

Meetings at work

Making a meeting neurodivergent-friendly

Neurodivergence is a huge spectrum that covers a wide range of conditions, strengths, difficulties, and accommodation needs. Every neurodivergent person will have different things they find easy or difficult about meetings, and different strategies that can be used to help them. Listed below are some strategies that are generally helpful for many neurodivergent people (and some neurotypical people as well).

- Remember, meetings are not a natural way of communicating for many neurodivergent people. Your neurodivergent employees are already accommodating your need to communicate in a way that doesn't necessarily work for them – making your meetings as neurodivergent-friendly as possible is a compromise between two different neurotypes who are both putting in the effort to adapt to each other's communication needs.
- **Provide an agenda in advance. This should cover how long the meeting is expected to take, what you will be discussing, and any materials or information the person should bring or have ready.**
 - Some neurodivergent people need to stick to a strict schedule to compensate for difficulties with time management, and having a meeting that runs for an hour instead of twenty minutes can throw off their whole day. Others find meeting environments difficult to deal with, and knowing how long they will be expected to be in the meeting can be really helpful. If meetings are going to run over the expected time, let people know as soon as possible.
 - Many neurodivergent people need time to work out what to say in meetings. They may need to come up with some specific scripts about the meeting's subject; or they may find it helpful to spend some time writing down all of their thoughts and then turning that into a couple of points that can be brought up. Knowing what will be discussed in a meeting means that these strategies can be used ahead of time, instead of in panic mode during the actual meeting. Some neurodivergent people also have trouble transitioning between tasks, and having as much information as possible about the upcoming task can make this easier.

- Many neurodivergent people struggle with executive functioning, which impacts things like organisation and memory – a list of what to bring to the meeting (even if it seems obvious) can really help with this.
- Use language that is as clear and idiom-free as possible. For example, a meeting to ‘catch up’ could mean that you are going to assign a list of tasks, or that the employee needs to provide a list of what they’ve been working on, or that you will be focussing on small talk, or that a completely new topic or task is going to be introduced. You will get a more productive meeting out of most neurodivergent employees if they know exactly what’s coming.
- Send out a meeting summary or task list after the meeting. For neurodivergent people who have trouble with auditory processing or focussing their attention, having a written list means they don’t miss things that were said in the meeting.
- **Have clear expectations about what happens in meetings, and communicate these in advance.**
 - Many neurodivergent people (particularly autistic people) may not pick up on unspoken rules, especially around interpersonal interactions. They may need to be told that they are expected to contribute ideas in this meeting, or that they are expected to take notes, or that they are allowed to disagree with or correct a manager.
 - If your employee is behaving inappropriately in meetings in some way, let them know (and let them know why the behaviour is inappropriate). If you don’t know your employee particularly well, check in with someone who does – are they likely to need a very blunt approach with specific examples (more likely if they are autistic), or are they likely to need a more tactful approach that ensures they don’t feel personally rejected or like their job is at risk over something they can’t control (more likely if they have ADHD or anxiety).

- **Talk to your employee/s about helpful ways to schedule meetings.**
 - Meetings can be exhausting for some neurodivergent people; others may enjoy the meeting itself but find it difficult to switch back to other work tasks once it's done.
 - If you have an employee who finds meetings draining, try to schedule meetings so that your employee doesn't have to attend multiple meetings in one day, or so that there are breaks between meetings.
 - If you have an employee who struggles with transitioning between tasks, try to schedule meetings early in the day, so that they're over and done with and not interrupting other work.

Tips for coping with meetings as a neurodivergent person

Why do we need meetings?

Meetings are one of the most important accommodations you can make for your neurotypical co-workers. Neurotypical people often need to discuss things in person in order to make sense of them; they are usually happier at work when they have lots of contact with other people; and they often find talking in person clearer and easier than emailing or messaging.

Here's a list of strategies that can help make attending meetings easier. Not all of these will work for everyone, but if you're finding meetings difficult, frustrating, or exhausting, this list is a good place to start.

- If you have trouble remembering when meetings are coming up, or if you often feel interrupted by a meeting, it can help to set yourself more reminders – either multiple reminders over time if you have trouble task-switching, or reminders in multiple places if you have trouble remembering that a meeting is coming up.
- If you find that you can't focus during meetings, it can help to bring something unobtrusive to do. Bring a fidget toy or some scrap paper to doodle on into meetings; try taking notes (even if you don't need them and will never look at them) or making coffee to have something to do with your hands. Some people find being the meeting's designated note-taker very helpful – it gives you a task to do, and helps your co-workers out, which can be strong motivators for your brain to focus your attention. (If you're not sure whether your workplace is casual enough for fidget toys, check with a co-worker or your manager.)
- Take notes before and after the meeting. If you find that you often struggle to articulate your point or don't know what to say in meetings, write out scripts for yourself beforehand. If you find that you often don't remember what was said in meetings, or what tasks you're expected to do now, write them down as they come up or directly after the meeting. You can also ask your manager to write down a task list for you, so that after each meeting you know what is expected of you.
- Make a list of any items you need to bring or things you need to know before the meeting. If you find that you often turn up to meetings missing something, find a time when you're calm and not stressed out, and make a list of absolutely everything you'll need (laptop, pens, paper, diary, etc.) – this can feel really basic, but some people find it really helpful to have done all of the executive functioning in advance.

- If you're finding that meetings throw your schedule off or make you less effective at your job for the rest of the day, try scheduling in a break after each meeting. Take ten or fifteen minutes to be somewhere without people, play with a fidget toy, concentrate on your breathing, and/or prepare to switch out of meeting-mode and into regular work-mode.
- Let your manager and/or co-workers know what they can do to help. That might be scheduling meetings at a particular time or with breaks in between; sticking to the agenda; communicating via email or messaging instead of meetings as much as they can; having meetings in quiet rooms with the door closed to reduce background noise; or anything else that will help you accommodate them.