

HELP NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS SUCCEED IN THE CLASSROOM

You may have more neurodivergent students in your class than you realize. According to Pryal (2023), not only have up to a fifth of your students been diagnosed with ADHD and 2 percent or more with autism, there are many students that remain undiagnosed, either due to unawareness or because of barriers that make it difficult to get medically diagnosed. What's more, many students are dealing with anxiety and depression as well as other forms of, which can interfere with everything from sleeping habits and energy levels to ability to concentrate or complete work effectively. There are many forms of neurodiversity, but the important thing to remember is that neurodivergence means different from, not less than. With that in mind, here are some steps you can take to increase your students' learning without singling any students out.

Before the Class

Provide a one-page guide or table-of-contents for the syllabus.

This can help students find what they are looking for more easily and not get overwhelmed by all of the common information that does not pertain to specifics of the class. Reiterate your contact information, response and turnaround time, and course schedule.

Bonus: consider a "[liquid syllabus](#)," which is a website published and sent out to students a week before the class begins.

Ask your students what they need.

Every student is different, and providing a place for them to tell you what they need/want to succeed in your classroom respects each person's individual experiences and choices. You can do this with a "getting to know you" survey before or on the very first day of class that not only keeps their answers confidential and allows them to disclose as much or as little as they want, but it will help just knowing that you care. By reaching out and making the first move, you are also lessening the stigma they might feel based on others' reactions to them in class.

Scaffold assignments and activities.

Break down assignments or activities into steps. Even processes you might think are intuitive aren't always clear to others. Think about where you can add ease and clarity of your expectations.

Post your agenda where students can see.

"Having a posted schedule creates predictability," says Welby (2022), which will help students know what to expect from each class and prepare for it. Have it up when students come in and keep it on screen or posted somewhere within easy sight throughout the class to help keep the class on track and ease anxiety.

Create an explicit learning objective for each class.

Much like the agenda, having this visible throughout the class provides focus and sets expectations so that students can help evaluate their understanding of the lesson. Post this along with the agenda where students can refer back to it throughout class.



During the Class

Create a calming environment.

Get there early and play some calming music while the students are arriving. Turn on only half the lights at first to make it feel a bit cozier than a standard classroom. If possible, declutter or organize the space. Tidy the rows of desks if they have been moved or regrouped, put away supplies – or set them out – and give the space a once-over to see what distractions and visual stressors might be seen from the students' point of view.

Give them a break.

Give a 5-minute period halfway through the class to allow students to use the bathroom and stretch their legs, ask you a semi-private question, or to destress for a few minutes. It could be 5 minutes with their eyes closed and headphones on- whatever they need. Breaking up lectures and activities can also keep students from getting overwhelmed or distracted.

Rethink your definition of paying attention.

Someone writing notes, doodling, or staring off into space may well be listening, but they may need to practice gaze aversion, a reaction that allows students to concentrate on what they have heard and process it. This could also look like typing, fiddling with their phones, and fidgeting.

Provide variety in activities and assessments.

Students show their knowledge in different ways and mediums. If you are only assessing their learning in one way, such as a multiple-choice test or a paper, you may be restricting students to demonstrating their learning in a medium they are not proficient at.

Use time wisely.

Time limits can be very anxiety inducing, so saying that something “should only take x minutes” to complete or giving time limits for completing quizzes and assignments can make students feel as if they are struggling or singled out.

Use direct speech.

Craddoc et al (2018) advise that many people with Autism Spectrum Disorder have trouble with small talk, nonverbal cues, and many of the digressions, metaphors, and ambiguous speech that makes up much of every-day conversation. Keep your language clear and direct, both spoken and in writing.

Offer multiple modalities for teaching and communicating.

Can you restructure your week so that on some days, students can tune in asynchronously? Dwyer et al (2023) recommend offering flexibility in modalities to “ensure accessibility of communication.” This gives students more control over their learning environment by giving them options to learn from home or in the classroom.



Make asking questions during class easy and confidential.

Have a “secret” way of students to ask questions that they aren’t comfortable asking in front of their peers. Could you have an anonymous form that all of your students could use to ask questions? A QR code to a chatbox? Then, set reminders to check it periodically throughout the class. Allowing students to do some reflective work can double as a time to check the questions forum and if needed, to check in with students discreetly.

After the Class

Create space to chat privately.

If possible, remain behind after class or remind students that you will be in your office. This gives students an opportunity and a reminder to seek you out for private questions after the lesson. If you are not available right after class, let students know when they can follow up (office hours, via email).

Send or post any recordings or documents used in the class.

Recording the classroom lecture can help students who are feeling overwhelmed review the lesson. Handouts and study guides can also help students focus on how all of the information from the reading, lectures, and assignments work together to achieve the objectives.

As Pryal (2023) points out, you don't need to be an expert when it comes to autism or ADHD to build a neurodivergent-friendly classroom space. A little bit of preparation and understanding can go a long way toward helping your students learn.

Want to learn more? Contact [CETI](#) for workshops, personal consultations, and additional resources on accessibility and universal design for learning.



References and Resources

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