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## **What is Neurodivergence and Why is it Important in Therapy?**

By: Jaelyn Rink, MSCP, LLP

Neurodiversity may have become a recent buzz word on social media, but in the psychology field, it is something that we have been focused on for a long time. As providers, understanding someone's development, how they think, and how they experience the world around them, are crucial parts to treatment planning and the therapeutic process. Neurodiversity embraces the idea that every individual is unique, with various abilities and needs. Someone who falls into the category of neurodivergent presents with different strengths and weaknesses than someone who is considered neurotypical.

For example: people who have ADHD are great at noticing various details in their environment simultaneously; their brains scan the room at an exceedingly fast rate, taking in an overload of information. In contrast, individuals without ADHD may process environmental stimuli differently, often filtering information more selectively. Many individuals with ADHD demonstrate strengths such as creativity, rapid idea generation, and heightened awareness (although these traits vary widely from person to person). Unfortunately, these traits can lead to feelings like anxiety, exhaustion and overwhelm due to the sheer amount of information that is being processed so quickly. Treating someone for experiencing anxiety and overwhelm in social settings due to being neurodivergent, can look different than how a provider will treat someone who presents with anxiety and overwhelm that is more neurotypical.



If a teenage client comes to therapy because they are “lacking motivation” to get their homework and chores done at home, how a provider approaches this with the client (as well as with their parents) depends on if they have a neurodevelopmental diagnosis. If ADHD is causing the problem, this may require increased structured and routine at home, implementation of a reward-system, helping the teen learn how to break down tasks to become more manageable, encouraging frequent breaks, or the support of a parent to sit with them while doing homework. For a teenager who is more neurotypical, treatment may focus on uncovering and addressing feelings of depression, anxiety, worthlessness, defiance or even environmental and behavioral factors that could be contributing to their lack of drive. Understanding the root cause of someone's behavior is crucial for effective treatment.

### **What is Neurodivergence and Neurodiversity?**

Neurodiversity refers to the diversity that all human brains have, while neurodivergence is considered to be the traits and characteristics associated with several neurodevelopmental disorders in the mental health field. When we discuss neurodevelopment, we are referring to the brain's growth process that occurs during the early stages of one's life. These disorders are a group of conditions where symptoms begin in the developmental period, often before a child enters grade school. In diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5, these conditions are described in terms of impairments in functioning; however, many clinicians also recognize that these differences can coexist with significant strengths. In short, the brain is developing at a different rate in comparison to same-aged peers, and we begin to see a lag in certain skill sets such as reasoning capabilities, emotional control, communication, relating to others, attention, basic/fundamental academic achievements, and/or motor skills.



**The following are classified as Neurodevelopmental Disorders per the DSM-5.**

- ADHD
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Specific Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia).
- Tics and Tourette’s Disorder
- Motor Disorders such as coordination disorder and stereotypic movement disorder
- Social (pragmatic) communication disorder
- Stuttering (Childhood onset-fluency disorder).
- Intellectual Disability
- Communication disorders such as language disorders and speech sound disorder

At MFS, we specialize in diagnosing neurodevelopmental disorders through our comprehensive neuropsychological assessment. We like to consider these evaluations as an “X-Ray” that helps us better understand how to most accurately treat current symptoms and make tailored recommendations to support a positive therapeutic outcome.

***Disclaimer:** Some clinicians and communities use the term neurodivergence more broadly to describe other mental health conditions; however, for clarity and consistency, this blog focuses on neurodevelopmental diagnoses as defined by the DSM-5.*

