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Understanding and Supporting Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways that people's brains work and process information. No two people are exactly the same in how they view their environment and respond to it. Additionally, people have different strengths and challenges based on how their brain functions.

Understanding the Terms

Neurodivergent is another related term. This is used to describe people whose brains developed differently from most people, affecting how they function. People who aren't neurodivergent are referred to as neurotypical. Neurodivergent is often used in the context of people with autism spectrum disorders, other neurological conditions, or learning disabilities. However, other people may identify as neurodivergent, including those who have not received a formal diagnosis.

The term neurodiversity was first coined by a sociologist named Judy Singer in the late 1990s. She wanted to encourage a more positive view of neurodivergence rather than labeling people as normal or abnormal.

Signs of Being Neurodivergent

People who identify as neurodivergent have different preferences from most people when it comes to social interactions, learning environment, and communication. For example, an individual who is neurodivergent might struggle to filter out external stimuli and cannot function in an environment with loud noises or bright lights. An individual might also struggle with:

- Focus and concentration
- Organizing thoughts
- Disruptions to their routine

It's also important to note that someone who is neurodivergent has many unique strengths as well, which may include innovative thinking, attention to detail, and taking the initiative in certain situations.

Promoting Acceptance and Inclusivity

Let's take a look at some ways that you can promote acceptance and inclusivity of neurodiversity in various settings, including the workplace.

- **Consider how you communicate.** Everyone has different preferences in how they communicate with others. Someone who identifies as neurodivergent might struggle to communicate with others for various reasons. For example, they might prefer written communication, such as email, versus a phone call so they have more time to think about what they want to say. They might prefer to see work assignments or updates in writing.

Often direct and concise communication is ideal. You can ask them directly about their preferences.

- **Take the time to listen.** Make sure to give individuals time to speak or respond. It might take someone who identifies as neurodivergent more time to formulate what they want to say or to find the right words.
- **Avoid making assumptions.** Get to know someone as an individual rather than making assumptions. No two people are the same.
- **Offer a flexible work environment when possible.** Individuals who consider themselves neurodivergent might excel with certain accommodations, such as being able to wear headphones at times to block out background noise.