

EATING DISORDERS



NEURODIVERSITY  
AUSTRALIA

**General  
Considerations  
for All Health  
and Allied Health  
Professionals**



# Overview

Neurodivergent patients often have various specific support needs and require accommodations. This document is intended for all health and allied health professionals and provides some key considerations aimed at helping to create an accessible therapeutic experience for neurodivergent individuals, from booking to appointment. However, it is not an exhaustive list of all the possible points to consider. Therefore, it remains important to ask neurodivergent people about their specific support needs.



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## New patients

- Be mindful that neurodivergent people may experience difficulties associated with completing long intake forms (e.g., attention span, dyslexia). Consider shortening such forms if possible as well as using a mix of tick boxes and free text boxes.
- Avoid making assumptions and ask about gender and neurodivergent identity as well as preferred terminology (e.g., pronouns, person-first versus identity-first language). Please note that many autistic people prefer identity-first language (e.g., autistic) rather than person-first language (e.g., with autism) (1).
- Consider including a tick box list of accommodations that could be provided (e.g., dimming or turning off the lights in the consultation room, fidget tools, floor sitting options, opportunity to stand up and walk around the room during a session, provision of notepads for non-verbal communication) and ask if any additional access needs are required.

# Administrative considerations

- **To minimise distress associated with going to new places and meeting new persons, consider:**



Providing information about practice access (e.g., driving directions, parking options, public transport options)



Describing and sending pictures of the waiting room and consultation space



Explaining the intake process (e.g., sending a short explanatory video with subtitles and transcript)

- **To cater for different access needs, consider:**



Offering booking and appointment management options via phone and online



Offering face-to-face and telehealth/phone appointments



Setting up subtitles for telehealth appointments



Having materials to write/draw readily available in consultation rooms



Encouraging patients to bring sensory regulation tools for face-to-face sessions (e.g., noise cancelling headphones, fidget tools, sunglasses, weighted blanket, plush toys)

- **To support executive functioning, consider:**



Offering different payment options (e.g., some neurodivergent people may find it easier to have direct debit set up so to limit the number of tasks associated with paying bills on time)



Offering several appointment reminders through text and/or email (depending on the patient's preference)



Booking a follow-up appointment directly at the end of the current session instead of leaving it to the neurodivergent person to organise post-session



# Physical environment

**Many neurodivergent people experience atypical processing of environmental stimuli. Therefore, these considerations may be useful:**

- Providing a low stimulation environment (e.g., avoiding ticking clocks, television, or radio background noises, dimming the lights)
- Avoiding scented products like diffusers, scented candles, or strong perfumes
- Providing sitting options suitable for all body types
- Providing fidget tools (e.g., spinner, liquid motion bubbler, pop its)
- Adjusting room temperature if possible



# Communication during session

- Consider neurodivergence-related communication preferences and needs. For example:
  - ▶ Using simple and direct language
  - ▶ Asking one question at a time
  - ▶ Asking clear and unambiguous questions
  - ▶ Using visual aids to help with explanations
  - ▶ Allowing additional time for the patient to respond to questions (i.e., allowing a purposeful pause after a question)
  - ▶ If requested by the patient, speaking at a slower pace
  - ▶ Having a non-judgmental attitude towards patients who may need to ask several clarifying questions
  - ▶ Welcoming the use of augmentative and alternative communication systems (AAC), a notepad, and/or speech (or a combination of those) (2)
  - ▶ Providing a written summary of sessions (e.g., highlighting key points and next steps) with pictures/graphics if necessary
  - ▶ Explaining the rationale for every treatment step and procedure as this may help reduce distress associated with uncertainty
  - ▶ Considering using declarative language for neurodivergent patients experiencing high demand avoidance (3). This can be achieved through the non-demanding framing of statements, comments, or observations. For example, saying “we can organise follow up appointments now if you find this helpful” instead of saying “we need to schedule a follow up appointment now”

- Use weight and body neutral language to avoid engaging in fat shaming and promoting weight stigma
- Avoid food morality or shaming (e.g., healthy food, bad food, unhealthy food, sinful food). Allocating dichotomous moral attributes to food items may be interpreted literally by neurodivergent people, possibly contributing to anxiety, calorie/carbohydrate counting, and/or restriction (e.g., orthorexia).



# References

- (1) <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221130845>
- (2) <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/.aug-alt-comm>
- (3) <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/working-with-pda-menu/>

## Further reading

- Autistic SPACE: a novel framework for meeting the needs of autistic people in healthcare settings  
<https://www.magonlinelibrary.com/doi/full/10.12968/hmed.2023.0006>
- What Does It Mean For a Therapist to Be Neurodiversity-Affirming?  
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-does-it-mean-for-a-therapist-to-be-neurodiversity-affirming-6829954>
- Barriers to healthcare and a 'triple empathy problem' may lead to adverse outcomes for autistic adults: A qualitative study  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13623613231205629>
- Neurodivergence-informed therapy  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dmcn.15384>
- What does it mean to be neurodiversity affirmative?  
<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/what-does-it-mean-be-neurodiversity-affirmative>
- Working with PDA: Information for healthcare professionals  
<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/working-with-pda-menu/information-for-healthcare-professionals/>