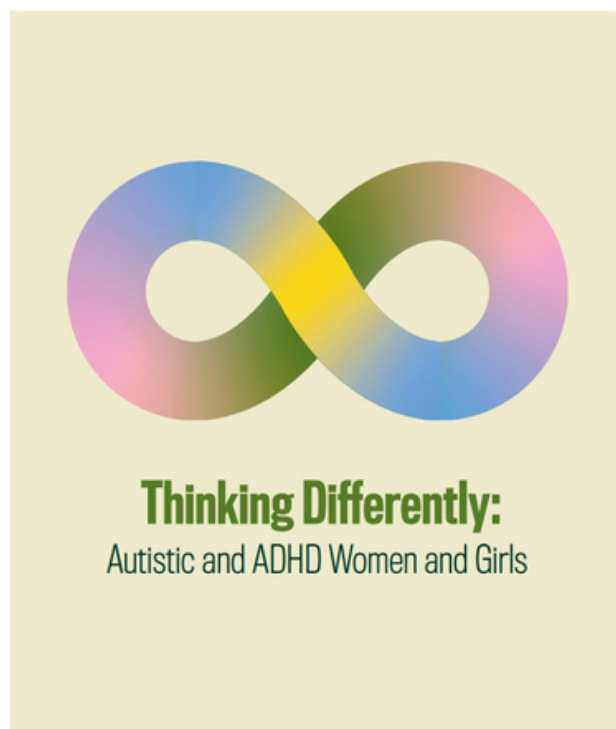


Understanding Autistic and ADHD Women and Girls: A Guide for Neurotypical People



Introduction

Women and girls with autism and ADHD often face unique challenges that can be misunderstood or overlooked. They also often possess particular strengths and skills. By increasing awareness and understanding, neurotypical people can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment. This booklet provides essential information and practical tips to foster better relationships and interactions between neurotypical and neurodivergent women and girls.

Please note, ADHD and autism can present differently in women and girls and can vary from person to person.

The information and advice in this booklet is not exhaustive and is designed to provide an overview.

Neurotypical: This is an informal term used to describe a person whose brain functions are considered usual or expected by society.

Neurodivergent: Is a term used to describe a person whose brain works in a way that is not expected by society in general.

Other neurodivergencies include dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome and dyscalculia

This booklet includes information for your WI, if you're not a member consider joining us. A WI membership means the chance to meet women in your local area in-person or virtually, to make friends and to make a difference in your community. Signing up as a WI Supporter also offers another way of being part of our movement without being a WI member. We also welcome anyone who believes in our values to make a donation towards us continuing to support and empower women, raise awareness and take further action on our campaigns.

Key Information to Understand:

1. Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)

Communication Differences: Women and girls with autism may have difficulty with social interactions and nonverbal communication. They might prefer written communication over spoken words.

Sensory Sensitivities: Many autistic individuals experience heightened sensitivity to sensory input, such as light, sound, and touch. This can lead to sensory overload.

Routine and Predictability: Changes in routine can be particularly stressful. Autistic individuals often feel more comfortable with predictable schedules.

2. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Inattentiveness and Hyperfocus: ADHD can manifest as difficulty maintaining attention on tasks, but it can also result in periods of hyperfocus on interests.

Impulsivity and Hyperactivity: This can include impulsive decision-making and excessive physical activity or restlessness.

Executive Function Challenges: Individuals with ADHD may struggle with organisation, time management, and completing tasks.

Acceptance, Strengths and Skills

Whilst neurodivergent people have brains that work differently to those of neurotypical people, it is important to embrace and appreciate these differences. Neurodivergent people may often possess a set of strengths and skills, including:

- Being honest and straightforward
- Being observant, accurate, detail-orientated or goal focused
- Having above average skills in maths, music, art, problem - solving or puzzles
- Having exceptional memory skills with facts and figures
- Being highly motivated by and able to focus intensely on topics which are of interest to them
- Excelling with repetitive tasks and able to work effectively in isolation

Stimming, Meltdowns and Shutdowns

Many autistic people 'stim'. Stimming can occur as a way to regulate emotions when over-stimulated. It can include repetitive movements, hand flapping or clapping or repeating words or sounds.

When a neurodivergent person is anxious, stressed or overwhelmed they may experience a meltdown. These are a 'fight or flight' type of response to a situation. They can involve crying, shouting, hitting things, self harm and running away.

A shutdown could also occur. This is a 'freeze' response, characterised by inability to speak, being withdrawn, not looking at people and wanting to hide away.

Tips for Supporting Neurodivergent Women and Girls

1. Communication

Be Clear and Direct: Avoid ambiguity. Clear, concise instructions and questions are more easily understood.

Allow Extra Time: Give them time to process information and respond. Don't rush them or interrupt.

Respect Preferences: Some may prefer written communication or need visual aids to understand complex information.

Don't assume that body language or tone of voice will be recognised or understood. Avoid eye contact if an autistic person seems uncomfortable with it.

2. Environment

Sensory-Friendly Spaces: Create environments that reduce sensory overload. This can include quiet areas, dim lighting, and minimising strong scents.

Predictability and Routine: Wherever possible, maintain consistent routines and give advance notice of any changes.

3. Social Interactions

Respect Boundaries: Understand that personal space and social boundaries may be different. Always ask before touching or initiating physical contact.

Be Patient and Non-Judgmental: Neurodivergent behaviours may be misunderstood as rude or inattentive. Approach these behaviours with acceptance, patience and without judgment.

4. WI Meetings and Other Group Settings

Flexible Participation: Allow for breaks, flexible deadlines, and alternative ways to demonstrate understanding or complete tasks. Some neurodivergent women may appreciate information being presented differently, may not be comfortable working in a group and may prefer to sit out of some activities, or listen without actively participating.

Supportive Tools and Resources: Provide access to tools such as calendar of events, agendas, and meeting room layouts to assist with executive function challenges and to minimise anxiety.

Work Together: Collaborate with neurodivergent individuals to find out their preferences.

Be Open to Adaptation: Be willing to adapt practices and environments to better support neurodivergent needs.

How to Make Autistic & ADHD Women Feel Welcome at your WI: written by an autistic WI member

If a prospective member discloses that she is autistic or has ADHD, ask if she is happy for other members to be informed. Even if a woman doesn't say she is neurodivergent (she may not realise she is), accept her and adapt as necessary.

Ask a member to be a "buddy" to answer questions and help out the ADHD/autistic person, where necessary. Although it might seem friendly to phone her before the meeting, check first- text or email might be preferred.

Provide the ADHD/autistic woman with a plan of the room and details of the meeting and the committee members. (Resources available on MyWI).

Ask the ADHD/autistic woman what to do should she be struggling with a situation (would she like to be just left quietly, escorted to another room etc.). Please don't assume she is attention seeking. If she says she is struggling or seems distressed, believe her. Your actions can determine whether or not she has a meltdown.

At the meeting, don't put the ADHD/autistic woman "on the spot". There will be a lot of information she is taking in and she may need time to process her thoughts. She may find talking in front of a group of people very challenging.

Autistic people can struggle with eye contact. Don't assume they aren't interested if they keep looking away from you. Sitting next to the neurodivergent woman, rather than opposite, can help.

Ask direct questions when talking to the ADHD/autistic woman, rather than open-ended. This can help with organising thoughts. Most autistic people don't make smalltalk - they speak when there is something they consider worth saying! They may struggle to understand facial expressions.

Consider the presentation of activities. Multi-tasking may be difficult for someone ADHD/autistic, so don't expect a craft, for example, to be done while it is being explained. Written or pictorial instructions may help. An autistic woman may like to complete activities on her own, rather than in a group. A woman with ADHD may prefer to work in a group as this may help her to focus better on the task.

Check with the autistic person before making physical contact or doing something which requires close proximity. (A hug isn't comforting to everyone and can be the complete opposite!)

Realise that autistic people tend to follow rules and are honest. They may seem blunt at times, as they will generally give a direct answer which may not be what you wanted to hear! They may at times even seem rude. Try not to be offended, but do explain what upset you, as it can be confusing when someone is annoyed and the autistic person doesn't understand why. Autistic people tend to take things to heart more than most neurotypical people.

The above are suggestions to help ADHD/autistic women join your group. As you get to know your neurodivergent members you will discover their individual needs, intense interests, skills and personality. Please don't assume all ADHD/autistic women will have the same needs, interests or skills. They are all different, just as neurotypical people are.

"When you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person." (Dr. Stephen Shore)