You work with someone who is bright, reliable and often very good at their job. They might also be a bit quiet, hard to read in social situations, or seem exhausted more often than you’d expect. Maybe they’ve told you they’re autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent. Maybe they haven’t, but you can see that the world asks a lot of them.

You’d like to be a good colleague. You don’t want to say the wrong thing, make a fuss, or turn them into a project. You just want to make everyday life at work a bit less harsh.

This guide is for you. It offers some small, practical ways to support a quietly neurodivergent colleague without trying to fix them or become their therapist.

Summary

- A quietly neurodivergent colleague might look calm and competent on the surface while spending a lot of energy coping with the environment and social expectations.
- You don’t need to be an expert. Clear communication, reasonable notice where you can, and respecting their boundaries are the basics.
- Everyday kindness looks like clear emails, not springing surprises, respecting headphone time, and not mocking their coping tools.
- Avoid minimising comments, diagnosing them behind their back, or gossiping about their diagnosis or adjustments.
- You are not there to fix them. Being a good colleague is mostly about reducing friction and making it safer for them to show up as themselves.

What a “quietly neurodivergent” colleague might look like

Every neurodivergent person is different, and not everyone wants to use that language for themselves. But you might recognise some of these patterns.

You may have a colleague who is careful and thorough, and whose work with detail is usually strong. In meetings they might go very quiet, speaking rarely but often saying something thoughtful when they do. They can seem more tired than others, especially after busy or noisy days. They may avoid phone calls and drop-ins, preferring email or chat where they have time to think before responding. You might notice they wear headphones or earplugs a lot, or keep a small fidget object in their hands. Sometimes they miss social hints or unspoken rules that others take for granted.

On some days, they may look like the most capable person in the room. On other days,

they might seem overwhelmed by things that don’t appear to bother anyone else. None of these traits prove anything on their own. But if you have a colleague who has mentioned being autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent, or who quietly shows several of these patterns, it can help to think about what everyday support might look like.

What might be going on under the surface

From the outside, it can be tempting to think things like, “If they can do that complex report, why do they struggle so much with a simple change of plan?” or “They seem fine in meetings, so why are they always exhausted?” You might wonder why they sometimes go very quiet until a deadline is close and then suddenly seem to be on the edge.

From the inside, there is often a lot going on that you don’t see. Many neurodivergent people mask at work, consciously or unconsciously copying other people’s behaviour to fit in. Sensory input such as lights, sounds and movement can be harder work for them to filter out. There may be constant effort going into keeping track of spoken instructions, changes and unspoken expectations. Anxiety about missing something important or being seen as lazy, difficult or odd can sit in the background all day.

By the time they show up at their desk, they may already be using a lot of energy just to be there. That doesn’t mean they can’t do their job well. It does mean that small acts of consideration from colleagues can make a bigger difference than you might think.

Everyday things that really help

You don’t have to redesign the whole workplace. Many of the most helpful things are small shifts in how you communicate and interact.

Be clear in communication

Neurodivergent colleagues often do best with straightforward, concrete information. Clear subject lines and emails that say what you need, by when, and in what format are far easier to work with than vague messages that say “quick question” and then turn into a major task. If plans change, try to say so explicitly rather than assuming they will infer it from a passing comment.

You don’t need to become cold or formal, just a bit more specific. “Could you send me a one-page summary of X by Thursday?” is kinder to a busy, overloaded brain than “Could you just pull something together when you have a minute?”

Give as much notice as you reasonably can

Surprises are not always bad, but they can be hard work for a brain that is already juggling a lot. Where you can, sharing meeting invites with a short purpose line, letting them know in advance if you are going to ask for their input, or sending a quick message before calling can all make things easier.

A simple “Is now okay for a quick call about X?” often feels very different from an unexpected ringing phone. You can’t control everything that happens, but even small bits of extra notice can reduce stress.

Respect headphone and quiet time

Many neurodivergent people use headphones, earplugs or quiet periods as genuine access tools, not as a way of blocking out the team. You can support this by thinking twice before interrupting someone who looks deeply focused and by using chat or email for non-urgent questions instead of tapping them on the shoulder.

If you are unsure what works for them, you can ask once in a straightforward way, for example: “When you’ve got your headphones on, is it okay to tap you for quick things, or would you prefer messages unless it’s urgent?” Then try to respect the answer.

Include them, but don’t pressure

You don’t have to walk on eggshells. Most neurodivergent people appreciate being invited to join social things; they just don’t always have the energy to say yes. A low-pressure invitation like “We’re going for coffee at 11 if you’d like to join us – no pressure” gives room for an honest answer.

If they say no or “not today”, it helps if that can be accepted without teasing or guilt. What often hurts is not the invitation itself, but the jokes that can follow a refusal. It can also help to notice and appreciate the ways they do join in, even if it is smaller or less frequent than with other colleagues.

How to avoid accidental harm

You don’t have to be perfect. Everyone says clumsy things sometimes. But some common patterns tend to hurt more than help.

Jokes and throwaway comments

Certain phrases are very common and almost always land badly, even when they are meant kindly. Lines such as “We’re all a bit on the spectrum”, “Everyone’s a bit ADHD these days”, “You’re just being antisocial” or “You’re too sensitive” usually end up minimising genuine difficulty. They suggest that the person is making a fuss and can make it less likely they will feel safe being honest with you.

You don’t need a perfect substitute phrase. Often, simple curiosity is better than a neat line. Saying “That sounds really hard, how does it affect you at work?” or “Is there anything small I could do that would make this easier?” keeps the door open instead of shutting it.

Gossip about diagnosis or adjustments

If a colleague has shared that they are autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent, or if they have been given adjustments at work, that is personal information. Speculating in the kitchen about their diagnosis or what is “really going on”, complaining about “special treatment”, or sharing details of their situation with others without their permission can be deeply undermining.

If you have genuine concerns about fairness or workload, it is better to speak privately with your manager than to talk about your colleague behind their back.

Turning them into a project

Wanting to help is kind, but it can slide into trying to fix the other person. If you notice that most of your conversations with them have turned into advice sessions or that you are frequently telling them how to be more “normal” or “resilient”, it may be worth stepping back.

A healthier approach is to trust that they know their own brain best and to focus on your side of the relationship: how you communicate, how you include them, and how you respect their boundaries.

Meetings, chats and everyday interaction

Work is made up of lots of small interactions. A few tweaks can make those easier for a quietly neurodivergent colleague.

In meetings, it can help to let people choose a seat that feels comfortable, including a place near the edge of the room. Giving a colleague a moment to think before expecting a

response, and avoiding putting them on the spot without warning, can make participation less stressful. “I’d really like to hear your view on this – I’ll come to you after we’ve heard from a couple of others” is easier to work with than suddenly hearing your name and feeling everyone’s eyes on you.

After meetings, a short follow-up message can be a real kindness: a few lines that recap what was agreed and who is doing what by when. That is often helpful for everyone, not only the neurodivergent people in the room.

For more informal chats, you don’t have to fill every silence. Some people think best with pauses. Simple, specific questions like “How’s your week going?” are usually easier than broad ones like “What’s new?” Respecting it if they don’t want to join every corridor conversation can also be a quiet way of showing care.

What to do if you’re not sure what helps

You are allowed to ask respectful questions, as long as you accept that the other person can say as much or as little as they want. You might say something like, “If there’s anything I do that makes work harder for you, please feel free to tell me – I won’t be offended,” or “I know our brains all work differently. If there’s anything small I could do to make meetings or messages easier for you, I’m open to hearing it.”

Then give them time. They may not have an answer immediately, or they may prefer to think about it and come back later. If they don’t want to talk about it, respect that. You can still apply the general principles in this article without needing their full story.

Looking after yourself as a colleague

Being thoughtful about your neurodivergent colleagues does not mean ignoring your own needs. You are not their therapist, their manager or the person responsible for fixing the whole system.

It is okay to set your own boundaries around time, energy and emotional labour. You can say, “I’m not the right person to help with that; maybe HR or your manager could support you better with this,” and still be a kind colleague. Sometimes the most helpful thing you can do is encourage them to seek formal support or adjustments, rather than trying to carry everything informally between you.

If you’re the neurodivergent person reading this

You might be reading this as the quietly neurodivergent colleague, trying to work out whether and how to share it. If parts of it feel familiar, you are not being demanding or dramatic for needing clearer communication, headphone time or fewer surprises. These are ways of working with the brain you actually have.

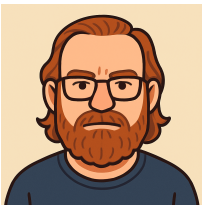
You might choose to send this article to a trusted colleague and say something like, “This describes quite a lot of my experience at work. You don’t have to read it, but if you do, I’d really appreciate it.” You don’t have to explain everything all at once. Even one person who understands a bit more can make work feel less lonely.

A gentle closing note

Being a good colleague to someone who is quietly neurodivergent is not about getting every word right or knowing all the jargon. It is about making it a little safer for them to show up as themselves.

If all you do is avoid mocking or minimising their differences, communicate a bit more clearly, give reasonable notice where you can, and respect their coping tools and boundaries, you are already doing more than many people ever will.

You don’t have to fix them. You just have to be willing to see that their brain works differently, to trust that their needs are real, and to share the workspace in a way that makes life a little kinder for both of you.



Andrew at Quietly Neurodivergent

I’m Andrew, the person behind Quietly Neurodivergent. I’m an autistic adult who spent many years trying to pass as “fine” – holding things together at work, showing up to meetings, hitting deadlines – and then unravelling in private. I know what it feels like to look competent on the outside while running on fumes underneath.

By day I work with student data in higher education; by night (and very early mornings) I’m a part-time PhD student thinking about education, inequality and how people move through systems that were never quite built for them. I’ve also spent nearly ten years as a town

councillor and I volunteer as a Beaver Scout Leader, which means I’ve had a lot of practice navigating meetings, forms, responsibilities and sensory/social overload at the same time. That mix of lived experience, community work and research shapes how I write here: practical, plain-English pieces that sit somewhere between “this is what it’s like” and “here are some things you could try”.

I’m not a clinician and I don’t offer diagnosis, therapy or miracle fixes. What I can offer are honest accounts of what has and hasn’t helped me with study, work and everyday life, alongside small, realistic tools you can adapt for yourself. If you recognise yourself in the phrase “quietly neurodivergent”, this site is for you.

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What “Quietly Neurodivergent” Means (and Who This Site Is For)

Many neurodivergent people look “fine” on the outside while quietly unravelling underneath. This start-here page explains what I mean by “quietly neurodivergent”, who the…