

Acquired vs Developmental Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence can be present from birth or arrive later in life. Both are real, and both deserve support.

TL;DR · QUICK SUMMARY

- Developmental neurodivergence (like autism, ADHD, dyslexia) is present from birth or early childhood.
- Acquired neurodivergence develops later in life, often after an injury, illness or major health event.
- Both are equally real and equally deserving of understanding and support.
- Someone can become neurodivergent as an adult, even with no earlier history of it.

A Note Before You Read On

This resource offers general guidance and reflects common experience, not professional, legal, medical or financial advice. It is not a substitute for employment law, HR policy, occupational health guidance, or individual professional assessment. Every person's experience of neurodivergence is different, so please adapt anything here to your own situation. The Uniquely Wired Network does not accept liability for decisions, actions or outcomes arising from the use of this material. If you need advice specific to your circumstances, please consult a qualified professional (e.g. HR, legal, medical, or financial advisor).

Why This Matters

It's easy to assume neurodivergence always means “born this way.” That assumption can leave people who acquire ND later in life feeling unseen, or unsure whether they're “allowed” to use ND language.

For employers, this matters because someone's needs can change partway through their career, not just at recruitment stage.

What This Might Look Like

- Someone returning to work after a stroke, finding word-retrieval or memory harder than before.
- A colleague with long Covid experiencing new brain fog, fatigue and concentration changes.
- Someone recovering from a traumatic brain injury who now processes information more slowly.
- A person going through menopause noticing new memory or focus changes.
- Someone who developed ADHD-type traits following a serious illness or period of chemotherapy ("chemo brain").

The Two Categories, Explained

Developmental Neurodivergence

- Present from birth or emerges in early childhood as the brain develops.
- Includes autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and similar conditions.
- Usually lifelong, though how it's experienced can change over time.

Acquired Neurodivergence

- Develops later in life, usually following an injury, illness, or major neurological or hormonal change.
- Common causes include brain injury, stroke, long Covid, chemotherapy, and some menopause-related changes.
- Can affect memory, processing speed, attention, language, or emotional regulation.

Why The Distinction Matters, But Isn't Everything

- Both types can affect similar things: focus, memory, sensory tolerance, energy and communication.
- Support needs may look very similar regardless of the cause.
- Someone doesn't need a lifelong history of ND for their current needs to be genuine and worth accommodating.

Helpful Phrases You Can Borrow

You don't have to use these exact words. Take what fits and leave the rest.

"Since my illness, I process things differently than I used to. I'd appreciate a bit of flexibility while I adjust."

"This is a newer part of how my brain works, not something I've always had, but it's just as real."

Quick Tips

- "Acquired" doesn't mean less valid than "developmental."
- Brain injury, stroke, long Covid and menopause can all bring ND-type changes.
- Needs can appear or change at any point in someone's working life.
- Avoid assuming ND always means "has always been this way."
- Ask what support helps now, rather than focusing on the cause.
- Occupational health can help identify practical adjustments for either type.

Want to Know More?

- Speak with occupational health or HR about a workplace needs assessment.
- Charities such as Headway (brain injury) and Long Covid Support offer specialist guidance.
- See our companion guide: "What Is Neurodivergence?" for the wider context.

Before You Go

Whether your neurodivergence has been with you since childhood or arrived later in life, it's a genuine part of how you work best.

You're not "less neurodivergent" for having acquired it, and you're allowed to ask for what helps.