

why do we need to work differently in psychotherapy with neurodivergent clients?

It is crucial to work differently in psychotherapy with neurodivergent clients because traditional models of therapy and approaches may not address and meet the unique needs and strengths of your neurodivergent client.

With neurodivergence – such as with autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions, differences in processing information are present alongside differences in communication and how one experiences the world – it can be exhausting trying to adapt and ‘fit in’ to a allistic or neurotypical world.

Here are some key aspects to consider –

Individualized Needs: Your neurodivergent client can have specific sensory processing differences that can impact on the therapeutic environment, communication preferences and styles and ways of interacting that are different and may require some adaptation. This can include the seating, the lighting, the use of metaphors, the sharing of psychoeducation and other such examples. This can be true also, for those who are not neurodivergent.

Understanding and Validation: Traditional ways of working in psychology and psychotherapy often focus on increasing tolerance and “normalising” behaviours or changing “maladaptive coping strategies” that can be invalidating for a neurodivergent client. We should aim to understand and validate their unique experience and their perspectives. The objective should NEVER be to get the client to adapt and become more “neurotypical”. This is harmful and unethical.

Building Trust: The therapeutic relationship is a key predictor of positive outcomes in engaging in therapy – we know this to be true from the vast amounts of research over the years. Your neurodivergent client however may struggle with social connections and therefore you need to adapt and create a safe and accepting space in order to build trust and rapport. This may mean doing it differently from how you always have done it. Providing an accepting relationship can allow the authenticity, vibrancy and excitement of the neurodivergent client to emerge as they realise that they are welcomed and accepted for who they are.

Accurate Diagnosis and Treatment: Misdiagnosis or overshadowing diagnoses is common and your neurodivergent client may have spent years in therapy or similar services feeling completely misunderstood. A neurodiversity affirming approach helps to ensure that clients receive accurate diagnoses and appropriate support.

Empowerment and Self-Acceptance: Autonomy should be key in all therapeutic objectives. Encouraging a robust sense of self and empowerment is crucial. Your client should feel supported and you should be curious about their identity, their strengths and explore with them strategies that work, as oppose to getting them to fit into a neurotypical way of being. Therapists need to be flexible and knowledgeable about neurodivergence. Assumptions invite masking and conforming to the 'best client ever' (Oates, 2021).

Language: Language is important – how does your neurodivergent client like to be seen when you are writing up the reports concerning their wellbeing and progress in treatment? Most of us have been taught to use 'person first' language and therefore we would say "Jo has autism" whereas now the majority of autistic adults prefer identity-first language, as is recognized in the APA language guidelines and by autism self-advocacy organizations.

Never assume: Oates (2021) argues that "in our desire for measurable and observable change ... we may well invite further masking ... as well as reinforce external behaviours that mask a troubled interior". (p.73). Change focussed interventions such as CBT can invite 'masking' – defined by Pearson and Rose (2021) as "conscious or unconscious suppression of natural autistic responses" (p.52) to fit into a neurotypical world, rather than experiencing acceptance, attunement, and meeting in relationship (involvement) (Erskine & Trautmann, 1996). Cast aside your assumptions or understandings of neurodivergence from decades ago. Be curious, authentic, transparent and available.
