

# FLEXIBILITY

**Flexibility** and **adaptability** are two key concepts often discussed in the context of neurodiversity, and they refer to an individual's ability to manage and adjust to changes in their environment, routines, or way of thinking.

For neurodiverse individuals (e.g., those with autism and/or ADHD), these traits may require specific strategies or approaches due to the way their brains process information, regulate emotions, or respond to stimuli.

Let me break it down a bit more:

## **Flexibility:**

In the context of neurodiversity, **flexibility** refers to a person's ability to adjust their thinking (shifting), behaviour, or responses in response to new or changing information, demands, or situations. It can be divided into a few different types:

- **Cognitive Flexibility:** The ability to shift your thinking or problem-solving approach when faced with new information or changing circumstances. For example, if a person is faced with an unexpected problem or change in a task, cognitive flexibility helps them adapt and consider alternative solutions.
- **Behavioural Flexibility:** The ability to adjust one's behaviour in response to changes in the environment. This includes things like switching from one activity to another, adapting to new social norms, or managing disruptions in routines.
- **Emotional Flexibility:** The ability to regulate emotional responses in varying situations, especially those that may provoke stress, frustration, or anxiety. Emotional flexibility means being able to handle unexpected challenges or changes in a way that doesn't overwhelm or lead to emotional dysregulation.

## **Examples of Flexibility Challenges in Neurodiversity:**

- **Autism:** Many autistic individuals experience a heightened need for routine and predictability. A sudden change in routine (like a new activity or change in environment) can cause stress or anxiety, which can make adaptation more difficult, particularly during unexpected change.
- **ADHD:** Individuals with ADHD might struggle with cognitive flexibility, such as shifting attention between tasks or adjusting to unexpected disruptions. They may also find it difficult to stay focused or to stop one activity and begin another.

## **Adaptability**

**Adaptability** refers to a person's ability to adjust to new circumstances, challenges, or environments in a way that allows them to function effectively.

It's a broader concept than flexibility, as it includes not only adjusting thinking or behaviour but also being able to thrive in environments that may initially feel unfamiliar or challenging.

- **Environmental Adaptability:** The ability to adjust to physical or social changes in the environment. For neurodiverse individuals, this might involve managing transitions between activities, understanding different social cues, or dealing with sensory changes (like noise, lights, or crowds).
- **Social Adaptability:** The ability to adapt one's social behaviour to fit different social contexts. For example, understanding social norms, making adjustments in communication styles, or managing social interactions in unfamiliar settings can be challenging for neurodiverse individuals, particularly those on the autism spectrum.
- **Emotional Adaptability:** This is similar to emotional flexibility but extends beyond reacting to changes to include actively finding ways to cope and thrive in a given emotional environment. For example, adapting to stress or changes in personal feelings (such as anxiety, frustration, or excitement) in healthy and productive ways.

#### **Examples of Adaptability Challenges in Neurodiversity:**

- **Autism:** Social adaptability might be a challenge, as some autistic individuals may not naturally pick up on social cues, which can make adapting to different social settings or expectations difficult.
- **ADHD:** Individuals with ADHD may find it challenging to adapt to shifting attention demands or maintain focus when external stimuli are constantly changing. The adaptability needed for rapid transitions between tasks or focus areas can be difficult.

#### **Why Flexibility and Adaptability Can Be Challenging for Neurodiverse Individuals:**

- **Neurological Differences:** Neurodiverse individuals often process information, emotions, and sensory input differently than neurotypical individuals. These differences can make sudden changes or the need to switch between tasks particularly overwhelming.
- **Routine and Predictability:** Many neurodivergent individuals, particularly those on the autism spectrum, find comfort and safety in routines. Unexpected changes can cause significant distress, making it harder for them to be flexible or adaptable.
- **Executive Functioning Issues:** People with ADHD, for instance, often experience difficulties with executive functioning skills (like planning, organizing, and switching between tasks). This can make it harder to adjust when something goes off-script or when tasks demand a shift in attention.

- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Many neurodiverse individuals have sensory sensitivities (e.g., to noise, light, or texture). These sensitivities can affect how adaptable they are in environments with lots of changes or unpredictability.

### Why Improving Flexibility and Adaptability is Important:

- **Cognitive Growth:** Being able to adapt to new challenges and change helps build problem-solving skills and resilience. It can lead to greater independence and the ability to handle complex situations.
- **Social Integration:** Developing greater flexibility can make it easier for neurodiverse individuals to navigate social situations, understand different perspectives, and adapt to varying social expectations.
- **Emotional Well-being:** Flexibility in managing emotions and responses to change can help reduce anxiety, stress, and frustration. It's also critical for improving self-regulation and mental health.

## STRATEGIES TO HELP

### Main Strategies to Improve Flexibility and Adaptability:

1. **Gradual Exposure to Change:** For those who struggle with sudden changes, slowly introducing them to small, manageable changes in routine can help build tolerance and ease them into greater flexibility.
  - Ten ways for Parents to help children cope with change - <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/2odjltz/top-ten-tips-for-parents.pdf>
2. **Supportive Environments:** Providing a structured, supportive environment with clear expectations and predictable routines can help neurodiverse individuals feel more confident in adapting to changes.
  - Visual prompts - using pictures to help children and young people anticipate what is going to happen. For example, pictures of new places, visual timetables or social stories. It will also be helpful to have a visual for when an activity has been cancelled (perhaps a cross over the activity). Visual supports work best when use consistently. <https://therapyworks.com/blog/autism/visual-schedules/>

- Physical prompts - for example, going to visit a new location - such as a doctor's surgery - before an event so children are physically familiar with the environment.
  - Warning – give your child warning of an upcoming change so you can talk about it, and your child can process the change. Show the change visually – if it's a new route, print out the route on Google Maps – instead/as well.
3. **Mindfulness and Coping Strategies:** Practices like mindfulness, deep breathing, or grounding techniques can help individuals manage stress and emotional reactions to unexpected changes. It is important to note that these strategies are not always tolerated well in autism due to interoceptive differences.
- Young Minds resource to support with transition from Primary to Secondary School - <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/151j4yqc/pupil-resource.pdf>
4. **Social Skills Training:** For those who struggle with social adaptability, social skills training or coaching can help individuals practice adjusting their behaviour and communication in different social contexts.
- Using social stories can help, especially when personalised and used consistently, with examples available here - <https://autismbehaviorservices.com/social-stories/>
  - More social story examples are available here too - <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/>
5. **Assistive Technology:** Tools such as visual schedules, reminders, and timers can help individuals with ADHD, autism, or other neurodiverse traits better handle transitions and adapt to new demands.

## RESOURCES

Here's a list of useful resources (websites, videos, leaflets etc) to practical tips and tools to help with improving flexibility for neurodiverse individuals, whether that's cognitive flexibility, emotional flexibility, or adaptability in day-to-day tasks:

1. My child has a strong Preference for Order, Predictability or Routine
  - a. [Preference for order, predictability or routine](#)
2. Advice and strategies for Repetitive Behaviours
  - a. [Repetitive behaviours and stimming | Ambitious about Autism](#)

3. Tips and routines for CYP when returning to school with a new routine
  - a. [Top tips to help when your child changes schools](#) 9 min read with tips and strategies
4. Supporting children with ADHD with routines
  - a. [Children with ADHD & Routines | Building Healthy Structures](#) including examples, visual tools and checklists
5. Preparing children with ADHD for change
  - a. [6 Ways to Prepare ADHD Children for Change](#)
6. Support with behaviour
  - a. <https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>
7. Understanding why change can be challenging
  - a. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/grownups/helping-children-deal-with-change>

### **General Websites with advice and guidance**

These sites should offer practical advice, resources, and support for neurodiverse individuals looking to improve flexibility in different aspects of life. If you need more specific techniques or strategies on cognitive or emotional flexibility, some of these sites also provide workshops, courses, or consultancy services.

#### **1. National Autistic Society (NAS) - Website: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)**

- **About:** The National Autistic Society provides a wide range of resources on understanding and managing flexibility challenges for autistic individuals. This includes strategies for improving cognitive flexibility, handling changes in routines, and managing transitions.

#### **2. Ambitious about Autism - Website: [www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk](http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)**

- **About:** This charity focuses on supporting young people with autism. Their advice and strategies include practical tips for increasing flexibility in social situations, managing transitions, and navigating changes in routine.

#### **3. Contact (for families of disabled children) - Website: [www.contact.org.uk](http://www.contact.org.uk)**

- **About:** Contact provides support to families of children with various disabilities, including those with neurodiverse conditions. They offer advice on how to help children develop flexibility in daily life, school, and social settings.

**4. YoungMinds - Website:** [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

- **About:** YoungMinds supports children and young people with mental health and neurodiverse conditions. Their website includes tips on managing change, developing resilience, and improving flexibility in thinking and behaviour.

**5. The ADHD Centre - Website:** [www.adhdcentre.co.uk](http://www.adhdcentre.co.uk)

- **About:** Specialising in ADHD treatment and support, this website offers guidance on improving cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and overall adaptability for individuals with ADHD.

**6. Families Under Pressure - Website:** <https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>

- **About:** Dealing with child behaviour problems? Try these simple tips and tricks, formulated by researchers and NHS mental health experts, which are backed by science and proven to work with families.

**7. Helping Children with Change - Website:**

- **About:** Provides an understanding of how change can be challenging for children and young people and some top tips, strategies and resources to help parents support their child.