

# Embracing neurodivergence: coping mechanisms & colleague support

Josh Morgan, [jmorg105@utk.edu](mailto:jmorg105@utk.edu)

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# What's on the menu?

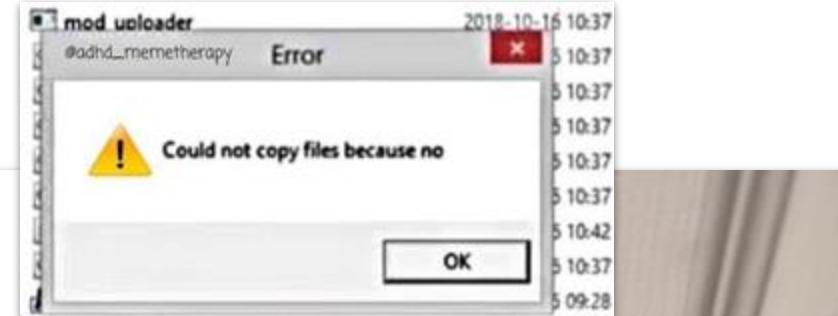
- Why am I talking about this?
- What do I mean by neurodivergent?
- Challenges, Coping, and Colleague Support
  - Environment
  - Organization
  - Motivation and productivity
  - Communication
  - Deadlines and meetings (if time allows)
- What can we do for ourselves?



# Bruises and daydreams



By Frits Ahlefeldt - [HikingArtist.com](http://HikingArtist.com)



# Neurodivergence - at a glance and without tangents

**Disclaimer** - I am not a medical professional. Experience is based on my father with combined type ADHD, and my own undiagnosed experience of over 36 years of inattentive ADHD.

**Definition** - Someone who is neurodivergent “means having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’.” Singer is credited with the term neurodiversity in the late 1990s. While the term neurodivergent (ND) was coined by Asasumasu in 2000. <sup>1</sup>

ADHD, autism, and dyslexia are some of the few examples of innate neurodivergence. A person can be neurotypical one day and suffer a traumatic brain injury the next, which can cause some form of neurodivergence.

## Some great things about being autistic

- Attention to detail/precision
- good memory
- honest and reliable
- strong sense of justice
- thinking “outside the box”
- problem solving
- ability to hyperfocus when motivated
- logical thinking

- passionate about special interests
- unique perspective and experience
- may learn to read at a very early age (hyperlexia)
- dependable in regards to schedule and routines
- joy in sensory experiences



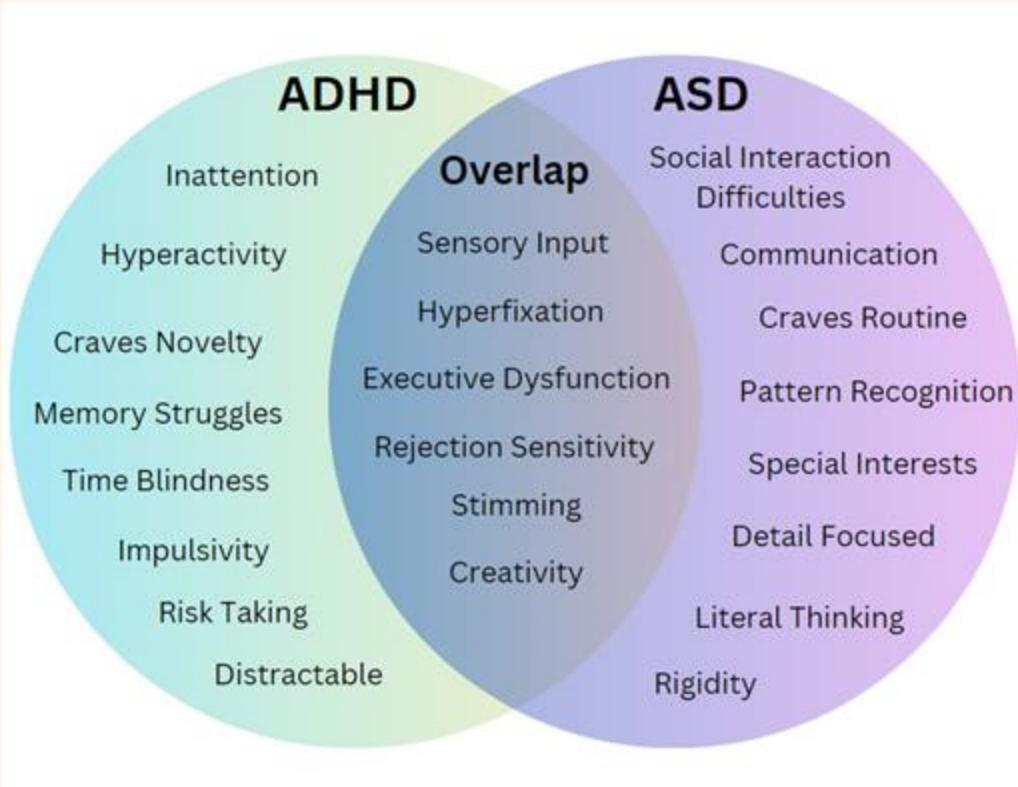
# Executive dysfunction

Executive dysfunction is a term used to describe weaknesses in these cognitive processes, affecting ability to prioritize tasks, manage time efficiently, make decisions, etc.

- being distractible or focusing too much on one thing
- difficulty planning or carrying out a task
- difficulty getting started on a task
- struggling with transitions
- getting distracted midway through a task
- trouble with impulse control
- difficulty explaining your thought process



# AuDHD Intersection



# This world isn't built for us

**Left handed** - scissors, tools, school desks, chalk/white boards, spiral notebooks

**Jewish** - only given Christian-centric holidays off and have to take PTO for Jewish holidays

**Gay** - couldn't join the military, had to wait to get married, comfort level with partner in public can vary

**ADHD** - standardized testing, one size fits all  
education, healthcare system, 9-5 workdays

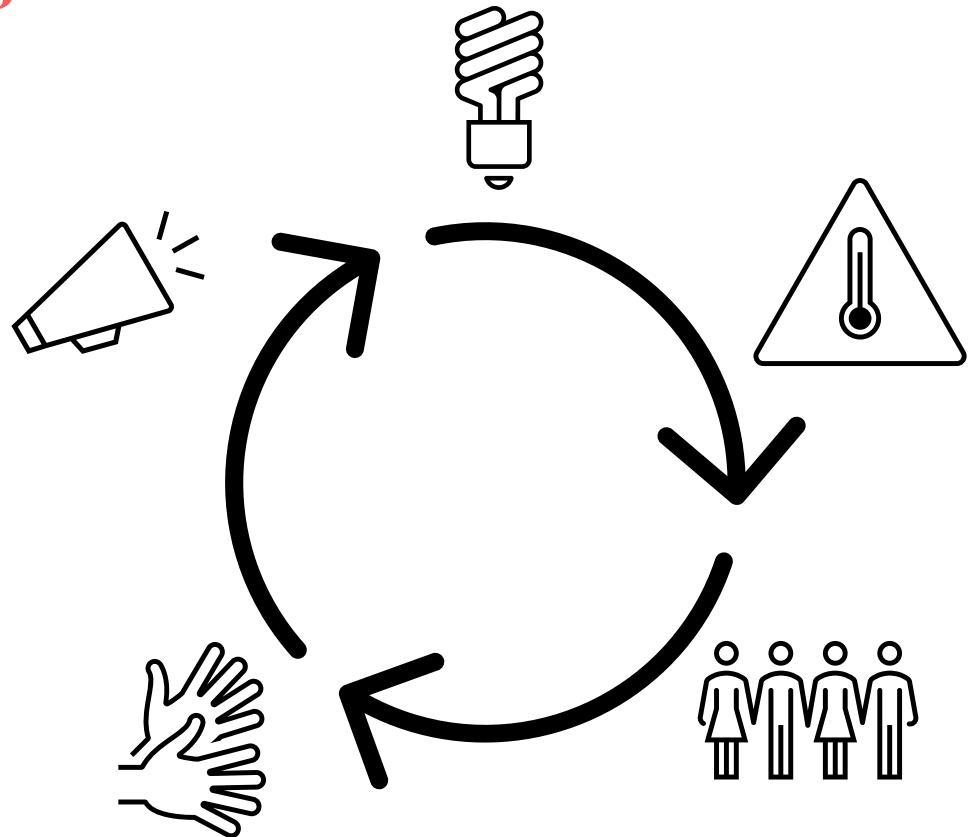


# Environment

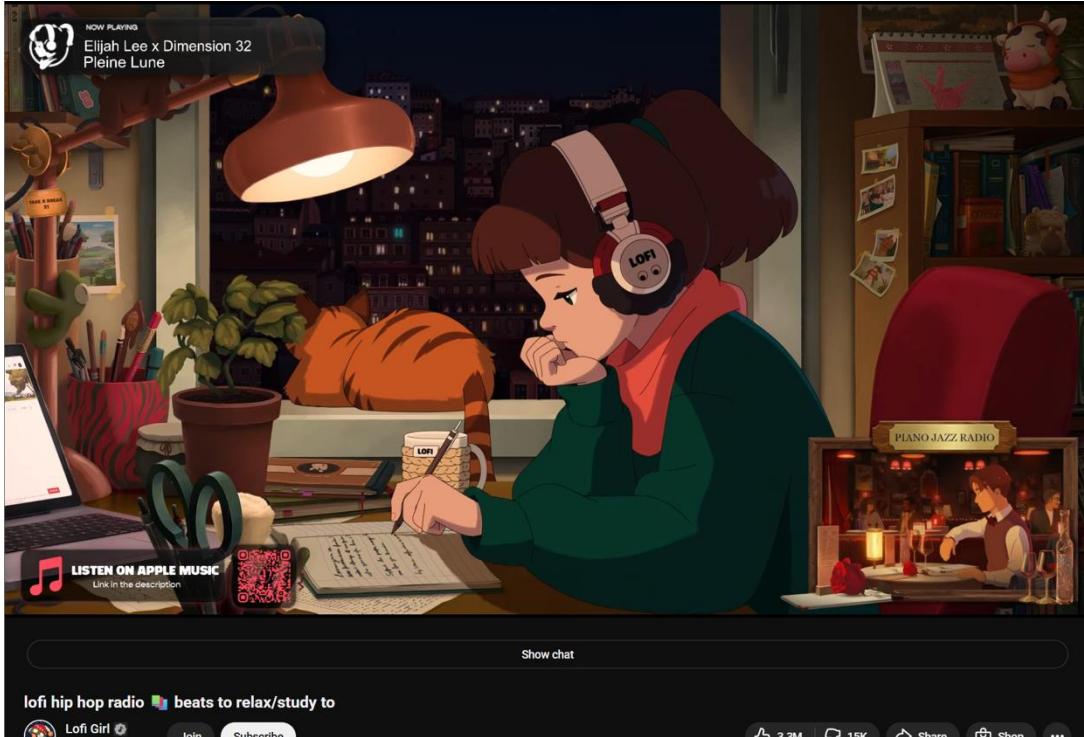


# Environmental challenges

- Misophonia
- Photosensitivity
- Temperature
- Isolation/Too many people
- Clutter
- Touch



# Coping mechanisms for our environment



- Noise-canceling headphones
- Noise-reducing earplugs
- Lamps/Light dimmers
- Sound machines (brown/white noise)
- Silent spaces/times
- Fidget toys

# What can we do as colleagues? - Environment

- Cognizant of the noise level
- Ambient noise - mechanical keyboards, buzzing lights, room speakers
- Hybrid meetings
- Signage with big letters
- Lighting
- Temperature



# Organization



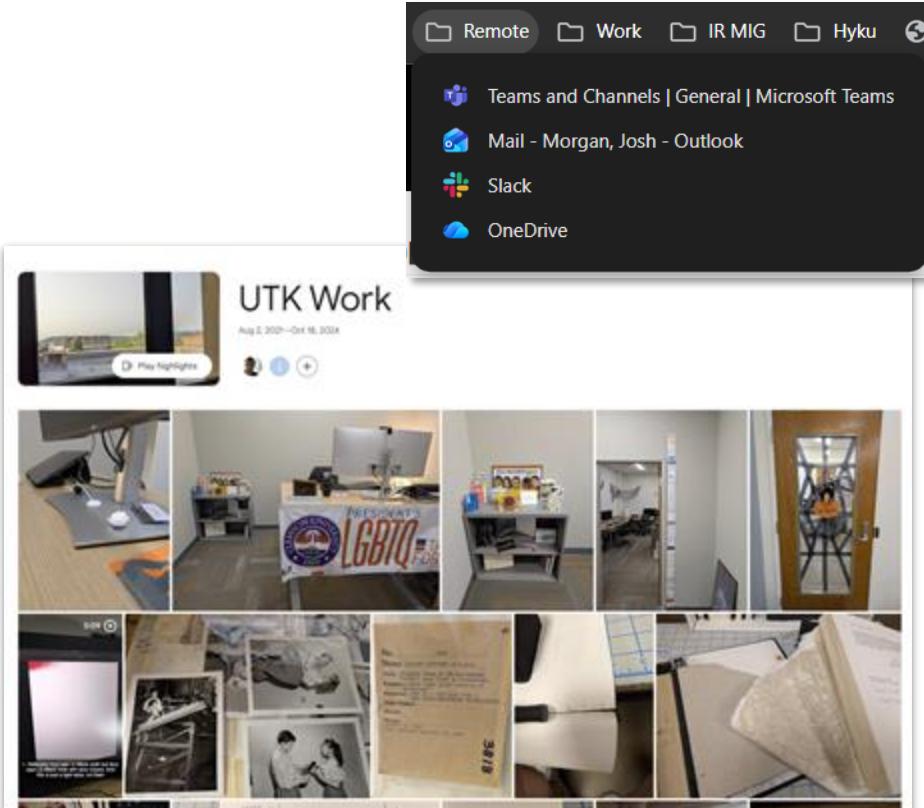
# Challenges staying organized

- Piles of stuff
- Can't see it, it doesn't exist
- Clutter can overwhelm
- Putting something down
- DRAFT, FINALDRAFT,  
FINALDRAFT-2, FINALFINAL



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backup	12/1/2025 12:02 AM	Outlook Data File	1,209,513 ...	
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# Coping for controlling organization



- Bookmark folder to start your day
- Take pictures and create a work album
- Add it to the calendar
- Version control!
- Use just one notebook (highlighters to stylize notes)
- “It goes here” spot
- Label maker

# What can we do as colleagues? - Organization

- Shared calendars
- Informal ND group chat
- Follow-up email after a chance meeting in the hall
- Control communal space clutter



# Motivation and productivity



# Challenges with motivation and productivity

- Dopamine too low to even get started
- Prioritizing/Constantly reprioritizing
- Multiple priorities and time blindness
- Transitioning to a new task
- Easily overwhelmed
- Norepinephrine too low to keep you going



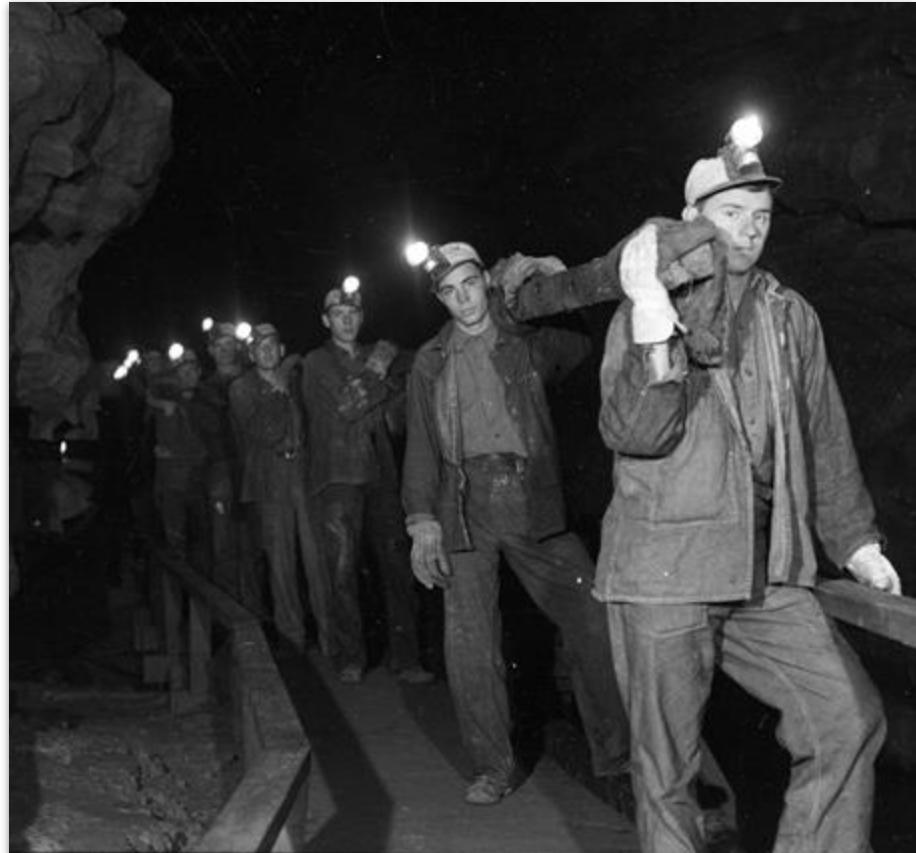
# Motivation and productivity coping



- Say it out loud “1..2..3..Go!”
- Body doubling
- If you’re bored, do something boring
- Go outside for a walk
- Controlled distractions: crowded coffee shop or podcasts
- Apps to restrict phone distractions (ScreenZen or Opal)
- Goblins Tools to reword communications or breakdown tasks

# What can we do as colleagues? - M & P

- Regular meetings to help prioritize
- Making space for others to work alone
- Body double or help with brainstorming
- Honest feedback
- Avoid interrupting colleagues when they are busy





Communication

# Communication challenges

- Auditory processing issues
- Reading into a situation
- Distractions and mind wandering
- Walls of text
- Overexplaining
- Tangents
- Follow-ups
- Losing train of thought from going on too long



# Communication coping



- Always ask for and provide it in writing
- Subtitles for virtual meetings
- Write down that thought or question immediately
- Stick to the 5 Ws (who, what, when, where, why)
- Draft that email!
- Email flags are a hit or miss

# What can we do as colleagues? - Communication

- Get educated
- Agenda
- Always provide instructions/feedback written and verbally
- Be mindful of interviews
- Be human
- Understanding behaviour without excusing it



Have I run out of  
time again?

# Deadlines



- Write down what you do in one spot
- Make a game plan
- Try out the Pomodoro technique
- Adrenaline driven deadlines
  - Great for getting things done, but not mentally/physically healthy

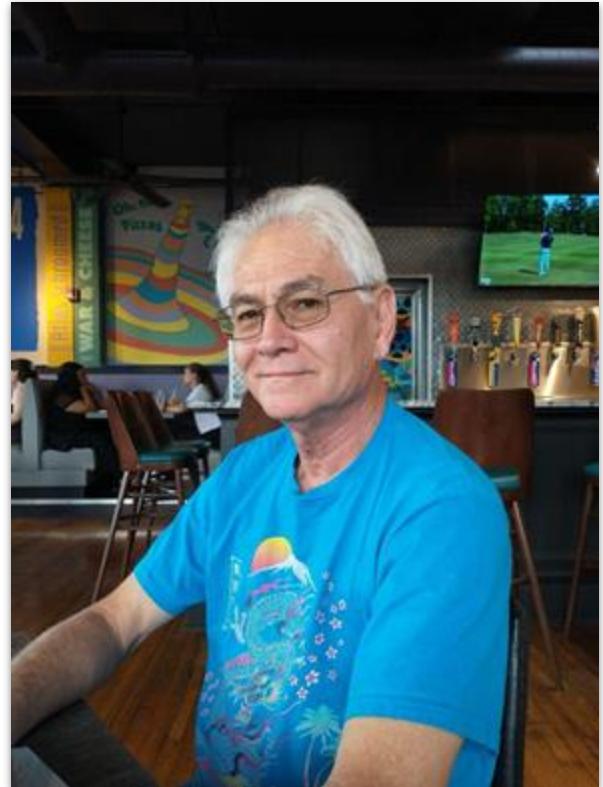
# Meetings

- Hybrid meetings
- Keep minutes/virtual meeting links in the same document
- Assign timekeeper and notetaker in a meeting
- Avoid final decisions in a meeting
- Embrace silence
- Avoid meeting callouts
- Provide audio recordings and auto-generated subtitles
- Keeping meetings short
- Always follow-up meeting with a reminder for others to verify minutes



# What can we do for ourselves?

- Morning check-in with self
- Build in that de-fluster time
- Stop being so hard on yourself!
- Neurodivergent people are creative, great at problem solving, pattern recognition, outside the box thinkers, can be calm in a crisis, and so much more.
- Seek a diagnosis and treatment
- Exercise and mind your diet (fiber, protein, fruits/veggies)
- Pursue workplace accommodations



# Questions? Thoughts?

Contact: [jmorg105@utk.edu](mailto:jmorg105@utk.edu)

Slides available from Gather and Grow  
webiste

