

Understanding ADHD under the Neurodiversity Umbrella

By Dr. Ed. Joanne Norris, 2022

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for the neurological brain characteristics present in people who have a diagnosis of ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and/or Dyscalculia.

We recognize the significant benefits derived when ADHD is firmly placed under the Neurodiversity umbrella, the main ones being the reduction of stigma and discrimination and the raising of the self-esteem of the individuals themselves. We want to move away from pathologizing ADHD, which we do when our focus is purely on the deficits, or limitations.

The term “Neurodiversity” allows for brain differences that have both strengths and limitations, but whereas the focus of the different medical labels used to describe these differences is only on the limitations, the focus of the Neurodiversity term is on the many strengths people with these characteristics have in addition to their limitations.

The neurodiversity model is a paradigm shift in how we think about children, adolescents and adults who have special needs; instead of looking at them as having a deficit or a dysfunction, neurodiversity encourages us to speak about their strengths. This will not only ensure that their self-esteem is raised, but also that because of this, they are more likely to achieve a lot more and become productive members of society.

The term “Neurodiversity” also allows for the use of suitable medication to treat the limiting symptoms as needed, but it is a strength-based approach that ensures that the child or adult is not in any way inferior because of this. In other words, the neurodiversity-inspired educator or employer will have a deep respect for each person’s unique brain characteristics and focus on the individual strengths that come with brains that are wired differently.

From a legal standpoint, the right of every person to an education and suitable employment will ensure that supporting the neurodiversity model will not lead to a lack of access to the medication that in many cases is needed for people with ADHD to perform to their potential.

Many large companies have already declared their support for the neurodiversity approach and what they have found is that neurodiverse employees - if placed in their areas of expertise and given suitable accommodations – are not only able to keep up with their neurotypical work colleagues, but in many cases, outperform them because their strengths have been taken into consideration.

In this way, society can use the great potential that people with these characteristics have.

When we raise awareness about ADHD, we need to point out the symptoms that limit the performance of a child or adult; using the neurodiversity model, we speak about both their limitations and their strengths and talents. This is more effective because it creates a more positive dialogue that could help motivate and empower.