

NAVIGATING NEURODIVERSITY



**A simple guide to
understanding and supporting
your neurodivergent friends**



BanyuleYouthServices



ENGAGE!

WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS?

This guide was created after the 2025 Banyule Youth Summit, where young people shared their experiences and ideas about how schools and communities can be more inclusive, safe, and respectful for everyone.

This guide is for young people who want to better understand and support their neurodivergent friends. You likely already know someone who is autistic, has ADHD, or another form of neurodivergence.

Neurodivergent people do not all have the same experiences. This guide focuses on understanding differences and practical ways to support friends in everyday situations.



BANYULE
YOUTH SUMMIT

What does “Neurodivergent” mean?

Everyone’s brain works differently.

Neurodiversity is the idea that there is no single “right” way for a brain to work. Just as people have different personalities, interests, and strengths, people also think, feel, and process the world in different ways.

The term neurodivergent is often used to describe brains that work differently from what is usually considered “typical”. This can include people who are autistic, have ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Tourette’s syndrome, or other learning and thinking differences.

Being neurodivergent is not something that needs to be fixed. It is a normal part of human variation.



Everyone's experience is different

Even when people share the same diagnosis, their experiences can be very different.

Some neurodivergent people may:



Get overwhelmed in loud or busy spaces



Need more time to process information



Feel exhausted after socialising



Struggle with sudden change



Focus very deeply on specific interests

Others may not experience any of these things.



Avoid assumptions. The most reliable way to understand what someone needs is to listen and ask.

A bit about Autism and ADHD

Autism

Autistic people may experience differences in communication, sensory processing, routines, and social interaction. Some prefer predictability and structure, while others need significant downtime after social or sensory input.

Many autistic people experience sensory sensitivities. Noise, lighting, textures, or smells can feel overwhelming or physically uncomfortable.

ADHD

People with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may experience differences in attention, impulse control, energy levels, and time awareness. Some struggle to maintain focus, while others become very absorbed in things they enjoy.

ADHD can also affect emotional regulation, memory, and organisation.

AuDHD

Some people are both autistic and have ADHD. This is often referred to as AuDHD.

People with AuDHD may experience a mix of traits associated with both Autism and ADHD. This can sometimes feel contradictory, such as needing routine while also craving novelty, or wanting connection while also needing a lot of time alone. Not everyone uses this label. It is one way some people describe how their brain works.



You do not need to memorise diagnoses, but having some basic context can be useful!

SUPPORTING A NEURODIVERGENT FRIEND

What people find supportive can vary from person to person, but some approaches are commonly useful.

Things that help:

JUST ASK!

Ask instead of guessing what someone needs

COMMUNICATION

Communicate clearly and directly

BOUNDARIES

Respect boundaries, even when you do not fully understand them

FLEXIBILITY

Stay flexible when plans change

SCAN ME FOR MORE!

Supporting your autistic friend
(Literally Ausome)
A Guide to Understanding and
Supporting your Autistic Friend



(External Resource)



BREAKS

Allow people to take breaks without drawing attention to it



Supporting someone usually means responding to what they need, rather than trying to fix things.

Communicate Clearly

Clear communication can reduce misunderstandings and stress.

YOU CAN HELP BY:

Saying what you mean – hinting can be confusing

Giving people time to think and respond

Not forcing eye contact, talking, or participation

Checking in privately instead of correcting someone in front of others

It can also help to give a heads up when something is about to change. Letting someone know what is coming next gives them time to prepare. This might include:

Mentioning if a place is likely to be loud or crowded

Saying when plans are about to change

Explaining what is about to happen before it happens, when possible

This does not need to be a big deal. Brief, practical comments can make situations easier to manage.

How can I support my neurodivergent friend (Rosie.org.au)
More tips on talking with and listening to friends



Neurodivergence and shame

Everyone experiences embarrassment at times, but shame can affect some neurodivergent people more intensely. When someone is feeling shame, it often shows up in their behaviour.

It can look like:

Going quiet or shutting down

Using humour to cover discomfort

Over-apologising

Becoming irritable

Withdrawing from the group

Avoiding eye contact

Shame can be triggered by:

Being corrected publicly

Feeling misunderstood

Sensory overload

Feeling like a social mistake was made

What helps:

Staying calm

Giving space, but checking back later

Making it clear they are not in trouble

What doesn't help:

Telling someone to "calm down"

Showing frustration or impatience

Pushing for explanations

Invalidating someone's experiences



MASKING

Some neurodivergent people mask, meaning they hide natural reactions or behaviours in order to fit in or avoid standing out.

Masking can take a significant amount of energy. Someone may appear fine in social settings and then feel drained or withdrawn later. This is not personal or a reflection of how they feel about you.

FATIGUE, OVERLOAD AND BURNOUT

Overwhelm can build up over time.

THIS MAY LOOK LIKE

Cancelling plans



Needing extended rest



Pulling away from activities they usually enjoy



Appearing flat or disconnected



This kind of exhaustion is not laziness or rudeness, but the result of ongoing overload.

SENSORY NEEDS AND TOOLS

Sensory needs can vary from person to person, and many neurodivergent people rely on certain adjustments to manage sensory input.

THIS MAY LOOK LIKE

Quieter spaces or noise-cancelling headphones



Soft or dim lighting



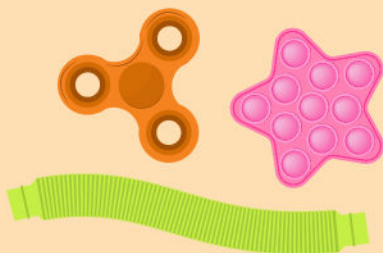
Avoiding strong smells



Movement breaks



Fidget and sensory tools



Having access to a calm space



These supports can help neurodivergent friends to manage sensory input and are not a sign of disengagement or rudeness.

Language Matters

Language can impact how people are understood and treated.

Helpful Reminders:

- Avoid calling anyone “normal”
- Avoid labels like “high functioning” or “low functioning”
- Avoid saying someone is “suffering from” their neurodivergence
- Ask people how they describe themselves

Some people identify as disabled and some do not. Follow the language your friend uses for themselves.



(External Resource)

Pocket Guide to Neurodiversity-Affirming Lingo.

Common terms to help you understand the words people use.



Reminder:



You do not always need to get this right.

Supporting neurodivergent friends involves listening, respecting boundaries, and learning over time.

Paying attention and responding thoughtfully matters more than getting things perfect.

Getting Support

If you or a friend need extra support, help is available.
You are not expected to handle everything on your own.

REACH OUT AUSTRALIA

An online mental health organisation providing information, support and resources for young people.

au.reachout.com

HEADSPACE

A national youth mental health service for young people aged 12-25, offering support around mental health and wellbeing.

headspace.org.au

KIDS HELPLINE

A free, confidential 24/7 counselling service for young people in Australia.

Hotline: 1800 55 1800

kidshelpline.com.au

AUTISM SPECTRUM AUSTRALIA (ASPECT)

Provides services, community connection and information for autistic people and their families.

aspect.org.au

YOUTH SUPPORT & ADVOCACY SERVICE (YSAS)

Offers counselling, support and education programs for young people, including those living with a disability.

ysas.org.au

BANYULE YOUTH SERVICES

Part of the Banyule Council, providing programs, activities and individual support for young people aged 12-25 years in the Banyule community.

9457 9855 banyuleyouth.com



BanyuleYouthServices



banyuleyouth@banyule.vic.gov.au



banyuleyouth.com



Banyule Youth Services



[@banyuleyouth](https://www.instagram.com/banyuleyouth)



ENGAGE!



Banyule

City Council



VICTORIA

State
Government