

Mildon's Neurodiversity Language Guide

This guide shares inclusive alternatives and gentle suggestions for rethinking language to foster respectful, uplifting conversations about neurodiversity.

Instead of

“Everyone’s a bit neurodivergent”

Even if well-meaning, this can dismiss the real impact of being neurodivergent. It’s not just a personality trait it shapes how people perceive, experience and respond to the world.

“We’re all on the spectrum”

This can blur the realities faced by autistic people. If you're neurotypical, it's more helpful to listen and learn rather than compare experiences.

This is often received very poorly by ND people, because it's seen as minimising our struggles. Sitting in the same space as saying that you have OCD because you're neat ignores how debilitating these conditions can be.

Try

“If you’re open to it, I’d love to learn more about you and how being neurodivergent impacts your experience, the joys, the challenges, and everything in between.”

If you are neurodivergent and feel comfortable sharing:

“I relate to parts of that too, being autistic affects me in X way.”

If you are not neurodivergent (we call that neurotypical):

“If you’re happy to share more, I’d love to understand better.”

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Instead of

“You don’t look [insert neurodivergence eg ADHD]”

Neurodivergence doesn’t have a “look”, and many people are having these conversations for the first time, often feeling vulnerable and fearful of judgment.

Tip: If you search for “autistic celebrities”, you’ll see a wide range of individuals; neurodivergence doesn't present in a single way.

Each neurodivergent person is unique, and so this response also doesn't take into account that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’.

Try

“Thank you for sharing that with me. I really appreciate your openness.”

Bonus - **“How can I support you?”**

“High functioning”

“High functioning” can minimise someone’s experience. Many neurodivergent people use masking consciously or not to hide traits and cope in neurotypical spaces. “High masking” better reflects the effort to ‘blend in’ and the toll it can take. 1 in 5 people avoid asking for adjustments due to fear of a negative reaction or believing the request won’t be granted

Another aspect of this is that often high high-masking ND people aren't actually functioning that well behind the scenes. This language can give the impression that we're fine, or don't need support or accommodations, or that we don't experience challenges.

“High masking”

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Instead of

“They’re a bit special”
(when referring to someone who is neurodivergent)

The word “special” is a judgement and can feel patronising or infantilising, particularly when referring to adults. It’s best to use language that is accurate, respectful, and based on how someone describes themselves.

If you work with children, you may be used to the term SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), which is an acceptable and widely understood term in educational settings.

Try

“They’re neurodivergent”, or use the specific term they identify with

Others include:

- Autism, or Autism Spectrum Conditions
- ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADD: Attention Deficit Disorder
- Dyscalculia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia, or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)
- Cognitive functioning difficulties or executive dysfunction
- Dysgraphia
- Misophonia
- Slow processing speed
- Stammering
- Tourette’s syndrome

We know that many of these phrases are often said with good intentions, perhaps to connect, comfort, or show empathy. But as our understanding of neurodiversity evolves, so too does the language we use. This isn’t about getting everything perfect, it’s about learning, growing, and creating space where everyone feels respected.

This guide reflects widely accepted and respectful language, but it’s always best to ask individuals what terms they prefer and stay open to learning.

There’s no one-size-fits-all approach to language. People experience neurodivergence in different ways and may have different preferences for how they describe themselves. No single person can speak for everyone.

If you’d like to explore this topic further or are interested in coaching, training, or workshops on neurodiversity and inclusive language, we’d love to support you. You can reach us at brooklyn@mildon.co.uk or toby@mildon.co.uk.