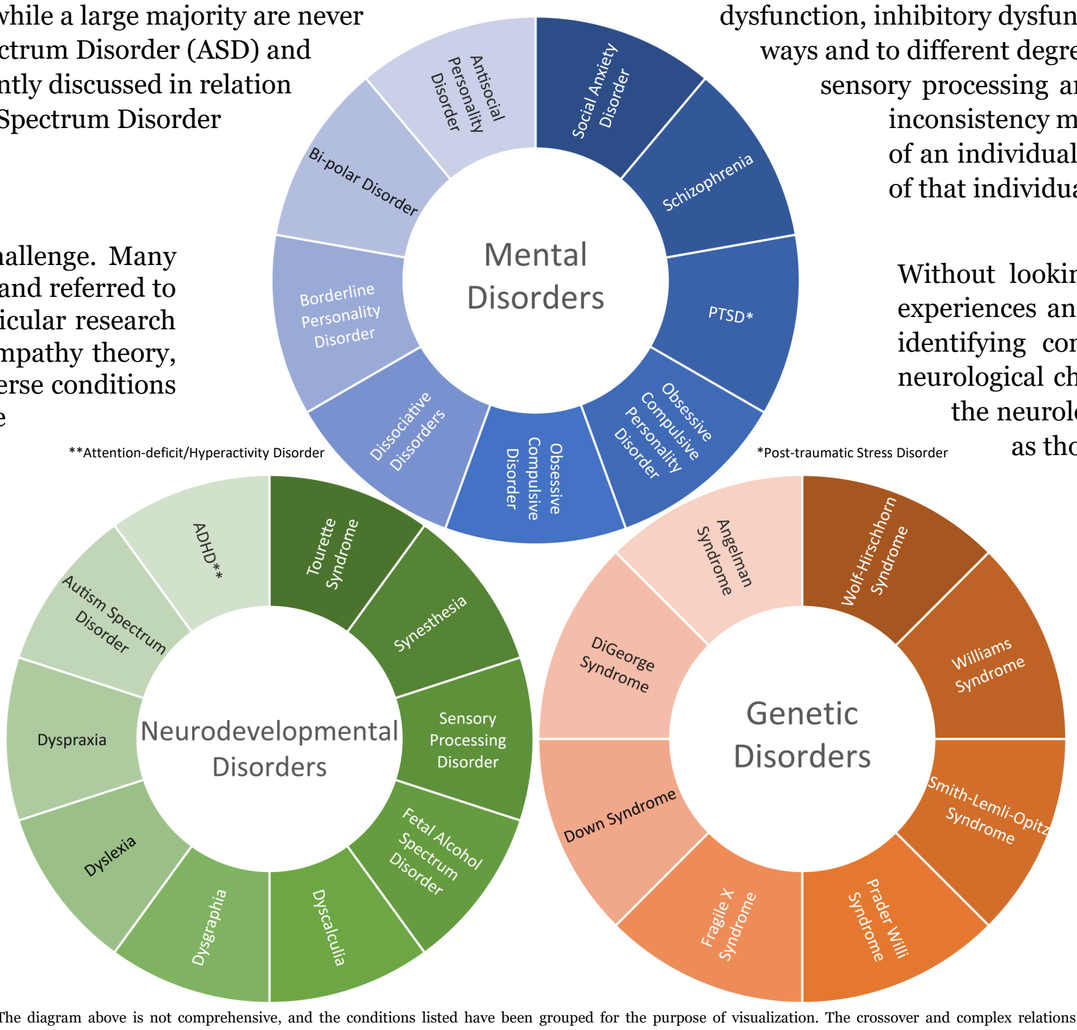
Balancing Neurodivergent Needs

The core of education is the communication of knowledge between two or more people, and effective communication is all about balance. Differences in personal communication style or preferences can be rooted in differences in life experience, language, physical ability, culture, or neurological characteristics. These differences can affect communication between people leading to the need to balance communicators' wants and needs. The first step to finding balance is identifying and understanding the wants and needs of all those involved. This applies to all communication and is necessary for effective instruction and educational interactions.

The Extent and Nature of Neurodiversity

The major challenges faced in relation to neuro-inclusive education/communication begin with the lack of awareness concerning the extent and nature of neurodiversity. Currently neurodivergent is a term used to group people who have one or more conditions considered to impact neurological function in a way considered atypical compared to peers. There are many conditions mentioned in relation to neurodiversity, however, there is no definite list that clearly outlines all these conditions. When looking into research concerning neurotypical and neurodiverse people a few of the many conditions linked to neurodiversity are regularly discussed while a large majority are never studied with an association to neurodivergence. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are frequently discussed in relation to neurodiversity while Bi-polar disorder and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are rarely mentioned.

Understanding the nature of neurodiversity is another challenge. Many neurodiverse conditions have been consistently considered and referred to as disabilities. In the past couple decades research, in particular research concerning autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and double empathy theory, has aided in the reframing of how ASD and other neurodiverse conditions are viewed. There has been more support for the perspective that views neurodiversity as a naturally occurring deviation in human cognitive functions. Viewing conditions previously seen as causing incorrect or unnatural neurological function instead as naturally occurring neurological diversity. Double empathy theory focuses on ASD, but generally concerns the difficulty of communication between individuals with conflicting disposition and personal conceptual understandings. This concept highlights the difficulty in communication between neurotypical and neurodivergent people influenced by lack of understanding originating in differences in neurological characteristics.



The diagram above is not comprehensive, and the conditions listed have been grouped for the purpose of visualization. The crossover and complex relations between these groups are not accurately depicted.

Labels vs. Experience

Bridging the disconnect through understanding the neurological characteristics experienced by people with neurodiverse conditions poses additional challenges. Many characteristics are shared by multiple conditions and experienced in varying ways and to different degrees even for two individuals diagnosed with the same condition. Certain characteristics are more specific to one condition. Central coherence weakness and theory of mind deficit are mostly linked to ASD but can be experienced in varying degrees by individuals with ASD. Other characteristics like emotion dysregulation, executive dysfunction, inhibitory dysfunction, and sensory overload can be experienced in differing ways and to different degrees by many different conditions. Physical coordination and sensory processing are also impacted by several neurodiverse conditions. This inconsistency makes diagnosis/identification of a neurodiverse condition of an individual near useless in understanding the neurological experience of that individual.

Without looking at diagnosis and instead being informed by personal experiences and characteristics individuals can begin understanding and identifying communication wants and needs in people with different neurological characteristics. This is difficult in an instructional setting as the neurological characteristics of the instructor or instructors as well as those of all the students all impact communication in lectures, class discussions, group work, individual feedback, and individual assistance. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes options for interaction and engagement to provide inclusive educational experiences to students. This approach is helpful for neuro-inclusive education; however, it is necessary for instructors to be active in including different forms of engagement in their instruction and offering different options for communication to their students. Self-advocacy can be difficult. Communicating clearly with students while expressing options to them can help in lessening the stress that some individuals may experience when asking for accommodations or expressing personal needs.

How does this all affect library instruction?

While library instruction is affected by communication concerns in the same way instruction in many other areas is impacted there are additional concerns specific to library instruction. Communication concerns can be more difficult to handle for library instructors as they often have limited time to interact with students and are entering a classroom where communication is impacted by the students as well as both instructors present. On top of the challenges in communication there is the nature of library instruction. Teaching information literacy skills involves building off of and impacting a student's basic conceptual understandings using information literacy framework and threshold concepts. If students have differences in their basic conceptual understandings rooted in differences in neurological characteristics, then how does this impact their views on information and their understanding and learning of information literacy?