

Positive Working Relationships

In this section we will be providing guidance on navigating working relationships between colleagues, line manager and employer, supervisor and PGR student, and PGR student groups. It also provides information on the double empathy problem alongside principles and practices of positive working relationships.

Double Empathy Problem

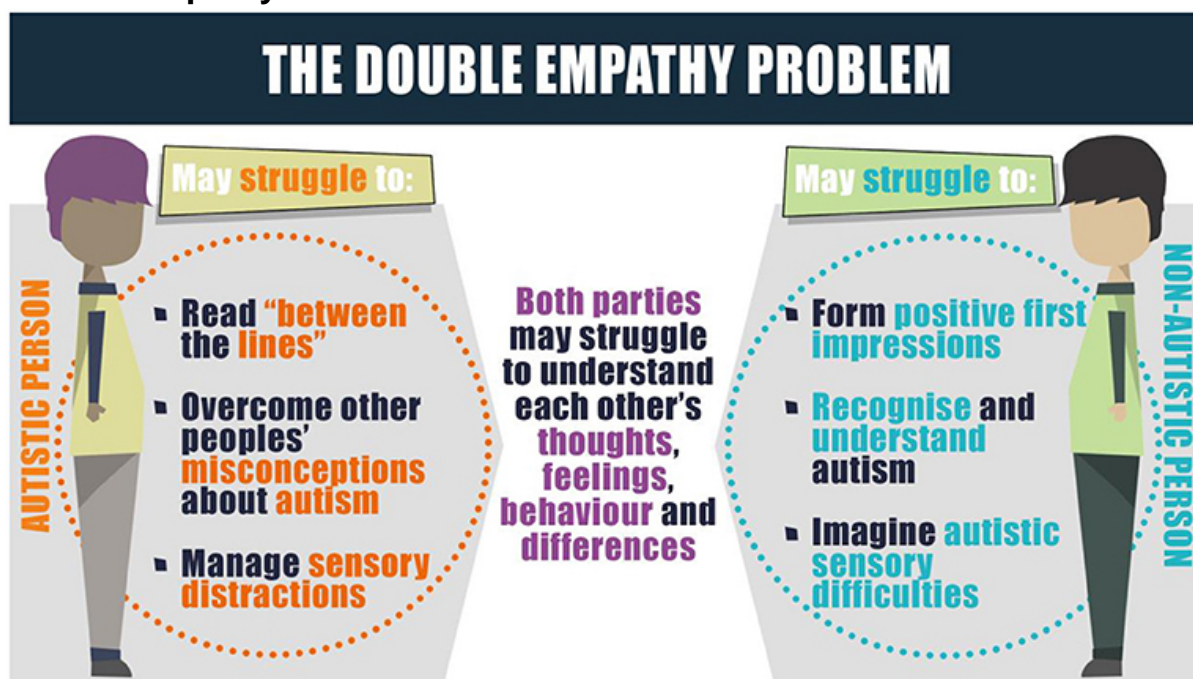


Image taken from [Crompton et al \(2021\)](#)

The double empathy problem was coined by [Damian Milton](#) as a theory to help understand what may happen when autistic and non-autistic people meet and communicate. It proposes that empathy is a two-way process that is usually formed from previous social experiences experienced by the individual which may be different for autistic and non-autistic people.

The picture above highlights some of the challenges faced by the autistic person and the non-autistic person. Non-autistic people are usually able to “read between the lines” of social interaction, which means picking up on nuances in language (e.g., sighing, tone, sarcasm) and picking up on body language (e.g., changing facial expressions, eye rolls, limb movement to express a certain feeling). This can be difficult for autistic people to understand and navigate during communication with a non-autistic person. Additional challenges are overcoming other people’s misconceptions about autism and managing sensory distractions.

On the other hand, non-autistic people may struggle to form positive first impressions, recognise and understand autism, and imagine/understand the sensory distractions/difficulties experienced by the autistic person. This [paper by Edey et al. \(2016\)](#) also found that non-autistic people found it difficult to understand autistic people’s bodily movements. To understand the sensory experiences of autistic people, you can watch [Dr. David Simmons talk on Sensory Processing in Autism within Higher Education Settings](#) to learn more.

Thus, differences in communication and information processing styles can make it difficult for **both** parties to communicate effectively, share experiences, connect, and empathise with one another.

Although the double empathy problem theory is used primarily for autistic and non-autistic communication, the same principle of miscommunication can be used to understand interactions with other neurodivergent conditions.

Below are guidelines on how to build and maintain positive working relationships to overcome the double empathy problem.

Principles of positive working relationships

[Dr Jonathan Vincent and his neurodivergent colleagues](#) have defined principles of positive relationships below.

- 1. Trust**
As many neurodivergent people have faced discrimination, trust is important to build and maintain. It is important to trust neurodivergent people to do their job, and for neurodivergent people to trust that others in the workplace will believe their lived experience.
- 2. Recognition**
To recognise neurodivergent people's strengths, needs, and ideas.
- 3. Compassion**
Understanding of the neurodivergent person's life experience and show empathy.
- 4. Patience**
Practising patience for difference and the need to do things in different ways which may stray from the "norm".
- 5. Respect**
Respect differences and try not to force a neurodivergent person into a "normal" way of working.
- 6. Collaboration**
Pro-active co-created solutions that are sustainable and meeting the needs of the neurodivergent individual.
- 7. Transparency**
Clear in expectations of the job role (including development), and discussions around what is absolutely needed in the job so that there is no ambiguity.

Practices of positive working relationships

Following the above principles, [Dr Jonathan Vincent and his neurodivergent colleagues](#) have also defined practices of positive relationships below.

- 1. Practice the principles**
Practise the principles outlined above.
- 2. Increasing everyone's understanding**
This could be through discussing neurodiversity with colleagues or encouraging others to learn more about neurodiversity.
- 3. Talk about the double empathy problem**
Discussing how neurodivergent people may interpret the world and communicate with others will increase understanding of different communication styles.
- 4. Differences in communication**

This could involve asking a person's preference in communication (e.g., written or verbal, or both), and providing options when disseminating information: please see [Accessibility](#) for more information.

5. Limit unnecessary demands

For remote working, this might involve reducing the number of zoom meetings, providing sufficient breaks between zoom meetings, keeping meetings to schedule, and not calling spontaneously. If in person, examples include reducing drop-by meetings and not changing/adjusting sensory aspects (e.g., lighting, use of radios, talking, smells etc.) of a shared space without consultation.

6. Agenda and structure for clarity

Agendas for meetings, provided in advance, have been said to be a key aspect of a healthy workplace for neurodivergent people to be able to process the information and understand the structure/tone of the meeting being held.

7. Creating safety

You can create safety in two of the following areas.

i) Psychological

Reassuring neurodivergent people that you are a safe person to disclose to so that neurodivergent people feel comfortable sharing information with you. Alternatively, you can guide/direct neurodivergent people to safe people/places that allows space for diversity in a supportive and respectful way. This could be through a committee or community, for more information, please see [Additional Forms of Support](#).

ii) Safe place

Provide or guide/direct neurodivergent people to [quiet spaces](#) to unwind if they are experiencing sensory overload and/or provide an environment where disclosure or different needs are welcomed.

8. Listen actively to reasonable adjustments

As mentioned in [Disclosure of a Condition](#) it is vital to actively listen to a neurodivergent person's reasonable adjustments and support this person through honest, open, and compassionate conversation/s.

We would like to note that creating and maintaining positive working relationships is a continuous journey and that we are not recommending a singular conversation or "fix-it" approach. As people age and experience different things throughout their life, needs will change, so **ongoing conversations and re-evaluations are required.**

Staff communication

This section will cover colleague-to-colleague communication.

If you have not read the principles and practices of positive working relationships above, please read those as they are the basis for creating and maintaining positive working relationships and may cover what it is you are searching for!

However, a common question that is often asked is the following:

“Without knowing about a peer or co-worker’s private medical information, how can you help create a healthy work environment for everyone?”.

It is estimated that 1 in 5 people are neurodivergent ([ADHD Foundation](#)), and therefore a large proportion of the adult population is neurodivergent. The behaviour of every colleague can make a workplace a healthy or unhealthy environment for people with neurodivergent conditions.

You can create a healthy work environment for everyone (including neurodivergent people) by:

- Building/maintaining trust through open communication and active listening. Consequently, colleagues and peers may feel comfortable to ask for reasonable adjustments and support if needed.
- As a colleague/peer, following the [Online Meeting Guidance](#) for inclusion purposes.
- Consulting the very helpful webpages such as [Supporting Disabled Colleagues and Prospective Staff](#) and [Support for Disabled and Neurodivergent Colleagues portal](#).

If you do **know** your colleague’s neurodivergent condition, either from them telling you themselves or that they’ve indicated they are open to it, it is advised that you ask them how this affects their daily working routine to co-create the optimum working environment/pattern for both your colleague and you. This will overall boost morale and work task outcomes.

Line manager and employee communication

This section will cover line manager and employee communication.

If you have not read the principles and practices of positive working relationships above, please read those as they are the basis for creating and maintaining positive working relationships and may cover what it is you are searching for!

A common question that is often asked is the following:

“How can a line manager manage challenges associated with neurodivergences in the workplace?”.

Firstly, we recommend that line managers embed the principles and practices section above into their management communication and work ethos, along with the following.

- Please see the [Support for Disabled and Neurodivergent Colleagues portal](#) for information on Reasonable Adjustment Passports, conversations surrounding reasonable adjustments amongst many other very helpful information.

- Line managers should make reasonable adjustments to allow people to carry out their jobs. For example, neurodivergent employees might need a safe space where all colleagues and peers are able to fidget and multitask, or have long breaks between social interaction, or are provided with speech-to-text software. Line managers should ask their employees what they need from work environment, communications etc to be able to work efficiently. Asking for feedback is an important part of this. For more advice on this, read [Disclosure of a Condition](#).
- Line managers should actively listen to their neurodivergent employee to see if changes can be made.
- Line managers should address discrimination by implementing an inclusive, diverse, and accessible environment that is safe and kind to all. To learn more about this, undertake [Equality and Diversity Unit Essentials](#) and other courses underneath (e.g., unconscious bias training, effective bystander training etc.). Also let staff know about this training and encourage others to undertake it too.
- If the neurodivergent employee complains about a negative work environment, try to settle any issues informally at first. If this cannot be settled informally, remind them of their rights and encourage them to complete an online form: [Report bullying, discrimination, harassment & sexual misconduct](#).

In terms of **good line management**, you can do the following:

- Embed the principles and practices of positive of positive working relationships into your management, as seen above.
- Read the [Disclosure of a Condition](#) to understand the procedure of disclosure including guidance on “dos and don’ts” when a neurodivergent person discloses to you.
- If you know your employee’s neurodivergent condition, it is advised that you ask them how this affects their daily working routine to implement the optimum working environment/pattern for the employee. For more information on this, including Reasonable Adjustment Passports, please see the [Support for Disabled and Neurodivergent Colleagues portal](#).
- Read the [Support Within the University](#) section of the hub and provide this to your neurodivergent employee.
- Read the [Harnessing Strengths](#) section of the hub and the [Double Empathy Problem](#) to learn more.

- Revise [the induction checklist](#) and see whether you have completed all points.
- Undertake the [Equality and Diversity Unit Essentials & Implementing Reasonable Adjustments for Students and Staff and Managing Diversity e-courses.](#)
- [There are different courses you may want to complete which are highlighted on the Management Skills and Managing People pages.](#)
- [There is a Policy for Managing Stress in the Workplace which you are advised to read, too.](#)

Employee to manager communication

Whether you know if a manager is neurodivergent or not, we recommend using the principles and practices mentioned above to be as inclusive as possible.

You can also:

- Build/maintain trust through open communication and active listening to create a healthy and accessible work environment between you and your line manager.
- Read the [Harnessing Strengths](#) section of the hub and the [Double Empathy Problem](#) to learn more.

If you know your manager's neurodivergent condition, it is advised to read relevant resources such as the ones highlighted in this hub to understand how their condition may affect your working relationship.

If you feel comfortable and your manager is **open** about discussing their condition, you can also ask them how their neurodivergent condition affects them and what you can do to optimise your working relationship.

Supervisor and student communication

This section will cover supervisor and PGR student communication.

If you have not read the principles and practices of positive working relationships above, please read those as they are the basis for creating and maintaining positive working relationships and may cover what it is you are searching for!

To gain/maintain a good working relationship between you and your PGR student, we recommend the following, irrespective of whether you know if your PGR student is neurodivergent or not.

- Embed the principles and practices of positive working relationships above into your role as a supervisor.
- Read the [Disclosure of a Condition](#) to understand the procedure of disclosure including the guidance on “dos and don’ts” when a neurodivergent person discloses to you.
- If you are supervising a PGR student and you know their neurodivergent condition, it is advised that you ask them how their neurodivergent condition affects them and what you can do to optimise your working relationship, alongside understanding how this may affect potential group work.
- Read the [Support Within the University](#) section of the hub and provide this to your neurodivergent PGR student.
- Read the [Harnessing Strengths](#) section of the hub and the [Double Empathy Problem](#) to learn more.
- Undertake the [Equality and Diversity Unit Essentials & Implementing Reasonable Adjustments for Students](#)
- [There are different courses you may want to complete which are highlighted on the Management Skills and Managing People pages.](#)
- [Read the Accessible Inclusive Learning Policy.](#)
- [Information for Staff Supporting Disabled Students covers many topics including Disability Co-ordinators, policies, and resources that you may find useful.](#)

Professor Jay Dolmage has also created an online resource that provides guidance on working one-on-one with students, please see: [Universal Design, Places to Start- One-on-one with Students](#).

PGR student to supervisor communication

Similar to the Employee to Manager Communication, we recommend using the principles and practices mentioned above to be as inclusive as possible.

You can also:

- Build/maintain trust through open communication and active listening to create a healthy and accessible work environment between you and your supervisor.
- Read the [Harnessing Strengths](#) section of the hub and the [Double Empathy Problem](#) to learn more.

- You can also contact the Student Support Officers to ask for advice. For more information, please see [Support Within the University](#).

If you know your supervisor's neurodivergent condition, it is advised to read credible resources such as the ones highlighted in this hub to understand how their condition may affect your working relationship.

If you feel comfortable and your supervisor is **open** about discussing their condition, you can also ask them how their neurodivergent condition affects them and what you can do to optimise your working relationship.

PGR student groups

Specifying needs openly as a neurodivergent person may not be easy and feel safe. Therefore, creating an inclusive space where needs can be discussed and met is an important part of successful group work.

Regardless of whether you identify as neurodivergent or not, it is important for PGRs to be aware that neurodivergent individuals may have different preferences, particularly when it comes to communication. It is important to **actively listen** to anyone who needs reasonable adjustments. Make sure to **respect** others' wishes when, for example, they request something to be communicated in writing.

Equally, if you are a person who has specific needs or preferences, transparency is key; specify what it is you would like from the people around you.

Below are also tips that you can use in your group work for it to be open, inclusive, and embrace diversity.

1. It is important for the group and group leader to be flexible in setting out tasks and group communication- no one size fits all!
2. Do not assume there is only one right way to do things, discussion about the optimum group work environment and collaboration is key.
3. Openly discuss differences in processing and thinking and consider how your work can be accessible to all group members.
4. Be aware of preferences when allocating roles for tasks to be sure that everyone is comfortable with the work they are assigned to.
5. Assign roles to different members in the group and let people know in advance what is expected of them.
6. Try to make documents/meeting notes/presentations accessible. This is especially important for those with dyslexia and dyscalculia. For more information on this, please read the [Accessibility](#) section.
7. If possible, you can gather information anonymously (e.g., by survey/forms) from group members about what their preferences are. This will provide all group members a chance to comfortably input their preferences, especially those who do not like to talk about their needs openly/publicly.