

The 7-Day Neurodiversity Inclusion Challenge at Heller

Introduction

Many people are unfamiliar with the term “neurodiversity,” a concept originating in the autistic community and made widely known, in particular, by [Jim Sinclair](#), a pioneer of autistic self-advocacy. Briefly, “neurodiversity” refers to the range of neurological divergence from “neurotypical” patterns of cognition. The term and concept originated from the neurodiversity movement, a social movement that argues that society should accommodate and include people with neurological disabilities rather than seek to cure them or enforce typical behavior. Human minds vary, and these variations do not all require a cure. The term also can imply that no typical or normal brain exists at all; all brains are variations on a theme.

Associated primarily with autism (now known clinically as autism spectrum disorder [ASD]), neurodiversity usually also includes attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and dyspraxia as well as many other conditions. Some apply the term not only to innate conditions but also to acquired conditions, for example, neurological divergence caused by brain injury. Different disability communities have different politics. While some do seek cures or other interventions designed to promote typical function, a growing number of communities have adopted the neurodiversity framework as offering a better approach to research, support, and advocacy.

While neurodiversity is consistent with services and supports designed to help people achieve important person-centered goals like communication, independent living, and avoiding self-injury, therefore, the neurodiversity movement rejects the idea that service provision or research should promote typical behavior, like eye contact or standard movement and speech patterns.

Neurodivergent people are subject to much stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion, and bullying in various aspects of life. While the numbers of those diagnosed as autistic have grown particularly dramatically in recent decades, autistic people and other groups of people with neurological disabilities continue to face high rates of unemployment and underemployment, even when obtaining significant education and other credentials. Add to this that, all too often, neurodivergent people have been prevented from advocating for their own needs. Much as in the workplace, the dominant practices and structures of education are generally not designed with neurodiversity in mind.

Over the next seven days, the Heller School’s Office of Equity, Inclusion and Diversity will present a social justice challenge focused on neurodiversity. The 7-Day Neurodiversity Inclusion Challenge is modeled on the 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge that many of you participated in recently. Each day of the Neurodiversity Challenge will give you the chance to look at some of the issues faced by the neurodivergent population. The Challenge will close with the opportunity for each of us—and all of us together, if we choose—to think about our goals for building a community both on campus and beyond that recognizes and respects neurodiversity and supports neurodivergent people.

Because we are compressing multiple issues into the span of seven days, each day we will offer a set of main suggested readings, videos, podcasts, and the like. We'll also provide several additional sources for those wanting more, as well as a set of resources relevant to that day's focus. That way, you will have many options for participation.

We hope you enjoy it all but do read, view, or listen as you choose.

With each day's topic, we will also include an introduction. This should be especially helpful for those who are less familiar with the idea of neurodiversity.

You also may notice some areas of disagreement and debate, even within the framework of inclusion. We present a variety of views and resources that support inclusion and acceptance; however, we do not necessarily endorse any particular position or interpretation. To promote discussion and reflection, we are setting aside an opportunity for people in the Brandeis community taking the Challenge to come together to process their thoughts and feelings. This will be held near the end of the ND Challenge. It is entirely optional, and all are welcome in this space.

The schedule for the 7-Day Neurodiversity *Inclusion* Challenge is as follows:

Day 1. Introduction to Neurodiversity

Day 2. Neurodiversity and Representation

Day 3. Neurodiversity, Race, and Ethnicity: Representation and Diagnosis

Day 4. Neurodiversity, Race, and Ethnicity: Impact and Effects

Day 5. Neurodiversity, Gender, and Sexuality

Day 6. Neurodiversity, Education, and Employment

Day 7. Neurodiversity Going Forward: Where Are We Now?

The 7-Day Neurodiversity Inclusion Challenge launches on Friday, April 2, and runs from Monday, April 5, to Sunday, April 11, 2021.

We chose this schedule because April 2 is celebrated each year as World Autism Awareness Day, with April often designated as Autism Awareness Month. Many individuals and organizations now replace the word "Awareness" in these phrases with "Acceptance," arguing that we have gained enough awareness at this point and must instead address the pressing need for acceptance.