

Embracing Disability and Neurodiversity in the Workplace



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Keywords: chronic illness, diversity, equality, inclusivity, neurodivergence

“As environmental and ecological practitioners ... it's time now that we look to fully embrace diversity in relation to the human body and mind.”

The unknown is understandably often a scary thing, particularly for employers when it comes to hiring and continuing to employ people who don't fit the 'neurotypical' mould or who disclose that they have a disability and/or chronic illness. Most of this fear is borne of a lack of knowledge

and understanding rather than coming from a place of intentional discrimination. Nonetheless, this fear of the unknown can result in a workforce lacking in diversity, or at least disclosure of diversity, and can prevent employees from reaching their full potential. This can cause additional stress

for employees and often exacerbate symptoms; critically, it can prevent employers from realising and fully drawing on the immense potential of neurodiverse, chronically ill and disabled people with a huge amount of talent to offer.



Introduction

As environmental and ecological practitioners, we work daily to help maximise biodiversity, acknowledging the vast research available that points to diversity being a key and eminently sensible goal in this regard. Employers too, recognise the value in employing a diverse workforce when it comes to technical skillsets and the benefits this brings to a commercial enterprise. It's time now that we look to fully embrace diversity in relation to the human body and mind; there is a huge amount to be gained by the employer, employee, client and the natural world, by drawing on a very wide pool of often ignored or overlooked talent among the neurodiverse, chronically ill and/or disabled.

This article takes Energy Limiting Conditions (ELCs) in the form of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME)/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) and neurodiversity in the form of ADHD, as examples to demonstrate how to fully embrace diversity and achieve inclusivity in the ecology sector.

Box 1: What are Energy Limiting Conditions?

“Energy Limiting Conditions (ELCs) are characterised by energy impairment (fatigue that is not alleviated by rest) and chronic pain, and include conditions such as Long Covid, ME/CFS, Fibromyalgia, Cancer, and many other neurological, musculoskeletal, autoimmune, and respiratory diseases too.”

“Over a third of disabled people in the UK have an Energy Limiting Condition.”

(Astriid 2023)

Neurodiversity in the workplace

Since being in the hiring seat and having the luxury of handpicking my own ecology team, I have been able to recruit a brilliantly neurodiverse team of ecologists at all stages of career. Currently, 50% of our ecologists are neurodiverse (based on those who are happy for me to disclose this information). Between us, we cover ME/CFS, ADHD, dyslexia, visual stress and dyspraxia, plus some other comorbidities (see my colleague Tracey Younghusband’s article on pages 17-19 for a detailed insight into being an ecologist with ADHD).

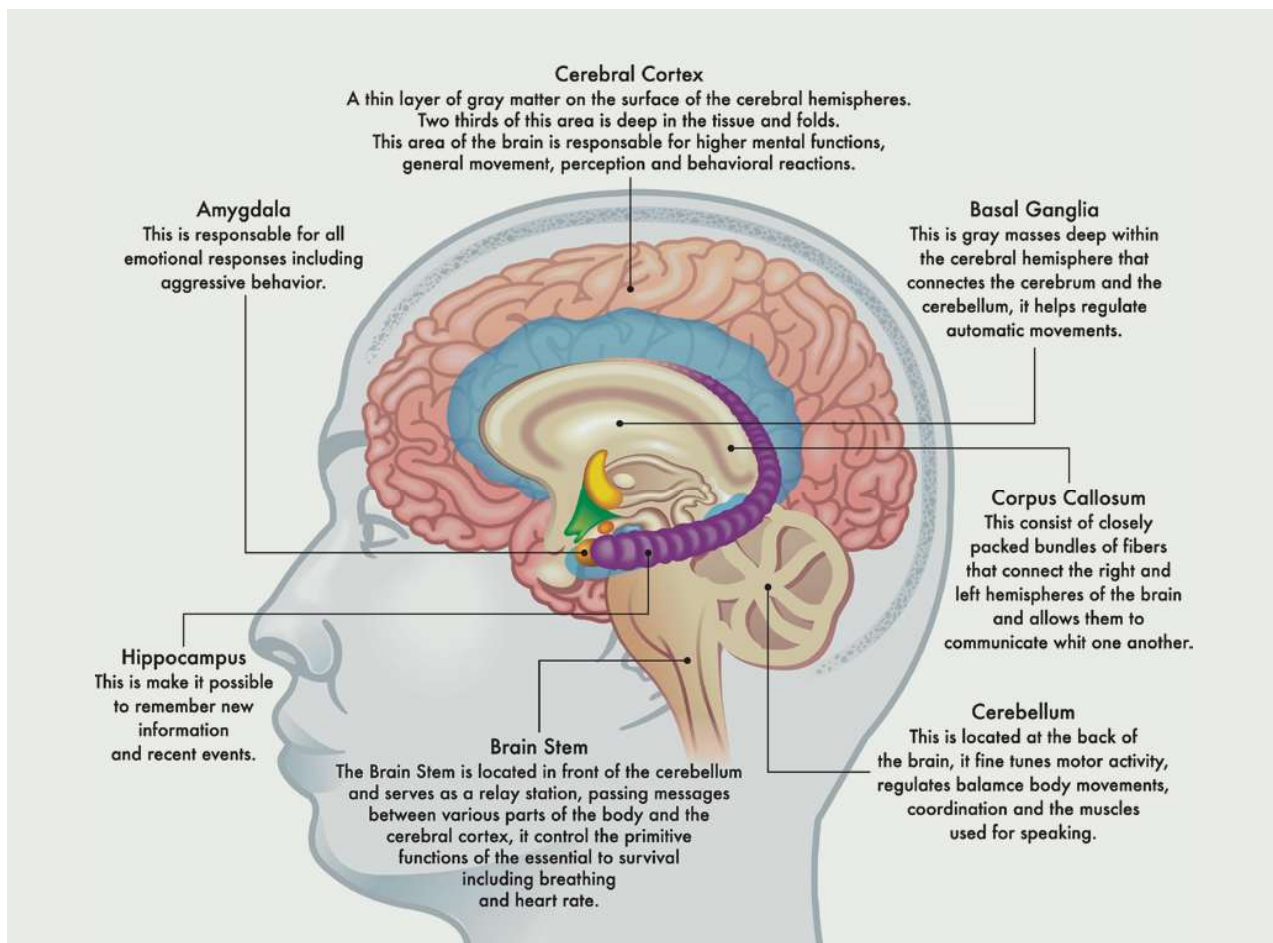
Safe to say, we have a few working examples of strategies that work and those that don’t! Our priorities are to enable everyone to maximise their potential irrespective of how ‘typically’ their brains go about completing tasks, and to ensure that we provide the highest standard of work output for our clients.

Box 2: What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity, put simply, refers to the different ways that brains process information. Within this we have those who are considered ‘neurotypical’, i.e., those whose brain processes and associated outputs are seen as standard in their particular culture; and we have those considered as ‘neurodivergent’, i.e., those whose brain processes and associated outputs differ to the ‘norm’ in that particular culture.

At least 20% of the UK’s adult population are neurodivergent and have been diagnosed with neurological conditions such as ADHD, autism and dyslexia.

(The Brain Charity 2022)



Major Brain Structures implicated in AUTISM.

Communication is the first and most critical thing to successful integration. There are many valid reasons why staff may not wish to disclose their neurodiversity, and our team have certainly had some bad past experiences which have led them to be very cautious about disclosure. It is therefore paramount that line managers and employers make clear, from the outset, that disclosure of neurodiversity will be treated with full support. Emphasis to the employee that your response will be entirely focused on an open dialogue to initiate appropriate changes to working practices and enable that employee to have the same opportunities as their neurotypical colleagues. This must be a two-way street, and there will be trial and error along the way. Often this will be the first time the employee has been open about their neurodiversity, and it may also be the first time the line manager or employer has worked through this with somebody. Both parties should keep an open mind and, together, try various strategies that you both think may work until you get the right balance. Remember, just because something once worked for someone else with the same diagnosis, doesn't mean that the same thing will work for another person; everyone's experience will be unique.

Working with an Energy Limiting Condition – ME/CFS

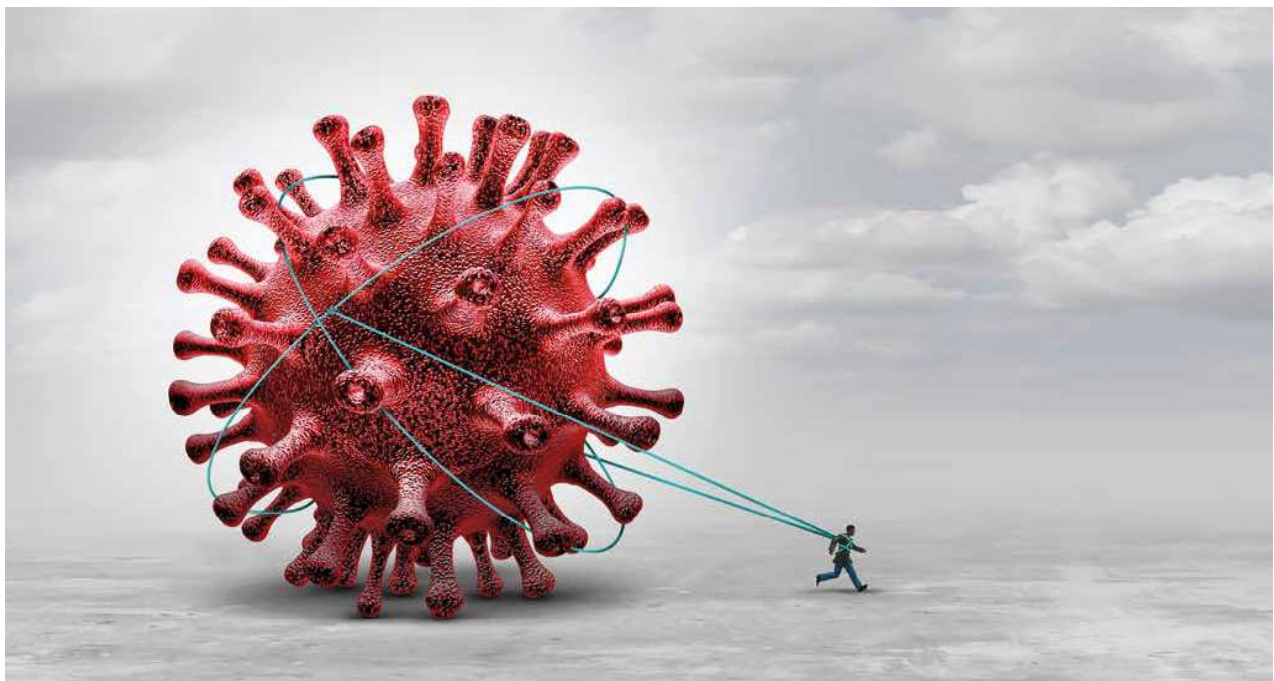
Covid-19 presented us with many challenges, but one long-term consequence is the presence of Long Covid, which in turn can become lifelong ME/CFS. Long Covid and ME/CFS fall under a rather wide umbrella of ELCs (see Box 1), with ME/CFS being classified as a disease of the nervous system (World Health Organisation, 2023), affecting multiple body systems. The ME Association (2023) estimates that more than 1.25 million people in the UK live with a diagnosis of ME/CFS and/or Long Covid, and there are likely to be many more undiagnosed. With the increased prevalence of viral diseases such as Covid, which are often a trigger leading to ME/CFS, the industry needs to take seriously the likely increase in the number of ecologists who will need to be supported through this health crisis.

There must be ecologists out there who are currently facing the challenge of adapting to a life with Long Covid. This can be a daunting and lonely place to be, particularly given the poor track record of general understanding and suitable medical interventions when it comes to ELCs. Navigating your way through your career with an ELC, or knowing how to support employees with ELCs, can be tricky and complex.

Having lived with ME for 14 years, progressing from a Graduate Ecologist to Associate Director in the private consultancy sector with this chronic illness, hopefully I can shed a bit of light on what people with ELCs may be facing and provide potential solutions to both employees and employers.

ME/CFS, like so many chronic illnesses/disabilities, is a fluctuating condition and hugely variable. Its symptoms range from those that, whilst still life-changing, can be managed in a way that allows employment to be an option, to those that leave people permanently bed-bound. For those able to work, the constant anxiety of the unknown and the potential for relapse or exacerbation in symptoms can be stifling in itself. Every day, and indeed sometimes every minute, can be unpredictable in terms of the level of chronic pain or fatigue that will be experienced. Forward planning for many different eventualities is therefore essential for those able to work with this condition.

There is no cure for ME/CFS and the only proven technique to maintain or sometimes improve symptoms is through rest and careful pacing. The best medical advice I've received in relation to ME/CFS is to only ever do 70% of what you feel able to do; this way you don't push beyond your limited supply of energy and cause a



Long-COVID has a lasting impact for some.

worsening of symptoms. Clearly this presents many challenges, particularly in the ecology industry where seasonality and time of day play a big part in when you *have* to work.

ME/CFS causes chronic pain and fatigue, which can, in some cases, also lead to mobility issues. The fatigue is body-wide, impacting even eye and throat muscles, thus sight and speech, as well as the more obvious muscle fatigue that we may typically think of. 'Brain fog' is another common symptom, which is often when the underlying neurological cause of ME/CFS can most easily be seen by others; brain processing is slowed, word recall may become tricky, and even things that are normally automatic, like moving a limb in a particular way, suddenly require great effort.

Why should employers embrace disability and neurodiversity?

Those whose brains and bodies work in different ways to the majority of a particular society or culture, have to adapt; it requires tenacity and determination to reach a point where they are considered equal to their peers. This involves immense problem-solving skills and typically means that by the time they meet a potential employer in the interview room, they have already overcome more challenges than most, and are likely to be hard working, sure of the route they are seeking to take, and be an example of resilience personified. What employer wouldn't want someone in possession of these qualities?

Further, as mentioned in the earlier point about diversity being something that environmental professionals recognise to be positive in so many ways, embracing neurodiversity can greatly strengthen your team. Having people who express traits from across the neurotypical and neurodivergent spectrum means you will have a highly creative workforce. The differences in approach can lead to out-of-the-box thinking and solutions for clients which each person individually may not have thought of.

Having employees with different types of brain processing means that where one struggles, another excels, and these skillsets can lead to great balance and

teamwork. For example, my ME/CFS go-slow brain and my colleague Tracey's go-fast ADHD brain are often at complete opposite ends of the brain processing spectrum. However, we have found that we make an excellent team, with Tracey generating highly creative solutions very rapidly for very detailed aspects of a project, whereas I maintain a well-organised overview of the entire project; between us we end up with a well ordered, timely output for our client with detailed and creative solutions incorporated in key areas.

Making reasonable adjustments to accommodate neurodivergence and disability in the workforce need not be arduous or costly; indeed, any upfront costs will be far outweighed by the benefits to be obtained from tapping into this vast amount of talent. Employees should always be fully encouraged and supported to ask for reasonable adjustments to be made where this will enable them to perform their role more effectively and efficiently, and to minimise the risk of work impacting negatively on their health and wellbeing.

Tips for embracing neurodiversity

Here are some examples of things we've tried, which have worked for at least some neurodiverse staff and/or those with chronic illnesses/disabilities, and which we have found to benefit the wider team:

- Flexible working. This is one of the most helpful things employers can offer people with neurodiversity or chronic illness/disability. Working from home means people can set their own working conditions including lighting, temperature, background noise etc. Taking numerous smaller breaks throughout the day where people can go somewhere private and quiet in their own home, or get some fresh air, can be immensely helpful. It is incredibly beneficial to allow flexible hours and enable people to work to a schedule that maximises productivity in their own way.
- Built-in rest time around out-of-hours surveys. One thing I and so many ecologists have experienced is burn-out from working round the

clock in peak survey season.

Historically this was the norm, but there is no place for it now; there is enough evidence showing the dangers to our health of this type of working. We have a policy whereby all staff have to take a compulsory, fully paid rest time of two hours out of their working day either before or after a dusk survey and three hours immediately after a dawn survey. This is costed into our quotes and is in addition to TOIL which is accrued to take back at a later date.

- Adapting all computer templates to use dyslexia-friendly fonts, colours and spacing. This can include quote and report templates, training materials and spreadsheets, for example.
- Seek out training opportunities which offer an online element with recordings, and ask training providers for handouts of the slides. This can help people to process the information before, during and after the training event.
- Take into account that people with ELCs, in particular, have often had to forgo many or all other aspects of 'typical' life to be able to work. This means that whilst you may see an outwardly 'typical' employee capable of doing everything other colleagues can, this may only be possible because that same person spends their non-working hours resting and recuperating so that all energy available goes on working. Employees may also choose to 'mask' their symptoms. Bear this in mind when arranging staff social events – make sure that activities being planned are accessible to all, particularly if these will extend beyond typical working hours.
- Where driving is an essential part of a job, consider automatic or specially adapted vehicles. I find that my chronic pain is significantly reduced by driving an automatic vehicle. Since my employer provided this for me, I've been able to drive more often and over longer distances whilst still managing field work, with much less pain.
- Good organisation is key. In addition to tools individuals can create and use themselves, employers should provide an overall job management



system or way of working across the team that enables effective and efficient organisation.

- Some people may prefer to communicate with clients by email instead of by phone. It means they have time to retrieve and process all the information needed to respond fully and accurately without worrying that they've forgotten a key piece of information when caught by surprise with a phone call. Where phone calls are necessary, pre-arranging times can be very helpful.
- Reasonable adjustments can include things such as employers supplying additional equipment, e.g. second monitors, noise cancelling headphones/earbuds, coloured screen overlays, reading rulers, sensory/fidget gadgets, ergonomic equipment, computer software such as ClaroRead Pro and Global AutoCorrect, and many more.
- When it comes to reviewing work of neurodivergent employees, always do so constructively and be mindful of the different ways that person may need to work. Remember, if it is frustrating for you as a reviewer to pick up on the same mistakes repeatedly, it is far more frustrating for a colleague with dyslexia to not be able to spot the errors themselves despite multiple proofreads.
- Break tasks down into smaller chunks. This can be helpful for managers to remember when assigning tasks, as well as a useful tip for staff to use. You can do this

in multiple ways to suit; you may find it helpful to start each day or each new piece of work by writing down a list of steps to take to reach your goal. You may prefer instead to assign yourself tasks based on manageable chunks of time; if you know you need regular screen-breaks, for example, set your to-do list to match the time you know you can realistically manage to work for in one go.

- Move around a bit! Sometimes, if feeling a bit stuck or frustrated, getting up and moving or working in a different place can help. Work wherever you are most comfortable. If working at home though, always make sure you can tidy away work at the end of the day so it's not looking at you and tempting you back in or causing you stress.

Conclusion

There is nothing quite like a global pandemic to highlight the fragility of our health; an increasing number of people are living with ELCs and employers must incorporate new ways of working to ensure that these people can not only be retained and recruited into the industry, but thrive within it. The sooner we incorporate working practices that enable the widest possible range of neurodiversity among our workforce, the sooner we will reach a point of long-needed equality. Only then will we, our clients, and ultimately our natural environment whose protection so often rests in our hands, reap the biggest rewards.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my colleagues, particularly Tracey Youngusband and Zenobia Hatch, for their assistance not only with generating ideas for this article, but for being so open and candid about their neurodiversity. They have been my inspiration and biggest cheerleaders, resulting in me finally coming out of the chronic illness closet in my professional life after over a decade of hiding and masking.

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About the Author

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