

What a Coach Should Know About Coaching Neurodiverse Clients

The following tips are general guidelines. There is no one-size-fits-all approach when working with neurodivergent clients. The phrase, “If you’ve met one neurodivergent person, you’ve met one neurodivergent person,” can help you remember to serve the individual in front of you. The flexibility, presence, and sensitivity you build when working with neurodivergent clients will elevate your coaching overall.

Understanding Neurodivergence

- Neurodivergence refers to natural variations in how people think, learn, process information, regulate emotions, and interact with the world that differ from the social norm, including ADHD, autism, anxiety, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, sensory processing sensitivities, OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), Tourette’s, brain injury, and long COVID.
- Current research estimates that 15-20% of the population is neurodivergent, with up to half of that population being undiagnosed, particularly adult women and people of color.
- Estimates suggest that 30-40% of neurodivergent individuals are unemployed.
- Neurodivergence often runs in families and has a strong genetic component. Clients may begin to recognize familiar patterns in themselves, their children, or their parents as they deepen their self-understanding.
- Neurodivergent brains process differently. What is intuitive to you might feel impossible or nonsensical to them. Conversely, they may grasp something instantly that you find challenging to follow or understand.
- Neurodivergent traits often show up as both strengths and struggles. What feels like a superpower one day might feel like a curse the next.
- Some neurodivergent individuals are twice exceptional, excelling in some areas while being deeply challenged in others.
- What appears to be procrastination or avoidance may be an executive dysfunction struggle with initiation, sequencing, or working memory.
- Demand avoidance, delayed processing, emotional alexithymia (difficulty in identifying, understanding, and expressing one’s emotions), and sensory differences may impact a client’s ability to achieve their goals.
- Individuals may not be aware that they’re neurodivergent. Be mindful of ethics; unless specifically trained to provide psychological testing, coaches should not diagnose clients.

Their Lived Experience

- Many neurodivergent individuals have experienced trauma from trying to live in a world not designed for them. They’ve often been told what they “should” be doing or how they “should” be doing it, and feel like they’re failing.
- Many neurodivergent individuals mask (suppress or hide their natural traits to fit into neurotypical expectations), and it is exhausting. A safe coaching space allows clients to unmask and show up more authentically, without fear of judgment.
- There are many terms in the neurodivergent community (autistic, ADHD, AuDHD (autistic and ADHD), neurospicy, etc.), and preferences vary. Honor the language your client uses.

Slow Down & Make Space

- Neurodivergent individuals may require more time to process and respond, sometimes taking days or weeks to do so.
- They might not be able to name or describe their emotions clearly or quickly. Allow and encourage nontraditional ways of processing thoughts and expressing themselves, such as through metaphor, imagery, color, physical sensation, or even movement. Their way of communicating is valid, even if it is not conventional.
- What seems scattered may simply be their natural way of processing. Hold the structure of the session loosely. Stay anchored to the agreement while giving them room to think out loud, loop back, and find clarity in their way. Trust that meaning will emerge, even if the path is nonlinear.
- Be open to nontraditional supports, such as body doubling (working alongside someone else to stay focused), drawing, singing, or movement. Shorter but more frequent sessions may be helpful for some neurodivergent clients.
- Hold space for them. They need to feel heard through your non-judgmental presence.

How to Support Them Well

- Ask how you can best support them. Some questions to help you learn more about them include the following.
 - How do you learn best?
 - How do you prefer to process information?
 - What do you enjoy doing for fun or in your free time?
 - What does challenge and support look or sound like for you?
- Invite pauses, experimentation, and choice. Neurodivergent clients may not yet know what works for them and what they need to thrive. Coaching can provide a safe space for exploration and growth.
- Some neurodivergent clients find abstract language or metaphors confusing, while others love them. Check in and adjust based on what lands best for your client.
- Consistency and change can be challenging for neurodivergent individuals. Predictability offers comfort, but transitions, even positive ones, can feel overwhelming. Allow them to set the pace and encourage clients' autonomy to choose their next steps.
- Sensory input impacts focus and regulation. Ask what helps them feel grounded, and be willing to adjust the environment as needed. They might need to fidget, stim (repetitive movements to help with attention or emotional regulation), doodle, or move while thinking. They might need a quieter or darker environment that is less stimulating. Remember that if they do not look directly at you or appear to be doing something else while talking to you, they are probably still paying attention.
- Motivation and accountability often work differently for individuals who are neurodivergent. Many neurodivergent brains are "interest-based," not willpower-based, so typical reward/punishment systems fall flat. Co-create flexible supports, such as body-doubling sessions, micro-deadlines, gamified trackers, or interest-first goal-setting, that spark curiosity and maintain momentum.

Coaching on Your Terms

A Guide for Neurodivergent Clients

Welcome to coaching! This guide will help you acclimate to coaching and advocate for your needs.

What to Expect in a Session

- Your coach will likely follow a general flow.
 - What do you want to focus on?
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about the topic?
 - What do you want to be different?
 - What did you learn?
 - What's your next step?
- You don't need to guide the conversation. Your role is to be present, honest, and open to possibilities. Your coach will walk with you through each step.

You Matter

Coaching is most effective when it's tailored to you. Your voice, needs, and preferences matter. Don't be afraid to advocate for what helps you thrive.

Communicate What You Need

- Share with your coach how you process best, and what support and challenge look like for you. If you're not sure yet, that's okay! You'll figure it out together.
- If you're not connecting with your coach or an approach isn't working, speak up. Coaches want your feedback so they can support you well.
- If a coach is not able to meet your needs, it's okay to find someone who can.

Show Up As You Are

- Coaching works best when you can be fully you. You don't have to mask or perform.
- Let your coach know what would help you feel more comfortable during the session (e.g., dimming lights, minimizing noise, stimming, fidgeting, or moving).
- Feel free to express your thoughts in ways that work for your brain (e.g., metaphors, drawing, music, or physical movement). Your coach can adapt.
- If you need nontraditional supports, ask for them (e.g., body doubling, shorter but more frequent sessions, movement, or creative expression).

Trust Yourself and Trust the Process

- Your thinking might feel scattered or nonlinear. That's okay. Your coach is trained to hold space while clarity unfolds.
- Your coach won't tell you what to do, and that can feel uncomfortable. It's okay to feel stuck. Sometimes clarity takes time or comes from trying a new angle.
- If you're struggling to answer a question, say so. If you're not motivated to take action, let them know that, too.
- Most coaches are comfortable with silence. Take the time you need to think or feel before responding.
- Take it one step at a time. Sometimes, not knowing the destination improves the journey.