



## Neurodiversity

Tessa Baum

As an accessibility centered graphic designer, I seek new perspectives and experiences that challenge my perception. Hoping to deepen my connection with the NEU design community, I looked towards aspects of my identity that my peers might share. This exploration is what led me to the topic of neurodiversity.

Neurodiversity describes atypical neurological functioning. The term, coined by sociologist Judy Singer, aims to reorient how we look at the word "disability". Often, Autism is what first comes to mind when talking about neurodivergence. However, experts continue to add disorders to the list: ADHD/ADD, Asperger's, dyslexia, epilepsy, OCD, tourette syndrome, and more. Neurodivergent people simply process information in a myriad of ways.

# A Conversation with a Hidden Community

I gathered a group of neurodivergent designers, **S**, **C**, and **H**. Predictably--neurodivergent people often struggle with time management--half of us were late. Our plan for Sunday morning turned to Sunday afternoon, but luckily, **S** brought their dog, Duma.

We are so quick to label things. As creatives, labeling styles and methods of creation can be limiting, but it can also legitimize our process. The debate of labels is seen in terms of neurodivergence and disability.

## Do you consider yourself disabled?

*In the silence of thinking Duma plops herself on a sunny patch of the floor, we all smile.*

**S:** No, I don't put the word disabled on myself. It might be harder for me to get my schoolwork done or to focus, but I can't compare that to not being able to hear or see, or use my legs.

**C:** Disability is certainly a difficult word. I do receive accommodations from Northeastern's Disabilities Resource Center (DRC), which is a huge help. So, in that sense, I identify as disabled. To your point **S**, there is a spectrum of ability...it's tricky, I have a lot of abilities and I don't want a label to discredit that. Even so, parts of my neurodivergence are PTSD. There are moments where I can't do something because a certain setting or topic. But I see why many people prefer terms like "differently abled" over disabled.

Yes, the hesitancy towards "disabled" is a large reason for the term neurodiversity. **Which brings us to the question: how did you learn of the label neurodivergence?**

**H:** Some words you learn from your parents or through casual language. I first heard neurodivergence on the internet in mid 2020.

**S:** I heard it on TikTok around the same time.

**C:** In recent years I've become aware of the term, and I mostly hear it in terms of mental illness. I'm still not very familiar with the word.

Tate Brochures  
TATE Britain, 2013-14

**Tomas Jef**,  
graphic designer  
tomasjef.studio

**T:** Neurodivergence concerns variances, divergence, with the brain, neuro. Like **C**'s point on "differently abled," the label neurodivergent addresses the stigma of the term "disability" and replaces words like stupid, crazy, abnormal.

**S:** I think it's a good word that fits better than "disabled". I am wary of how it's exploited on the internet in a way that allows people to claim oppression.

**T:** I think the way many of us learned of the term speaks to **S**'s point. The internet takes things out of context, offering misinformation and only snippets of the full picture. Even as neurodivergent ourselves, we have a partial understanding of the term. Conversations like this give people, in and out of the community, insight on this buzzword.

*A moment of distraction comes as Duma struts under the table's shade. The dog basks in the sun and our attention.*

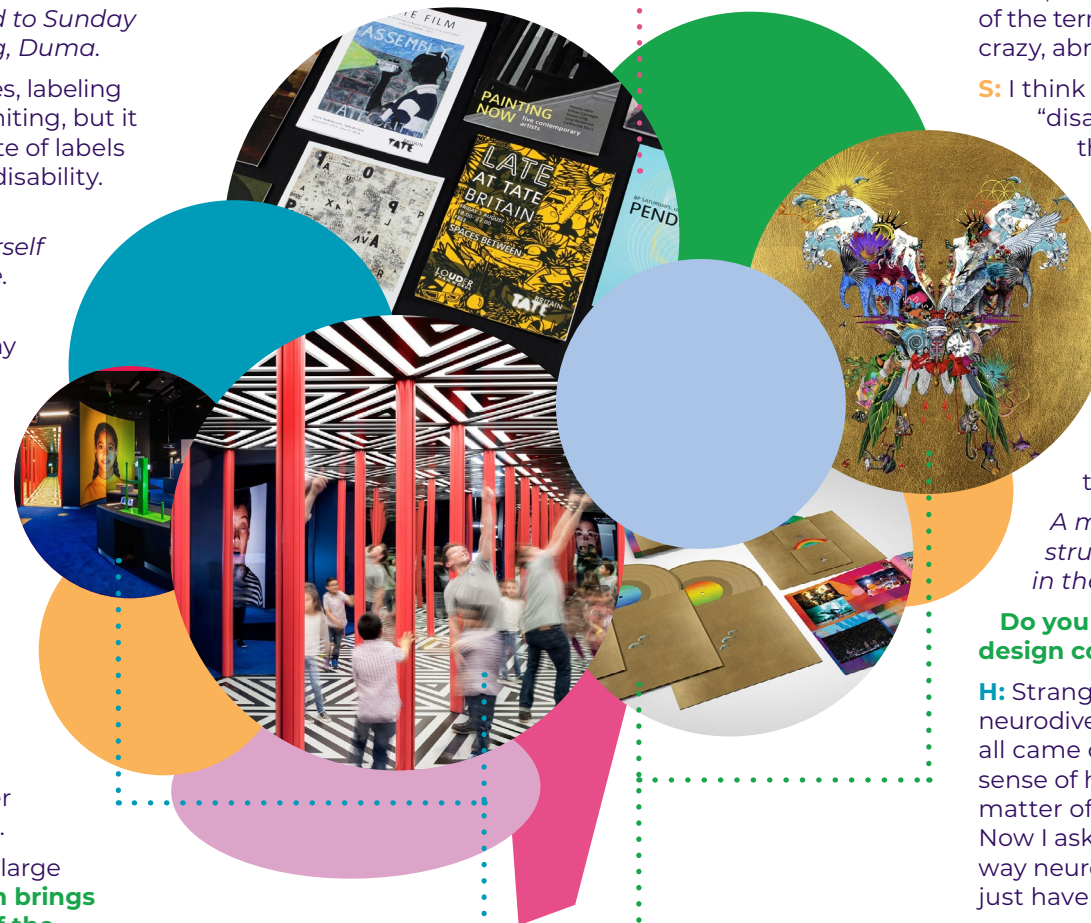
## Do you feel a sense of neurodiversity in your design community?

**H:** Strangely my friends and I realized we were neurodivergent at the same time. It was like how we all came out as queer. Before, there was a strong sense of having something in common. It was just a matter of time until we found out what that was. Now I ask why do all my friends have ADHD? Is it the way neurodivergent people interact or think? Do I just have similar friendship styles as them?

**T:** Well, I wouldn't discount this pattern to a mere coincidence or friendship styles.

**S:** You're drawn to them! When I talk to someone with ADHD the conversation just makes sense. The flow is natural; you'll go on tangents and remember to keep circling back to other topics. You both understand that you want to stay engaged all the time. **H**, I need to meet this group of queer neurodiverse designers--it sounds like a dream and a half--that overlap feels so hard to find.

**H:** Of course, you can!



WonderLab  
National Science +  
Media Museum, 2017  
**Ab Rogers**, dyslexic  
environment designer  
abrogers.com

Coldplay 'A Head Full  
of Dreams' live in South  
America album, 2017  
**Kristjana S Williams**,  
dyslexic designer  
kristjanaswilliams.com



*We smile, imagining how lovely it would be to have more people a part of the conversation.*

**T:** It's a shame how **H**'s experience is uncommon. Like **S** said, labels legitimize your needs and the issues you face. Being around neurodivergent people, like right now, is so validating.

**S:** I'm privileged to even label myself neurodivergent. I've had so many resources that allowed me to get diagnosed and DRC accommodations.

**T:** Same. The process of official diagnosis and DRC approval is arduous and expensive; we are very much a hidden community because many neurodivergent people, for whatever reason, don't have the ability to officially label themselves so.

**H:** That's me! I don't have DRC accommodations. A lot of my life has been coping and finding different strategies to work around.

**Does your neurodivergence play a role in studying design? Do you find you have to cope and strategize less?**

**H:** *[People with ADHD don't simply struggle with lack of focus but also hyperfixation, hours of extreme focus on one area].* I found I hyperfixate the most with creative projects. I have always paid attention to advertisements, imagery, and patterns when looking at the world around me. I cope less with design because I gravitate towards it. I was also drawn to typography because I liked the idea of making things easier to read.

Dyslexic Design  
at Designjunction  
London, 2016

**Cargo Collective**  
<https://cargocollective.com/DyslexicDesign>

How can we build  
'homes' with the  
many communities  
we're a part of?

Artist statements,  
similar to **S,C** and **H**,  
talk about how being  
neurodivergent has it's  
benefits. One mentions  
how dyslexia gives  
him better spacial  
awareness.

**C:** I also find more success when I design. I'm more passionate about it unlike in high school with general studies. Other parts of my neurodivergence are from depression. Being in a creative field helps me, however, I cannot be creative while in an episode. This has tried to be addressed with extra time on projects, but I can't know when an episode will end.

**T:** Of course, design doesn't absolve you from neurodivergent related struggles.

**Neurodivergent people often gravitate to creative careers. Do you think this is a coincidence?**

**S:** Nothing is more exciting than the arts for me. I think that creative stuff just does it for a lot of people. There might be a pattern...but I know neurodiverse people who found their place in stem fields because that's their niche. But yes, with neurodivergence there is an identification of feeling othered, and the arts is a great place to go when you feel othered... it's the alternative option.

**H spoke about how their interest in typography stems from wanting to make things easier to read. Do you design with neurodivergence in mind?**

**C:** Now that I think of it, I guess I do. I design with the comfortability of neurodivergent people in mind: would someone like me be feel safe here? Would someone like me enjoy this? How do we make a huge space like ISEC feel comfortable for someone like me, who is easily overwhelmed and socially anxious, and maybe going through some stuff?

**S:** Yes, a lot of what you end up designing is a registration of things you've seen and like. I'm drawn to things that are consumable [*neurodiverse people process information in atypical ways*]. I try to design with as few words as possible, making it very clear what's going on. But I've never thought about that being an approach to accessibility.

**H:** The fact that I am neurodiverse, and I am designing through my lens means I design with neurodiversity in mind. I've never thought of it, but this also applies to critiques. Giving feedback with a neurodivergent perspective helps others design with neurodiversity in mind.

**Is there a part of design thinking that you apply to your management of neurodivergence?**

**H:** I break things down into steps. With design you have a problem along with a blank page you could fill with countless solutions. Say I have to clean my room [*people with ADHD struggle with executive functioning like organization*]. Just like with design, where step 1 is a client brief, step 2 is brainstorming and so on, I look at my task and come up with any first step. I'll do the first step without even thinking of the next steps. Then I take it step at a time.

**C:** There's this process some designers use called minimum viable product (MVP). It asks what's the minimum you can do to get this job done. This really helps me because I'm still turning something in. That's a premise of iteration that designers deal with. I tell myself to take the first step, I just need to get one iteration out. I know I'll build on it and it'll get better later.

**Do you feel this conversation helped you find a sense of community?**

**H:** Definitely! This is the first time I've been in a space specifically for neurodivergence, not to mention how it overlaps with design.

**S:** I don't want to stop talking! There is so much value in being the first person in a room to say something that other people identify with. You feel this relief of "yes, somebody else said it". Admitting you struggle with something is vulnerable and opens the door to build stronger communities...**T**, your comment on

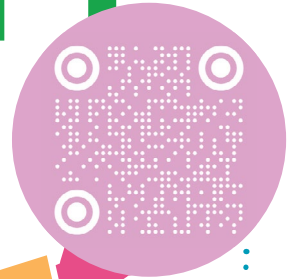
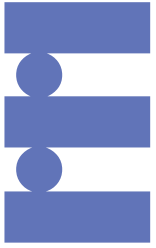


good design being accessible is something I've never thought about before, but it's true; information that's consumable means designs that are for everybody.

**C:** For sure, in my leadership position I emphasize acknowledgments of our differences to my team. To be cognizant of where we are mentally, skill wise, and outside of work is important. Also, I play to my team's strengths. I'm learning that it's often better to ditch the "keep going, work through it" approach. Instead, I say "how about you try doing something totally different than the project you're stalled on." It is so much more productive than pushing and saying keep at it. Because of my neurodivergence, I approach my team with a sense of awareness. I'll say, "okay, I see you're different, so we are gonna try something different."

*I smile. There are so many hidden groups within our larger design community. **S**, **C**, and **H** revealed that becoming closer to these groups only strengthens the whole.*

**I wonder what other hidden communities I'm a part of. What about you? Cast a line, open that door, and be the first in the room to say it. I swear it's worth it ♦**



*More on Dyslexic Design at the Designjunction. Artists cite their unique perspective and ability to visualize 3D space are two ways that dyslexia helps them create.*

*More about sociologist and neurodiversity advocate, Judy Singer.*

