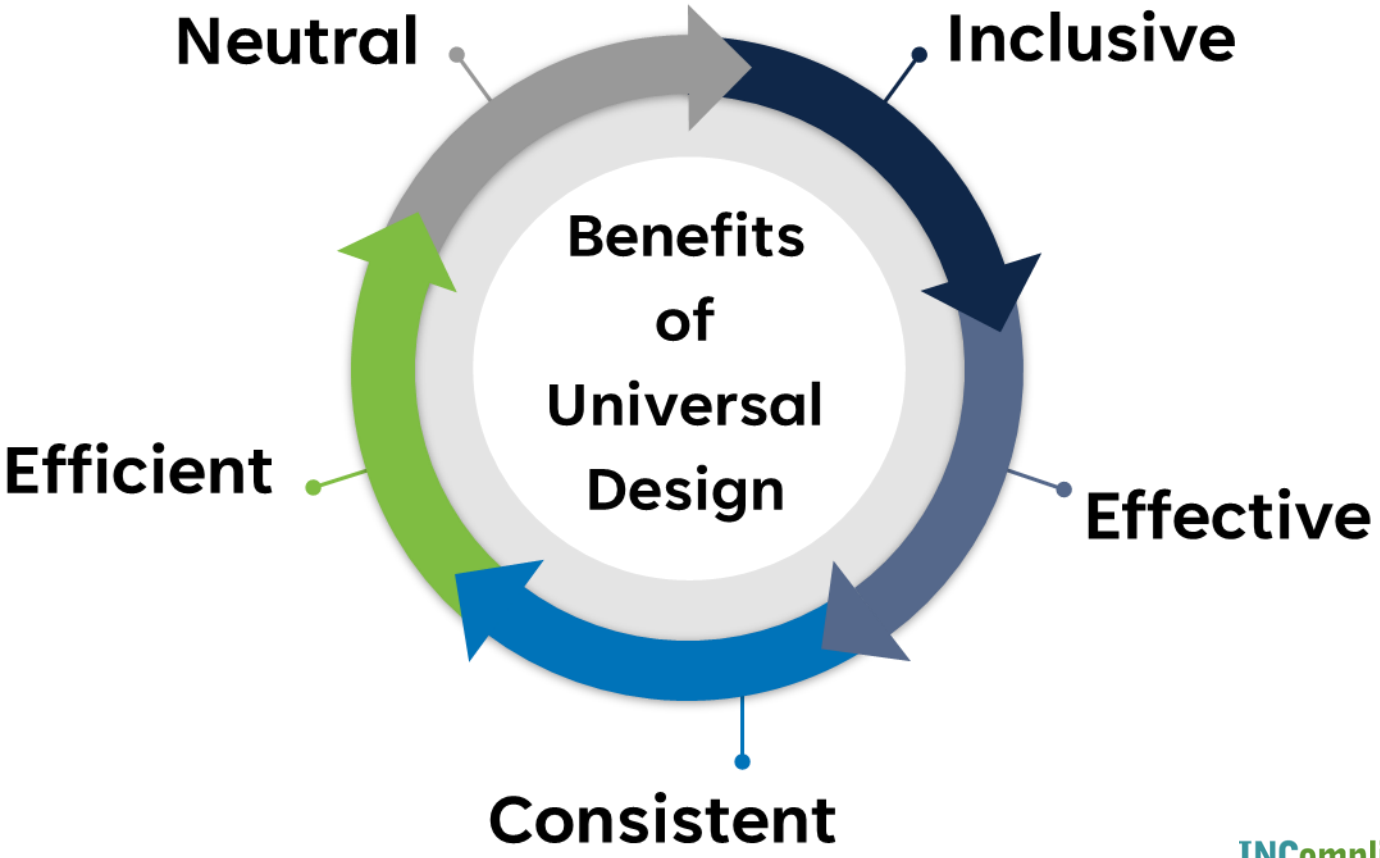
# Universal Supports

## when the ramp built for one becomes the pathway for many


Neutral
Inclusive
Benefits of Universal Design
Efficient
Effective
Consistent

# Tiered Interventions



# Level 1: Systemic Efforts

- Training
- Language use
- Process adjustments
- Sharing information in multiple modes
- Providing supports (environmental, breaks, support person as permitted)

# Level 2: Preliminary Outreach

## Provide Process Overview

- Describe logistics: start/end time, interviewer, setting, availability of breaks, accommodations, what to bring
- Share potential for multiple sessions
- Identify policies and standards
- Consider preview of topics and/or questions

# Level 2: Consider Sensory Needs

| Sight | Sound | Taste | Smell | Touch |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| lighting | ambient sounds | mints | cologne | fidget items |
| clutter (virtual and in person) | clock | water | diffuser | seating |
| window | HVAC | snacks | cleaning supplies | hand-shake |
| | talking | | food | |

# Level 2: Setting up the Meeting

## Greeting

- Handshake
- Choice of seating
- Acknowledge the discomfort
- Rapport building
- Supports they might need

# Level 2: Meeting Strategies

## Sharing information to minimize surprises

- Role/process
- Expectations
- Cautions
- Support reminders
- Preview of topics to discuss (?)

# Level 2: Investigation Techniques

## Asking Questions

- Begin with open-ended questions?
- Pivot if necessary and consider
  - Specific and targeted questions
  - Visual prompts
  - Segmenting topics (WAFA technique)
- Check for understanding and need for breaks

# Responding to Challenges

**Discomfort**
**Distress**

- Provide reminders of support options
- Acknowledge discomfort
- Try to de escalate
- Check yourself

# Responding to Challenges

**Detours**

- Reflect
- Redirect
- Address relevance
- Rephrase

# Responding to Challenges

**Disengagement**

- Return to easier topics
- Allow different ways of responding
- Check for comprehension

# Responding to Challenges

**Delay or Discontinue**

- Extend response time
- Reinforce expectations
- Check your bias
- Consider pausing or discontinuing

# After the Interview

## Follow up

- Clarify next steps
- Document
- Invite questions or additional information
- Consider providing interview summary for feedback and clarification

# Level 2: Informal Resolution

## Challenges for neurodiverse parties

- Dispute might relate to a neurodivergent trait
- Standard process favors those with
  - quick verbal processing
  - emotional regulation skills
  - comfort with interpersonal dialogue

# Level 2: Informal Resolution

## Challenges for neurodiverse parties

- High pressure, emotionally charged sessions can trigger shutdown or anxiety
- Communication mismatch and masking
- Unpredictability of proposals
- Sensory overload from long, back-to-back sessions

# Level 2: Sharing Outcomes

## Decisions and debriefs

- Multi modal information sharing
- Previews
- Support person
- Availability for debrief immediately or after processing time

# Recommendations

- Reduce cognitive load and overwhelm
- Provide previews of
  - Agenda
  - Setting
  - Expectations
- Offer flexibility
  - Timing/Pace
  - Format
  - Mode of communication
- Provide support early

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# Takeaways

- Let’s think differently about thinking differently
  - Divergence = differences
- Great minds don’t think alike
- Assumption is the risk
- The ramp you build for one becomes the path for many

“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment, not the flower.”

# Laura G. Anthony

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## Give feedback to Laura

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