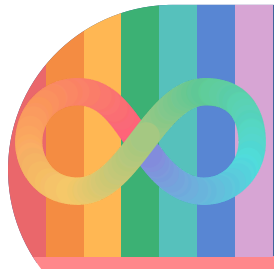


# different brains, different needs

a guide to neurodiversity &  
mental health





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CELEBRATING DIFFERENT BRAINS & SUPPORTING UNIQUE NEEDS

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**a note  
from  
omm:**

The purpose of this guide is to provide a **general overview** of several different kinds of identities and experiences that can fall under the umbrella term “neurodivergent.” This resource is based on a combination of research, professional experience, and lived experience. However, **this is not medical advice or a comprehensive text on this complex subject.**

This guide and the OMM team seek to take a **neurodiversity-affirming approach** to our language and content. In an effort to acknowledge the various opinions and preferences of those individuals who identify as neurodivergent and/or with the conditions described

in this guide, **we use a combination of both person-first and identity-first language.** In OMM club meetings and beyond, be sure to ask folks which they prefer to best align with the individual preferences of those in your community.



## what is neurodivergence?

**Neurodivergence is not a diagnosis**, but an **umbrella term** that includes many different kinds of people. The term “neurodivergent” includes anyone whose brain thinks and processes information differently from what is considered “typical” ([Northwestern Med](#))

This can include people with many kinds of cognitive (brain-related) conditions such as:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Intellectual Disability (ID)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

However, **not everyone with one of these conditions will identify as neurodivergent**, and many people without these conditions can identify as neurodivergent too.

## the mental health intersection

Neurodivergent individuals face significantly **higher rates of mental health challenges** than neurotypical folks. While the exact cause of this relationship is unknown, it likely has to do with a combination of different factors such as a person’s inherited traits or environment. Lots more research is needed, especially among neurodivergent folks of color, women and those belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community.

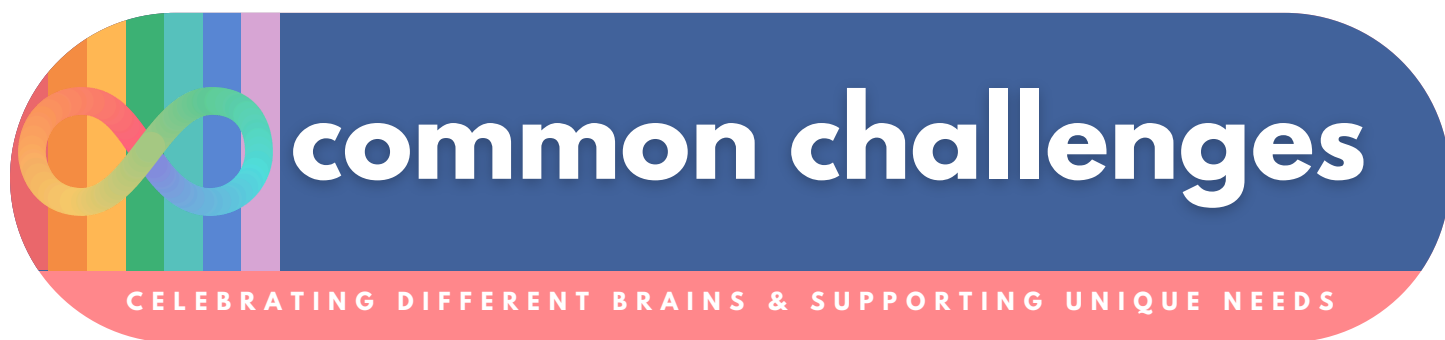
## here's what we know so far about how neurodivergence can impact mental health:

- **Chronic Stress:** constantly trying to fit in or act a certain way can lead to burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion
- **Co-Occurring Conditions:** an estimated 50-70% of folks with ASD or ADHD also have anxiety and/or depression ([NIH](#))
- **Social Isolation:** Differences in communication, social skills, and academic environment can lead to higher rates of bullying and increased loneliness
- **Increased Risk of Suicide and Self-Harm:** higher rates of anxiety and depression, impulsivity, and difficulty with sensory or emotional regulation can make neurodivergent folks more likely to attempt suicide or engage in self-harm behavior ([NIH](#))



did you  
know?

It is estimated that around **15-20%** of people in the world may be neurodivergent ([PMC](#))



Different brains have different needs, and the support you need may change day to day. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming or lonely to feel “out of sync” with your friends or family, or to have sensitivities that others do not. However, **your differences are not flaws**. Learning how to cope with how your brain reacts to different environments and situations can help you understand and communicate your needs better.

## executive dysfunction

Executive function is like your brain’s task master. It allows you to **plan, organize, and complete goals**. For many folks with some kind of neurodivergence, their executive function skills are not as strong, making it difficult to plan, stay organized, or start and finish tasks. It is not a lack of effort, but a struggle with the brain's internal management system.

## sensory overload

Many neurodivergent folks are not only **more sensitive** to certain kinds of sensory input like smell, light, or sound, but their brain also has a hard time **organizing** it. This makes some kinds of sensory input, like the feeling of an itchy sweater, impossible to ignore, leading to the person feeling overwhelmed and upset.

## rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD)

No one likes the feeling of being excluded or rejected. However, some people (especially those with neurodivergence), have **very intense negative emotions** when they feel they are being **criticized, rejected, or falling short of expectations**. These feelings are often so strong that they cause the person to avoid others or exhaust themselves trying to be “perfect.”

## social exhaustion

It is normal for neurotypical folks (those who are not neurodivergent) to feel tired after a long day at school or meeting new people, especially if you feel you are more introverted. But for those neurodivergent folks who put in **extra effort to look, talk, and act a certain way** to seem “normal” around others (many people in the ND community call this effort “**masking**”), this is especially exhausting. They will often need extra time to recharge after being social, even around friends and family, and doing too much too often can lead to burnout.



**Traditional self-care tips (like meditating or journaling) don't always work for neurodivergent brains. Real self-care means working with your brain, not against it.**

OMM clubs stand for **inclusivity**, **community**, and **belonging**. Here are some helpful tips for making sure that your club is a safe space:

### **Create a Sensory Sanctuary:**

Identify a space (even just your bed with a heavy blanket) where you can control the light, sound, and smell. Use this as a resource when you need to decompress, especially after a long day at school or when you feel stressed out.

### **Budget Your Social Energy:**

Allow yourself space to spend time alone or focusing on a special interest or hobby after a busy day. If it feels exhausting to try and fit in with your friends, consider hanging out for shorter periods of time or talking to them about ways you can feel more like yourself when you spend time together.

### **Break it Up:**

If a task feels impossible to start, don't force it. Try doing just 5 minutes of the task or asking a friend or loved one to hang out while you work on something. Reward yourself for your progress and take breaks when you need to!



Everyone deserves to have a space where they feel comfortable talking about mental health. Whether it's speaking up for a classmate, advocating for inclusivity during OMM club meetings, or supporting a friend, these tips can help you be an ally to the neurodivergent folks around you.



## speak directly

Lots of neurodivergent people (especially those with autism) have a hard time understanding what other people want or mean by their tone or body language. If you want to make sure you are understood, say exactly what you mean and be super clear when giving directions.



## be consistent

Hold everyone accountable to the same standards. If club members aren't allowed to interrupt while someone is speaking, neither are club sponsors or student leaders.



## stay on schedule

Make (and stick to) a schedule or agenda that you follow during your club meetings. Try to include visuals (like a picture of a clipboard when it's time to take attendance) and timers when you can!



## think ahead

If there is free time during the meeting, or you are doing an activity where some people may finish before others, let club members know what they can do while they wait. It can be helpful to have some coloring pages, fidget toys, or puzzles on hand for early finishers.



## know the signs

Many neurodivergent folks may stim (fidgeting or repetitive behavior) or withdraw from social situations when they feel overwhelmed or burnt out. This can look like hand flapping, hair twirling, humming, tapping hands or feet, nail biting, and much, much more.



## be patient

Your neurodivergent friends may need more time to recharge after social events, communicate differently, or have a hard time understanding information the same way you do. Give folks some extra time to answer questions or form opinions so help make sure everyone's voice is heard.



## Speak up

if you see someone being teased for stimming or their unique interests, step in to redirect the conversation or let a trusted adult know. No matter someone's disability nor neurocognitive status, bullying is never ok.



## Be curious

There are lots of great resources online (and included in the “resources” section of this guide!) to learn more about specific kinds of neurodivergence and how to support a friend or family member. Remember to **get your info from trusted, reliable sources** that center the voices of neurodivergent folks, not just those who care for or work with them.

### a note from omm:

**Never assume someone has a disability or diagnosis.** If someone brings up their neurodivergence or offers their perspective, be a good listener and ask questions to make sure you understand. However, some people are very open to sharing, and some are not. Always start by asking if someone is willing to share or to explain something, and respect their decision to say “no”.



## my coping skills wheel

### modification ideas:

- Narrow down the variety of choices and help club members identify situations that might cause them stress, and when to practice certain coping strategies.
- **For example:** “Many people feel stressed when “\_\_\_\_\_” (they have a big test coming up, around new people, etc.). And then talk about which coping skills make sense. Listening to calming music or calling a friend are great strategies, but are not appropriate during class.



## my own emoji

### modification ideas:

- You can use alternative ways to explain the activity for visual learners, such as [this video](#) that highlights O'Plerou Grebet, the student whose work inspired this activity.
- Use **clear language** and provide specific options for what their emoji can represent, such as:
  - A favorite food
  - Culture or heritage
  - Hobby
  - Themselves
  - A place or building
- Let club members know ahead of time if they'll be displaying their creations or taking them home



## the rain game

### modification ideas:

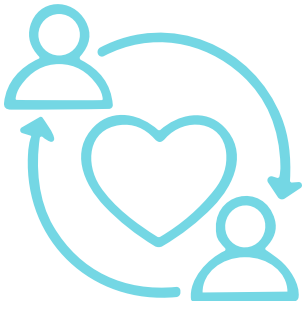
- Set a timer and use visuals to represent each sound used in the game
- Model the entire sequence quickly before asking club members to participate so they know what to expect.
- Let club members know that the middle of the sequence, where everyone is participating, can get very loud. Offer them the opportunity to put on headphones or move to a quieter part of the room while still participating. You can also help make it a comfy, less stimulating space by dimming the lights.



## welcome to the zen garden

### modification ideas:

- Use a timer at stations, and shorten to just a few if needed!
- Provide visuals for more individualized or complex activities, such as the sand garden or galaxy bottle.
- Provide explicit instructions for when and how to use their creations
- **For example:** the galaxy bottle may not be appropriate to bring back to class and use during instruction. Instead, let them know and give examples of when they might want to use it.



# what makes a safe space?

## modification ideas:

- Be sure to talk about what feeling emotionally “safe” means.
  - You might do this by asking what sorts of things or environments help club members feel calm and comfortable, or give examples of how a safe space may make folks feel.
- Allow club members **other ways to participate** through writing, discussion, or drawing, and let them know that they don’t have to have all the answers and can always be an active listener!
- Because this is a discussion-heavy activity, provide explicit guidance on how club members can voice their thoughts and opinions throughout the activity.
  - **For example:** Should everyone raise their hand before speaking? Are you going around and calling on everyone individually? After you share, should you wait until someone else has the chance to talk before sharing again?

### a note from omm:

A lot of these tips can be applied to our other activities! It can feel overwhelming at first to try modifying activities, campaigns, or events. Remember, **all of OMM’s activities, opening connections, and campaigns are designed to be adapted to your club’s unique needs**, and there is no single right way to do so. Ask for help when you need it and know that it is ok to make mistakes along the way. Just make sure you are leading with compassion, kindness, and curiosity.



If you've been reading about ADHD, Autism, or OCD and thinking, "That sounds exactly like me," you are not alone. Many people don't realize they are neurodivergent until they are older, when school and social lives become more complex. If you think you may have some kind of neurodivergence, here are some steps you can take:

### **Start a "Brain Journal":**

For a week, write down things that feel harder for you than you think they might for others (like staying organized or loud noises), and things you are great at. This helps you explain your experience better to others.

### **Talk to a Trusted Adult:**

This could be a parent, a favorite teacher, or a school counselor. You can say: "I've been learning about neurodivergence and I think it might explain why I struggle with certain things. Can we talk about getting a professional opinion?"

### **Request an Evaluation:**

To get formal support (like extra time on tests), you usually need an evaluation from a doctor or school psychologist. Don't be afraid to ask—it's your right to have the tools you need to succeed.

### **Seek Neuro-Affirming Care:**

When talking to a doctor or therapist, it's okay to ask if they have experience working with neurodivergent teens. You deserve a care provider who understands you and your needs.



**Neurodiversity is a big term that includes lots of different identities. Some of these resources may be specific to a specific condition while others are more general.**

### general resources

- [Neurodiversity HUB](#)
- [Understood.org](#)
- [Neurodiversity Podcast](#)
- [National Autistic Society \(UK\)](#)

### asd & adhd specific resources

- [Attention Deficit Disorder Association \(ADDA\)](#)
- [Children and Adults with ADHD \(CHADD\)](#)
- [Autistic Self Advocacy Network \(ASAN\)](#)
- [Embrace Autism](#)
- [Organization for Autism Research](#)
- [Association for Autism and Neurodiversity](#)

### ocd specific resources

- [Purely OCD](#) Podcast
- [OCD Challenge](#)
- [NOCD](#)
- [International OCD Foundation](#)

### other disability specific resources

- [The ARC](#) (intellectual & developmental disability)
- [Dyspraxia Foundation USA](#)
- [The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity](#)
- [Mental Health America- Trauma & PTSD](#)

### crisis resources

- Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: **text 9-8-8**
- Crisis Text Line: **Text “MIND” to 741-741**
- The Trevor Project (for LGBTQ+ youth): Call **1-866-488-7386** or **text “START” to 678-678**

our minds  
matter