

What do Neurodivergent (mostly Autistic) people think about words like “neurodiversity”?

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Menstruation to menopause research: Autistic community group **and** Dr Aimee Grant: Autism from menstruation to menopause

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Why is language important?

- Powerful
- Disability rights movement
- Neurodiversity model
- Medical model
 - Implies disorder
 - Need of treatment

Neurodiversity language

- Collectively developed by Autistic people in 1990s
- Akin to biodiversity
- Neurodiversity / neurodiverse = all humans
 - Neurodivergent (ND)
 - Neurotypical (NT)
 - Confusion “neurodiverse”
- ND = different ways of communicating, thinking and moving
- No agreed list of diagnoses/disabilities





What we did

- We = collective of ND people
- Online survey
- Questions about language preferences:
 - Individual diagnoses (Autism, ADHD etc)
 - Neurodiversity
- 901 ND people from the UK
 - 691 were Autistic
 - 476 clinically diagnosed
 - 93% identified as disabled
 - 69% women
 - 93% white

Key stats

- Almost everyone had heard of 'neurodiversity' (98.8%)
 - Autistic people: 99.7%
- Nearly three quarters used words like 'neurodiversity' and 'neurodivergent' to describe themselves (74.8%)
 - Autistic people: 78%





Thoughts about neurodiversity language

- 650 people answered questions about ND language
 - 398 spoke about “neurodiversity”/ “neurodivergence”
- Three themes
 - ‘An umbrella term’,
 - ‘Understanding of neurodivergence (vs. neurodiverse)’
 - ‘Stigma and identity’

An umbrella term (1)

- ND covers multiple types of brain
- Positive
 - Shorthand
 - Multiply ND
 - Contains all of self
 - “laundry list”
 - “Drawn the lines in the wrong places” (eg: Autism/ADHD)
 - Helps to avoid misconceptions
 - Partial sharing without “outing”
 - More comfortable for some self-ID
 - Shared identity; solidarity





An umbrella term (2)

- Negative
 - “so broad it’s useless”; meaningless
 - Hard to identify with
 - General
 - Mostly associated with Autism and ADHD
 - Unclear what is included (mental health)
 - Doesn’t say what support is needed
 - Hiding identity
 - Better to be specific

Neurodiverse v neurodivergent

- Poorly understood
- “Neurodiverse” used instead of “Neurodivergent”
 - Buzzwords
 - Frustrating
 - Some ND people choose to say “neurodiverse”
- Some worried about making mistakes
 - Conflict in online communities
- If used, not understood by others
 - Awkward conversations





Stigma & identity

- Reduced stigma
 - Neutral
 - Strengths-based v disorder
 - Neurodiversity paradigm
 - Less likely to be judged
- Sense of community/belonging
- Reinforce stigma
 - Avoiding saying 'Autism'
 - Cushioning/distancing
 - Delegitimised identity as eg: Autistic
 - 'one big category of "not normal"'

Views on Autism language

- Prefer identity first language (Autistic)
- More likely to find person first (with Autism) offensive
- Most preferred term: Autistic
- Least preferred: Aspergic, person with Asperger syndrome





Limitations

- Unfunded study
- Few participants with learning disabilities
- Most participants white (93%) and women (69%)
- Less than half answered the open questions – may have had stronger feelings on ND terminology

What language should be used?

- ND people should:
 - Use whichever language feels comfortable
 - Try not to “police” incorrect language
- Services for ND people should:
 - Generally use ND language correctly
 - Mirror individual ND people’s language



Read our research for free

1. Neurodiversity language

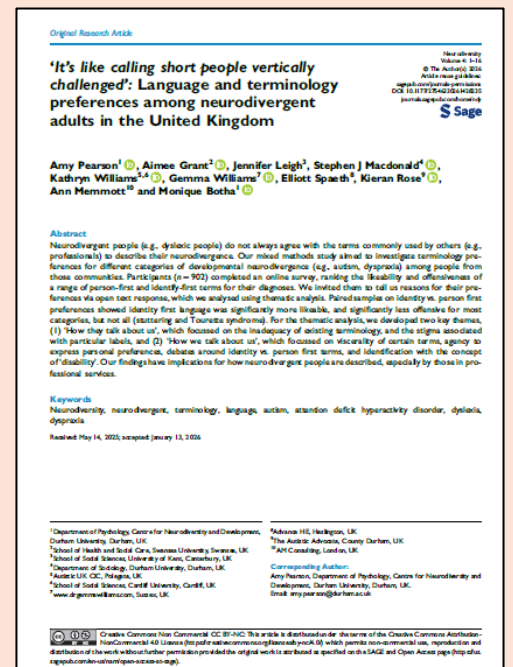
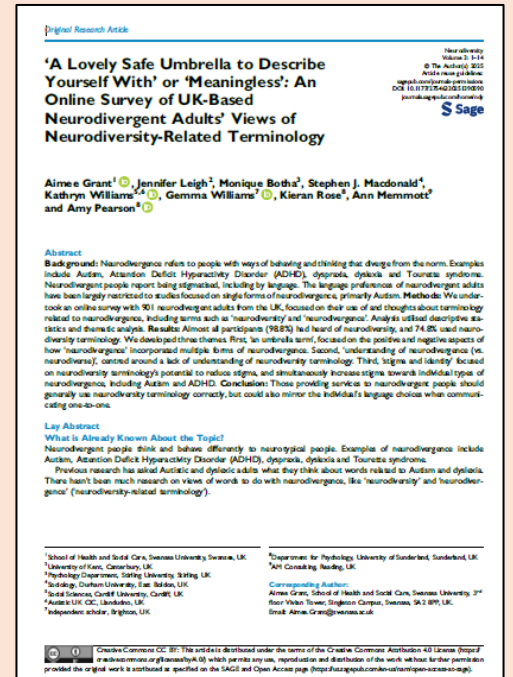
Summary: Grant, Pearson and Leigh (2025). What autistic people – and those with ADHD and dyslexia – really think about the word ‘neurodiversity.’ *The Conversation*

Journal article: Grant, A. et al. (2025). ‘A lovely safe umbrella to describe yourself with’ or ‘meaningless’: An online survey of UK-based neurodivergent adults’ views of neurodiversity-related terminology. *Neurodiversity*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251390590>

2. Autism (and ADHD, dyslexia etc) language

Summary: Pearson, Grant, and Botha. (2026). What neurodivergent people really think about the words used to describe them. *The Conversation*.

Journal article: Pearson, A. et al. (2026). ‘It's like calling short people vertically challenged’: Language and terminology preferences among neurodivergent adults in the United Kingdom. *Neurodiversity*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330261428235>



Stay in touch

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