

## Cognitive Dissonance and Neurodiversity

Cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort or tension experienced when two beliefs, values, or behaviours conflict. Put simply, a neurodivergent brain, especially an autistic one like mine, dislikes inconsistency.

Cognitive dissonance can manifest differently for neurodivergent individuals, including those on the autism spectrum. Due to differences in cognitive processing, communication, and social experiences, the way autistic individuals experience or cope with conflicting beliefs or behaviours may vary. We must remember that just because someone is neurodivergent doesn't mean all neurodivergent brains work the same way. They don't, just like neurotypical brains; we are all different, have different experiences, upbringings, cultures, etc, so we all think differently, regardless of our neurodiversity.



### Things to Consider:

#### **Black-and-White Thinking (Cognitive Rigidity)**

Many autistic individuals tend to favour concrete or rule-based thinking. An almost binary “if-then” thinking strategy. This can make inconsistencies or contradictions more distressing and harder to resolve than for neurotypical individuals, who might rationalise or adapt their beliefs more flexibly.

**Example:** If a trusted friend provides contradictory information, it may cause anxiety or frustration, as the conflict between their friend's usual reliable information and the contradiction creates inconsistency.

#### **Sensitivity to Internal Conflict**

Autistic individuals may have a heightened awareness of inconsistencies between their values and actions, leading to stronger reactions when dissonance occurs.

**Example:** Believing in honesty but feeling pressured to tell a social white lie may cause significant internal stress.

#### **Strong Commitment to Personal Values**

Many autistic individuals have a strong adherence to personal ethics and values. When behaviour deviates from these values (even unintentionally), they may experience deep dissonance.

**Example:** A person who values environmental sustainability might experience strong guilt when forced to use disposable plastics due to a lack of alternatives.



#### **Challenges in Understanding Social Norms**

Social interactions can often create cognitive dissonance, particularly when implicit norms or expectations contradict explicit rules or logic. Autistic individuals may struggle to reconcile social expectations that seem inconsistent or irrational.

**Example:** Understanding that being bluntly honest is often perceived as rude, even though being totally honest and open is considered the right thing to do.



## Coping Strategies

### **Explicit Logical Resolution:**

Many autistic individuals may benefit from logical problem-solving approaches to resolve cognitive dissonance. Breaking down the situation and analysing potential solutions can help.

### **External Validation:**

Seeking advice from trusted people to gain perspective on conflicting beliefs or behaviours may help resolve the tension.

### **Self-Compassion Practices:**

Encouraging self-acceptance and recognising that imperfections and contradictions are part of being human can help reduce distress.

### **Routine and Structure:**

Maintaining predictable routines can minimise situations where dissonance is likely to occur, fostering a sense of security.



## Neurodivergent-Inclusive Workplaces

Understanding how cognitive dissonance may be amplified for autistic employees can inform better communication and management strategies in the workplace. Offering clear expectations, valuing transparency, and providing reasoning behind decisions can create a more supportive environment.

Creating a work environment that acknowledges and mitigates cognitive dissonance for neurodivergent colleagues, including those on the autism spectrum, fosters psychological safety and productivity.



Below are practical suggestions to help workplaces be more inclusive:

### **1. Clarity and Transparency**

**Why:** Clear communication reduces ambiguities that may trigger cognitive dissonance.

**How:**

- a. Provide explicit guidelines and expectations for tasks and behaviour.
- b. Explain the rationale behind changes or decisions.
- c. Offer written communication for complex information to help employees process details at their own pace.

### **2. Consistent and Fair Policies**

**Why:** Inconsistent rules or exceptions can be challenging for those who thrive on structure and fairness.

**How:**

- a. Apply rules consistently across all team members.
- b. If exceptions are necessary, communicate the reasoning transparently and ideally in advance of when they are expected to occur.
- c. Provide advanced notice of any policy changes when possible.





### 3. Support in Ethical or Value-Driven Dilemmas

**Why:** Neurodivergent colleagues may experience heightened distress when faced with value-based conflicts.

**How:**

- a. Encourage open discussions around ethical concerns without judgment.
- b. Provide avenues for employees to suggest value-aligned improvements (e.g., more sustainable practices or inclusive policies).
- c. Empower them to act in ways that maintain their personal integrity.

### 4. Reduce Social Pressures for Conformity

**Why:** Social expectations that conflict with logical reasoning can create cognitive dissonance.

**How:**

- a. Normalise a variety of communication styles, including directness or limited social engagement.
- b. Avoid forcing participation in social events that may conflict with people's individual preferences.

### 5. Tailored Feedback and Problem-Solving Support

**Why:** Dissonance can arise when feedback contradicts self-perceptions or when problems are difficult to resolve.

**How:**

- a. Use constructive, specific, and fact-based feedback to reduce ambiguity.
- b. Collaborate (not impose) on solutions, focusing on logic and fairness.



### 6. Self-Compassion and Cognitive Flexibility Workshops

**Why:** Developing self-compassion and flexibility can help reduce the distress caused by dissonance.

**How:**

- a. Offer mindfulness or resilience-building workshops.
- b. Normalise making mistakes and model self-compassion within leadership practices.

### 7. Accessible Coaching and Mental Health Resources

**Why:** Cognitive dissonance may be more manageable with professional support.

**How:**

- a. Provide access to neurodivergent-aware mental health professionals or coaches.
- b. Offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that recognise the unique challenges that neurodivergent employees can face and help them find allies (as in "Allyship").

### 8. Foster a Culture of Respect and Autonomy

**Why:** Respecting individual processing styles and decision-making autonomy reduces tension.

**How:**

- a. Allow for flexible work structures where possible.
- b. Encourage employees to share what communication and decision-making styles work best for them.