

Studying while neurodivergent: personal reflections and tips for surviving and thriving

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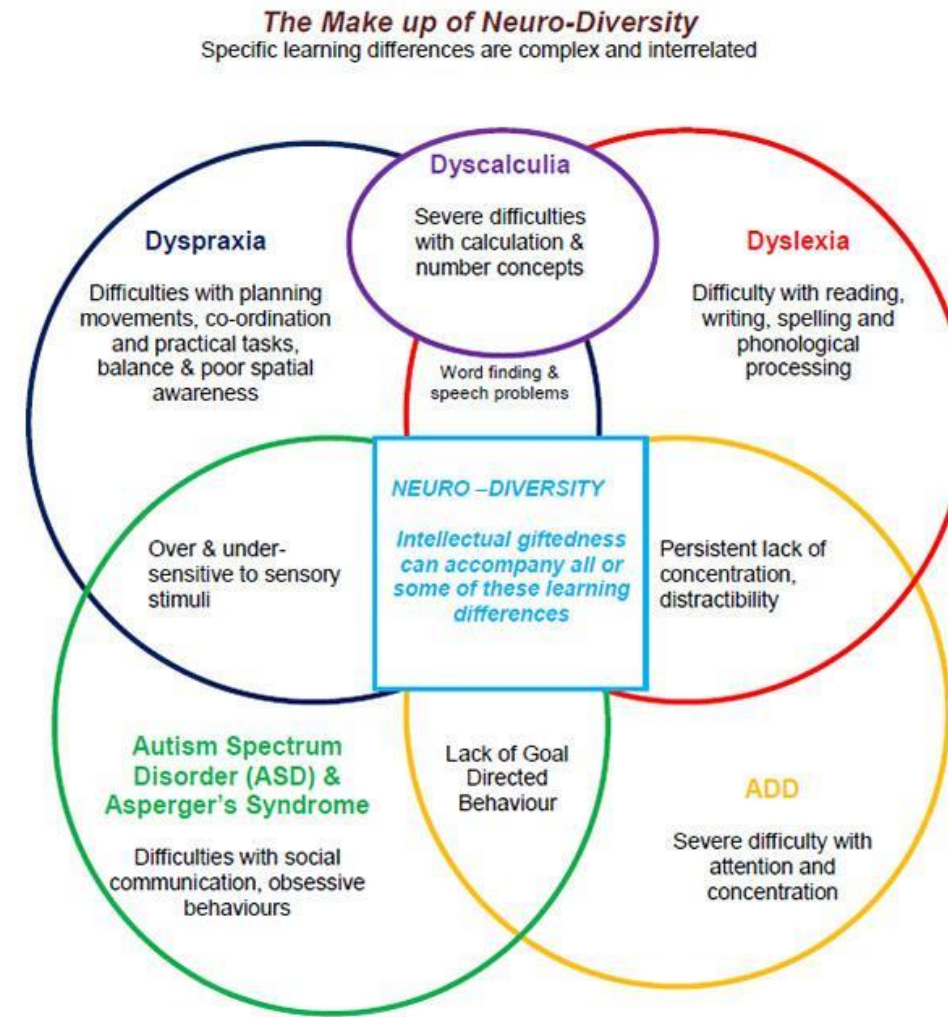
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A plan

- A (very short) introduction to neurodiversity
- An (even shorter) introduction to how neurodiverse brains impact on studying
- Some lessons learned that may help you
 - (even if you're neurotypical)
- With thanks to Harriet Cannon (University disability practitioner) for providing a couple of slides

Introducing neurodiversity

- At attempt to reframe neurodevelopmental disorders to de-emphasise the deficits and promote acceptance
- Emphasises the role of the environment in the disabling aspects of the associated diagnoses
- Not a universally accepted paradigm:
 - does it downplay the extent of difficulty some people have?
 - Where are its borders?
 - Acquired neurodiversity (e.g. from physical or psychological trauma)
 - Tendency to focus only on autism and/or ADHD



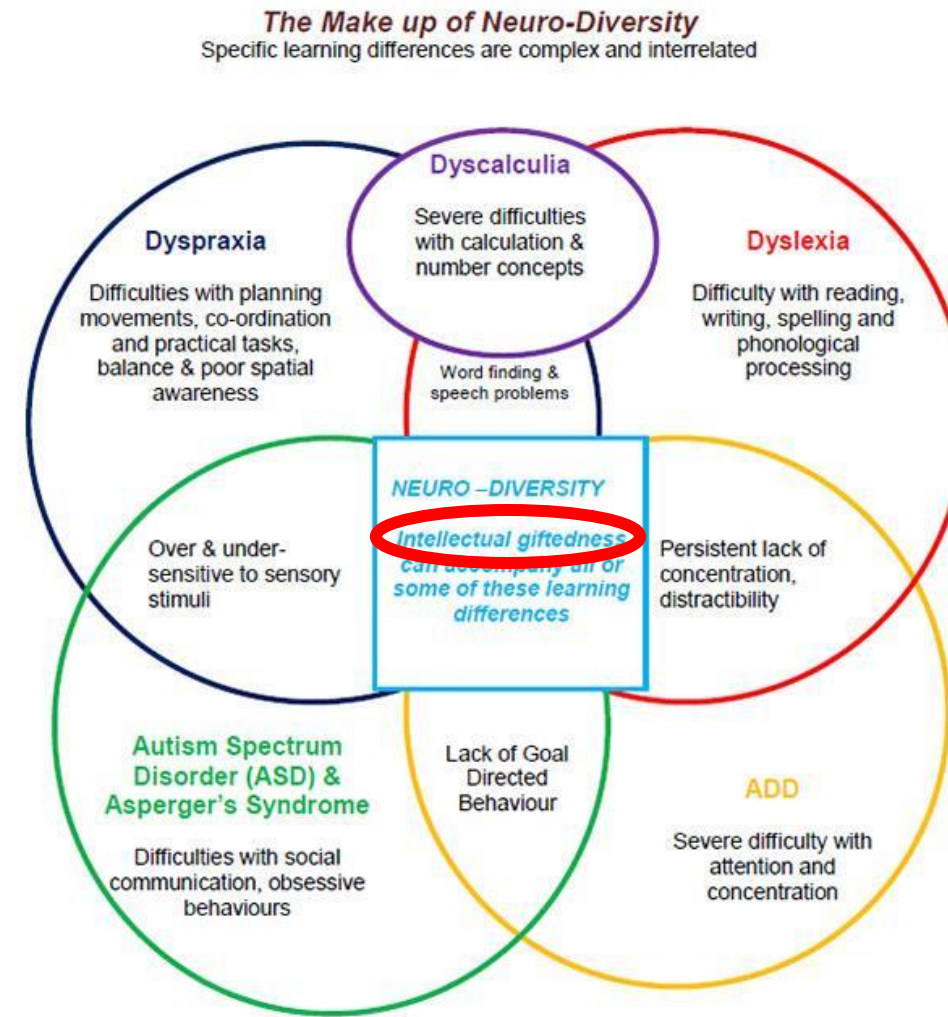
For further information:

Neurodiversity in Higher Education Edited by David Pollak

Developmental Adult Neuro-Diversity Association (DANDA)

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The spectrum isn't that kind of spectrum



Pragmatic Language	Social Awareness	Monotropic Mindset	Information Processing	Sensory Processing	Repetitive Behaviors	Neuro-Motor Differences
Social communication including body language, eye contact, small talk, and turn-taking in conversation.	Ability to pick up on etiquette, social norms, taboos. Ability to form and maintain relationships.	Narrow but intense ability to focus, resulting in "obsessive" interests and difficulty task-switching.	Ability to assimilate and apply new information quickly or to adapt to new environments or situations.	Challenges interpreting sensory information, hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to stimuli.	Tendency to "stim" in response to varying emotions. Can be beneficial or harmful in nature.	Ability to control body movements. Ranges from clumsiness to complete loss of ability to move with intention.

Study consequences

- Your performance is likely to be unusually dependent on assessment mode
- You may find working in groups either hugely beneficial or massively stressful
- You might find it very stressful to be in some environments (big lecture halls, crowded study rooms)
- You are likely to feel much more fatigued than your course mates after doing the same work, which might further limit how socially engaged you can be
- Keeping track of deadlines and following the large canvas pages for the modules is likely unusually difficult
- It might be hard to keep concentrating during lectures or long workshops

Some hard learned lessons to help you cope

1. Stop studying (metaphorically)
2. Reflection – no longer just a pass/fail assessment
3. Know your strengths (and chase them relentlessly)
4. Working with your weaknesses
5. Stop studying (literally)
6. Loving your asshole brain

1. Stop studying (metaphorically)

- Make time for yourself *especially* when busy
- Active recovery is the secret
- Know what calms your brain



1. Stop studying (metaphorically)

- Make time for yourself *especially* when busy
- Active recovery is the secret
- Know what calms your brain
- Find your gang of weirdos
 - <https://su.utwente.nl/en/get-involved/Associations/>

2. Reflection – no longer just a pass/fail assessment



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- Spend time understanding how what you feel means
- Work out which ways of working work for you personally – generic advice often does not work if you are neurodivergent
 - (Conversely, study advice for ND people is often great for neurotypicals – lucky buggers)
- Know your strengths and weaknesses, your passions and your insurmountable mountains

3. Know your strengths (and chase them relentlessly)

- ND brains are (often) motivated by task process not task completion
- Hyperfocus can be your friend
- ...and your enemy
- Keep a diary or make time to regularly reflect on what you are good at
- Look for opportunities to use these strengths in group work to show your value (to them, and to yourself)
- Look for careers where you get to follow your passions and use your strengths
 - E.g. security services love dyslexics, police use autistic people for their pattern spotting abilities, ADHD massively overrepresented in paramedics
 - As psychologists – use your empathy as a strength as a clinician or researcher

4. Working with your weaknesses

- It's a “super power”?
 - Sensory overwhelm in autism
 - Reading with dyslexia
 - Mathematics with dyscalculia
 - Physical coordination with dyspraxia
 - Organisation and planning with ADHD...
 - ...and ALL of them!
- What can you delegate, and what do you just have to do?
- Do you *have* to be good at everything all the time?

4. Working with your weaknesses

- Spellcheck EVERYTHING
- Proofread after a delay (and on paper?), have someone else do it too
- Use screen readers or read text aloud yourself
- Use speech to text to write
- Use mind mapping (either on paper or with software)
- Try different kinds of planner or AI personal assistants
- Use recorders for meetings (and ask for use in lectures)
 - Some also now available with AI summaries
- E.g. <https://www.usemotion.com/>
- All these things cost money and time to learn to use

A meme featuring Denzel Washington in a scene from the movie 'Boyz n the Hood'. He is wearing a dark suit and tie, pointing a silver handgun directly at the camera with a serious, intense expression. The background shows an interior room with wooden trim and a doorway. The text 'SAY "HAVE YOU TRIED MAKING A SCHEDULE AGAIN", I DARE YOU' is overlaid in large, bold, white capital letters with a black outline.

**SAY "HAVE YOU TRIED MAKING
A SCHEDULE AGAIN", I DARE YOU**

4. Working with your weaknesses

- Pomodoro – 25 minutes work, 5 minutes break
 - Pro – forces you to take breaks
 - Cons – time blindness, interrupts hyperfocus, forces task switching
 - Use timers with visual indicators (<https://www.online-stopwatch.com/countdown-clock/>)
- Task based working
 - Pro – forces you to plan specific activities, removes guilt from finishing early, breaks up larger tasks, reduces procrastination
 - Con – requires upfront planning, hard to know how long things take (<https://goblin.tools/>)
 - Add two minute rule
 - And Eisenhower matrix
<https://asana.com/resources/eisenhower-matrix>

Estimator

Just tell me how long this is probably gonna take

Also available on [Magic Todo](#) items!

write a lecture on neurodivergent study tips

Estimate

3 to 6 hours

4. Working with your weaknesses

- Body doubling (<https://www.flow.club/>)
 - Pro – Social and forces you to work
 - Con – Social! Requires commitment from both
- Time blocking (with external reminders)
 - Pro – Provides clear structure to day, helps reduce anxiety about when you tackle your tasks, task switching is expected and so less frustrating
 - Con – temptation to overfill day, alarms may stop working if overused, remembering to set the damn alarms
- Routine and reward
 - Pro – helps reduce risks of forgetting, works with need for dopamine in ADHD
 - Con – can be too rigid, hard to implement when course requirements fluctuate from week to week and per module

5. Stop studying (literally)

- Is this the right topic for you?
- Is this the right study programme for you?
- You are not your grades
- You are not your degree
- Make sure you have an identity besides your job, your education
- Some of the happiest people I know are people that quit doing what was harming them

6. Loving your asshole brain

- The world will tell you that you are stupid, don't tell yourself that.
- Keep a diary – it's not only for helping you study.
- Know when to be selfish.
- It can help to share – with people you trust.
- The neurotypicals will never understand – that doesn't make them the enemy.
- It's very difficult to avoid burnout forever – but take care of yourself to reduce the chances, and to reduce how bad it will be.
- Seek help early.

6. Loving your asshole brain

- The study advisors can help (a bit):
<https://bms.planner.utwente.nl/>
- Office hours: Tuesday (RA3270) or Wednesday (RA3268) from 12:45 – 13:45 hrs
- Student wellbeing website:
<https://www.utwente.nl/en/ces/sacc/>
- Specialist help can help more, speak to your doctor about getting a diagnosis, access to therapy or coaching (possibly subsidised by gemeente)
- Diagnosis is not always helpful, big cultural differences in how you'll be treated
 - And even the accepting people get it wrong

