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# FEMALE NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Three neurodiverse women and an adult psychiatrist discuss their experiences of workplace challenges facing neurodivergent people

Discussion facilitator Hannah Longman began by recounting her autism diagnosis as an adult, after she found herself relating to a woman with Asperger's on TV program *The Undateables*.

Hannah then brought in Chi-Chi Obuaya to offer a clinician's perspective on why neurodiversity is often diagnosed far later in women than in men. Chi-Chi said he had an adult female patient he was initially treating for a personality disorder, displaying impulsive behaviour and drug use, which was not working. A second colleague's diagnosis that the woman had ADHD led Chi-Chi to realise how her symptoms had been misattributed to other diagnoses.

Chi-Chi said ADHD manifests as two symptom clusters: inattention; and hyperactivity and impulsive behaviour. Because girls with ADHD tend to be more inattentive but less impulsive and

From left: Hannah, Chi-Chi, Vic, Meike and Samantha talk about neurodiversity in work

hyperactive than boys, their condition is often missed.

Hannah handed over to Vic Mazonas, who was diagnosed with autism in her 30s. Vic said she suffers from complex PTSD, in part as a result of a 16-year emotionally abusive relationship as an adult. Referring to a study, the Vulnerability Experiences Quotient, on traumas such as childhood bullying, workplace mistreatment, intimate partner violence and sexual abuse in non-autistic versus autistic participants, Vic said: "In almost every category, autistic respondents reported rates of traumatic experience far higher than the general population."

When she left her abusive relationship, →

Vic said she had been in a new job for less than a year and her employer “did something no other company I had worked for did: they listened, they believed me and tried to help”. She said supporting neurodivergent employees does not have to be difficult. The first step is to assume they want to do their job well, so if they are not there is probably a reason for it. “The smallest action you take could well end up being the thing that changes someone’s life,” she concluded.

On the topic of late diagnosis, Hannah brought in Meiki Bliebenicht, who was diagnosed with ADHD at 38. Meiki said she had long been aware of having “very distinct strengths”, such as feeling very calm in high-pressure moments, yet also struggling with following lessons at school or learning through reading a book.

### PERMISSION TO BE IMPERFECT

While having the diagnosis was helpful, Meiki said, she was also left to work through her response to it on her own, which led to her having a breakdown. Part of her recovery, she said, involved a psychiatrist telling her she could “be less perfect”, with Meiki adding people with ADHD, especially women, often have a coping strategy of aiming for perfection so they can never be criticised.

Firms generally can take one of two approaches to neurodiversity, Meiki continued: the first, the neurodiversity passport, involves encouraging employees to reveal their diagnoses, with the company then creating a support framework to accommodate their needs. The problem with this, she said, is it requires employees to know their diagnosis and be able to articulate their needs. It is important that firms assess their standard processes, which are often geared towards neurotypical people, and change these to



## The smallest action you take could well end up being the thing that changes someone’s life

accommodate those who are not.

Samantha Hiew, who was diagnosed with ADHD at 40 after the birth of her second child, then spoke of her “lifetime of existential anxiety” from not knowing where she fitted into the world. Her diagnosis was complicated, she continued, by entering perimenopause at 41, as well as further diagnoses of autism and dyspraxia. “Can you imagine living up to the age of 40 thinking maybe you’re like everybody else, even though you felt different, then having to deal with this huge stigma?” Samantha said.

As a result of her neurodivergence, she said she has worked in 16 different sectors, because she can only focus on something if she likes it for as long as she likes it. Samantha said many people with ADHD will often be told they are failing to achieve their potential, which is why when they are diagnosed later in life and get the support they need, their careers skyrocket.

However, she added, late diagnosis can trip you up if you do not have the right support. Getting support in the workplace entails keeping the employee/employer conversation open, as neither party may know what they want or need. Finally, Samantha touched on the danger of burnout for employees with autism, as their focus means they can work intensely for long hours but this is not sustainable. ■

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Late diagnosis of neurodivergency is particularly common in women, because of differences in the way the symptoms manifest between girls and boys. With ADHD, for example, stereotypical “hyperactive” behaviour is more common in boys than girls, who are more likely to have attention problems.

2 While people often assume dealing with workplace neurodiversity will be a difficult task, helping a neurodivergent employee can be as simple as listening to them and believing what they say, then making often small changes to accommodate their needs.

3 Because neurodivergent women will often have developed a series of coping mechanisms for the workplace without necessarily knowing the underlying cause of their problems, following a late diagnosis they may not easily be able to articulate their needs, so keeping lines of communication between employee and management open is important.



Samantha (left) and Chi-Chi highlighted the higher frequency of late diagnosis for women