

Welcome

Welcome to the September edition of Curious Minds, the Doing What Really Matters (DWRM) Newsletter, in partnership with the Global Freedom Scholars Network (GFS).

This quarter's theme is **Neurodiversity**, and we are celebrating the many different ways people learn.

Our contributors write about what it takes to study when the room is not built for you. They write about a diagnosis arriving late in life, about needing quiet and space to think, and about the difference between being called difficult and being understood. Their stories remind us that how you learn says nothing about what you are capable of.

We are grateful to Charlie P, whose account of studying with autism makes a point worth repeating: you never know what you can achieve until you try. We also return to the Prison Service Journal, whose editors introduce Edition 280, a special edition on neurodiversity built around lived experience. Copies are in every prison library, so ask your education team.

Alongside these reflections, we look at what prison inspectors found across the estate, and set out the adjustments you can ask for when you study.

Our next edition will focus on **Your first assignment**. Tell us how it went, how you approached it and any tips and tricks you have picked up.

Deadline for submissions is November 7th. Share your stories via your Education Lead, by emailing info@dwrm.org.uk, or by post to DWRM, PO Box 6219, Sheffield S2 9JQ. The editorial team for Curious Minds consists of serving prisoners, ex-prisoners, academics, employers and DWRM staff.

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"I'm not thick, the room's too loud"

Walking out of a workshop because the noise is unbearable gets written up as bad behaviour. Knowing exactly what you want to say but not getting it onto paper gets marked as a poor essay. Neither says anything about your intelligence. Both are a mismatch between how you learn and how the room is run.

In July 2025, HM Prison inspectors reported on how far prisons have come with neurodiversity since 2021, meaning autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and similar. Their answer is: some way, unevenly. Every public prison and YOI now has a Neurodiversity Support Manager, 105 across the estate. Part of their job is to link education, healthcare and the wings, and to sort out adjustments. If you don't know who yours is, ask in Education.

Most prisons still wait for you to tell them about your neuro diversity.. At Deerbolt, staff worked out that around two thirds of the young men there had neurodivergent needs, then did almost nothing about it. At Thameside, there was no route to get assessed for ADHD at all.

But there are places where the support works well. At Styal, support plans were passed on to teachers and instructors, which is the bit that usually fails. At Drake Hall, a "neurodiversity passport" saved women explaining themselves to every new officer. At Ranby, the men in a workshop agreed how the space would run, down to the volume of the radio. At Kirkham, twelve prisoner orderlies trained in neurodiversity awareness alongside staff. The biggest gap the inspectors found is that neurodivergent prisoners are still shut out of designing the support meant for them. Ask who your Neurodiversity Support Manager is and what reasonable adjustments can be made.

Congratulations to

Emily B
HMP Foston Hall
for her completion of the Fundamentals of Effective Learning in Psychology towards her Cert HE

Adam W
HMP Oakwood
for his completion of the Fundamentals of Effective Learning for the Business and Management course towards his Cert HE



Last steps from old to new

Most prisons still wait for you to tell them about your neurodiversity. Solid steel with flaking paint slams and clicks behind you, the bridge to another world in sight but seemingly out of reach. The sights, sounds and smells are daunting, foreign and overwhelming. The constant hum of tension, just waiting to explode into violence. The clinical stench of bleach mixed with decay. All eyes seemingly fixated on you, cons and screws alike, psychoanalysing your potential for exploitation and or bullying. Education is the key to stepping free from this awful, sorrow filled environment you have stepped into. Don't let your own thoughts of fear, anger or nihilism consume you. You can get through this, and change your outlook on life, inside, and out.

The time I spent doing bird gave me chance to reflect. I'm not going to tell you that life on the wing is easy but its even harder if you only spend your social on the yard. Constantly ticking out your canteen on spice and having the screws watching you is a shit state of affairs, as if losing your freedom wasn't enough already. The first few months are always the worst and it's hard to see light at the end of the tunnel. Use whatever is available to you though to mentally break free from the loneliness and isolation of a 7x11 ft cell. I used the opportunity to get as many books out the library as I could to read when bang up came around. When reading you can immerse yourself into a better world than you're in and it makes the time go a hell of a lot faster. I managed to get my maths degree through the classes; I went to art therapy which is a great way of at least having things to decorate the cell and make it feel a little more like home!

I was moved down to a cat C after a fair few months of good behaviour where they even had music production classes with computers to make beats and record your own tracks. I'm not religious in the slightest but via that course I ended up playing guitar at the church service on Sundays. Hell, do whatever you can do to get out of that miserable box you're in!

I started to write hip hop style poetry and made a compilation of them a long with the art I had made. I could not believe it when the prison managed to get that published for me as an actual book!

Life is short, hard and unpredictable and always will be but you can always be master of your own fate. Now I am out I've moved away from my home town and the circle of fake friends and started my life a fresh at the age of 35. Due to the positive things I strived to do in jail rather than dwelling on the past I have now gotten into university to do an arts and creative writing degree after getting recommendations from my parole officer, a thing I NEVER thought I would see myself doing.

Long story short, prison is shit and no way to live your life, but it doesn't have to be the end. There are bad screws and there are good screws (which I appreciate may not be a very popular opinion) but stay off the radar and try to make the best of it. That's easy to say and harder to do but all I can say to you brothers is try to stay strong, stay positive because whatever has happened in your past does not have to define you.

Josh A

Studying with dyslexia, ADHD, or other learning differences

If you have dyslexia, ADHD, dyspraxia, or a similar learning difference, you are not alone — and it does not have to stop you succeeding in higher education.

Universities must make reasonable adjustments for these differences. Once registered, tell the DWRM team, who can discuss your needs and recommend adjustments. You do not need a formal diagnosis to start that conversation. These might include extra time in exams, questions read to you, or sensitive marking — where tutors focus on your understanding rather than your spelling or grammar. If you are struggling with a deadline, tell the DWRM team — options may be available. Getting support recognised early means you can focus on what you are capable of — which may be more than you think.

How it might affect you

Dyslexia can make reading slower and spelling inconsistent. You might lose your place in a text, or struggle to get ideas onto the page in the right order, even when you understand the subject. ADHD can bring restlessness and difficulty concentrating. Your mind may wander mid-paragraph, or starting an assignment can feel harder than the work. Dyspraxia can affect fine motor skills, making handwriting slow and tiring under pressure. With any of these, low confidence and self-doubt often come along for the ride. Remember, that is not a reflection of your intelligence.

Studying with Autism

At 54 my diagnosis of autism arrived late in life, yet it explained so much. Not least my attitude to education. At school I passed four G.C.E. 'O' levels at A or A* but failed the other four. Over the years since I've gained many academic and vocational qualifications. Mostly outside prison, but more recently inside.

The successes all have two commonalities:

- 1) The subjects were all ones I had a personal interest in or had to cover to achieve what I wanted.
- 2) The circumstances in which I studied had to suit my need for quiet and lack of distractions.

This is why distance learning and the ability to work in my own space have been essential to me. Another advantage has been the flexibility to work at times that suit me. Yes, there are deadlines to be met, but how you reach those is up to you.

I'm lucky in not needing much support. Give me the instructions and materials to get on with it. Others do need more support, so it's useful to be able to contact tutors and advisers. In prison you may also have help available from the Education department.

Neurodiversity doesn't have to be a barrier to education. There's much greater awareness and help than in the past. You never know what you can achieve until you try.
Charlie P

Different Minds, Real Strengths

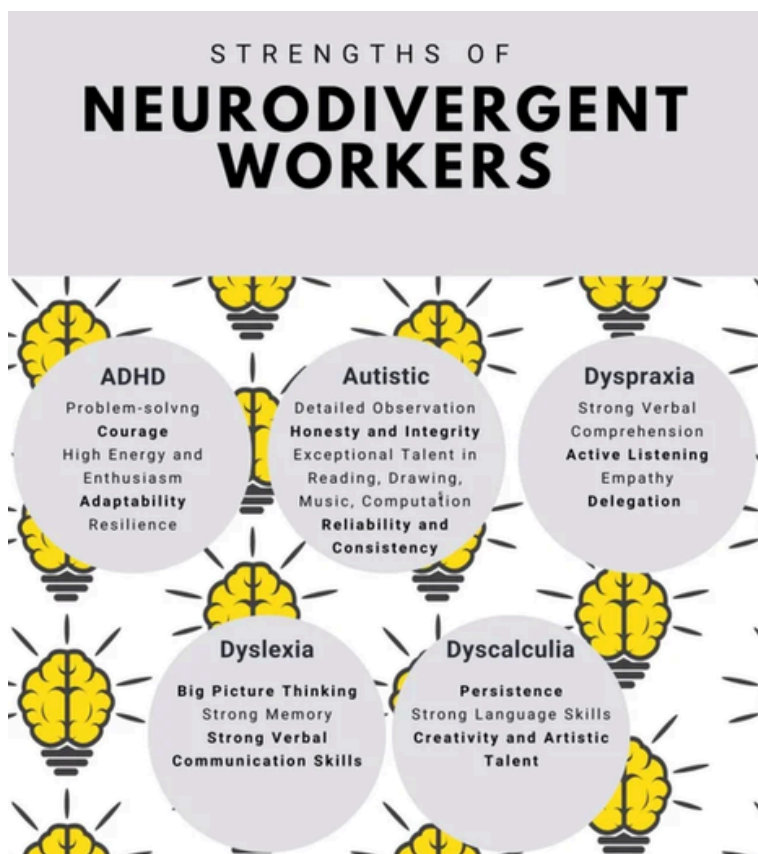
The 2021 inspectorates' review found that somewhere between a third and a half of people in prison are neurodivergent: dyslexic, autistic, dyspraxic, ADHD. The system responded with policies about reasonable adjustments, all of it built on the assumption that we are discussing a problem to be managed. It isn't only a problem, and the education department is usually the last place you'd learn that.

Dyslexia costs you at the desk and pays you back in the workshop. Reading and spelling take effort that never fully goes away. The same brain is often unusually good at holding a whole structure in mind: how the roof goes together, the flaw in a rota, the finished thing before anyone has drawn it.

ADHD gets filed as an attention problem. The attention is there. It won't take orders, which is a different complaint entirely. Give it something urgent or interesting and it locks on for hours at an intensity most people cannot manufacture. Same trait that gets some thrown out of class at fourteen.

Autistic thinking runs on precision. Deep focus, a memory for detail that embarrasses the room, a low tolerance for what everyone has agreed not to mention. Awkward in a meeting. Invaluable anywhere the job has to be right rather than fast. The difficulty is not cosmetic. A brain that needs routine gets a regime that changes without notice. A brain that needs movement gets bang-up. Nothing in this article makes that smaller.

What can change is learning to work with your own wiring instead of against it. When you choose the thing that fits your brain, not the thing you think you "should" do, everything is a bit more bearable.



Practical Skill: Reading in Three Passes

You already do this. When a long document lands in front of you, you do not start at the first word and plod to the end. You look for the part that matters. You check the headings and work out what it is asking of you. That is skilled reading. The trick is doing it deliberately, with the dense material a course sets you.

Most of us were taught to read a chapter the way we read a story: beginning to end, every word, once. With academic text that is the slowest method and the least reliable. You reach the last page with a vague sense of having read something. Three short passes beat one long one, every time.

Pass one: the shape

Give it five minutes. Read the title, the introduction, every heading, the first sentence of each section, and the conclusion. Look at any tables or diagrams. You are not trying to understand the argument yet. You are building a map: how long it is, how it is organised, what the argument is, where it ends up. Then write one sentence saying what the piece is for.

Pass two: the argument

Now read it through at a steady pace, without stopping. Do not look up every unfamiliar word. Do not stop at the parts that confuse you. Mark them with a line in the margin and keep going, because the next page often explains the last one. What you are chasing is the spine of the argument: the main claim, the evidence offered, the order the author builds it in. At the end, write the argument down in three or four lines of your own words. That note is worth more than any amount of highlighting.

Pass three: what matters

Only now do you slow down, and only on the parts you need. Go back to the margin lines, to the section that answers your assignment question, to the paragraph the whole argument turns on. Read those slowly. Reread sentences. Look up the terms. Write your proper notes here, with page numbers, so that when you come to cite the source later you are not hunting through fifty pages for one quotation. Highlight or copy down useful quotes.

Some material resists this. Some papers, legal text, a poem: the wording is the point, and you will read it line by line. The passes still earn their place. They tell you which lines deserve that attention, and they mean you meet the hard sentences already knowing where the argument is going.

Why it matters

Study time is limited and rarely uninterrupted. Three passes means you always have something usable, even if the third never comes. One pass gives you nothing until it is finished. The passes also feed your notes: the map from the first, the argument from the second, the detail and page numbers from the third.

Terms of Publication

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Content: No discriminatory or violent content.

Next Edition

Our next edition is about *Your first assignment*. How did you approach it? What caught you out? What would you tell someone about to sit down to theirs? Send us your tips, however small

The Deadline for submissions is November 7th 2026

Send to DWRM, PO Box 6219, Sheffield, S2 9JQ or to info@dwrn.org.uk through your Education Department marking it *Curious Minds Submission*.

Work should be your own and clearly written or typed, with your name, prison and prison number on the document. 600 words maximum.

Distribution

We will send paper copies to all students registered with DWRM as well as people who show interest in our Learning Communities.

We will also email it to all the Prison Education departments. If you would like to be a named person to distribute copies, please let us know and we'll send you a batch of printed copies to distribute.

We need your help getting the message out: if you can, speak to your distance learning facilitator in your prison and work with them to ensure that your fellow students get to be a part of our community and receive a copy of our newsletter.

Understanding neurodiversity in prison: why lived experience matters

The Prison Service Journal shares research, practice and lived experience from across the criminal justice system. Edition 280 is a special edition on neurodiversity, bringing together research, lived experience and practical examples on how prisons and probation can better support neurodivergent people. Many people in prison may recognise some of what it describes, in themselves or in others.

Neurodiversity describes natural differences in how people think, learn, communicate and process information, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, learning disabilities, communication difficulties and acquired brain injury. These differences are common in prisons and can affect how people understand rules, manage routines, complete forms, attend appointments or cope with stress.

Prison can be especially difficult. Noise, lighting, crowds, sudden changes, written instructions and unfamiliar expectations can feel overwhelming, and behaviour seen as difficult may be linked to unmet neurodivergent need.

A strong message running through the edition is the value of lived experience: the articles include the voices of people who know what custody is like with neurodivergence, explaining what support helps, what makes things worse and what could make prison more manageable.

Others describe practical responses. Professor Amanda Kirby's article on screening explains that different forms of neurodivergence often overlap and may sit alongside trauma, adversity or mental health needs, so earlier identification helps staff support people before difficulties escalate. The edition also emphasises reasonable adjustments: clearer written information, more time to process instructions, support with forms, visual reminders and quieter spaces where possible.

Articles prisoners may find especially relevant

The Experience of Prison by Individuals with Neurodivergence: A Lived Experience Perspective may feel familiar and validating. It shows that some difficulties in prison may be linked to how people process information or manage their environment, and offers hope: with the right understanding and support, prison can become more manageable and more focused on rehabilitation.

Learning from Lived Experience, by Dr Luke P. Vinter, looks at what can be learned from autistic people's experiences of prison, highlighting communication, anxiety, sensory sensitivity and feeling misunderstood. People with lived experience are experts in the challenges they face, and their voices should help shape better practice.

Why this edition matters

Neurodiversity should not be treated as a specialist or marginal issue. It is central to building prisons that are fair, humane and effective. When needs are understood and adjustments made, people are more likely to engage, feel heard and take part in opportunities that support rehabilitation. Confusion, overload, difficulty communicating or feeling misunderstood are not personal failings; they may reflect needs that should be better understood and supported. If you recognise any of these, it may be worth speaking to staff, healthcare, education or a neurodiversity lead.

To learn more about the PSJ or submit an article, contact the editors at prisonservicejournal@crimeandjustice.org.uk, or ask the education team or a librarian to contact us on your behalf. Copies are available in all prison libraries. We hope it encourages reflection and discussion across the prison estate.

Co-Editors of the Prison Service Journal