

## Dr Mike Talbot - Key Learns

- ND is just the natural variation in the human brain
- The challenge for the ND individual is that the difference between strengths and weaknesses is magnified
- There are both challenges and positives to any neurodiversity
- There are practical ways that we can embrace ND as mediators
- We can predict some of the ways that ND might contribute to conflict, e.g. in the workplace
- Ultimately, it is the mediation environment, and not the ND individual, that needs to be 'fixed'

## Understanding and Embracing Neurodiversity in Mediation

### What Is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in the human brain that influences how people think, learn, and interact with the world. It is not a disorder to be cured or prevented, but a difference to be understood and accommodated. Just as we accept physical diversity, we must also embrace cognitive diversity.

Common forms of neurodivergence include:

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**
- **Dyslexia**
- **Dyspraxia**

These are not deficits, but different ways of experiencing and processing the world.

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### Key Insight: Neurodivergence Magnifies Strengths and Challenges

One of the defining features of neurodivergence is the **amplified contrast between strengths and difficulties**. For example:

- An autistic person may struggle with social interaction and sensory overload but may also exhibit deep focus, loyalty, and honesty.
- A person with ADHD may find it hard to concentrate or sit still but may also be highly creative, intuitive, and resilient.

This wide gap between comfort and discomfort zones can lead to misunderstanding, especially in structured environments like the workplace or mediation settings.

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### Neurodiversity in Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities

Mediation can be a high-pressure, emotionally charged environment. For neurodivergent individuals, this can be particularly overwhelming. However, with the right approach, mediation can also be a space where neurodivergent voices are heard and respected.

#### Challenges

- **Sensory overload** (e.g., noise, lighting)
- **Communication differences** (e.g., non-verbal communication, literal interpretation)
- **Social expectations** (e.g., eye contact, small talk)
- **Impulsivity or difficulty focusing**

#### Opportunities

- **Creative problem-solving**
- **Honest and direct communication**
- **Unique perspectives on conflict**
- **Strong sense of justice and fairness**

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### Practical Ways Mediators Can Embrace Neurodiversity

1. **Adapt the Environment, Not the Person**
  - Create quiet, low-stimulation spaces.
  - Allow breaks and thinking time.
  - Use clear, literal language—avoid metaphors like “building bridges.”
2. **Understand Communication Styles**

- Be open to non-verbal communication methods.
  - Don't misinterpret lack of eye contact or small talk as disinterest.
  - Recognize that masking (trying to appear neurotypical) can be exhausting.
3. **Be Flexible and Patient**
- Allow extra time for processing and responses.
  - Use visual aids or written summaries.
  - Focus on one issue at a time to reduce cognitive load.
4. **Challenge Neurotypical Assumptions**
- Don't assume someone is being difficult or uncooperative.
  - Understand that what seems like a "bad attitude" may be a coping mechanism.
  - Aim to create a **safe, non-shaming space** where all participants feel respected.
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#### Case Reflections

- **Mike's Experience:** Worked with non-verbal autistic individuals in mediation, using alternative communication methods. Employed an autistic person who excelled in task completion and focus.
  - **Laura's Journey:** Diagnosed with ADHD at 46, she described her life as "before and after diagnosis." Understanding her neurodivergence helped her reframe her self-perception and improve her relationships. In mediation, she now feels empowered to self-advocate.
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#### Why This Matters

- **1 in 100** people in the UK are autistic.
  - **1 in 25 adults** and **1 in 20 children** have ADHD.
  - Neurodivergent individuals are part of every community and workplace. As mediators, we will encounter them—and we must be ready to support them.
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#### Final Thought

Neurodiversity is not a problem to be solved. It is a reality to be embraced. The goal of inclusive mediation is not to "fix" neurodivergent individuals, but to **reshape the mediation environment** so that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate, be heard, and find resolution.