Neurodivergence – What is it?

We have known for years that the brain is the most complicated part of the human body. That is no understatement. Our brains define our humanity – it is where we process thought, control motor functions, and synchronize our emotional responses. The brain controls our reactions and behavior in response to external factors.

Only recently have we begun to understand more about how the brain functions, but there is still a lot that science is still looking to explain. The last couple of decades have brought about significant advancements in research techniques and knowledge of the brain that have fundamentally changed what we know about this complex organ. In fact, scientists have learned more about the brain in the last ten years than in all preceding centuries!

It stands to reason that there is still much more that we don't yet have an explanation for or terms we can use to talk about.

This is where the rise in popularity of the terms "neurodivergent" and "neurodivergence" come into play. Not everyone's brain works in the same way, or what we have come to accept as "neurotypical." This can lead to misunderstandings for people who are navigating the world differently.

Neurodivergent has not yet been added to dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster, nor is it an official (quote-unquote) "medical" term.

So, what does neurodivergent mean?

At its base, neurodivergent means someone who differs in mental or neurological function from what is considered normal or typical. This could mean that the person has a developmental disorder or a mental illness. The key takeaway is that being different does not imply a person has deficits.

Humans have long viewed disabilities and differences to mean that there is something wrong with a person. The term neurodivergent is trying to take that back – different does not equal bad. As Harvard's Nicole Baumer, MD, MEd, says on the blog:

"Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one 'right' way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits."

There is so much about the brain that we do not yet understand, so neurodiversity strives to create a safe, inclusive space. The term neurodiversity was created by Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, in 1998. It was initially used to describe people with autism, ADHD, and other conditions in mind, but it has now expanded to cover more.

As with any term that seeks to define a person in a particular category, neurodiversity comes with its controversy and criticisms. Some critics say that calling diseases that can be debilitating just a natural variation takes away from a person.

Ultimately though, it is about helping a person feel heard and understood. Everyone needs help sometimes, and neurodivergent people are not different in that sense.

What should I keep in mind when I hear the word neurodivergent?

It is essential to remember that neurodivergent and related terms were created to help recognize and support people whose brains may work in an atypical way. The goal is to be more inclusive in our language and not automatically designate someone who identifies in this category as lesser.

Be sure to listen and support the person and address them as they want to be addressed. Your words matter and can help address the stigma people face worldwide.