

SafeCare BC

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Neurodiversity Celebration Week

Beyond Awareness: Building Belonging Through Neurodiversity

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coaching
that belongs



Hi, I'm Jackie Connelly (she/her)

I'm a Certified Organizational Coach, speaker, and writer with over a decade of HR and DEI leadership experience.

I'm the founder of Coaching That Belongs, a practice at the crossroads of **neurodiversity and workplace belonging**.

I approach this work from two directions:

- **partnering with organizations** to build neuroinclusive conditions across the full employee lifecycle; and,
- **supporting individual clients in 1:1 coaching** to build the clarity and confidence to claim their belonging at work.

What we'll cover today

1. Terms: neurodivergent and neurodiversity
2. Common Barriers Neurodivergent folks face
3. The Neurodiversity Paradigm
4. Six Steps towards Neuroinclusion
5. Benefits of Building Belonging
6. What You Can Carry Forward
7. Resources

*What's not included today: Employment legislation, Duty to Accommodate, HR best practices

Neuroinclusive notes

- I'm going to make space for both hearing my voice and reading the information on the slides
- Having said that...you will receive the slides afterwards
- I've included some research which you will receive afterwards
- You can see me, but I can't see you
- I'm not able to monitor the chat while also facilitating
- Q&A option is open

Neurodivergent:

Describes **an individual** whose brain processes information and learns differently from what is considered typical.

The term emphasizes that these differences are natural variations in the human brain, not inherent flaws.



Neurodiversity:

The difference that exists within a **group of people** whose brains are different from each other.

Representing the full human cognitive variation.





600,000 Canadians

= 15%
of our global
population may
identify as
neurodivergent

**More than one-quarter of
the Canadian population
aged 15 years and over
have a disability (27.0%).**

Source: Canadian Survey on Disability, 2022.



MILANO CORTINA
2026

Common Barriers...but first

We're talking in broad strokes

- ✓ No two people are the same
- ✓ Needs shift depending on...a lot of things!
- ✗ We're not creating a checklist of traits or to-do's to follow

“Nothing about us without us”

- ✓ Decisions affecting neurodivergent individuals should not be made without their direct involvement

Cognitive Overload

- High volumes of **information simultaneously**
- **Social and emotional processing**
- Unclear **structure**

Masking

- Masking: **trying to hide or suppress** our natural ways of thinking in order to fit in and be accepted
- Sustained masking can be a **contributor to burnout** for neurodivergent workers
- When people hide who they are, teams **lose the cognitive diversity** that drives innovation
- **Stigma as a driver** of masking
- Neurotypical is the default in society = **imbalances**

One Speed Norms

- Spaces are designed for a **single pace** and a **single way** of being engaged
- Heightened sensitivities to **environmental stimuli**
- Lack of emotional/cognitive **regulation opportunities**

So, what now?

What do we do with this information?

A Framework for Understanding



The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The **neurodiversity paradigm** offers a framework for understanding neurological differences as natural and valuable forms of human diversity^{4,11-13}. This framework can be used to become more neuroinclusive. The neurodiversity paradigm encompasses the following guiding principles¹³:

Social Justice Orientation: Center neurodivergent voices in decisions around policy and systemic change¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

Identity and Self-Acceptance: Acknowledge that neurodivergence is an important part of identity and should be valued rather than "fixed." Use identity-first language (e.g., *Autistic*, *neurodivergent*), if that is preferred. Acknowledge intersections with other marginalized identities such as race, sexuality, gender identity and expression, and age.

Strengths-Based Perspective: Focus on strengths such as deep focus, visual-spatial thinking, analytical abilities, technological skills, and passionate interests^{17,18}.

Difference, Not Deficit: Remember that neurodivergence is not inherently better or worse than neurotypicality—it's simply different.

Empowerment and Inclusive Support: Empower neurodivergent people by removing barriers such as stigma, inaccessibility, and rigid neurotypical social conventions.

Connection to the Social Model of Disability: Neurodiversity aligns with the social model of disability. Cure-focused approaches should be rejected. Instead, "accommodations, improved societal attitudes, and reduced stigma" should be the focus of inclusion efforts¹⁹.

Beyond Autism: Initially centered on autism, remember that neurodiversity now includes a broader range of neurological differences, such as ADHD^{20,21}, dyslexia¹⁷, and many more.



To learn more about the Social Model of Disability, check out CCRW's Blog post *Disability and Work Topics 101: Understanding "Barriers" for People with Disabilities*: [Disability and Work Topics 101: Understanding "Barriers" for People with Disabilities](#) | [Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work](#)



Neuroinclusion Practices

1 Ask, don't assume

"How do you work best?" is more powerful than any policy

2 Provide information in advance

...and in different ways! Agendas, prep materials, and clear expectations reduce anxiety and improve participation.

3 Offer multiple ways to contribute

Written, verbal, asynchronous.
Vary how people can show up, participate and respond.

Neuroinclusion Practices

4 Name the unwritten rules

Make implicit expectations explicit.

What seems obvious to some isn't to others.

5 Curiosity over assumptions

Replace assumptions with genuine questions about preference and needs.

6 Reduce sensory friction

Offer quiet spaces, advance notice of changes, flexible seating.

Micro adjustments = macro impact.

Poll:

Are any of these happening in your team already?

Belonging:

“A subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places.”



Best practice: understand each person individually, listen to what they choose to share with you, and respect their preferences, without needing to know any diagnosis.

This is building belonging.

Neuroinclusion and Belonging

Future Skills Canada and Signal 49 Research

“Expand recruitment strategies through skills-based hiring and **alternative interview formats.**”

“Enhance the **accessibility of workplace accommodations**, such as flexible work arrangements and clear communication practices.”

“Foster neuroinclusive cultures where all employees can benefit from **transparent and supportive workplace policies.**”

Deloitte

“Teams with neurodivergent professionals in some roles can be **30% more productive** than those without them.

This is likely because of **neurodiverse employees’ unique skills and cognitive abilities**, allowing them to solve problems and approach tasks differently than their team members.”

CCRW 2025 Trends Report

“Inclusive workplaces benefit from the skills and insights of neurodivergent workers, including **different ways of working and solving problems**”

“Providing support for neurodivergent workers **supports retention, work performance, and wellbeing**”

What you can carry forward

- ✓ Neurodiversity is natural human variation, not a deficit
- ✓ You don't need to know who is neurodivergent to create inclusive conditions
- ✓ Neurotypical norms create exclusion and increase masking, with real costs to those individuals
- ✓ Neuroinclusive practice don't require organizational permission or resources
- ✓ Curiosity over assumptions: ask people how they work best
- ✓ Universal design benefits everyone

Resources

Statistics

- Accessibility Statistics: Stats Canada. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/topics-start/accessibility?utm_source=lnkn&utm_medium=smo&utm_campaign=statcan-statcan-accessibility-accessibilite

Study

- Ndindeng, A. 2024. The Impact of Neurodiversity-Inclusive Policies on Employee Performance, Retention, and Organizational Culture in the Workplace. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381699207_The_Impact_of_Neurodiversity-Inclusive_Policies_on_Employee_Performance_Retention_and_Organizational_Culture_in_the_Workplace

Books

- The Canary Code: A guide to neurodiversity, dignity, and intersectional belonging at work by Ludmila N. Praslova (2024)
- Divergent Mind: Thriving in a world that wasn't designed for you by Jenara Nerenberg (2020)
- A Hidden Force: Unlocking the potential of neurodiversity at work by Ed Thomson (2023)

Articles

- Deloitte: A rising tide lifts all boats. <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace.html>
- Impact HR: Neurodiversity <https://impacthr.ca/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace/>

Employer Support Firms

- Specialisterne Canada. Supports employers to tap into the talents of a neurodiverse workforce and to build inclusive organizations <https://ca.specialisterne.com/>
- The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability (EARN)_ Information and resources to help employers, HR professionals and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to create workplaces that are inclusive of people with disabilities: <https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-resources>
- Lexxic. A specialist psychological consultancy dedicated to empowering neurodiversity in the workplace. <https://lexxic.com/>

Technology

- Auticon Canada. Autistic-majority consultancy delivering global IT solutions for neuroinclusion expertise <https://auticon.com/ca-en/>
- Everway (formerly TextHelp) Creating software for organizations and the educational system that are intelligent, inclusive technologies that help people read, write, and communicate accurately and fluently. <https://www.everway.com/about/>

What We Covered

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2. Common Barriers Neurodivergent folks face
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Website

www.CoachingThatBelongs.com