

PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Neurodivergent-inclusive event guidelines

Creating accessible experiences for
Autistic people and those with ADHD



Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and deeply respect the lived experiences of Neurodivergent individuals, whose insights have informed and enriched the development of these guidelines. Neurodivergent voices are essential in shaping a more inclusive and understanding world, and we are grateful for these contributions towards fostering accessibility and belonging in all spaces. These guidelines are dedicated to ensuring that Neurodivergent individuals are not only accommodated but celebrated for their strengths and perspectives.

Recommended citation:

Australian Psychological Society. (2025).
Neurodivergent-inclusive events guidelines: Creating accessible experiences for autistic people and those with ADHD.

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Topic: Neurodivergent-inclusive event planning and design

Overview

This information provides event planners and organisers with comprehensive strategies for creating Neurodivergent inclusive events – particularly for Autistic individuals and those with ADHD. Drawing from the Australian Psychological Society's guide, participants will learn how to design events that accommodate Neurodivergent individuals, estimated to be 10-20% of the world's¹²³⁴⁵ population. The guidelines cover key areas such as sensory considerations, program design, and communication strategies to ensure events are accessible and comfortable for all attendees.

Target audience

- Event planners
- Conference organisers
- Venue managers, and professionals involved in designing and executing private, professional or public events and corporate or association gatherings.

Prerequisites

Basic understanding of event planning and management. No specific knowledge of Neurodivergence is required.

Objective

By the end participants will be able to:

- Understand Neurodivergence and its prevalence in the general population
- Implement sound management strategies for Neurodivergent-inclusive events
- Design appropriate lighting and visual environments for Neurodivergent attendees
- Create sensory-friendly spaces within event venues
- Develop inclusive program structures and schedules
- Craft effective pre-event communication for Neurodivergent attendees
- Utilise technology to enhance accessibility
- Implement support services and feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement.

What is Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence



“Neurodiversity is the range of differences in brain function and behavioural traits across the human population.” The term was coined in 1998 by Australian sociologist Judy Singer.

The American Psychological Association states that human beings are neurodiverse, which means that there is great diversity amongst us all in relation to our brains and how they work. The most common brain may be referred to as ‘neurotypical’. Others who differ from this, such as autistic people and those with ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) are referred to as ‘neurodivergent’. While these Guidelines focus on Autism/ADHD inclusion, other forms of neurodivergence include:

- Dyslexia
- Dyscalculia
- Dyspraxia
- Dysgraphia
- Tourette Syndrome

Other neurological differences for example: Biopolar Disorder, Epilepsy, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.



Neurodiversity Symbol.
Source: Wikipedia

Why consider Neurodivergence in event design?

It is estimated that 10-20% of the world’s population is Neurodivergent according to Deloitte. Neurodiversity Media reports that 1 in 8 Australians identify as Neurodivergent and it is generally accepted that between 15%-20% of Australians are Neurodivergent.⁶

The likelihood that your event audience will include Neurodivergent individuals is substantial. How are you working towards inclusivity in your event design?

Total No. Event attendees	Minimum No. Neurodivergent attendees	Maximum No. Neurodivergent attendees
100	10	20
250	25	50
500	50	100
750	75	150
850	85	170
1000	100	200
1500	150	300
2000	200	400

Event design tips for Neurodivergence

1. Sound management

Sound can significantly impact Neurodivergent individuals, who may have heightened sensitivity to noise. Excessive or unpredictable sound, such as loud announcements, background music, and clapping, can cause sensory overload, leading to distress or an inability to focus.

It may not be possible or desirable to remove all noise from an event. The key is to ensure Neurodivergent attendees are aware of where noise areas will be, any provisions to support them or be given the opportunity to come prepared with their own items to manage noise.

Provide a quiet retreat space:

- Secure a space close to the event but relatively insulated from outside noise. This room should be quiet, with low lighting, and a variety of comfortable seating options (e.g. bean bags, soft chairs, sofas) that allow privacy.
- This space should be solely for quiet retreat, and not multi-purpose, such as for prayer, breastfeeding or other activities.
- Attendees should receive clear instructions on the location of the space, via the event website/program information.
- Attendees should be informed that this is a non-talking space for quiet reflection.

Event noise management:

- Ensure background noise is kept to a minimum. Consider other sources of loud noises, especially sudden noises such as doors that bang, the use of P.A. systems, and event lanyards that make a noise when walking.
- Avoid any piped or live background music during breaks or networking sessions. This makes it especially difficult to engage for Autistic, ADHD and hard of hearing individuals.
- Sounds of nature are another option for background sound that can be incorporated into your event spaces.



- Ask all participants and presenters to use 'silent clapping' to acknowledge a presentation (such as palms raised and fingers wiggling, or the wave used by the deaf community – palms raised and hands turned quickly back and forth).
- Turn off hand dryers in bathrooms and provide paper towels.

Attendee noise management:

Provide clearly marked areas for attendees who wish to take notes on their laptop during presentations, and areas delineated as 'laptop free zones'. Keyboard tapping can represent a sensory stressor for Neurodivergent individuals.

Noise cancelling:

Some attendees require noise softening or cancelling headphones to manage noise sensitivity. Bringing their own headphones/earplugs should be normalised and welcomed. For example, information about the conference can state that attendees are welcome to bring their own headphones or noise softening earplugs to use while attending. If budget allows, you may extend this inclusion further by hiring noise cancelling headphones (some will even filter all noise, allowing allow the presenter to be heard), or providing noise filtering earbuds (there are several inexpensive ones available).

2. Lighting

Lighting plays a crucial role in the sensory experience of Neurodivergent individuals, as many are sensitive to bright, fluorescent, or flickering lights, which can trigger discomfort, headaches, or sensory overload.

Soft, Non-Fluorescent Lighting:

- Use lamps or string lights with warm tones to minimise glare.
- Overhead lights, particularly fluorescent types, can cause sensory overload and headaches.
- In venues with fluorescent lighting, you may be able to turn these off and use lamps, projectors with calm imagery, or rely on natural light.

Large screens should be kept at half brightness:

Especially when seated in the front rows, both Neurodivergent and Neurotypical individuals can find screens that are kept at full brightness uncomfortable.

Adjustable lighting:

Dimmable lights allow for greater control in event spaces. However, individual comfort will vary, and lighting should err on the dimmer side.

Lamps:

There are many lighting options that can be useful for sensory-seekers, such as lava lamps, jellyfish lamps, projectors etc. Lamps and dimmable lights can be useful for the general event spaces and particularly a quiet retreat space, engaging without being overstimulating.

3. Visual environment

Neurodivergent attendees may process visual stimuli differently, which makes cluttered or high-contrast environments overwhelming. Simplifying visual elements and using muted colours can reduce sensory strain, enabling attendees to engage more fully without distraction or discomfort.

Calm visuals:

- Decorate with soft, muted colours. Avoid high contrast patterns and bright colours which can be overstimulating.
- Minimise and simplify wall displays.

Clear signage:

Provide clear, straightforward signs to indicate the room's purpose and rules, using plain language.

4. Smell

Strong scents, such as perfumes or cleaning products, can cause distress and illness in Neurodivergent individuals with heightened olfactory sensitivity. Providing fragrance-free environments and maintaining neutral air quality ensures accessibility.

Encourage all attendees to refrain from wearing perfumes, after-shave etc, in pre-event information.

Fragrance-free space:

Avoid strong perfumes, scented products and strong-smelling cleaning products as some individuals may be sensitive to smells and experience significant physical symptoms.

Natural freshness:

Consider an air purifier to maintain clean and neutral air quality.

5. Tactile engagement

For Neurodivergent attendees, access to tactile tools, like stress balls or fidget spinners, can support focus and reduce stress. Normalising the availability of these items helps create an inclusive setting where individuals can self-regulate without feeling singled out.

Sensory products:

Using sensory products can aid focus and wellbeing. Some of the items you can place in the room include:

- Stress balls
- Fidget spinners
- Tactile mats
- Weighted blankets
- Sensory sand
- Unscented sensory dough
- Placing sensory products on every table can normalise the use of fidget and other items, so that those who need them do not feel singled out.

Crafts and activities:

- Offer calming opportunities such as mindfulness colouring books or puzzles.
- Make these items/activities available during event sessions as well as in the quiet retreat space (if the activity is silent).

6. Furnishings

Furnishings directly influence comfort and accessibility for Neurodivergent attendees. Flexible seating arrangements and options for standing or movement accommodate diverse needs, promoting inclusion for individuals with varying sensory, physical, or attentional requirements.

Seating Options:

Include alternative seating and standing options, such as:

- Bean bags
- Soft chairs
- Modular seating
- Ottomans
- Floor cushions; and
- Back-of-room standing or lying space to provide choice, comfort and something to lean on. This is very helpful for people with ADHD as it gives them room to move, fidget or pace without distracting others. It also enables participants to lay on the floor, especially helpful for those with co-occurring chronic illness.



- If providing stools for tall tables, ensure they have backs to support those with low muscle tone.
- With seating, if providing backless options, ensure that options with chair backs are also offered.
- Seating and reserved disability seating is important for lunch and break periods. Many Neurodivergent people have co-occurring disabilities, chronic illnesses/chronic pain, and may find standing for entire break periods challenging.
- Seating for people with larger bodies should be accommodated, such as wider seats or bench seating (with back support).
- Avoid crowding of seat rows, where seats are placed close together. Tables with chairs are preferable to rows of seats.
- Speak to your venue about how you might be able to use furniture they have in other areas (e.g.: lounge furniture in café's etc).
- Ensure all furniture used maintains open spaces for wheelchair and assistance-dog access.
- Back-of-room standing or lying space to provide choice, comfort and something to lean on. This is very helpful for people with ADHD as it gives them room to move, fidget or pace without distracting others. It also enables participants to lay on the floor, especially helpful for those with co-occurring chronic illness.

Floor coverings:

You may also want to look at floor coverings such as:

- Soft rugs
- Memory foam mats
- Anti-fatigue mats
- Non-slip mats
- Yoga mats
- Larger event spaces can encourage sitting, lying, standing or quiet movement as needed, by laying out mats and ensuring the ability to move/stretch at all times.
- Encourage wellness/movement breaks for events with prolonged sitting times.

Spaces for retreat:

- Set up small, private tented areas or partitions for attendees needing solitude.
- Alternatively, speak to your venue to see if they have green rooms available for those who need solitude.

7. Program design

Program structure affects how both Neurodivergent and Neurotypical attendees manage attention and energy. Long, uninterrupted sessions can be overwhelming. Additionally, for Neurotypical attendees, a recent study from the QEI Centre in London⁷ reported that the average attention span for attendees at live meetings and conferences is between 11 and 30 minutes.

Session length

- Presentations that run for longer than 30 minutes should include movement breaks.
- Research indicates the average attention span for an in-person event attendee who identifies as Neurotypical is between 11 and 30 minutes.
- For Neurodivergent individuals this can vary depending on individual differences and co-occurring conditions (e.g., ADHD), and the provision (or lack) of environmental supports such as spaces to stand/move, fidget items.
- Ensure the schedule keeps strictly to time (speakers running over time and cutting into other people's talks or breaks can cause anxiety).

Practical steps for event planners

Structured schedules

Break down sessions into smaller, manageable segments (e.g., 20-30 minutes) with regular breaks.

Engaging content

Use interactive and varied content to maintain interest and attention.

Program format

Allow attendees to easily move in and out of sessions without feeling disadvantaged. This means ensuring the exit doors are at the back of the room, not next to the presenter.

General considerations for Neurodivergent individuals

Frequent breaks and flexible schedules:

- Providing frequent breaks and allowing flexible schedules can help Neurodivergent individuals manage their attention span more effectively.
- Breaks every 20-30 minutes are often recommended for maintaining optimal attention and reducing cognitive overload.

8. Pre-arrival information

Clear, detailed pre-event communication alleviates anxiety and supports Neurodivergent attendees in navigating the event. Information on schedules, layouts, and sensory-friendly areas provides predictability and reduces uncertainty.

Providing clear pre-arrival information assists Neurodivergent individuals to have some certainty around their arrival and processes for engaging in the event. Knowing what to expect can help minimise anxiety. Consider the below when planning your communication prior to the event commencing:

- Offer detailed information about the event including:
 - Layout
 - Menu
 - Schedule
 - Sensory-friendly areas
 - Amenities beforehand
- Provide a virtual tour or map of the venue to help attendees familiarise themselves with the space.
- Liaise with your venue to understand how they support Neurodivergent and/or gender diverse individuals.

For example, does the venue have gender neutral bathroom facilities? If so, let attendees know this before arriving.

9. Technology and digital information

Accessible digital content, such as captions and screen-reader-friendly materials, benefits attendees with diverse neurocognitive needs. Providing adaptable technology ensures equal access to information and improves the overall event experience.

- Ensure all digital content (presentations, handouts, apps) is accessible, e.g., with screen readers, captions for videos, and alternative text for images.
- Closed captions during presentations are very helpful for people with auditory processing issues, which includes many Autistic people, those with ADHD and those with hearing impairments.
- Provide an event app or digital guide that is easy to navigate with clear instructions, larger fonts, and customisable settings.
- Knowing if the event is being live streamed or recorded for later viewing will give participants options for their best level of engagement.

10. Communication

Effective communication strategies are vital for creating a welcoming event environment. Visual aids, plain language, and clear instructions reduce ambiguity and anxiety, enabling Neurodivergent individuals to participate confidently.

Use visual aids, clear signage, and plain language throughout the event.

For example, Neurodivergent people can experience higher levels of anxiety, and attending events can be overwhelming. Having a website, document or instructions that utilise visuals, not just the written instructions, about how to arrive, where to sign in, where the rooms are located, the location of a quiet/sensory room, toilets, when to expect food/drinks, encouragement to come/leave as needed, provision of earphones, sensory toys etc – all of this can be communicated with visuals that are colour coded (for example) and then this is replicated using large signage in the actual event space.

11. Support services and feedback

Tailored support services ensure that Neurodivergent attendees feel valued and heard. Providing staff with training and visible identifiers, such as lanyards, signals a commitment to inclusivity. Feedback mechanisms allow continuous improvement of the event's accessibility.

- Provide clear instructions on emergency procedures tailored for Neurodivergent attendees.
- Have support staff or a designated point of contact for Neurodivergent attendees, and those with disabilities, to address any concerns or needs during the event.
- Consider having a support booth specifically for assisting those who are Neurodivergent and/or have disabilities. Given the significant co-occurrence of Neurodivergence and LGBTQIA+, inclusive symbols can be incorporated (rainbow infinity symbol for Neurodivergence, and the rainbow flag for LGBTQIA+).
 - Consider providing badges or lanyards depicting the 'invisible difference' sunflower pattern to neurodivergent attendees who would like one. These are for those with hidden disabilities to wear, in recognition that not all differences are observable to others. This is a simple way of communicating support to Neurodivergent attendees.
 - Ensure any/all support options are shared with attendees in your pre-arrival communication.



- Implement feedback mechanisms that allow Neurodivergent attendees to share their experiences and suggest improvements, including options for anonymous feedback.
 - Use feedback to continually refine and enhance the inclusivity of future events.

12. What to avoid

Avoiding common pitfalls, such as overcrowding or insufficient sensory-friendly spaces, is essential to foster inclusivity. Understanding the specific stressors for Neurodivergent individuals and planning around them ensures a welcoming atmosphere.

Overcrowding:

You may need to limit the number of people in the sensory space at any given time.

As an option, you may want to offer differing levels of spaces e.g:

- Quiet room
- Prayer or meditation rooms
- A library or reading space
- Solo spaces such as a venue's green room
- Sensory space.



13. Additions for consideration

Attention to additional elements, such as dietary inclusivity and gender diversity, ensures that all attendees feel accommodated. Small details, like food options and accessible facilities, can make a significant impact on the inclusivity of an event.

Food/drinks:

- Ensure the food options include simple, clean foods such as fruit, vegetables, bread etc. Cooking smells can cause sensory challenges, so where possible, provide space between tables that serve simple and cold foods, and those that serve hot/strongly aromatic foods or live cooking stations.
- Ensure access to food and drink at all times. This can be incorporated into your event through all-day grazing stations, fresh whole food stations and pantry stations.

- Ensure the special dietary section is clearly signed. Neurodivergence is associated with significantly higher allergy conditions and gastrointestinal problems.
- Ensure food tables are at wheelchair height.
- In your pre-arrival communication clearly communicate where special dietary options will be within the event space. Include a map if possible.

Gender inclusion:

- Neurodivergent individuals are more likely than others to have diverse gender identities. Ensure you provide opportunities through the registration process, on name badges and bathroom facilities to accommodate this diversity, such as including the option to signify pronouns on a name card.
- In speaker briefings, share suggestions for gender and neurodivergent inclusive language.

Supporting Neurodivergent attendees

By developing a set of response protocols, you and your team can be more aware of how to support attendees who may be struggling while at your event. The below are examples of how you can offer support to anyone in distress.

Identification and initial contact

- **Recognise signs of distress:** Train staff to recognise non-verbal cues such as covering ears, restlessness, or withdrawal, which might indicate sensory overload or distress. Reach out to your local Psychological Society, Association or Autism hotline for support by those with expertise/lived experience.
- **Approach calmly:** As with any person who appears to be distressed or overwhelmed, respectful and calm communication is key. Introduce yourself and ask if the person needs assistance. Allow plenty of time for the attendee to respond.
For example, you might say *'Hi, my name is [...], I am a support person for this event. Would you like any assistance?'*. Please see Appendix A for further communication examples.
- It's important to only ask one question at a time so that the person does not feel overloaded (due to language processing differences).

Assessment of needs

- **Ask simple questions:** Find out what the attendee needs to feel more comfortable. This could be a quieter space, a less crowded area, food/water or access to sensory tools like noise-cancelling headphones.
- **Be patient and attentive:** Some Neurodivergent people need more time to process verbal information. Allow the attendee to express their needs without rushing them, ensuring they feel heard and respected.
- Some Neurodivergent people may prefer to type a response on their phone or keyboard.
- Neurodivergent people may or may not make eye contact during communication. This does not mean that they aren't listening. For some, looking elsewhere helps them listen.

Guided assistance

- **Invite the attendee to quiet/sensory room:** If the attendee is feeling overwhelmed, offer to guide them to a quiet or sensory room. Ensure that the path taken is the least crowded or noisy.
- **Offer additional resources:** Depending on their needs, offer additional support such as water, a place to sit or sensory tools.

Follow-up

- **Check in regularly:** Once the attendee is settled in a more comfortable environment, ensure staff check in periodically (but not intrusively)⁸ to ask if they need anything else.
- **Flexible re-entry:** Allow them to rejoin the main event at their own pace and provide support if they wish to navigate different parts of the venue.

Summary

- By integrating these strategies and maintaining a commitment to inclusivity, you can create events that are truly welcoming to all attendees. Creating Neurodivergent inclusive events is not just about implementing specific accommodations, but about fostering a culture of understanding, flexibility, and respect for all.
- As you move forward with your event planning, keep in mind that every step towards inclusivity, no matter how small, can make a significant difference in someone's experience. By consistently striving to improve and adapt, you can create events that not only accommodate Neurodivergence but celebrate all individuality as a valuable aspect of human experience.

Have your event endorsed as Neurodivergent inclusive

The APS & APA are working together to support diversity, equity and inclusion in the events sector.

Many countries have clear disability anti-discrimination laws. By having your event endorsed, you will clearly demonstrate your commitment to DEI and offer

assurances to your attendees that your event is a safe and inclusive environment. You will be provided with a logo that can be used in your marketing and communications and a link that attendees can follow to understand what each level of endorsement means.

[Apply here](#) to have your event endorsed as Neurodiverse inclusive to one of three levels.

LEVEL I

Tranquillity Room

AUD \$750 +GST

Foundation of inclusivity

This level focuses on creating a baseline inclusive environment by providing a dedicated Tranquillity room. This space serves as a quiet retreat for attendees needing to step away from the sensory demands of the event.

Key features include:

- Low lighting and comfortable seating.
- Clear communication about the room's purpose and location.
- A no-talking policy to maintain a peaceful environment.

Additionally, you may want to assess your other event spaces to include:

- Opportunities to move about the room or leave if needed.
- Diversified seating and standing options.
- Sensory or fidget items.

Tranquillity spaces are the first step toward recognising the diverse sensory needs of event attendees and offering support to enhance their overall experience.

LEVEL II

Sensory Room + Sensory tools

AUD \$1,000 +GST

Enhanced sensory support

Building on the Tranquillity level, this endorsement includes the provision of a sensory space designed to meet a broader range of sensory needs. These spaces provide tools and accommodations that help Neurodivergent individuals regulate and feel comfortable in the event environment.

Key features, in addition to those already mentioned in Level I include:

- Fidget items, stress balls, and weighted blankets.
- A variety of seating options to accommodate movement and comfort.
- Noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs for noise-sensitive attendees.
- Calm, low-stimulation decor to create a soothing atmosphere.

The Sensory level demonstrates a deeper understanding of sensory diversity, offering proactive support for attendees.

LEVEL III

Comprehensive Neurodivergent accommodation

AUD \$1,500 +GST

Comprehensive inclusivity

The highest level of endorsement signifies a fully Neurodivergent inclusive event, with design strategies that ensure accessibility and inclusivity for all attendees, integrating inclusivity into every stage of planning, execution, and feedback.

Key features, in addition to those already mentioned in Level I & II include:

- Clear pre-event communication, including virtual tours and detailed schedules.
- Flexible programming with frequent breaks and shorter sessions.
- Sensory-friendly spaces and tranquillity rooms as standard.
- Training for event staff to Recognise and support Neurodivergent attendees.
- Inclusive communication, accessible materials, and feedback mechanisms tailored for diverse attendees.

Achieving this level reflects a commitment to best practices in inclusivity, ensuring Neurodivergent individuals feel valued and supported.

Need a speaker?

Did you know that many psychologists are also professional speakers?

Psychologists can specialise in topics ranging from:

- Mental wellbeing
- Generational leadership
- Leadership
- Organisational psychology
- Mindfulness
- Leading through change

If you're looking to include mental or organisational wellbeing topics into your event, reach out to your local psychology body and tap into a wealth of knowledge and professional speakers.

Australian Psychological Society

Email: externalengagement@psychology.org.au

Telephone: (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497



About the developers

Angela North, BA(Psych), GradDip(AppPsych), MAPS.

In addition to writing educational content for the APS, Angela is Principal Consultant Psychologist to a specialist school for children with social and emotional problems. In collaboration with Monash University and Bestchance, Angela developed SEED, an evidence-based training program for educators. Angela is co-author of 'Mindfulness at Play', focusing on practical strategies to support child and adolescent wellbeing. With 30 years of experience, she presents on a range of subjects, including autism, trauma, inclusive practices and child mental health.

Paula Rowntree, DES

Paula is Head of External Engagement for the APS, Founder of The Business Events Network and an events industry veteran with more than 25+ years' experience. In addition to her work with the APS, Paula speaks at many industry events and consults to associations and venues around the world on the science of event design, teaching how to integrate neuroscience and psychological based learnings into event design to create more fulfilling experiences for attendees and increase return on investment.

About the reviewers

Dr Rachelle Wicks

Rachelle is a Neurodivergent early career Research Fellow at Griffith University, Honorary Research Fellow at Telethon Kids Institute, and Chairs the Autism QLD Advisory Committee. She brings lived experience as a late-diagnosed Autistic and ADHD'er woman and knowledge of the varied perspectives of individuals within the Autistic and autism communities. Rachelle was also involved in the recent update of the National Guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism in Australia and advocates for Neurodiversity- affirming practice and research that is co-designed and co-produced with the communities that it aims to benefit.

Monique Mitchelson

Monique Mitchelson is an Autistic and ADHD'er Clinical Psychologist and Board Approved Supervisor in Brisbane, Australia. Monique works in private practice and does training and consultation as Co-Director of Divergent Futures. She has an interest in Neurodivergence particularly in women and AFAB, chronic pain and illness and trauma. She has

consulted on the National Autism Strategy on the Diagnosis, Services and Supports Working Group. In an effort to make up to date Neurodiversity affirming information about Autism and ADHD accessible, Monique has co-authored 'The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD by New Harbinger (2024) and is co-host with Clinical Neuropsychologist Dr Michelle Livock of 'The Neurodivergent Woman Podcast' which has over 1.7 million downloads.

Dr Catriona Davis-McCabe

Dr Catriona Davis-McCabe is a Counselling Psychologist and Fellow of the APS and APS College of Counselling Psychologists. She has worked as an academic for the last 13 years, as a Senior Lecturer and then Program Director of postgraduate psychology programs, training future psychologists in both the UK and Australia. Catriona is research active in the field and has published in peer-reviewed journals. She supervises psychology honours and PhD students. Catriona also runs a private clinical practice offering psychological assessment and treatment. She has worked in various psychology settings including the Health Department, prison service and private clinics. Throughout her career, Catriona has always worked as both an academic and practitioner.

Catriona is the past National Chair of the APS College of Counselling Psychologists and has served as a General Committee Member and Chair-Elect.

Dr Zena Burgess

Zena Burgess is an experienced non-executive Director and Chief Executive Officer with significant experience across commercial and social enterprise organisations. She holds a PhD in Organisational Psychology and Master's Degrees in Business Administration and Education. Zena was awarded Fellowship of the Australian Institute of Company Directors in 2013.

Prior to joining the APS in 2020, Zena was the Chief Executive Officer of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) for 11 years. During that time she oversaw a transformation of the RACGP to be the largest, most influential and innovative medical college in Australia. Zena has a passion for building human capability in individuals, organisations and systems. Zena has driven new strategic directions and change implementation, achieving a culture of high-performance and innovation in organisations.

Gina Samuels

Gina Samuels is the Founder and Director of The Production House Events, a professional conference organiser dedicated to delivering exceptional event experiences. With a wealth of experience and a hands-on approach, Gina leads her team in partnering with associations and corporates to deliver a diverse range of events, including conferences, events, workshops, and product launches. Passionate about creating inclusive and accessible experiences, Gina is committed to fostering diversity and ensuring all individuals feel valued and represented. Her work often involves tailoring events and frameworks to meet unique needs, including considerations for neurodiversity, reflecting her dedication to understanding and inclusion in every project.

Samme Allen

Introducing Samme Allen, the visionary CEO of The Attendee Experience Company.

With an illustrious career spanning over two decades, Samme has continually pushed the boundaries of event design and audience engagement. As the former CEO and Founder of conferenceemcees.com, she has been a trailblazer in creating better attendee experiences with her network of professional emcees and has evolved this business to really deliver across the attendee experience spectrum.

Samme's multifaceted skill set encompasses the roles of a meeting designer, award-winning emcee and a dynamic presenter. Her extensive experience has seen her collaborate with global audiences, earning her recognition as a leader in her field.

Samme's passion extends beyond the podium, as she is dedicated to delivering sustainable event solutions that not only inspire but also leave a profound and lasting impact on attendees and the planet. As an industry veteran, she brings a wealth of expertise to her role, shaping the future of event experiences and redefining industry standards.

Away from her professional endeavors, Samme wears another proud title: "mum" to a spirited border terrier puppy named Bertie. In her leisure time, she embraces the invigorating world of cold water swimming, a testament to her adventurous spirit. Samme Allen is not just a CEO but a true pioneer, committed to transforming events into unforgettable experiences and making a mark in every facet of her life.

Dr Marnie Cumner

Dr Marnie Cumner is a Clinical Neuropsychologist specialising in paediatrics. Marnie has extensive career experience in various settings, including schools, hospitals, adult and youth mental health, and child protection. She has dedicated the past 14 years to working with children, adolescents, and families in her private practice, with a focus on identifying, understanding, supporting, and celebrating neurodivergence. Marnie is a board-approved supervisor and has contributed to course development and teaching at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Marnie has a strong focus on neuroaffirming care and is always learning from both her professional work and lived experience within the neurodivergent community.

Bianca Comfort

Bianca Comfort is a neurodivergent Clinical Psychologist based in Melbourne, Australia, and is the Director of Comfort Psychology, a telehealth practice focused on supporting those with chronic illness and neurodivergence. She is also the current Vice President of the Australian Psychological Society, and Co-Chair of the Australian EDS & HSD (Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder) Network. Bianca's expertise lies in the intersection of neurodivergence and chronic illness, and her practice is informed by both her professional and lived experience. She is a dedicated advocate and educator, having been invited to speak at national and international conferences, share her insights on podcasts, and contribute to a wide range of advocacy initiatives.

APPENDIX A:

Quick reference to inclusive language for Neurodivergent conference attendees

This appendix offers examples of respectful and effective communication specifically designed for conference settings. The goal is to help event organisers ensure all attendees feel welcomed, supported, and included.

General communication principles

Use clear and concise language

Avoid overly complex phrases or jargon, particularly in instructions or event details.

Examples (verbal):

Instead of: *"If you find yourself in need of some solitude, please proceed to the designated area adjacent to the central atrium."*

Use: *"The quiet room is near the central atrium. Follow the signs."*

Instead of: *"Let's regroup at the breakout session when the main conference agenda concludes."*

Use: *"The breakout session starts at 2:30pm in Room 4."*

Examples (written):

Instead of: The keynote will occur shortly before midday.

Use: The keynote session is at 11:30am in the Grand Ballroom.

Avoid idioms or ambiguous phrases

Be direct and literal in your communication.

Examples (verbal):

Instead of: *"We'll hit the ground running in the next workshop."*

Use: *"The next workshop will start promptly at 3pm."*

Instead of: *"Make yourselves at home."*

Use: *"Please make yourself comfortable. There's seating in the lounge or standing space near the back."*

Provide choices rather than commands

Empower attendees by offering clear options.

Examples (verbal):

Instead of: *"You must sit here during the session."*

Use: *"Would you prefer to sit closer to the screen or near the door for easy access?"*

Instead of: *"Take this seat."*

Use: *"There's seating here and also near the back of the room. Let me know if you'd like help deciding."*

Empathy and supportive language

Acknowledge and validate feelings

Examples (verbal):

"I understand it can feel overwhelming in busy spaces. The quiet room is available if you'd like a break."

"It's okay to take your time. Let us know how we can support you."

Encourage self-advocacy.

Examples (verbal):

"Let us know if there's anything we can adjust to make the session more comfortable for you."

"If you need help finding a sensory-friendly area or specific resource, just ask a volunteer."

"Feel free to come and go during sessions as needed."

Instructions and expectations

Break information into small steps.

Use bullet points or numbered lists for clarity.

Examples (written, program details):

To join the panel discussion:

- Go to Room 5 on the second floor.
- Check in at the registration desk near the door.
- Take any available seat.

Lunch service:

- Begins at 12pm in the Garden Hall.
- Gluten-free and sensory-friendly food stations are marked with green signs.
- Seating is available indoors and outdoors.

Be specific about time and place

Examples (Verbal):

Instead of: *"Lunch will be available later."*

Use: *"Lunch will be served at 12pm in the Garden Hall."*

Instead of: *"The workshop starts in the afternoon."*

Use: *"The workshop begins at 1:30pm in Room 6."*

Feedback and encouragement

Provide constructive feedback sensitively

Examples (verbal):

"Your insights during the session were very thoughtful. One way to enhance your next presentation could be to include a slide with key points for clarity."

"I really liked your questions during the discussion. If you want to expand further, the Q&A session tomorrow might be a good opportunity."

Celebrate efforts, not just outcomes.

Examples (Verbal):

"You've put a lot of effort into participating today. Thank you for your contributions."

"I noticed how engaged you were in the session. That made the discussion richer."

Event-specific scenarios

Welcoming attendees at registration

Examples (verbal):

"Welcome to the conference. Here's a map of the venue and the schedule. Let me know if you have any questions."

"Hi! If you need a quiet room, it's located on the first floor near the elevators."

"Thank you for joining us! If you need assistance or sensory aids, visit the support desk by the entrance."

Directing someone to a sensory-friendly space.

Examples (verbal):

"The sensory room is down the hall on the left. It's a quiet, no-talking space."

"If you'd like a break, the relaxation area is just around the corner. It's marked with a green sign."

Avoiding harmful phrases

Avoid infantilizing language

Instead of: *"Good job! You did better than I expected."*

Use: *"Great job! Your contributions made a positive impact on the session."*

Instead of: *"You're so brave for attending."*

Use: *"Thank you for being here and participating."*

Avoid judgmental or ableist language

Instead of: *"You don't seem Autistic."*

Or

"Isn't everyone a little bit on the spectrum?"

Use: *"Thank you for sharing your perspective."*

Instead of: *"Why can't you just sit through the session?"*

Use: *"Would you like to move around or take a break? The back of the room is available for standing."*

Inclusive terminology

Use identity-affirming language and respect personal preferences

Instead of: *"Suffers from Autism."*

Use: *"Is Autistic" or "Is Neurodivergent."*

Example (verbal):

"Do you prefer 'Autistic person' or 'person with Autism'?"

Not intrusively can be described as:

Quiet and calm approach: Approaching in a gentle, non-demanding way, without excessive eye contact or loud tones, to avoid startling or causing discomfort

Timing and frequency: Checking in at reasonable intervals, ensuring enough time has passed between interactions, and allowing the individual to adjust or signal when they are ready for contact.

Clear and simple communication: Asking simple yes/no questions or offering a small selection of options, rather than open-ended questions that may cause decision fatigue or confusion.

Respecting cues: Being attentive to any non-verbal cues indicating discomfort or a preference to be left alone and adjusting the frequency or method of checking in accordingly.

Offering assistance without expectation: Phrasing questions in a way that feels optional and low-pressure, like *“I’m just checking in to see if there’s anything I can help with,”* instead of expecting a response.

APPENDIX B:

Event staff approaches that foster respect

This appendix outlines approaches that enhance inclusion and foster respect when communicating with Neurodivergent people at conferences and events. These examples are designed to guide event staff and speakers.

General engagement

DO: Approach respectfully and calmly

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Maintain a calm demeanour and speak in a neutral, friendly tone.
- Allow extra time for responses, avoiding interruptions.
- Use clear and direct communication when offering assistance.
- *"Hi, my name is [Name]. I'm here to help. Do you need anything to make your experience more comfortable?"*
- Many Autistic people experience high social anxiety, and may not like direct eye contact or prolonged conversation.

AVOID: Approaching in a rushed or overly animated manner

- Hovering or standing too close might feel overwhelming.
- Don't pressure individuals to respond immediately or make decisions on the spot.

Responding to sensory deeds

DO: Be mindful of sensory sensitivities

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Offer accommodations such as noise-cancelling headphones or access to quiet spaces.
- Avoid all unnecessary physical contact (e.g., handshakes, patting someone on the back, placing your hand on their arm/shoulder/back to direct them).
- *"Would you like to use the quiet room for a break? It's nearby."*

AVOID: Ignoring or downplaying sensory requests

Avoid loud, abrupt gestures (e.g., clapping, loud laughter).

- Refrain from commenting on or judging the use of sensory tools like fidget devices or headphones. Normalising the use of such tools means making no comment at all.
- *"Why don't you just ignore the noise? It's not that loud."*

Facilitating participation

DO: Allow for autonomy and choice

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Let attendees move in and out of sessions without judgment.
- Provide multiple ways to participate, such as writing questions instead of speaking aloud.
- *"Feel free to come and go during the session. There's seating by the door for easy access."*

AVOID: Restricting movement or imposing unnecessary rules

- Penalizing attendees for taking breaks or needing to leave early.
- Having entry and exit doors at the front of session rooms.
- *"If you leave now, you'll disrupt the session."*

Encouraging interaction

DO: Respect social preferences

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Engage in conversations only if the attendee appears comfortable and willing.
- Offer alternative networking options, like written introductions or quieter meetups.
- *"Would you like to join the group discussion, or would you prefer to observe?"*

AVOID: Forced interactions or misinterpret social cues

- Pressuring individuals to participate in group activities. Interactive workshops should provide options for all participants to engage at the level they are comfortable with.
- Interpreting lack of eye contact as disinterest or disrespect.
- *"Why aren't you talking to anyone? That's the point of networking!"*

Handling overload or distress

DO: Recognise signs of sensory or emotional overload

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Quietly check in and offer a retreat option if an attendee appears overwhelmed.
- Provide space for attendees to self-regulate without interference.
- *"You seem a little overwhelmed. Would you like to take a break or use the sensory room?"*

AVOID: Draw unnecessary attention to the individual

- Making loud or public comments about their behaviour.
- *"You're overreacting. Calm down."*

Offering assistance

DO: Ask before helping

Examples (positive behaviour):

- *"Do you need help finding the session room, or are you okay on your own?"*
- *"Would you like assistance carrying anything?"*

AVOID: Assuming or acting without permission

- Taking control of someone's belongings or personal space.
- *"Let me just do this for you."*

Providing feedback

DO: Offer constructive feedback privately and respectfully

Examples (Positive Behaviour):

- Use positive reinforcement first, followed by clear, actionable suggestions.
- *"Your question during the session was insightful. Next time, you could try keeping it a bit shorter for more group interaction."*

AVOID: Criticising publicly or using harsh language

- Generalizations or dismissive comments.
- *"Your comment was too long and distracted the group."*

Interacting with sensory tools or supports

DO: Normalise the use of aids and accommodations

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Treat sensory tools like fidget spinners, earplugs, or weighted blankets as normal and acceptable.
- Offer support without singling anyone out.
- *"We've placed sensory tools at each table. Feel free to use them."*

AVOID: Drawing attention or making dismissive comments

- Asking why someone is using a particular tool.
- *"Do you really need that?"*

Respecting personal boundaries

DO: Be attentive to individual comfort levels

Examples (positive behaviour):

- Maintain a respectful distance unless invited closer.
- Allow attendees to opt out of physical gestures like handshakes.
- *"It's great to meet you!"* (followed by a pause to see if the participant reaches for a handshake).

AVOID: Violating personal space or boundaries

- Initiating touch without explicit consent.
- *"Why won't you shake my hand?"*

References

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- 3 <https://www.abs.gov.au/about/abs-careers/inclusion-and-diversity> (Public service/ABD employees)
- 4 <https://convergeinternational.com.au/resources/celebrating-Neurodiversity-in-the-workplace/>
- 5 <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/research-analysis-and-publications/state-service/state-service-report-2023/aps-profile/understanding-Neurodiversity-aps>
- 6 <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace.html>
- 7 [Distracted Economy Report - QEII Centre](#)
- 8 Refer to page 17 for further explanation on the meaning of not intrusively.



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