

# Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Employee Expectations and Employer Obligations

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# Agenda

- Understanding Neurodiversity
- Why Should Employers Care?
- How Do You Know If an Employee is Neurodiverse?
- Neurodiversity Across the Employment Lifecycle: What Do Neurodiverse Individuals Need?



# Disclaimer

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# Understanding Neurodiversity

# Important Terms

Employers should be aware of and use appropriate terms around neurodiversity.

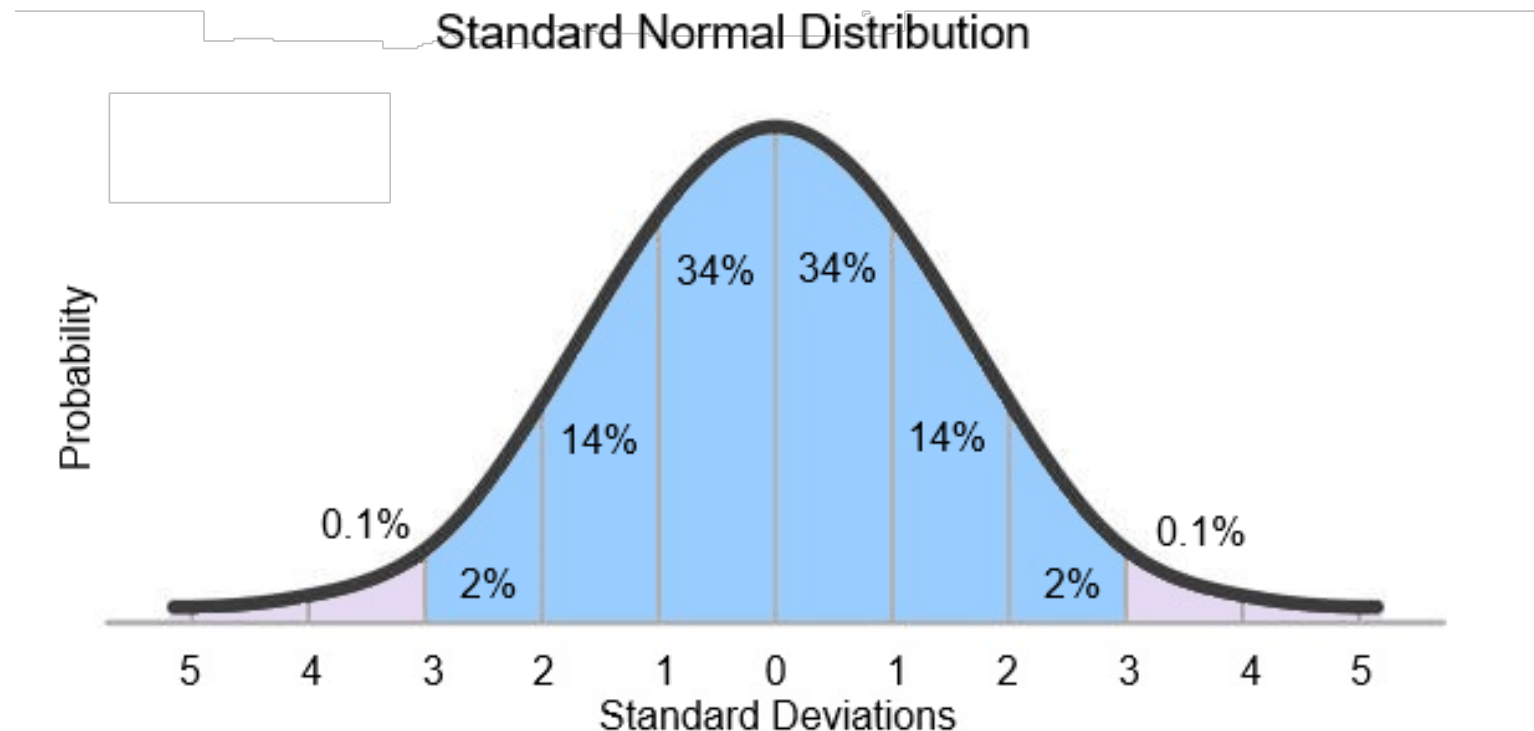
- **Diversity:** Biological term for the genetically-determined variability of many traits within a species, seen across all life.
- **Neurodiverse:** Exhibiting behaviors, thoughts and emotions that suggest atypical neurological development and functioning based on the natural variation of human brains and nervous systems; synonymous with **neurodivergent**.
- **Neurotypical:** Exhibiting behaviors, thoughts and emotions that suggest typical neurological development and functioning.

# Important Terms (cont.)

- **Person-first language:** Identifies differences as only one aspect of the person, ex;
  - “A person diagnosed with depression” vs. “A depressed person”
  - Generally (but not universally) preferred for people diagnosed with a behavioral health condition.
- **Identity-first language:** Identifies differences as a central aspect of the person’s identity.
  - “I’m autistic” vs. “I have been diagnosed with autism-spectrum disorder”.
  - No general agreement on which to use; will depend on the specific person’s preferences.
- **Neurochameleon:** A neurodiverse person who adopts behaviors to fit in with others who are neurotypical; a type of code switching.

# Neurodiversity: An Evolving Concept

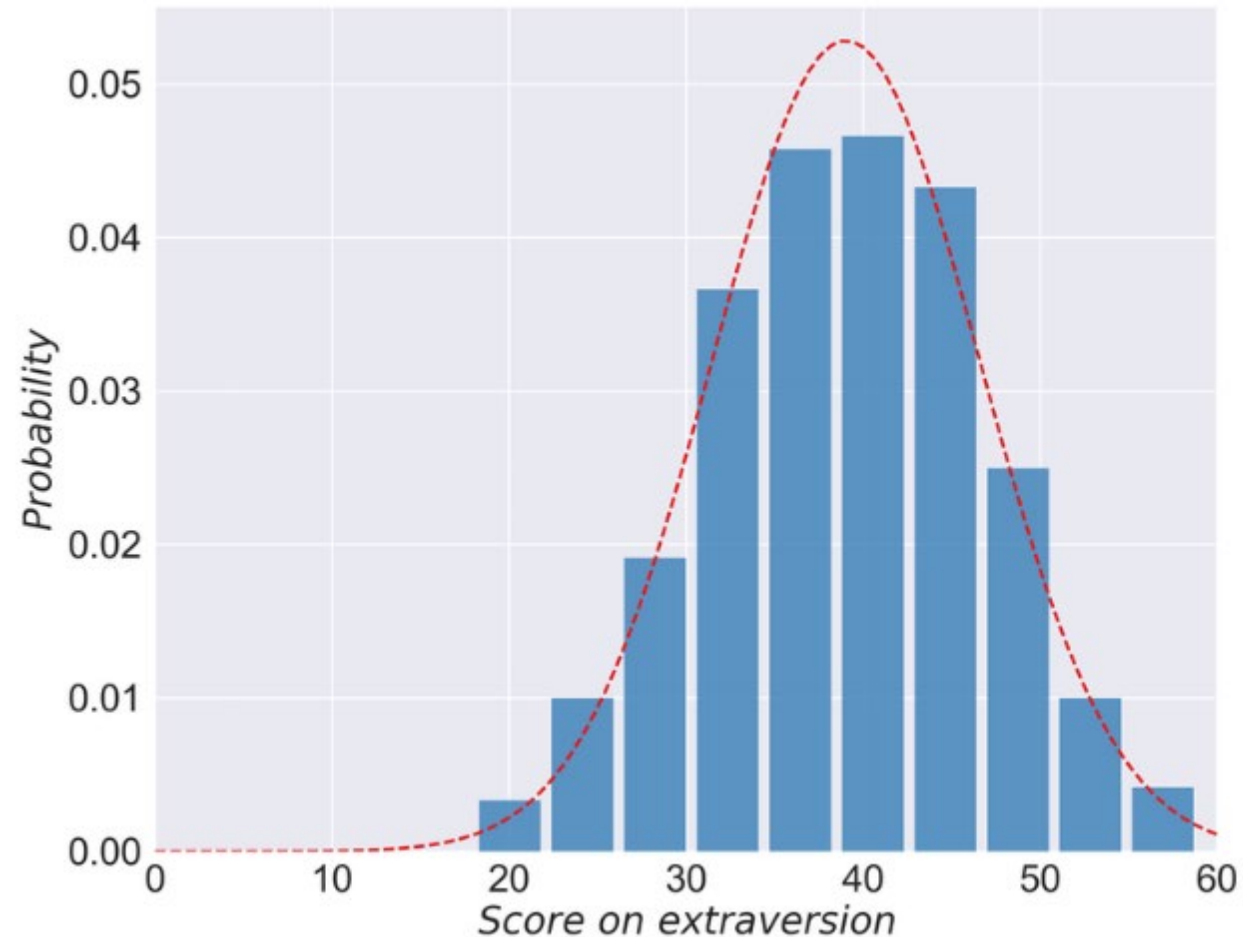
The theory of neurodiversity hypothesizes that many characteristics, usually classified as disorders, are just normal deviations from the mean with respect to neurological functioning.





# Neurodiversity: Variation in Extraversion

One psychological trait that's normally distributed is how introverted or extraverted an individual may be.



Source: Zhou, Z, Ke, X. and Zhao, Ji; 2017.

# Neurodiversity applies to all different types of brains



**The medical model** considers differences pathological, as diseases or disorders to be cured.

- **Differences are seen as bad.**  
Any divergence from the norm is considered a problem.
- **The aim of treatment is to fix the patient.**  
Treatment aims to make people conform to the societal definition of normal.



**The neurodiversity framework** understands variations in behaviors, feelings and thoughts as natural deviations that are merely different.

- **Diversity is seen as good.** Differences can be adaptive and confer advantages.
- **The aim of treatment is well-being.** While some differences may create difficulties for the individual, the goal is well-being, not conformity.

# Most Behavioral Health Disorders May Be Considered to Be Neurodiverse

## Autism Spectrum Disorder:

may include exceptional memory skills, increased understanding of natural systems and behaviors, heightened perception and/or creativity and unusual problem-solving approaches.

## Anxiety Disorders:

may serve as an early warning system for threats and encourage groups to prepare for potential dangers.

## Addictions:

promoted fitness through reward-seeking behaviors and identified substances useful as medicines.

## PTSD:

priming the fight-flight-flee response centered in the amygdala, affected individuals respond more quickly and strongly to potential dangers

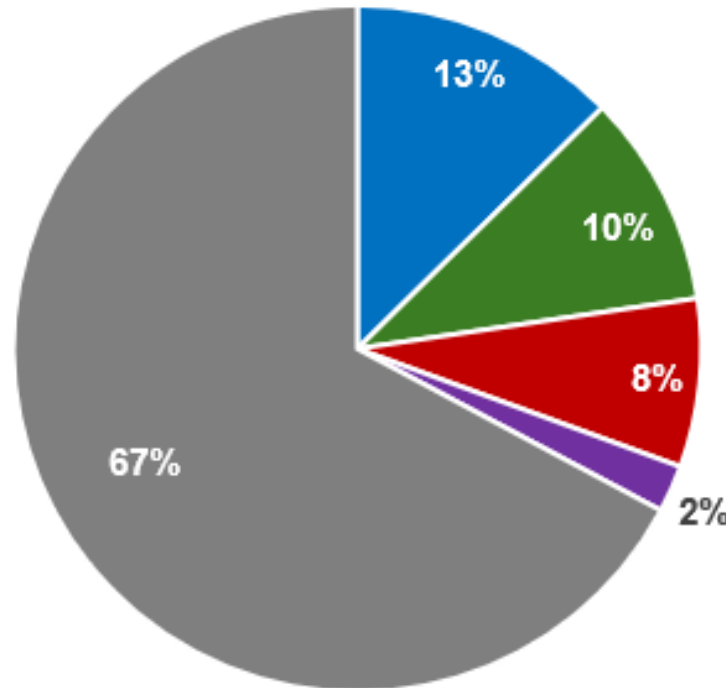
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# Why Should Employers Care?

# Neurodiversity is Very Common

As many as one-third of U.S. adults may be considered neurodiverse, depending on how it's defined.

Many people who would meet the criteria for a diagnosis considered neurodiverse are **not formally diagnosed**, and many people who identify as neurodiverse have no formal diagnosis.



## Neurotypical

Roughly 69% of the adult population.

## Any mental illness

## Any substance use disorder

## Both mental illness and substance use

## Autism-spectrum disorder

# The Neurodiversity Employment Crisis

**4.2%**

Unemployment rate for people without a disability

vs.

**9.3%**

Unemployment rate for people with any disability

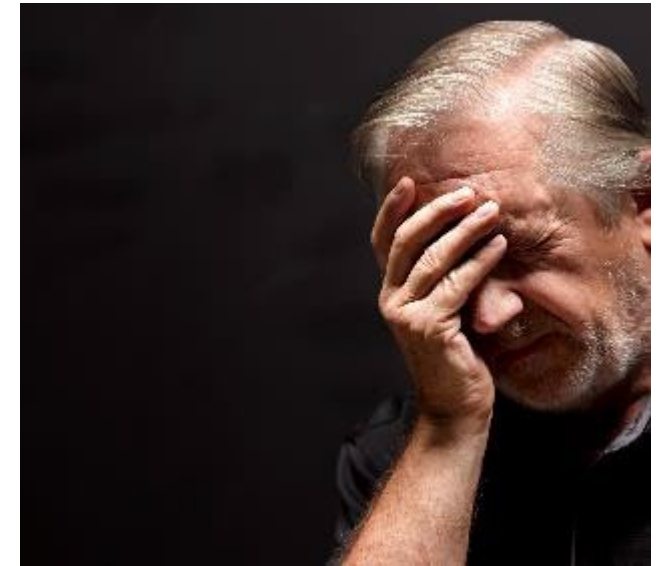
**85%**

Percentage college-educated people with autism who are unemployed

and

**50%**

Percentage of people with severe mental illness who are unemployed



Source: Department of Labor, June 2025.

# Neurodiverse Workers Make Significant Contributions



**Innovating perspectives:** including unique cognitive perspectives, which can lead to greater innovation.



**Unique strengths:** including strong detail orientation, exceptional memory, enhanced multitasking, excellent pattern recognition, outstanding math skills, etc.



**Problem-solving abilities:** neurodiverse individuals often have a long history of problem solving to overcome societal barriers.



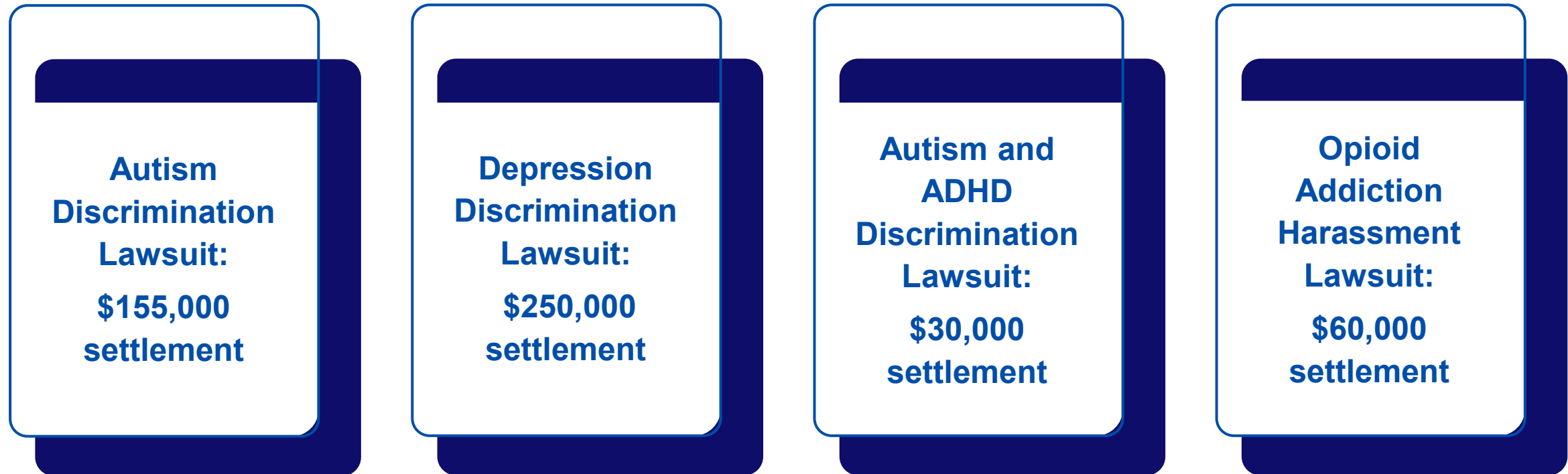
**Focus and attention to detail:** some neurodiverse individuals have an enhanced ability to focus, leading to improved work quality and high productivity.



**Creativity:** some neurodiverse individuals are highly creative.

# EEOC Discrimination Lawsuits Involving Neurodiversity Have Been Increasing

Diagnoses included under the neurodiverse label may be considered a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, and its Amendment Act, or ADAAA.





**How Do You Know If An  
Employee is Neurodiverse?**

# You Don't.

The only way to know that someone is neurodiverse is through a comprehensive assessment and diagnosis by a trained professional.





# Don't Fall into the Trap of Trying to Diagnose Employees

It's always a bad idea to diagnose employees, even informally, but that's especially true with neurodiversity.

- **"Are you on the Spectrum?":** This is just as bad an idea as asking a person if they're pregnant.
- **"Are you autistic?":** Please tell me you know this is off limits.
- **"Regarded as Disabled":** The ADA/ADAAA, protect workers who do not have even have a disability if their employer believes they do.
- **"He told me he was":** Many people describe themselves as "neurodiverse" without ever receiving a formal diagnosis. Although it's probably a good idea to accept that as their self-definition, be careful about making any assumptions about what they mean or how you should treat them.

**The Challenge:** If you don't know who's neurodiverse, how do you accommodate them?



# Universal Design

Develop processes and procedures that minimize barriers for all people, including those who are neurodiverse.



Source: Nick-philly

# Neurodiversity Across the Employment Life Cycle Neurodiversity

# The ADA Applies at every Employment Stage

Neurodiverse individuals may be protected by and have specific rights under the law.



Recruitment



Hiring



Management



Retention

## A Crucial First Step

Job descriptions frequently include characteristics that exclude neurodiverse individuals even though they are not truly essential job functions.

# Accurate and Up-to-date Job Descriptions are Essential

- **“Excellent communication skills”** are often included in every job description but may not be truly necessary for people whose work doesn’t involve interactions with others, such as those in engineering or statistical fields.
- **“Strong interpersonal skills”** are similarly included in many job descriptions for positions that don’t involve interactions with others.
- **Train hiring managers to make objective decisions** based on qualifications and essential job tasks, rather than their social impressions.

*Source: How to Optimize Job Descriptions for Neurodivergent Job Seekers, Society for Human Resource Management; Leopold, M., accessed May 2025.*



# Recruitment Barriers

Disability discrimination in recruitment is prohibited by the ADA/ADAAA but is difficult to identify or track. Potential barriers for neurodiverse employees can include:



- **Traditional recruitment strategies often exclude neurodiverse individuals:** Neurodiverse individuals may not network as well as others.
- **Job listings may deter neurodiverse people from applying:** Listings that include extensive requirements that might apply to any position may be overwhelming, and some neurodiverse individuals may read specific requirements very literally and decide they don't meet them.

# Recruitment Opportunities

Opportunities to improve recruitment of neurodiverse employees.

- **There are recruitment platforms specifically for neurodiverse candidates:** Adding a resource for neurodiverse individuals to the recruitment process can increase the diversity of applicants and uncover excellent candidates who might otherwise be missed.
- **The ADA allows employers to target neurodiverse individuals for recruitment:** But check with an employment attorney before implementing one.

# Hiring Barriers

The job interview process often includes elements that effectively limit the ability of neurodiverse individuals to present well.



- **Live, individual interviews may cause anxiety:** Most people have some anxiety around interviews, but this may be debilitating and even verge on panic for some neurodiverse individuals.
- **Group interviews:** These can be anxiety-provoking for most people but can eliminate neurodiverse applicants from the process.

# Hiring Opportunities

Opportunities to improve recruitment of neurodiverse employees.

- **Focus on skills, not social norms:**

For example, for applicants who will not be communicating with external customers, communication skills may not be essential.

- **Offer a menu of interview options:**

Unless the essential job functions prohibit this kind of accommodation, employers may offer:

- Accommodations at the time of scheduling
- Written interviews
- To provide questions in advance
- A sensory-friendly and/or private area for the interview

# Management Opportunities

Specific strategies and techniques may be used when managing neurodiverse individuals.

- **Create sensory-friendly workspaces:** Employees who are distracted by excessive stimuli may do better in quiet areas with natural lighting.
- **Trauma-informed management:** This strategy uses a neurological understanding of trauma to guide management.
- **Neurodiversity management:** Neurodiverse employees may need specific management approaches to succeed.
- **Recovery-friendly management:** Recognizing and supporting challenges employees in recovery from addiction can help them succeed.



# Management (cont.)

- **Offer modifications to address specific limitations.**  
Employees who are overwhelmed in social situations may do better working alone or with a single colleague.

- **Encourage an explicit culture of inclusion and belonging.**  
Diversity is always a fact of life but is often invisible and people may work to hide their differences.

- **Leverage individual strengths.**  
Every team has members with diverse skills, but this may be more extreme with neurodiverse employees.

# Retention Opportunities

Neurodiverse employees may be more loyal to their employers than other workers, but companies must still do the work to retain them.



- **Create career paths that don't require management:** Many solid performers don't want to manage others, but they still want a path for advancement.
- **Reward performance even without promotions:** Employees who demonstrate excellent performance must be rewarded, even if they remain in the same role.
- **Challenge myths and assumptions:** Consider each employee's skills in relation to the actual essential job functions, rather than focusing on limitations that that may not be relevant.

# Reasonable Accommodations

Reasonable accommodations exist for every common limitation and restriction associated with neurodiversity; however, they must be appropriate to the specific situation and that doesn't mean that every neurodiverse individual can be successfully accommodated.



## Reminders:

1. Ask each worker about their needs.
2. Understand how limitations and restrictions affect job tasks.
  - The accommodation of mental health diagnoses is much more individualized and involves more trial/error than musculoskeletal diagnoses.
3. Re-assess after implementing an accommodation.



# Reasonable Accommodations Examples

## Emotional regulation

- **Modified break schedule** to allow time to use techniques suggested by treatment providers
- **Job restructuring** to minimize situations that lead to emotional reactions
- **Support person** to help prevent meltdowns

## Difficulty with change

- **Extended transition period** to allow time to adjust to change
- **Workflow and task separation documentation**, giving step-by-step instructions for revised processes
- **Job coaching** to identify strategies for adjusting

# Accommodations Examples (cont.)

## Difficulty with attention and concentration

- **Active seating:** can enhance focus, increase comfort, decrease restlessness/hyperactivity and boost productivity
- **Noise cancelling headsets:** effective tools to assist in focus/concentration by blocking out external noise
- **Fidgets** help with focus, comfort and sensory regulation
- **Therapeutic glasses** may help to reduce visual distractions

## Social skills

- **Social skills training** such as communication training
- **Disability awareness and etiquette training** for coworkers
- **Management approaches** including use of written directives

# Accommodations Examples (cont.)

## Task Management and Organization

- **Project Management Tools:** software tools or even simple check lists can provide structure and reminders to help employees stay on track
- **Visual Timer:** helps users perceive time better by showing how much has passed, aiding in accurate task time projections and keeping them on track
- **Chunking work tasks:** helps employees break tasks down into designated blocks of time and identifying “do not disturb” times can improve productivity
- **Smart pen:** digitalizes handwritten notes and records audio

# Case Studies and Success Statistics

# Stay-at-Work Case Study 1: Professional

- **Diagnoses:** Major Depression, Panic Disorder, PTSD
- **Barriers:** Losing focus/concentration due to noise, bright lights, being fidgety and privacy concerns.
- **Accommodations:** Flexible seating chair; privacy screen; noise-cancelling headset; fan; cube shield and therapeutic glasses provided.
- **Cost:** \$1,415
- **Estimated Savings:** \$7,792
- **Estimated Disability Days Saved:** 75



# SAW Case Study 2: Program Coordinator

- **Diagnoses:** ADHD
- **Barriers:** Memory and processing of verbal information in meetings.
- **Accommodations:** Visual timer, rolling footrest, digital voice recorder and training on software tools.
- **Cost:** \$2,008
- **Estimated Savings:** \$7,485
- **Estimated Disability Days Saved:** 75



# SAW Case Study 3: Lab Tech

- **Diagnoses:** Major Depressive Disorder with Anxiety and ADHD
- **Barriers:** Difficulty focusing, sensory issues with noise and visual stimuli.
- **Accommodations:** Weighted lap pad; therapeutic glasses; fidgets and noise-cancelling headset.
- **Cost:** \$1,109
- **Estimated Savings:** \$4,702
- **Estimated Disability Days Saved:** 46





# Stay-at-Work Success Statistics

**86%**  
success rate

- **98%** participation rate.
- **\$1,374** = the average cost per SAW referral.
- **\$3,993** = the average estimated gross claim cost savings per referral.
- **\$12,578** = the average estimated non-claim cost savings per referral.
- **50 days** = the estimated disability days saved per referral for SAW services.

**Source:** Combined insured and self-insured results between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2024, based on internal data developed by Standard Insurance Company. These data include employees with both primary and secondary diagnoses indicating neurodiversity, with 36% having a co-occurring physical condition.



# Return-to-Work Case Study 1: Healthcare Instructor

- **Diagnoses:** Autism-Spectrum Disorder, Anxiety, and Depression
- **Barriers:** Ceased work after telling provider he was suicidal; problems in primary relationship.
- **Accommodations:** Gradual RTW plan with one week part-time before increasing to full-time.
- **Cost:** \$623
- **Estimated Savings:** \$6,238
- **Estimated Disability Days Saved:** 29



# RTW Case Study 2: Academic Counselor

- **Diagnoses:** Alcohol Use Disorder and Bulimia
- **Barriers:** Extended inpatient hospitalization.
- **Accommodations:** Coordination between employee, employer, and provider to facilitate return to job.
- **Cost:** \$619
- **Estimated Savings:** \$3,447
- **Estimated Disability Days Saved:** 30



# RTW Case Study 3: Internet Technician

- **Diagnoses:** Opioid Use Disorder
- **Barriers:** Ongoing cravings, lacked a sober network, lacked coping skills.
- **Accommodations:** Referred to a local sober support group.
- **Cost:** \$1,129
- **Estimated Savings:** \$13,657
- **Estimated Disability Days Saved:** 106



# Return-to-Work Success Statistics

**71%**  
success rate

- **75%** participation rate.
- **\$404** = the average cost per RTW referral.
- **\$991** = the average estimated gross claim cost savings per referral.
- **\$3,122** = the average estimated non-claim cost savings per referral.
- **11 days** = the estimated disability days saved per referral for RTW services.

**Source:** Combined insured and self-insured results between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2024, based on internal data developed by Standard Insurance Company. These data include employees with both primary and secondary diagnoses indicating neurodiversity, with 5% having a co-occurring physical condition.

**What Do Neurodiverse  
Individuals Need?**



# The Same Things We All Need

Neurodiverse individuals, like people with other disabilities, want to be able to live a full and productive life.

A work environment where:

- They are treated with **dignity and respect**.
- They have the **opportunity to contribute and succeed**.
- **Differences are accepted, even celebrated**.
- **Their skills are recognized and appreciated**.
- **Artificial barriers are removed**, so they can do the essential functions of their jobs.



In the quest for an inclusive and dynamic work environment, acknowledging neurodiversity is crucial. It's not just about ticking boxes. It's about recognizing and leveraging the unique strengths that each individual brings to the table through awareness and support.

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**Kali Love**

*Inclusivity is the Future of Work*



# Thank You



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