ADHD, Autism, and Language

A Note About Language

Language is constantly evolving, and the terms we use to describe and discuss neurodiversity are no exception.

At CAAS, we strive to use language that is respectful, inclusive, and reflective of the preferences of the neurodivergent community. We recognise that terminology and perspectives can change over time, and we are committed to staying up to date with these changes. However, we also understand that language is personal, and what feels right for one person may not for another.

We welcome feedback from our clients and community to ensure our language remains both current and sensitive. If you have any suggestions or preferences regarding the language we use, please let us know. By working together, we can foster a more inclusive and affirming environment for everyone.

What is Neuro-Affirmative Language?

Neuro-affirmative language is a way of speaking and writing that proactively respects and values neurodiversity. It acknowledges and supports the experiences and identities of neurodivergent individuals, avoiding negative terms, and focusing on words that highlight strengths and promote acceptance.

CAAS uses neuro-affirmative language because it:

- Promotes Respect and Dignity: It ensures that neurodivergent individuals are spoken about and referred to in a way that respects their identity and experiences. This fosters a sense of dignity and self-worth.
- Reduces Stigma: By avoiding negative or stigmatising terms, neuro-affirmative language helps reduce the societal stigma often associated with neurodivergent conditions. This can lead to greater acceptance and understanding in society.
- Encourages Inclusivity: It creates a more inclusive environment where neurodivergent individuals feel valued and understood, which we hope will, in turn, support easier participation in education, work, and other services.
- Supports Mental Health: Positive and affirming language can have a beneficial impact on the mental health of neurodivergent individuals, promoting a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation.
- Reflects Best Practice: Using up-to-date, neuro-affirmative language aligns with current best practices in fields such as education, healthcare, and social services, ensuring that communication is both respectful and effective.

Key Terms

These terms are those which are often mis-understood, but frequently used within our work.

Neurodiversity recognises the concept that brain differences are natural variations to be expected, accepted, and celebrated. Everyone thinks, learns, relates to others, and experiences the world differently.
For example: "The human existence is enriched by neurodiversity."

Neurodivergent refers to a person whose neurological development and cognitive functioning differ from what is considered typical or neurotypical.
For example: "I have ADHD, I am neurodivergent."

Neurodivergence is the state of having a neurological difference.
For example: "Autism is a form of neurodivergence."

Neurodiverse refers to a group or community that includes individuals with potentially a range of neurological differences.
For example: "A neurodiverse group of young people went to the cinema."

Neurotypical is a person whose neurotype is considered typical within the wider population and who benefits from the way society operates.
For example: "My friend is Autistic and has ADHD, I do not have Autism or ADHD, I am neurotypical."

Phrases We Avoid

Sometimes we hear people using the following phrases, which we avoid as not being neuro-affirmative:

- "They have autism" or "they are a person with autism": Instead, we say "they are an autistic person," as this reflects that autism isn't a separate part of someone's personality, nor something they carry around, but rather something that is intrinsic to who they are.

- "They have / are a person with autism and ADHD": Instead, we say they have a dual diagnosis of ADHD and autism, or that they are an autistic person with ADHD.

- "That family is suffering from his autism" or "he suffers from autism": We understand that sometimes family members or neurodivergent individuals may feel that life can take unexpected turns or bring challenges because of a diagnosis, but we prefer to focus on the strengths and joys that also arise. Autistic people tell us that "suffering from" implies that they are a burden to those around them, and it treats autism like a disease, which is unnecessarily stigmatising.

- "They are low or high functioning" or "they are 'more' or 'less' autistic than others": Autistic people, like all people, have a range of strengths and talents. The environment around an autistic person impacts how they can manage their differences, so someone might seem very able to manage in school, but they could be masking, or it could be that appropriate accommodations have been made that allow them to thrive. Instead, we talk about the sensory, communication, or executive function differences that might impact an individual, and the strategies and reasonable adjustments that can be provided to support them.

- "Everyone's a little bit autistic / ADHD": This simply isn't true. All ADHD and autistic traits are human traits, which we may all have to some degree. However, having those traits doesn't make you autistic or ADHD. It is the specific cluster of traits, which have a significant impact on daily life, that are required for a diagnosis.

- "They don't look autistic / ADHD": Autism and ADHD are invisible differences; they don't have a 'look'.

How We Work

We try to avoid negative terms like "issues," "difficulties," or "disorders"; instead, we use "differences," such as sensory or communication differences. That being said, we wouldn't wish to downplay the validity of our clients' experiences, especially when they share their challenging moments with us.

We aim to keep a neutral perspective on the conditions – we don't describe ADHD or autism as either a "problem" or a "superpower." However, we know that different groups of clients might benefit from different approaches, so younger children may find a more positive framing helpful.

We do not support or promote misinformation about the causes of ADHD or autism, and encourage the use of evidence-based support strategies and approaches.

Neuro-Affirmative Language

This document represents our commitment to using respectful, inclusive, and empowering language. We believe that by fostering a more neuro-affirmative environment, and encouraging everyone in society to be neuro-affirmative in the way they talk to, and about ADHD and autistic people, we can build a better society for everyone.