



Institute Of Neurodiversity™

Guide for

Empathy and Curiosity Across Neurotypes and Cultures

Empathy and Curiosity are key to so many things, they will open up deeper conversations leading to deeper understanding. Of course it needs to be laced with respect and kindness to open up depth and mutual understanding.

Curiosity and empathy are twin forces of understanding.

Curiosity asks, "What is your experience?"

Empathy replies, "I care how that feels."

When curiosity is guided by empathy, it becomes more than just a quest for knowledge, it becomes an act of respect. It doesn't seek to fix, label, or compare. Instead, it listens to difference without fear and meets unfamiliarity without judgement.

Empathy is often misunderstood as a single expression, tears, hugs, soft words, but in truth, it takes many forms. Across cultures and neurotypes, empathy may be shown through problem-solving, quiet presence, humour, acts of service, or simply staying close without speaking.

What feels comforting to one person may feel overwhelming or insincere to another. This is why recognising and respecting different expressions of empathy is essential: it reminds us that care is not about how we would show it, but how they can receive it. True empathy means learning each other's language of kindness, and not assuming ours is the only one.

1. Empathy Across Neurotypes

Neuromajority Expression

- Often expressed nonverbally (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice).
- Emphasis on emotional mirroring ("I feel what you feel") and comforting gestures.
- Social scripts guide timing and form of empathetic responses.

Minority Neurotypes (e.g. autistic, ADHD, dyslexic minds)

- May express empathy through action (e.g. problem-solving, offering solutions).
- May share a personal story to signal understanding, a way of saying "I truly get what you're going through."
- Some may struggle with reading or expressing typical emotional cues, but feel empathy deeply.
- Autistic individuals often report heightened emotional empathy but difficulty with social performance of empathy.

Important Insight: What looks like a lack of empathy may be a difference in communication, not compassion.

2. Empathy Across Cultures

Individualistic Cultures

- Empathy is often verbalised: “I’m sorry you’re going through this.”
- Focus on personal boundaries and emotional validation.
- Often encourages direct support (e.g. "What can I do to help you?").

Collectivist Cultures

- Empathy may be expressed through acts of service rather than words.
- Emphasis on nonverbal harmony, shared silence, or group cohesion.
- Empathy can be shown by fulfilling obligations quietly or maintaining group stability.

High-context cultures

- Empathetic cues are implicit; you’re expected to “just know.”
- Listening deeply, not interrupting, and anticipating needs are key empathetic acts.

Low-context cultures

- Empathy is explicit; you say how you feel and what you need.
- Misunderstandings may arise when expectations differ.

3. When Neurotypes and Cultures Intersect

Neuromajority people in collectivist cultures may struggle with literal or practical expressions of empathy from autistic individuals and other minority neurotypes.

Autistics in Western cultures may be judged for not displaying neuromajority empathy norms.

Misunderstandings are common when empathy doesn't look familiar across neurotypes and cultures.

Expanding Our Definition of Empathy

To create inclusive societies and workplaces, we must:

Recognise and appreciate diverse forms of emotional expression.

Educate about how empathy shows up differently across both neurotypes and cultures.

Encourage mutual respectful and kind curiosity: “How do you show you care?”

Curiosity and Empathy

Together, curiosity and empathy open space for truth to be spoken safely. They allow us to approach each other not with assumptions, but with presence, asking not just what someone is, but who they are, and what matters to them.

In conversations between different neurotypes, this combination is especially powerful. Curiosity ensures we don't stay silent out of fear of saying the wrong thing. Empathy ensures we speak with care, not intrusion. When held in balance, they create trust, foster belonging, and unlock connection where there was once misunderstanding.

Too often people start with judgement in stead of curiosity. When I speak to people of different neurotypes around the world I hear the same story from most of us.

When we disclose our neurotype it often triggers judgemental and biased comments or questions like “you don't look autistic” - “you don't behave like ADHD” - “but you read books so how can you be dyslexic” - I thought Tourette was about swearing”

Judgement is easy; curiosity is brave. Whether we are neurotypical or of a minority neurotype, we are all vulnerable to judging what we do not understand.

That's where curiosity and questions come in. When we replace judgement with genuine, open-ended inquiry "What helps you feel safe?" or "How do you show empathy?" we shift the dynamic from conflict to connection.

Questions invite understanding without assumption. They honour differences without diminishing it. And importantly, they remind us that every mind, no matter how it processes the world, holds meaning worth listening to. In asking with kindness, whether we are the ones being asked or the ones doing the asking, we co-create spaces where mutual dignity can grow.

This is a list of proposed curiosity-led, kind, and respectful reactions and questions to ask when someone shares they are autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, or have Tourette syndrome. These are designed to honour their experience without making assumptions, and to invite dialogue rather than extract personal detail.

At First Try These Affirming Responses

- "I really appreciate you telling me that."
- "Thanks for helping me understand more."
- "You don't have to explain anything you don't want to."
- "I'm here to learn, not to judge."
- "You're welcome to be exactly as you are with me."

Questions Rooted in Curiosity, Kindness, and Respect

General for Any Neurotype Disclosure

- “Thanks for trusting me with that. Is there anything you’d like me to understand better about how you experience the world?”
- “How can I support you better—in conversation, work, or just day-to-day?”
- “Are there things people often misunderstand about your neurotype that you wish they didn’t?”
- “Do you have preferences around communication or pace that help you feel more comfortable?”
- “What brings you joy or focus when you’re in your element?”
- “Are there things that help you feel more at ease in group settings or busy environments?”
- “Is there anything you’d like me to avoid saying or doing that people often get wrong?”
- “Would you like to talk more about it, or should we just keep hanging out like always?”

Following that, if conversations progress, you can ask more specific questions.

If Someone Shares They're Autistic

- “Do you have things that help if you're overwhelmed, like movement, music, or quiet time?”
- “What does stimming look like for you? Are there ways I can make space for it?”
- “Are there specific routines or sensory things that matter a lot to you?”
- “Do you ever mask around others? Would you prefer not to here?”
- “Is eye contact something that works for you, or should we not worry about it?”

If Someone Shares They Have ADHD

- “What helps you focus best—quiet, movement, background noise?”
- “Do you like structure or more flexibility when you're working or planning?”
- “Are there ways I can help remind you or follow up without being annoying?”
- “Does your mind work best with talking things through or writing them down?”
- “What's your favourite hyperfocus rabbit hole right now?”

If Someone Shares They're Dyslexic

- “Is reading from a screen or printed text easier for you?”
- “Do you prefer audio, video, or other formats when learning something?”
- “Would you rather we use bullet points, voice notes, or something else?”
- “Are there specific fonts, layouts, or tools that make things easier to access?”
- “Do you find people tend to make assumptions that frustrate you?”

If Someone Shares They Have Tourette Syndrome

- “Do you want me to ignore your tics or would you prefer I acknowledge them?”
- “Are there times of day or environments that make tics harder or easier?”
- “Can I ask what your tics feel like, or would you rather not go into that?”
- “Are there things people do that make it worse or more stressful?”
- “Would you like me to support you if someone responds poorly?”

Be mindful of cultural differences

While the questions above are rooted in curiosity, kindness, and respect, they are still shaped by certain cultural norms, particularly around directness, openness, and individual comfort.

To make them more culturally sensitive and globally inclusive, here are key considerations and adaptations to consider:

1. Adapt for Indirect Communication Cultures

In many cultures, direct questions about personal identity or support needs may feel intrusive or disrespectful, especially in early relationships.

Adaptation:

- Use storytelling or shared reflection instead of direct questions.

“Some people I know with ADHD say background noise helps them focus. I’m still learning, what’s your experience like?”

- Offer instead of ask.

“If you ever want to share anything about how I can support you, I’m always open to listening.”

2. Consider Community vs. Individual Framing

In collectivist cultures, identity is often relational, not just individual. A person’s disclosure might reflect family, community, or spiritual context.

Adaptation:

- Avoid framing the neurotype as an isolated individual trait.

“How does your family or community talk about this?”

“Are there ways this has shaped your journey with others around you?”

3. Respect Cultural Interpretations of Neurodiversity

Some cultures may not have diagnostic language like “autism” or “ADHD”—or may interpret these traits differently (e.g. through spiritual, moral, or ancestral lenses).

Adaptation:

- Ask how they view their neurotype, not just what they call it.

“Is this something that’s been part of your story for a long time?”

“How do you think about it, what meaning does it have for you?”

4. Language & Translation Sensitivity

Words like “neurodivergent” or “dyslexic” might not translate clearly or carry different meanings across languages. Literal translation can lead to stigma if not handled carefully.

Adaptation:

- Let the individual guide the language.

“What words do you prefer to describe your way of thinking or experiencing the world?”

5. Honour Silence and Boundaries

In many cultures, not talking about disability or difference is a protective mechanism, not a lack of openness.

Adaptation:

- Silence may be a sign of trust-building, not avoidance.

Offer care without pushing disclosure:

“Whether or not you want to talk about anything, just know you’re welcome here exactly as you are.”

What Can Be Universally Kept?

The **intent** behind the questions—**respect, dignity, curiosity, and kindness**—is universal.

But the **form and tone** of the questions must shift with cultural norms around:

- Authority
- Privacy
- Disclosure
- Community
- Disability and difference

The Power of Asking

In a world that often rushes to label, assume, or explain, choosing to ask with curiosity and empathy is a radical act of connection. Whether we're neuromajorities or of a minority neurotype, we all benefit when we slow down and make space for each other's ways of thinking, feeling, and being. This guide offers a starting point, not to interrogate or diagnose, but to build trust, confidence, and shared understanding.

When we are curious and respectfully ask instead of judge, we invite healing. And when we listen with respect instead of fear, we open the door to belonging.

No one needs to be an expert to show kindness.

We just need the willingness to wonder, and the humility to learn from each other, across every neurotype, culture, and way of being.