fasd NL

Neurodivergence & Stigma

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a ***neurodevelopmental disability*** that results from ***exposure to alcohol prenatally***. FASD is a ***lifelong disability*** that affects the brain and body of each individual differently depending on ***when*** alcohol is consumed during the pregnancy and ***how much*** is consumed, making FASD a spectrum diagnosis.

What is Neurodivergence?

The term "neurodivergent" describes people whose ***brains operate differently*** than the average population. That means they have unique strengths and challenges when compared to people whose brains don't have those differences.

Stigma

Stigma is the ***negative*** and often ***unfair beliefs*** that a society or group of people have about something. Stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice are examples of stigma.

An increased level of ***stigma surrounds people who engage in substance or alcohol use while pregnant.*** When people consume alcohol during pregnancy, they are often subject to judgment from service providers, leading to embarrassment, low self-esteem, and fear of losing their children. This ***judgement*** ignores the societal and cultural factors that influence substance use among all populations, and can prevent individuals for seeking support. Stigma may also be experienced by individuals diagnosed with FASD, as well as by their caregivers, as FASD is often viewed as a preventable outcome.

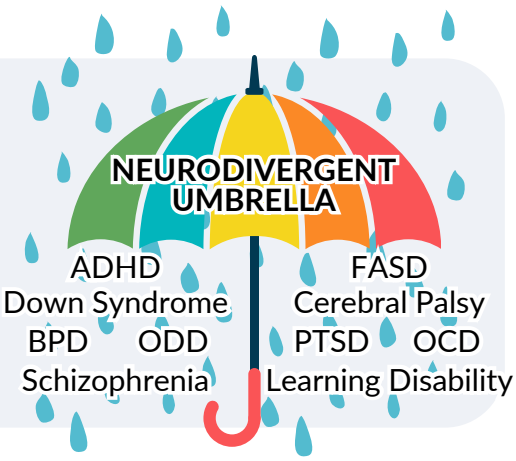
Breaking Down the Stigma

Stigma has significant impacts on treatment procedures, public understanding, policies, and legislation concerning individuals who are perceived as being different, such as those who may consume alcohol during pregnancy or people with neurodivergent diagnoses. Individuals facing stigma often have difficulty "emerging from the shadows" and asking for assistance due to the potential for judgement. The stigma, or expected differential treatment, ***may keep people from pursuing treatment and support*** that could enhance their quality of life.

Many neurodivergent individuals ***may also struggle with their mental health*** or other challenges which adds another layer of stigma. Because stigma can impact healthcare and support access, it it important to recognize the effects of stigma on the individual and their life course.

Neurodivergent Umbrella

Neurodivergent is an ***umbrella term*** that encompasses a variety of diagnoses, and can include FASD, ADHD, autism, down syndrome, cerebral palsy, Tourette syndrome, dyslexia, personality or dissociative disorders, and many others, most of which ***carry inherent stigma***.



Perceptions of Difference

Individuals who are neurodivergent can sometimes be ***viewed as less intelligent*** because their strengths and challenges ***diverge*** from what is perceived to be ***'normal'***, especially in schools or the workplace. For example, people with personality disorders who are experiencing psychosis may be referred to using derogatory terms like "psycho", "crazy", or "insane". Despite these stigmatized perceptions, which can be internalized, neurodivergent individuals are just as capable as anyone else if not more so, especially if needs-based supports and services are in place.

Promoting Acceptance & Humility

Stigma and judgement can be minimized when we promote ***the acceptance of FASD, other neurodivergent diagnoses, and physical disabilities*** regardless of their visibility. When we promote acceptance, we convey the message that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and humility. Acceptance helps dispel stigma and barriers that can prevent individuals from accessing the support they need to thrive. We are all unique and different in our own ways, and that should be celebrated!

Embracing & Celebrating Strengths

Celebrating neurodiversity encourages variety and different ways of thinking. ***Neurodivergent individuals have many strengths*** and different perspectives which can be immensely beneficial. Embracing and celebrating individual strengths encourages people to be authentic and see the value in their selves.

Many neurodivergent individuals have remarkable skills in mathematics, music, art, sciences, engineering and much more. Embracing and promoting these strengths helps to create a more inclusive and diverse society that benefits everyone!

Why Should We Change Language?

The words in the left column place the diagnosis before the person, assuming that there is a 'normal' and people with disabilities fall outside of this. The right column places the person before the diagnosis. The language used in the right column recognizes that everyone is different and has unique strengths and challenges, regardless of their brain composition.

Changing language can help change our perspective when it comes to deficit- or disorder based thinking, when compared to strengths-based thinking. Changing the way we talk about people can help dispel stigma and shows individuals who are part of these groups that we support them and don't define them or judge them based on a part of them that can't be changed.

Language Guide

Avoid Saying	Instead Try
Suffering with FASD/Suffering with Autism	**Individual with FASD/Individual with Autism**
Bad parent	**Parent**
Junkie/alcoholic/druggie/addict	**Person who uses substances or person with a substance use disorder**
Can't do [...]	**May need support with [...]**
Different than normal	**Unique strengths**

These responses use language that can be blaming or stigmatizing, and attaches a negative label to an individual based on perception.

These responses utilize person-first language which centres on the individual before the condition or diagnosis and focuses on strengths.

Follow the lead about how a person with a disability refers to themself and recognize that some language is appropriate based on if you are part of that community or not.

Scan the QR code to find more resources like this!