



INSIDE

Neurophototherapy



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Hello!

This short PDF has been written to share some of the neuro-inclusive ideas used during a second iteration of my Neurophototherapy Project, in 2023.

I describe what I do as working neurodiver-gently; a practice I've developed through a series of Arts Council England (ACE) funded projects, since 2016. My work also aligns with *access intimacy*, a term coined by Mia Mingus (and shared with me by Selene Burn, Access Lead, Wellcome Collection).

Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level.

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>

It's taken many years to develop working successfully in this way (because it has broken new ground), but at heart it's not rocket science. It simply requires a culture shift and a change of habits. For those new to neuro-inclusive work, learning about the neurodiversity paradigm provides a framework for understanding.

Simply put, it takes all kinds of brains to make a world. Across a lifetime, we many all at some point experience cognitive challenges. I believe that most people can benefit from neurodiver-gentle work practices which are fundamentally about acknowledging and accommodating a diversity of neurological needs.

Sonia Boué, December 2023.

What is Neurophototherapy?

Neurophototherapy is a creative method. It involves the playful use of photography and collage to unmask neurodivergent identities. It is designed for people who discover that they are neurodivergent as adults, but it can be used by anyone seeking to explore their identity creatively.

ACE funded me to develop Neurophototherapy as a solo project in 2021, and I received further funding to road test it with a small focus group in 2023. The project has culminated in a publication entitled Neurophototherapy: Playfully Unmasking with Photography and Collage.

A free PDF download, an online gallery of work by the focus group and new commissioned writing by Joanne Limburg can be accessed and viewed on the Autograph website. A print version of the book is available for £18.00 from Amazon.

You can access Neurophototherapy on the following links:

PDF <https://autograph.org.uk/blog/texts/free-download-neurophototherapy-publication/>

Gallery <https://autograph.org.uk/online-image-galleries/neurophototherapy/>

Blog post <https://autograph.org.uk/blog/texts/on-using-photography-to-unmask/>

Print <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1399969293>

Working neurodiver-gently

A hyphenated use of the word neurodivergently has been adopted to spotlight working gently (calmly, softly, mildly) is the core of this approach.

Definitions of the word gently often refer to the absence of violence, severity or harshness, words which describe the effects of neurotypicalism on neurodivergent people.

Neurotypicalism is a dominant culture consisting of norms and practices that are often disabling for neurodivergent people.

Working neurodiver-gently is a pro-active position which counters neurotypicalism to provide access for neurodivergent people and to avoid harmful practices.

It is a practice informed by a deep understanding and respect for human neurological diversity, and a de-centring of neurotypicalism; a normative set of values and assumptions about human needs and behaviours.

This is why working neurodiver-gently matters for genuinely inclusive practice.

Intuitively iterative

Working in neurodiver-gentle ways can be seen as restoring working methods that are native to neurodivergent people, and I've consistently found that iterative practice comes most naturally to me.

Too often we've been conditioned (and forced) to work against our neurological orientations, as left handed people were once coerced into writing with their right hands. The analogy ends here, as neurotypical norms affect all aspects of our daily lives, including most work practices. I believe that iterative practice can be employed to help counter this bias.

As iterative methods are ways of developing ideas in phases (each phase building on the previous one) you can test your ideas as you go. This presents the opportunity to tweak a project whenever obstacles are met. When barriers are encountered a project can swerve in part, whilst remaining goal orientated en toto. This allows for precisely the responsiveness and flexibility that's required for us to remain engaged with projects on our own terms.

What you need to know

Working neuro-divergently is an active process of deconstructing neurotypical norms and practices in the workplace and establishing new ones. For example, thinking differently about what group work and participation might mean for a neurodivergent person. Working iteratively and being responsive to need are the two overarching principles for this work, alongside the following adaptations listed in no particular order.

- **Offer a wide variety of communication channels.** I surveyed my participants communication preferences from the outset, and worked across a range of channels including Google Drive folders, SMS, WhatsApp chat, video calls, phone calls and in person meetings. Communication needs also can vary greatly according to circumstances. Be open to changing channels where this may better support participation at any given time.
- **Create a single source of information for your project.** I made one Google folder for all project information to be sure that participants could access and revisit key information at all times. This one stop folder idea was highly successful. Keeping everything in one place (and providing multiple formats for information) reduced the stress and cognitive/communication load for everyone.
- **Work remotely to accommodate the impact of the everyday and chronic conditions.** It's vital to note that many neurodivergent people experience sensory and communication challenges and often have co-occurring conditions, both of which can make working 'in real life' (IRL) hazardous to our wellbeing. I call this the impact of the everyday. Facilitating project work online reduced the impact of the IRL everyday on participants, freeing them to engage with the method. Some participants preferred in person contact and so it was important to work in hybrid form.

- **Work with neurodivergent time and space.** Activity plans should reflect a need for more time and space to participate in projects and create work. Pacing the flow of information, allowing for downtime and building flexibility into project work is essential. Doing so will help manage anxiety and ensure outcomes can be met.
- **Give clear signals about project expectations.** While flexibility is key to countering ableist working norms, it's also important to give neurodivergent participants clear signals about what is expected within a timeframe.
- **Reframe participation in neurodivergent terms.** For example, a participant may contribute in ways that vary from your plan but are equally valuable your project's outcomes. You may need to redefine what participation means in each case. Be open minded and non-judgemental.
- **Remove admin barriers.** I found it important to remove unnecessary admin. For example, conventional contracts or artist agreements can be hard to process and involve multiple disabling tasks. This can hold up project work and waste time chasing paperwork. It can also start a project on the wrong footing. Having checked the legals, we used simple agreements and signed with thumbs up emoji via a communication channel of choice.
- **Create a neuro-inclusive culture.** Creating a project that is genuinely neuro-inclusive requires understanding neurodivergence from a cultural perspective. Make neuro-inclusion your key project outcome, and consider adapting your project when barriers are encountered along the way.
- **Redefine group work.** Participants formed a group by engaging in neurodiver-gentle parallel processes. Meeting points were remote, light touch, and mediated via group chat and 1-1 contact with a mentor.

'A love letter to late discovery!'



If you'd like to arrange a consultation about using Neurophototherapy for engagement purposes please contact me via my website <https://www.soniaboue.co.uk/>