



Southern Volunteering (SA) Inc

Engaging Neurodivergent Volunteers



What is Neurodivergence?

Neurodiversity and neurodivergence are non-medical terms used to describe people who experience the world differently than those who are often described as typical, neurotypical or less helpfully - normal. This may be because they live with a condition such as:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) this includes Asperger's Syndrome

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental condition. It affects how people behave and interact with the world around them.

People with ASD will all have different experiences and need different levels of support. Along with some challenges, a person with autism will also have a range of strengths.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a developmental disorder that begins in early childhood. ADHD used to be called attention deficit disorder (ADD).

ADHD is often misunderstood. It can cause problems:

- concentrating
- becoming distracted
- being hyperactive (sometimes)
- being impulsive

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is also called a specific learning disorder with impairment in reading. It's a common learning disability, affecting about 1 in 10 people.

Dyslexia makes it challenging for people to read. People with dyslexia often also have problems with spelling, writing and understanding what they've read. Dyslexia is a neurological (brain) condition. It isn't due to low intelligence.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a neurological (brain) and developmental condition. It's also called developmental coordination disorder (DCD). People with dyspraxia have problems learning and doing motor skills. A motor skill involves using your body's muscles to do a task.

Tourettes Syndrome

Tourette syndrome is a lifelong condition that affects the nervous system causing tics. Tics are sudden movements (motor tics) or sounds (phonic tics) that a person cannot control.

For many neurodivergent people, sensory experiences (sights, sounds, tastes, textures, moving and being moved) may be amplified, muted, or processed uniquely. This can profoundly influence their daily lives, preferences, and challenges.

Neurodivergent conditions can exist in isolation or together.

This information is adapted from [healthdirect.gov.au](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au). Visit the website for more comprehensive details and further reading.

Engaging a volunteer who identifies as being neurodivergent

Some individuals who are neurodivergent will disclose this, others may prefer not to.

For general good practice volunteer management, is it helpful to include a question in your recruitment process that asks how you might offer additional support to make someone's volunteering experience the best it can be. This gives people the opportunity to express any support needs they may have.

Example supports that neurodivergent people may need:

- **environments that are not over stimulating e.g. bright lights, noisy, or regular breaks from these environments.**
- **understanding and patience with social interactions, especially if others find their reactions unusual. Notice if they maybe feel isolated or have trouble making conversation**
- **patience when following instructions, learning a new task, or if they become easily distracted**
- **support organising tasks and paying attention to detail**
- **forgiveness if they make a mistake that others may consider careless**
- **understanding if they hyper-focus on a task they are interested in**
- **support if they seem to become overwhelmed quickly**
- **understanding around repetitive movements or behaviours**

Individuality

It is important and essential, to always remember that each neurodivergent individual will present differently, so you must not assume when you have met one neurodivergent person, the next neurodivergent person will be the same.

A Welcoming Team

It is not solely your responsibility as a Volunteer Manager to embrace diversity in your volunteer teams. All other volunteers must also exhibit and practice inclusive behaviours.

A start might be sharing this resource with them or engaging them in disability awareness training. Southern Volunteering also have another resource about the impact of conversations between volunteers which can be found [here](#)

Being an Upstander

Becoming an upstander is about moving from silence to action. An upstander is “someone who actively chooses to support or intervene on behalf of someone who is being mistreated or harmed, recognising injustice and using their strengths to create positive change”.

This would include addressing issues within a volunteer team where someone’s differences are being highlighted in a negative way or they are being excluded.

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