

Principles, Qualities, and Key Tasks of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist

Lila Low-Beinart MA LPC, [Divergent Paths Counseling](https://divergentpaths.com), hello@divergentpaths.com

This framework was developed from Lila Low-Beinart's clinical experience, adapted from current neurodiversity-affirming literature, and expanded with the assistance of Gemini, an AI.

This document provides a comprehensive framework for clinicians seeking to adopt a neurodiversity-affirming approach. It outlines the **foundational principles** (such as presuming competence and respecting autonomy), the **essential qualities** a therapist must embody (including deep empathy and flexibility), and the specific **clinical tasks** necessary to put these concepts into practice. The document emphasizes a shift away from the pathology paradigm, centering the client's lived experience and addressing the trauma of systemic oppression to foster authentic healing and self-acceptance.

For comprehensive development in across these areas, consider our [New Pathways to Neurodiversity Affirming Therapy](#) training program.

Please feel free to provide feedback at the email above - I am always looking for ways to improve the resources I create.

Principles of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist

1. Presume Competence
2. Respect Autonomy
 - a. Reject Compliance-Based Therapies
 - b. Prioritize Client Goals
3. Center Lived Experience
 - a. Believe clients
4. Embrace Intersectionality
5. Challenge Pathology Paradigm from a Systemic Perspective
 - a. Reject the goal of "normalcy" or "cures"
 - b. Deconstruct Power Dynamics in Therapy Room

Qualities of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist

© 2025 Lila Low-Beinart MA LPC, Divergent Paths Counseling. All rights reserved.



1. Prioritizes Self-Awareness & Regulation in Relationship:
 - Dismantle one's own Neuronormative Biases, including Masking
 - Engages in Thoughtful Self-Disclosure
 - Works with Burnout and Burnout Prevention
 2. Cultivates Deep Empathy & Trust:
 - Honors All Forms of Communication
 - Validates Neurodivergent Experiences
 - Believes Clients
 - Collaborates with client (i.e. flattens power dynamics/returns power to client)
 - Demystifies Therapeutic Framework (if helpful)
 3. Employs a Strengths-Based & Affirming Approach:
 - Creates an Affirming Helping Space (physically)
 - Nurtures Positive Self-Identity
 - Challenges Neuronormativity in Self & Client
 - Helps Clients Identify Gifts
 4. Understands & Addresses the Impact of Systemic & Relational Trauma
 - Contextualizes Distress/Trauma within Systemic Harm
 - Addresses Internalized Ableism
 - Supports Identifying and Sharing Client Needs and Boundaries
 - Engages in ND-Affirming Advocacy (on all levels)
 5. Utilizes Flexible & Individualized Interventions:
 - Allows for Flexibility in Techniques, including cultural adaptations
 - Integrates Sensory Awareness
 - Understands Executive Functioning Needs & Supports
-

Key Tasks of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist

1. Collaborate on Goal Setting, Strategies, & Therapeutic Modalities
2. Teach about Neurodivergence
3. Explore Sensory Sensitivities & Needs
4. Foster Identity Integration & Self-Acceptance
5. Identify Client Gifts
6. Celebrate Neurodivergent Strengths & Joy
7. Support Authentic Unmasking
8. Heal & Prevent Neurodivergent Burnout
9. Work with Alexithymia & Interoception
10. Explore Nervous System Regulation
11. Support Practical Skill Development
12. Heal Systemic & Invalidating Trauma

- 13. Cultivate Affirming Relationships
- 14. Empower Self-Advocacy & Boundary Setting
- 15. Advocate for Environmental & Systemic Accommodation

Principles of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist

Foundational beliefs and core values that form the basis of the neurodiversity-affirming therapeutic approach.

1. Presume Competence

- **Description:** This fundamental principle asserts a therapist's belief in the inherent capacity of all neurodivergent individuals to learn, grow, and make meaningful decisions about their own lives. It means approaching every client with the assumption that they are capable and intelligent, even if their abilities are expressed or perceived differently. This challenges deficit-based thinking and counters societal biases that often underestimate neurodivergent individuals.

2. Respect Autonomy

- **Description:** This principle emphasizes honoring the neurodivergent individual's right to self-determination and agency in all aspects of their lives and therapeutic journey. The therapist supports clients in making their own choices, expressing their preferences, and defining their own path to well-being.
 - **a. Reject Compliance-Based Therapies:** Actively opposes and avoids therapeutic approaches (e.g., traditional ABA, some forms of social skills training) that prioritize behavioral compliance, control, or forced normalization over a client's authentic self-expression and well-being. This principle recognizes such approaches can be traumatizing and foster masking.
 - **b. Prioritize Client Goals:** Therapeutic goals are always defined in collaboration with the client, ensuring they align with the client's unique aspirations, values, and vision for their well-being, rather than being imposed by external (neurotypical) norms.

3. Center Lived Experience

- **Description:** This principle places paramount importance on the first-hand knowledge and perspectives of neurodivergent individuals themselves. The therapist values their lived experience as the ultimate source of expertise regarding their own internal world,

needs, and well-being, informing all aspects of therapeutic engagement and understanding. This means listening deeply and believing the client's subjective reality.

4. Embrace Intersectionality

- **Description:** This principle acknowledges that neurodivergence does not exist in isolation. It critically recognizes and addresses the complex interplay of neurodivergence with all other aspects of a client's identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class, disability status, cultural background). The therapist understands how these intersecting identities create unique experiences of oppression, marginalization, privilege, and resilience, profoundly shaping the client's lived reality and therapeutic needs.

5. Challenge the Pathology Paradigm from a Systemic Perspective

- **Description:** This principle involves an active, ongoing challenge to the societal assumption that neurotypical functioning is the only "normal," "correct," or superior way for a mind/body to exist in the world. It fundamentally rejects the notion that neurodivergence is a disease or condition requiring a "cure," advocating instead for acceptance and accommodation of neurological diversity. This also includes examining and deconstructing power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship and broader societal contexts, helping clients to see how their struggles are often rooted in ableist systems rather than individual pathology.

Qualities of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist - With Descriptions

The essential attributes, practices, and skills a therapist embodies to operationalize neurodiversity-affirming principles in their practice.

1. Prioritizes Self-Awareness & Regulation

- **Description:** A neurodiversity-affirming therapist deeply understands and consistently manages their own internal state. This involves an ongoing commitment to self-reflection and personal growth. They are acutely aware of how their own neurotype, biases (including neuronormative ones), and emotional responses can influence the therapeutic relationship. This self-knowledge is foundational for effective co-regulation with clients and for maintaining cultural humility.
 - **Dismantle one's own Neuronormative Biases, including Masking:** Actively identifies and works to dismantle their own biases rooted in neuronormativity (the assumption that neurotypical functioning is the norm). This includes recognizing

and addressing any personal masking habits (if neurodivergent) or internal expectations that might unconsciously influence their practice.

- **Engages in Thoughtful Self-Disclosure:** Utilizes self-disclosure judiciously and intentionally, always with the client's therapeutic benefit in mind. This might involve sharing aspects of their own neurodivergence (if applicable and appropriate) or processing, to foster connection, validation, and normalization for the client.
- **Works with Burnout and Burnout Prevention:** Understands the unique patterns and intensity of neurodivergent burnout, both in themselves and their clients. They implement personal strategies for preventing and healing from burnout, recognizing that their own well-being is essential for sustainable and ethical practice.

2. Cultivates Deep Empathy & Trust

- **Description:** This quality is about the therapist's profound capacity to genuinely understand and connect with the client's internal world. It involves actively building a therapeutic relationship founded on trust, safety, and mutual respect. This empathy extends beyond cognitive understanding to an emotional attunement that validates the client's subjective experience.
 - **Honors All Forms of Communication:** Recognizes and respects the diverse ways neurodivergent individuals communicate (e.g., through stimming, scripting, tangential conversation, non-speaking, visual means). The therapist adapts their own communication style to meet the client's needs, rather than expecting conformity to neurotypical norms.
 - **Validates Neurodivergent Experiences:** Affirms that the client's neurodivergent ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving the world are valid and not inherently disordered or wrong. This involves actively listening, believing their experiences, and refraining from pathologizing neurodivergent traits.
 - **Believes Clients:** A cornerstone of trust. The therapist takes the client's lived experience and self-report at face value, recognizing them as the expert on their own life, without requiring external "proof" or imposing neurotypical interpretations.
 - **Collaborates with client (i.e. flattens power dynamics/returns power to client):** Actively works to create an egalitarian therapeutic relationship, consciously dismantling traditional hierarchical power dynamics often found in therapy. This involves sharing decision-making, respecting client autonomy, and empowering the client to be an active agent in their healing process.

3. Employs a Strengths-Based & Affirming Approach

- **Description:** This quality involves a fundamental shift in perspective from a deficit model to one that highlights and builds upon the individual's inherent strengths, talents, and unique ways of being. The therapist actively works to counter internalized ableism and foster a positive neurodivergent identity.
 - **Creates an Affirming Helping Space (physically):** Designs and maintains a therapeutic environment that is physically and psychologically safe, inclusive, and accommodating to neurodivergent sensory and processing needs (e.g., considering lighting, sound, seating, visual clutter).
 - **Nurtures Positive Self-Identity:** Actively supports the client in developing a strong, authentic, and affirming sense of self as a neurodivergent individual, helping them to move away from shame and toward self-acceptance and pride.
 - **Challenges Neuronormativity in Self & Client:** Critically examines and challenges neuronormative assumptions, both within their own internal biases and when these assumptions are presented by the client or society. This helps to liberate the client from societal pressures to conform.
 - **Helps Clients Identify Gifts:** Actively works with clients to recognize, articulate, and leverage their inherent talents, unique perspectives, and areas of deep competence or passion that often stem from their neurotype.

4. Understands & Addresses Systemic Impact

- **Description:** This quality emphasizes the therapist's deep understanding that many of the challenges and distress experienced by neurodivergent clients are not inherent flaws, but rather direct results of living in unaccommodating systems and encountering ableist oppression. The therapist helps clients externalize the problem and advocates for systemic change.
 - **Contextualizes Distress/Trauma within Systemic Harm:** Frames client challenges (including distress and trauma responses) as logical reactions to systemic invalidation, ableism, and a world not built for neurodivergent neurology, rather than as individual pathology.
 - **Addresses Internalized Ableism:** Actively works with clients to dismantle the internalized shame, self-blame, and negative self-perceptions that result from societal ableism.
 - **Supports Identifying and Sharing Client Needs and Boundaries:** Collaborates with clients to articulate their specific needs (e.g., for accommodations, communication styles, sensory regulation) and empowers them to communicate and assert healthy boundaries in various contexts.
 - **Engages in ND-Affirming Advocacy (on all levels):** Participates in and supports advocacy efforts for neurodiversity affirmation, whether at the individual client level (e.g., advocating for accommodations), within their professional community, or at a broader societal level.

5. Utilizes Flexible & Individualized Interventions

- **Description:** This quality reflects the therapist's ability to adapt their therapeutic approach and techniques to meet the unique and diverse needs of each neurodivergent client, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model. It prioritizes what works for the individual.
 - **Allows for Flexibility in Techniques (including cultural adaptation):** Is open to modifying standard therapeutic techniques, pacing, and structure to align with the client's neurotype and cultural background. This means being creative and responsive to individual differences.
 - **Integrates Sensory Awareness:** Incorporates an understanding of the client's sensory profile into therapy, helping clients identify their sensitivities and integrate sensory strategies for regulation and comfort within and outside sessions.
 - **Understands Executive Functioning Needs & Supports:** Possesses knowledge of how executive functions (e.g., planning, organization, task initiation, time management) may differ in neurodivergent individuals and collaboratively develops practical, neurodivergent-friendly supports.

Key Tasks of a Neurodiversity Affirming Therapist

The essential attributes, practices, and skills a therapist embodies to operationalize neurodiversity-affirming principles in their practice.

- **Collaborate on Goal Setting, Strategies, & Therapeutic Modalities:** Work collaboratively with clients to define therapeutic goals that align with their self-identified aspirations, and co-create strategies; choosing and adapting therapeutic techniques that respect their neurotype and build on their strengths.
- **Teach about Neurodivergence:** Provide accessible, affirming, psychoeducation about neurodivergence, including giftedness, and differences in attention, executive function, sensory processing, emotional intensity, and more.
- **Explore Sensory Sensitivities & Needs:** Help clients, especially those with a history of masking, to identify and understand their unique sensory sensitivities and sensory needs, promoting self-awareness, boundary-setting, and regulation.
- **Foster Identity Integration & Self-Acceptance:** Assist clients in healing their internalized ableism (i.e. shame around neurodivergent traits), integrating newly recognized neurodivergent identities (post-diagnosis or self-identification), and seeing their neurodivergent traits through an affirming lens.

- **Identify Client Gifts:** Actively work with clients to recognize, articulate, and value their inherent [gifts](#), unique perspectives, and areas of deep competence or passion as valuable aspects of their neurotype.
- **Celebrate Neurodivergent Strengths & Joy:** Actively highlight and celebrate the unique strengths, talents, and perspectives associated with neurodivergence, helping clients find joy and connection within neurodivergent culture and community.
- **Support Authentic Unmasking:** Guide clients through the process of unmasking, encouraging playful exploration, reconnecting with their authentic selves, and rediscovering genuine preferences, wants, and needs.
- **Heal & Prevent Neurodivergent Burnout:** Support clients in recognizing and understanding their unique burnout patterns and triggers, and develop strategies for healing from and preventing future burnout episodes.
- **Work with Alexithymia & Interoception:** Support clients in recognizing and understanding their unique experience of energy and emotions, and help them reconnect with their interoceptive awareness and emotions, if this is their goal.
- **Explore Nervous System Regulation:** Educate clients on nervous system responses and explore strategies to help them learn to regulate their sensory and emotional systems (when the client is ready), thereby increasing their window of tolerance.
- **Support Practical Skill Development:** Assist clients (only if desired by client) in developing neurodivergent-friendly strategies and executive function supports for navigating daily and long-term tasks effectively.
- **Heal Systemic & Invalidating Trauma:** Be aware of and address the profound impact of traumatic invalidation and systemic oppression on clients' self-perception, emotion regulation, and behavior, along the spectrum of trauma work.
- **Cultivate Affirming Relationships:** Support clients in identifying, building, and navigating relationships that are genuinely affirming, respectful of their neurotype, and promote authentic connection rather than masking or conformity.
- **Empower Self-Advocacy & Boundary Setting:** Teach clients how to recognize, express, and assert their own needs, boundaries, and preferences in various contexts.
- **Advocate for Environmental & Systemic Accommodation:** Collaborate with clients to identify and advocate for necessary accommodations and adaptations in their environments (e.g., home, work, school, community).