



# NEURODIVERSITY TOOLKIT

**Neurodiversity is, well... diverse!**

In this toolkit you will learn more about:

- Some of the unique strengths and great traits often associated with being neurodivergent
- How these traits may show up on the outside, and what might be happening on the inside that isn't always visible
- The broader spectrum of neurodiversity and practical ways we can all be more neuroinclusive
- Support available at AIA — for you as a leader, a colleague, and as an individual.



**HEALTHIER, LONGER,  
BETTER LIVES**

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People experiencing traits of neurodivergence deserve support and understanding just like anyone else to be their best selves. What this looks like will vary and often be hidden from external view so always remember to treat everyone with compassion and kindness.



AIA NZ would like to acknowledge our employee-led Accessibility Network, New Zealand Disability Employers Network, ADHD New Zealand, Autism New Zealand, Dyslexia Consulting for generously sharing their subject matter expertise to shape this Toolkit.

Disclaimer: This toolkit is intended for general awareness and educational purposes only. It does not provide medical, psychological, or health advice and should not be used to diagnose any condition. If you would like support for your wellbeing, please seek guidance from a qualified healthcare professional.

# WHAT IS NEURODIVERGENCE

Being neurodivergent means having a brain that works differently from the average or “neurotypical” person. A neurodivergent person may have different social preferences, ways of learning, ways of communicating and/or ways of perceiving the environment.

These differences are simply variations of the human brain. There are lots of different types of neurodiversity, as seen in this image below.

Most types of neurodiversity have a spectrum of traits that have variations in their nature and the extent of the traits. The types can overlap, and it is not uncommon for an individual to have more than one, this is known as co-occurrence.

The great news is that neurodivergence often provides additional strengths, which you will learn more about in this toolkit.

To get us started, we have gathered information on three of the most encountered traits: ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia.



Source: Adapted from Genius Within CIC (2026). "What is Neurodiversity?" <https://geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity>

# NEURODIVERGENCE IN THE WORKPLACE



## This toolkit will help you to:

- Learn about neurodivergence, and how it can show up in the workplace.
- Understand the practical, everyday adjustments you can adopt as a leader or colleague to better support others and help them thrive at work.
- Be confident about your role in making AIA a more neuroinclusive workplace.

## Why supporting neurodiverse people is important:

- **20% of the population identifies as neurodiverse**

One in five people! You probably interact with neurodiverse colleagues every day without realising it.

At AIA we want to raise awareness and end stigma around neurodiversity to cultivate an inclusive workspace where people can access reasonable accommodations that enable them to thrive.

- **To uplift wellbeing**

Neurodiverse children receive **20,000** more instances of negative feedback than their 'neurotypical' peers by age ten. It's no surprise then that **63%** of neurodiverse adults do not disclose to their employers. In fact, most neurodiverse adults proactively try to 'mask' their traits to avoid stigma in the workplace. It can be exhausting to constantly self-monitor and mask traits, and doing this can negatively impact mental health.

By creating workplaces where people feel safe to talk about neurodiversity, organisations can provide support & accommodations and provide a safe space for neurodivergent people so everyone can be their authentic selves.

- **It's the right thing to do**

Neurodiversity is an asset to workplaces and teams. Research shows that inclusive workplaces are six times more likely to improve in areas such as innovation and agility. Embracing neurodiversity means including people who process information in unique ways; they can uncover patterns and opportunities that others may not see. It's a fantastic way to drive continuous improvement, creative problem solving and innovative ideas.



## How neurodiversity may show up at work

- **Social isolation** — difficulty comprehending implicit communication and social norms could make it harder for people to engage with colleagues, or clearly understand instructions.
- **Executive function** — the way information is processed by the brain can affect people's ability to plan, prioritise and organise tasks.
- **Sensory overload** — being more sensitive to noise, lights, smells and other distractions can diminish executive functioning and make it difficult to concentrate on work.
- **Invisibility** — having unseen traits that are often misunderstood or stigmatised makes it hard to thrive in the workplace.

# ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)



The Te Reo Māori term for ADHD is 'Aroretini' which means 'attention goes to many things'.



## What is ADHD

ADHD impacts the part of our brain that helps us to plan, control impulses and execute tasks. There are three types: predominately inattentive, predominately hyperactive/impulsive, or a combination of the two.

In New Zealand, an estimated **280,000** Kiwis have ADHD. It is important to remember that:

- ADHD can present differently in different sexes and occurs in all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
- The reason ADHD occurs isn't known, however current consensus is neurotransmitters work slightly differently, with dopamine and noradrenaline being most affected.

[ADHD New Zealand](#) can provide comprehensive support services.



### Strengths / great traits

Often highly creative thanks to their different perspectives, ADHD can bring a unique problem-solving perspective to challenges. For some impulsivity lends itself to adventure, meaning an ability to lean into what is enjoyable with courage.

### What you might see

#### SEEN TRAITS

**Impulse control** can be a challenge and sometimes this may present as interrupting others in conversation or appearing to bounce from one thing to the next.

Some people with ADHD and other neurodivergences use **self-stimulatory behaviour** (stimming) which may present as or fiddling. This can help with dysregulation and may be conscious or unconscious.

### What you might not see

#### UNSEEN TRAITS

People may be unable to control what they focus on. When a task isn't stimulating, people with ADHD can quickly become **distracted or disinterested**. On the flip side, **hyperfocus** is when people are so engrossed in what they're doing they become oblivious to anything else — including eating, drinking or even using the bathroom!

**Fatigue, restlessness, and anxiety** are also traits that may go unseen.

# AUTISM



The Te Reo Māori term for Autism is 'takiwātanga' which means 'in their own time and space'



## What is Autism

It's a neurodevelopmental condition that affects cognitive, sensory, and social processing, changing the way people see the world and interact with others.

[Autism New Zealand](#) provides fantastic resources and support.



### Strengths / great traits

Autistic people can have a strong focus on **attention to detail**, which can be invaluable to managing tasks in a careful and methodical way. They often thrive in routine and can display an exceptional **depth of knowledge** on topics they find interesting.

### What you might see

#### SEEN TRAITS

Autistic people don't always comprehend '**social norms**' in the same way as neurotypical people. This may show up in difficulty maintaining consistent eye contact, or their tone of voice and facial expressions not matching what's being said. Often, they can **take things very literally**, so may not have a typical response to a phrase like 'it's raining cats and dogs'.

When **routine is disrupted**, it may be quite unsettling, and you may see this in **stimming**. **Stimming** can help with focus, you may see this as hand wringing, tapping of fingers or tapping the floor.

### What you might not see

#### UNSEEN TRAITS

People with autism often know that they don't naturally mirror the same social cues as neurotypical people. This can make it difficult to navigate relationships with others resulting in **social anxiety**.

Processing information differently can extend to sensory input, for example light, touch, noise, and smell may be distracting or result in **sensory overload or fatigue**.

# DYSLEXIA



The Te Reo Māori term for dyslexia is 'tīpaopao kupu', tīpaopao meaning 'out of order' and kupu meaning 'word'.



## What is Dyslexia

Brain research shows that whilst most people use the 'verbal' left side of the brain to process information, making them neuro-typical word-based thinkers, dyslexic individuals use the 'visual' right side of the brain. In short, they tend to turn words into pictures to understand them, and then have to turn the picture back into words to respond — which requires extra effort and time when communicating.

- Dyslexia affects around **10%** of the population worldwide.
- Dyslexia affects all races, ethnicities, genders and languages, and is often inherited.
- The most common sign is a difficulty to read, write and spell.

[Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand](#) provides comprehensive resources and support.



### Strengths / great traits

Those with Dyslexia bring a unique approach (**dyslexic thinking**) to problem solving that involves pattern recognition, spatial reasoning, lateral thinking and interpersonal communication. They are often very **innovative**, with the ability to see many perspectives and have a noticeably **high learning capacity**.

### What you might see

#### SEEN TRAITS

They may have difficulties with **expressing themselves verbally**, and may feel reluctant or embarrassed to read out loud. Understanding what others are saying can also be a struggle, especially if someone is speaking at pace.

When it comes to **written communication**, you may notice poor handwriting, punctuation, and grammar, misspelling or mixing up words which sound similar making it difficult to communicate clearly and accurately.

Dyslexia can also make **prioritisation** and **time management** difficult.

### What you might not see

#### UNSEEN TRAITS

People with dyslexia often **experience words moving** on a page, or reversing (e.g., b/d/p/d, n/u, 13/31), which can make it difficult to 'skim' text for meaning or organise thoughts on paper/ screen.

**Following written instructions** and memory recall can be difficult, repeat learning often helps with retaining information. The challenge to retain information can also make it **hard to concentrate**

Diminished **fine motor coordination** can make tying shoelaces or fastening buttons trickier.

# NEUROINCLUSIVITY AT AIA

At AIA New Zealand, we all play a part in creating a workplace that is safe, inclusive, and empowering for everyone. By building collective awareness and understanding of neurodivergence, we're able to create practical adjustments and supports that help our people feel like their authentic selves and do their best work.

We're proud to make these insights available more broadly, supporting other organisations to take practical, meaningful steps toward greater neuroinclusion in their own workplaces and industries.



# PRACTICAL EVERYDAY SUPPORT

Simple adjustments can make a big difference, speak to your teammates about what works best for them.

## Inclusive Meetings

- Keep meetings to **25 or 55 minutes** so people can take a breather between bookings.
- Meet in a **quieter place** to minimise sensory distractions.
- Share meeting agenda & supporting documents in advance so people have enough **time to read/prepare**.
- Wrap up meetings with a **debrief** to ensure actions and next steps are understood.
- Allow questions or feedback to be raised in the **meeting's Teams chat** for those who are less comfortable speaking up.
- Create a **Team Treaty** outlining the preferred approach, tools or format for communication and documentation (e.g. Teams chat, email, kanban board).

## Work Environment

AIA House was designed with accessibility in mind. With access to a variety of spaces, neurodivergent people have the flexibility to choose a work setting that suits their needs, for example:

- **Quiet Spaces and Focus Rooms** have reduced noise disruption in neighbourhoods, take advantage of these spaces when needed.
- The **Wellness Rooms** are great places to take some time away from work if required.
- **Standing desks** allow more movement, which can help some people with focus.

## Flexible Working

Neurodiversity can impact sleep schedules, so it's not uncommon for people to be more productive at different times of the day.

Enabling people to leverage the time when they're most energised means they can collaborate fully and best meet the needs of stakeholders and colleagues. Leaders and employees are encouraged to consider how flexible ways of working can be leveraged to provide the support needed.

## AI Tools

**Copilot and other AI** tools can assist with some common neurodivergent challenges:

- Break down big, overwhelming tasks into simple, manageable steps to **support focus and prioritisation**.
- Summarise long emails or documents in plain language, making it easier to **understand what really matters** without the cognitive overload.
- Draft or refine content to **support clearer communication**.
- Prepare talking points to help people organise their thoughts before meetings, so they can be more **present and engaged in discussions**.
- Task managers/automated reminders can help with organisation, time management and focus.

## Professional Development

Setting goals, planning ahead and prioritising tasks requires high executive function, so **Performance Development Discussions** can be challenging. These tips can make them feel more manageable:

- Agree **regular cadence of meetings** with your team member throughout the year.
- **Break goals down** into clear, manageable steps and monitor progress regularly (not just at review time).

# PRACTICAL EVERYDAY SUPPORT

A lot of workplace communication is not explicit, and building new relationships involves navigating unwritten rules of social etiquette or office hierarchy which neurodiverse people may miss. Take dress codes for example, neurotypical new hires may notice that staff tend to wear casual attire, whereas neurodiverse people are less likely to notice.

## New Team Members

- Adopt a **'buddy'** system to help new team members settle in.
- Hiring managers can connect with their organisation's People & Culture or Talent teams for guidance on inclusive recruitment and onboarding practices. Where internal support is limited, seeking advice from external DEIB or accessibility consultants can also be helpful.
- There's a variety of **formal and informal social activities** to suit different interests, needs and preferences. If you're involved in a club/group/team don't assume everyone knows about it - Spread the word and welcome new members!

## Psychological Safety

- Avoid making assumptions about neurodivergence, and **approach conversations with curiosity**. It's not a requirement to disclose neurodivergent traits.
- Fostering a psychologically safe environment where people can bring their whole selves to work and feel heard. One powerful way to do this is through an employee-led network.
- Explore existing partners such as Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) providers to see what support they might be able to provide around neurodiversity.

# NEURODIVERSITY DICTIONARY\*

\*This is not a real dictionary, it's the words those with lived experience use and would like you to know.

Term	Definition	Lived experience insights
<b>MASKING</b>	Attempting to hide neurodiverse traits, or appear 'neurotypical' by mimicking behaviours.	Masking often stems from a desire to fit in and feel accepted. Practicing kindness and inclusivity will help people feel comfortable ditching the masks and coming to work as their authentic selves.
<b>TIME BLINDNESS</b>	The inability to estimate how much time has passed, or how much time is needed for something.	There are lots of tools available that can help people keep track of tasks and deadlines, for example reminders, kanban boards or tasks. Regular check ins between people leaders and individuals are a great opportunity to review progress and highlight any support needs.
<b>EXECUTIVE FUNCTION</b>	Cognitive skills associated with decision making, memory recall, impulse control and time management.	
<b>STIMMING</b>	Can help with focus, it may be conscious or unconscious and can show up as twitching, fidgeting, tapping, humming etc.	Compulsive stimming can feel embarrassing for some. There may be ways to help colleagues feel less 'observed', for example working in a lower traffic area, or joining some meetings online (where possible).
<b>NEUROTYPICAL</b>	A term used to describe people with typical neurological development or functioning.	
<b>NEUROSPICY</b>	A playful, creative term often used in place of 'neurodiverse'.	
<b>INTERNEST</b>	When you feel exhausted after a day socialising and need to bunker down in a little nest and absent mindedly 'doom scroll' through your phone for a while.	
<b>CONVERCOASTER</b>	Switching between topics, changing cadence and/or tone throughout a conversation — like a rollercoaster!	
<b>SIDE QUEST</b>	There's something you're supposed to be doing, but you need to break away and focus on something different for a while.	The dopamine reward system in the brain is impacted by some neurodiverse traits, causing people to seek novelty or distraction. Facilitating 'side quests' can ignite more productivity and focus. Speak to your team members to explore opportunities for new tasks outside of their core role that may be of interest.
<b>DOPAMINING</b>	Engaging in activities that'll provide a quick dopamine hit — often achieved by snacking, 'doom scrolling' or engaging in a hobby.	
<b>PROCRASTIWORKING</b>	Working really hard - just not on the thing you're supposed to be working on.	
<b>NOTIVATION</b>	The inability to begin or finish a task that's unengaging.	



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