



NEURODIVERSITY & SENSORY-FRIENDLY EVENT GUIDE



PRODUCED BY

THE FRIST CENTER
FOR **Autism** AND
INNOVATION
*Engineering technologies and transforming
the workplace – inspired by neurodiversity*

[MY.VANDERBILT.EDU/AUTISMANDINNOATION/](https://my.vanderbilt.edu/autismandinnoation/)

BUT WHY?

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity refers to the variety of ways that human minds are wired and specifically to the idea that there are certain neurological differences which confer both challenges and gifts. This encompasses autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, and more. There are a number of students, professors, employees, and other members of the Vanderbilt community who belong to each of these identities!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON NEURODIVERSITY VOCABULARY, CHECK OUT my.vanderbilt.edu/autismandinnovation/language-person-first-identity-first/

STATS:

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT ABOUT 2% OF THE POPULATION IS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM AND ABOUT 10-15% OF THE POPULATION IS NEURODIVERGENT.

IMPORTANCE OF ACCESSIBILITY

Organizations can begin to make events more accessible so that everyone has the opportunity to participate in campus life to the fullest extent. By considering neurodiversity inclusivity in event-planning, groups can expand neurodiverse involvement in their organizations which can lead to higher diversity of thought and bring other strengths to the organization. Through actively working to be more inclusive and taking the time to understand why inclusivity is important, we as a campus can increase acceptance and awareness for neurodiversity at Vanderbilt. Some of the first steps include advertising acceptance within the organization and taking tangible steps towards accomodation during events.

BARRIERS



1. DEALING WITH STIGMA

Stigma and misconceptions about neurodiversity and autism might prevent an individual from being open about their condition and the accommodations they need.

2. SENSORY INPUT

Autistic individuals have varying levels of comfort with different kinds of sensory input, and often can experience sensory overload from sensory input that might seem normal to neurotypical individuals. This could include sensory input from noise, lights, temperatures, smells, or textures.

3. ROUTINE & PREDICTABILITY

Autistic individuals have a strong affinity for routine, structure, and sameness, which can be difficult in an event setting. There are often many different things occurring when someone visits a new place, with high levels of unpredictability surrounding what will happen and when it will happen.

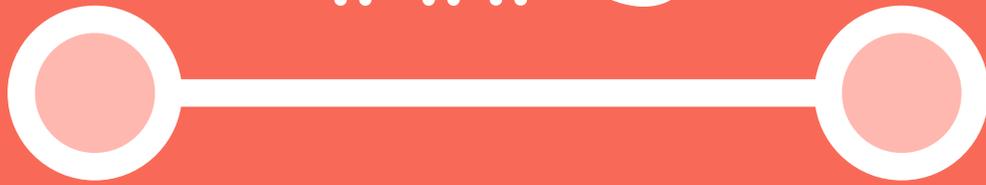
4. PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

Autistic individuals, along with many other neurodivergent individuals, tend to think more visually. Combined with a tendency for being overwhelmed by sensory input, it can be difficult to take in information from a speaker without another choice of format. Additionally, an autistic individual may need more time to process or may have a hard time generalizing information across contexts.

5. SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

A key marker of autism is persistent difficulty with social communication and social interaction, which may prevent autistic individuals from attending events if they predict that they will not fit in socially.

TIPS



NOTE: ACCOMMODATIONS LIKE THIS HAVE NO DOWNSIDE FOR ANYONE. NO-ONE ATTENDING YOUR EVENT WILL SUFFER BY BEING OFFERED A CHOICE OF FORMATS TO EXPERIENCE.

DEALING WITH STIGMA

- Communicate that your organization supports neurodiversity. Even outside of the event setting, demonstrate knowledge and celebration of neurodiversity.
- Share some of the accommodations that you will be making for your event in your advertising.
- Provide basic training if you have staff on duty for how to best support neurodiversity.
- Share that it is acceptable to get up and walk around if an attendee needs to, or to take other measures that may be necessary for their comfort.

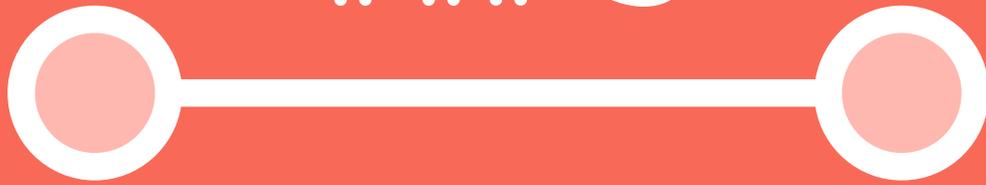
SENSORY INPUT

- Prepare to give information that might be relevant to people with sensory sensitivities, such as warning about bright fluorescent lights or noisy air conditioning.
- Share where attendees can find spaces without much sensory stimuli or specific quiet and sensory-friendly rooms. Provide a map to these spaces!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON SENSORY SPACES AT VANDERBILT, VISIT THIS ARTICLE BY FRIST CENTER COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR CLAIRE BARNETT:

vanderbilthustler.com/30146/featured/guest-editorial-you-need-sensory-spaces-and-you-may-not-even-know-it/

TIPS



SENSORY INPUT

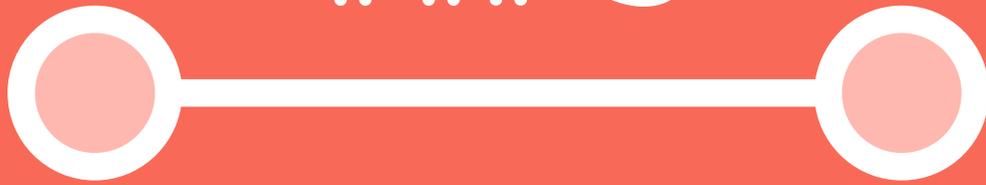
- **If planning on having food at an event, think about what kinds of scents there will be and try to reduce smelly foods. Provide options for those you would consider "picky eaters."**
- **Outside of larger event settings, consider avoiding lunch meetings. The lack of control of amount of stimuli, noise, smells, and other people, can be overwhelming and distracting. Feel free to give the option for a lunch meeting or another setting and time.**

One autistic member of the Vanderbilt community shared that she finds it particularly difficult to concentrate on the work at hand during lunch meetings
- **Eliminate unnecessary loud noises and bright lights. Lower the volume of any background music and consider designating a time without any music.**

The Career Center at Vanderbilt provided a good example of this by designating the last 30 minutes of their Spring Career Fairs to have reduced sensory stimuli including dimming the lights, asking that attendees and employers speak softly and avoiding raised voices.
- **Consider whether or not participants will be going between indoor and outdoor locations and be transparent about potential temperature changes.**
- **If breakout groups are a part of your event, keep them separated enough that the background noise of another group is not disruptive.**

The Vanderbilt Panhellenic Community began offering the option to request for formal recruitment conversations between members and potential new members to be held in more quiet locations away from other groups.
- **Consider making sensory kits, fidget toys, ear plugs, or sunglasses available to attendees.**

TIPS



ROUTINE & PREDICTABILITY

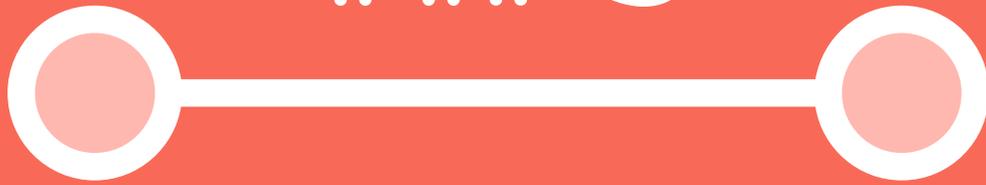
- Provide detailed information about the event venue, including maps and directions for location, which entrance to use, and how to navigate the venue. Include pictures if possible.
- Provide pictures/descriptions/diagrams of where different aspects of the event will take place, such as where speakers will be located, what seating arrangements will be, and where bathrooms are located.
- Provide a detailed schedule of the event. This includes the time the earliest time attendees can arrive, time limits for registration or ticketing, planned start and finish times for each aspect of the event, any scheduled breaks or eating times, and schedules for individual components of the event.
- Provide a description of the rules and expected behaviors for each part of the event, including expectations for arrival, what would be considered unacceptable behavior, rules from the venue itself, who to ask for help, and guidelines about asking questions for presenters.
- Ensure that this information is available well before the event takes place.

PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- If there's a lecture, the slides should be available as a handout for people to read at the event (not sent out as an afterthought later).

Vanderbilt's InclusAbility does a great job of ensuring everyone has copies of presentation text available if they need it, such as at their Autism 101 and Deaf Culture and Awareness 101 events.

TIPS



PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

- If there's a written timetable, a visual representation should be offered, too.
- If there's a map of the venue, arrows or directions in words should also be provided.
- Include maps, arrows, and signage throughout the venue.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

- Provide an outline for etiquette for social interaction and expectations at the event.
- If possible, in the marketing materials include the contact information for an individual who can be contacted for potential attendees to find someone to go to the event with.

A GOOD RULE OF THUMB IS THE MORE CHOICE OFFERED AND THE GREATER THE DETAIL PROVIDED THE BETTER!

EVERY NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUAL IS DIFFERENT AND SO SOME ACCOMODATIONS MAY BE USEFUL TO SOME, WHILE LESS SO FOR OTHERS. WHEN POSSIBLE, IT HELPS TO ASK!

SUCCESS STORY

"After attending a neurodiversity training, girls in my sorority were more able to understand that not everyone's strength is small talk and the ways our annual recruitment process can cause sensory overload. I think it allowed for us to create a more aware and accepting environment for neurodiversity during the recruitment process."

-a member of the Vanderbilt Panhellenic community

EVENT STEPS



PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS FOR A STUDENT ORGANIZATION EVENT AS OUTLINED BY VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Room & Event Registration; Advertising & Copies (Print, Digital, and Banners); Hiring Performer, DJs, Bands, and Other Entertainment; Electrical & Stage Needs; Event Ticketing Policies & Procedures; Special Events Registration; Catering & Other Food

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CHECK OUT:

The [Student Engagement](#) section of the Vanderbilt University Student Handbook and vanderbilt.edu/studentorgs/manage-your-org/event-planning

QUESTIONS TO ASK AT EACH STAGE

PLANNING

ARE YOU CONSIDERING THE TIPS AT EACH STEP OF YOUR PROCESS?
ARE YOU USING STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE EACH BARRIER?

MARKETING

ARE YOU TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE ACCOMMODATIONS YOU ARE MAKING?
IS THERE INFORMATION ABOUT ACCESSING EVENT PLANS IN MARKETING MATERIALS?
ARE YOU EXPLICITLY WELCOMING TO NEURODIVERSITY IN YOUR MARKETING?
ARE YOU REACHING THE INTENDED AUDIENCE AND ARE YOUR MATERIALS LEGIBLE?

HOSTING

ARE YOU ENSURING THAT YOUR ACCOMMODATIONS ARE FOLLOWED THROUGH ON?
ARE YOU SHOWING ENTHUSIASTIC ACCEPTANCE OF NEURODIVERGENT ATTENDEES?
ARE YOU TAKING YOUR CONSIDERATION FOR NEURODIVERSITY BEYOND THIS EVENT?

ADDITIONAL INFO

CONTACT

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, CHECK OUT THE FRIST CENTER WEBSITE [HERE](#) OR EMAIL OUR COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR AT CLAIRE.BARNETT@VANDERBILT.EDU.

PLEASE CONTACT US WITH YOUR FEEDBACK AND YOUR EXPERIENCES USING THIS GUIDE!

MORE ABOUT INCLUSION:

For more information about inclusion at Vanderbilt University, visit vanderbilt.edu/inclusion/

This is not a comprehensive guide to inclusivity. This guide focuses on neurodiversity inclusion. There are many other accessibility and inclusion guides out there that can provide useful guidance. We've provided links to a few of them here.:

[Cornell Accessible Meeting and Event Checklist](#)

[UCA Planning An Accessible Event Checklist](#)

[Tufts Accessible Event Checklist 2018](#)

[Clemson Events Checklist](#)

IF ADDITIONAL FUNDS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT NEURODIVERSITY ACCOMODATIONS FOR AN EVENT AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY, [INCLUSABILITY](#) MAY BE AVAILABLE TO CO SPONSOR AN EVENT.