

This resource is part one of a mini-series created in partnership with [Neurodiverse Sport](#). It aims to improve **understanding about neurodiversity**, and how to support neurodivergent paddlers to have **inclusive** and **accessible** paddling experiences.

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a term that describes all the different ways in which our **brains function**. There is no “right” way of thinking or learning, just a spectrum of **different** ones. Within your club, group of friends or workplace, there is neurodiversity already.

Alongside neurodiversity, we might also see terms including **neurotypical** people and **neurodivergent** people. Definitions for these words, along with other common terms, can be found in the glossary in this resource.

Why do we need to know more about neurodiversity?

Levels of understanding about neurodiversity and how to support neurodivergent people are very varied. This can mean that people who have conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), autism or dyslexia are **not able to access the support** they might need in order to be fully included and thrive.

This mini-series aims to **improve the information** available about neurodiversity. It will also help the paddling community ensure that they can **support people with a range of neurological experiences**. Improving our knowledge in this area ensures we don't rely on stereotypes, and maintain a person centred approach.

What are the facts?

An estimated **1 in 7** people in the UK are neurodivergent

The British Medical Association estimates that **1 in 100** children in the UK are diagnosed with autism

The British Dyslexia Association estimates **10% of the UK** to be on the dyslexia continuum

Many athletes are neurodivergent. For example, **Michael Phelps** (swimmer) and **Simone Biles** (gymnast) both have ADHD

The **experiences of those with neurodivergent conditions is varied**, but the numbers above show the prevalence of people with these conditions in the UK population. It's likely that these figures are actually **higher in reality**, due to low diagnosis rates among women and lower socio-economic communities.

Many people you know, including colleagues or fellow paddlers, could be neurodivergent. It's also possible that there is a higher proportion of neurodivergent people active in sport and physical activity than in the general population.

Paddling can offer **many benefits** to neurodiverse paddlers, such as the feeling of **freedom** away from land, enjoying **blue spaces and nature**, and being **part of a group** while paddling separately.

Glossary

This glossary summarises some of the **most common terms** you might encounter when talking about and learning about **neurodiversity** and **neurodivergent conditions**. You can also find additional information and resources in places such as [The Brain Charity](#), [AMASE](#) and [Play Learn Chat](#).

Executive function: Executive function refers to the set of cognitive processes that help us to complete tasks or goals. Some neurodivergent people may struggle with a consistent level of executive function, which means they may struggle to focus on or complete a task.

Hyperfocus: Hyperfocus is an intense absorption into a task, topic or activity for an extended period of time. For some people with neurodivergent conditions, this can come at the detriment of other tasks or responsibilities. It can also affect the ability for a person to focus on multiple tasks or stimuli.

Intellectual disability: Intellectual disability is “a term used when a person has certain limitations in cognitive functioning and skills, including conceptual, social and practical skills, such as language, social and self-care skills” ([Special Olympics](#)).

Not all people who have neurodivergent conditions have an intellectual disability.

Learning disability: A learning disability “is to do with the way someone's brain works. It makes it harder for someone to learn, understand or do things.” ([Mencap](#)). This is sometimes confused with neurodivergent conditions such as dyslexia or ADHD.

It is important to recognise the difference between the two. Mencap describes those conditions “as a ‘learning difficulty’ because, unlike learning disability, it does not affect intellect”.

Masking: Masking refers to the actions or other strategies that people with neurodivergent conditions use to hide their thoughts, emotions, or difficulties associated with their condition. Masking is often used as a strategy to ‘fit in’ with peers. Long-term masking can be very mentally and physically exhausting.

Mental health conditions: Mental health conditions are conditions which affect a person’s mental, emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Neurodivergent conditions are not the same as mental health conditions. However, in settings where neurodivergent people are excluded or unsupported, they may experience poor mental health as a result.

Neurodiversity: Neurodiversity refers to the diversity in the neurological experiences and brain function across a population or group. A person does not ‘have’ neurodiversity. Instead there is diversity across a group of people, as everyone’s brains will function differently.

When neurodiversity is used as an umbrella term for this topic, it refers to the full range and spectrum of these experiences.

Neurodivergence or neurodivergent: A person is neurodivergent if they have a neurological experience which is different to the majority. They may also have a condition including (but not limited to) autism, ADHD or dyslexia.

Neurodivergence is the term used to describe the neurological experience of a person or persons that is different from the majority within a group.

Neurotypical: This term is used to describe someone who has a neurological experience that is the same as the majority of a group, such as the general population.

Sensory overload: Sensory overload is an experience common for many with neurodivergent conditions. This is where multiple sensory stimuli causes someone to become distressed or disorientated.

Shutdown: Related to sensory overload, a shutdown can occur when there has been too much sensory input. A shutdown can cause people to lose the ability to respond verbally or manage any further sensory input.

Stimming: Stimming is a shortened term for self-stimulating behaviour. This can help individuals with neurodivergent conditions to self-regulate, or respond to the environment around them. It can include a range of actions, such as twitching or flapping one's hands, or vocal stims such as humming.

This resource is part four of a mini-series created in partnership with Neurodiverse Sport. After Neurodiversity Celebration Week in 2023, British Canoeing Awarding Body recorded a fascinating podcast episode exploring **neurodiversity in sport**.



Helena Russo
Equality, Diversity
and Inclusion Lead at
Paddle UK



Nerys Hall
Marathon and
sprint racing athlete



Caragh McMurtry
Former Olympic
rower and founder
of Neurodiverse Sport

Nerys and Caragh have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and high functioning autism, respectively. They discuss their sporting achievements, **what their diagnosis means, and how it has affected their sporting lives**.

They go on to explore the **barriers they have faced** and the **strategies they put in place** to improve performance. Caragh and Nerys share their **top tips for coaches** to consider neurodivergence and adapt their coaching practice accordingly. This is a must-listen for anyone **developing their understanding** of neurodivergence, or having a conversation with a coach or athlete.

Importantly, they explain **the need to change the narrative** from neurodivergent sportspeople being a problem, to **person-centred, flexible and inclusive environments** supporting all to thrive.

[Click here to listen to the full episode!](#)

This podcast is also available on Podbean, and the transcript for the episode is available here.

Whether a person is neurodivergent or not, everyone has their own individual set of needs to feel supported and included. Here are some key takeaways on **how to support neurodiverse paddlers**.

Improve your understanding

Knowledge about neurodiversity and how it impacts people's daily lives can be low. This can lead to fewer people understanding these experiences. Improving your knowledge about neurodiversity and neurodivergent conditions ensures you can support more people, avoid stereotyping, and make paddling more neuroinclusive.



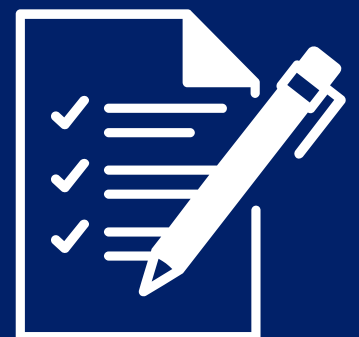
Take time to understand individual needs

Understanding individual needs is good practice regardless of a person's identity or experience. It can help everyone feel understood and supported. Taking the time to understand the specific needs a neurodivergent person has, and how you can personally support them can go a long way in helping them to enjoy paddling.



Think about how you share information

Everyone processes and absorbs information in different ways. This can be challenging when there is a lot to share. Could you share information in multiple formats, such as written and verbal? Is the setting you share information in quiet and free from distractions? Have you checked whether the information made sense to them?



Avoid making assumptions

Even for people with the same neurodivergent condition, there is a range of experiences and needs. Avoid making blanket assumptions about a group, or labelling neurodivergent people universally. This will ensure neurodiverse paddlers are well-supported in their environments, and avoids perpetuating stereotypes.



Coaches are pivotal to enjoyable paddling experiences, for new and experienced paddlers. Their support on the water is essential. Below are key takeaways on how **coaches can support neurodiverse paddlers**.

Adopt a person-centred approach

A person-centred approach is a cornerstone of the BCAB coaching philosophy. It helps coaches get the most out of participants, and creates opportunities for them to share their knowledge and expertise in different ways. Working with neurodivergent paddlers during coaching can ensure they feel supported, and get the most out of paddling.



Understand how participants learn best

Through a person-centred approach, coaches should spend time understanding how neurodivergent paddlers learn and absorb information, and improve their experience. How can you break down information in a way that is more manageable? Would some paddlers benefit from video analysis or visual aids, for example?



Take a strengths-based approach

A strengths based approach means focussing on people's capabilities, rather than what they might not be able to do. Building their confidence about their strengths can support them to excel in their paddling performance. Be mindful that neurodivergent paddlers may put themselves in a state of burnout if not supported to rest.



Continue support for high-performance

It is likely that high-performance coaches will work with neurodivergent athletes in their career. High-performance settings can be overwhelming, and athletes may find unsupportive spaces very difficult to navigate. Coaches must be able to support neurodivergent athletes, as their need for support continues even as a performance athlete.



Clubs are hubs of social connection, shared interest, and supportive environments. It's important that they consider how they can be welcoming for all. Here are tips on how **clubs can support neurodiverse paddlers**.

Empower volunteers with knowledge

It will benefit your club to ensure that volunteers are educated about neurodiversity and how they can support neurodiverse paddlers. Your committee and key volunteers, such as team managers, should have access to resources to develop understanding, and opportunities to learn about topics they feel less confident about.



Take time to listen to your members

An estimated 1 in 7 people in the UK are neurodivergent, so it's easy to imagine that members of your club may be neurodivergent, whether or not they have a diagnosis. If you survey your members, focussing on the lived experiences of neurodivergent members to inform more inclusive practices, can have significant impact.



Challenge non-inclusive behaviour

Neurodivergent people face exclusion in their day-to-day lives for various reasons. If inappropriate or non-inclusive behaviour occur, clear steps must be taken to tackle this and prevent it from happening again. Ensure people who engage in this behaviour are provided with education and resources to understand the impact of their actions.



Be open to supporting reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are steps clubs can take to support a person to engage with your activities. They might include allowing people to bring a trusted person to sessions, offering club information in various formats, or one-to-one support on the water. Adjustments can be temporary or ongoing - everyone's needs are different.

