

# Accommodating Neurodivergence at the Library

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Transcript

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Hi, and welcome to my capstone presentation on accommodating neurodivergence at the library. My name is Brenna Wasser. I work as a service associate at a local library here in the Boise area, and recently I've done personal and academic research on neurodiversity.

And based on that research, I realized that there was a gap in accessibility at my library. Due to this, my question for this project became: how might I create an environment and programs at my library that are supportive to adult and teen community members who are neurodivergent?

And initially I came up with, either we provide patients with circulation items and programming that support and assist their neurodivergency, or we provide services and programs designed to bridge state and federal support gaps. My initial stakeholders were the neurodiverse patrons, the families of neurodiverse individuals, library staff, and myself.

When I began this project, I was planning on doing library tours, a sensory kit that contained materials to help self-soothe individuals who have neurodivergencies, that they could check out at the library, and finally, instituting a sensory-friendly browsing hour at some point in the week.

As far as innovative approach, approaching this project I knew that I wanted to work with library staff stakeholders to ensure that items were appropriate and met the standard of quality that we strive for at the library.

I contacted the Idaho Council for Developmental Disabilities for their input on this project. I contacted the Idaho Council for Libraries' accessibility project manager for ideas. She's in charge of a grant as well. However, due to the timing of this capstone project, I was not eligible to receive a grant for that at this time.

And I also planned on contacting neurodivergent families and patrons for feedback on implemented programs and items, as well. My reasoning for these are, those in the community are the experts to be learned from. Those not in the community do not get to dictate how and what works.

Creative problem solvers listen and receive guidance from those who experience day-to-day life in neurodivergencies or disabilities, and using the diverse voices that I had, the experts from the libraries, experts from disability organizations, neurodivergent patrons themselves, I wanted to merge the information and feedback to build the solution, and I wanted to make sure that I gave all of the experts equal say in the solution.

So, for emotional intelligence, I am new to the neurodivergent community myself, and embracing my diagnosis shows that I have awareness of self. And serving those who are currently not being served shows an awareness of others, specifically looking at the way in which the library could better offer support for neurodiverse patrons.

My approach and recommendations consider the emotional intelligence of the audience. Working with the Idaho Adaptive Project to learn about adaptive technologies means that I am looking at more than just people who have, maybe just ADHD symptoms.

I'm looking at people who may be non-verbal, I'm looking at people who may really struggle with day-to-day communication. Asking the Idaho Council for Developmental Disabilities for feedback and constructive criticism on the changes we make and implement ensures that our changes are accessible and that they are fair and equitable. The research is valuable.

Looking at the research and determining what can a library feasibly do to accommodate patrons, looking at previous accommodations we've made, looking at where we can do better and where we can bridge those gaps, bringing science and proof of success from other successful programs of libraries around the country to our local board of trustees is more likely to allow them to be more excited and motivated to implement the changes that I propose.

A primary tenant of libraries is providing easy and free access to information and resources, so the Union of Research and Library Opportunities provides success that outlives my time at the library.

Providing research in a spot available for our library staff ensures that if for some reason some of these programs fail or they stop being implemented, someone can come by later, look at the research, and then implement something like this, or something better again, if I'm working at the library or not, which is very important to me.

The success of this project was important. However, setting the foundation for improvements and better programs themselves was something that I cared about a lot as well. Creative thinking. I knew that one singular approach to a solution would exclude some members of the neurodivergent community. This is because neurodiversity is a spectrum.

So, the solution must address the varied nature of neurodiversity itself. This lack of support has never been addressed before at our location or around the Treasure Valley. We don't have any sort of sensory browsing hours. The most we've had are children's programs that are sensory story times, but we've never had something that caters more to adults and teens.

Sensory friendly browsing hour at the library allows neurodiverse patrons to navigate the library successfully. An aspect or a characteristic of neurodiversity is often sensory sensitivity. So, very bright lights, things that make noise, too many people. Those can be overstimulating and can really hinder a neurodiverse person's ability to function in a given space.

So, sensory friendly browsing hours proposes that you dim the lights, you turn off unnecessary noises, you limit people, and you provide maps that either show high traffic areas, or you provide maps to better assuage any anxieties that a patron has, and basically give them all the tools that they need to have a successful interaction at the library.

The second thing is a sensory wall located in a quiet spot in the youth services department. Adaptation is integral to innovative solutions.

Due to the pandemic many neurodiverse and autism organizations that usually hand out grants every year, or every six months, simply were not doing that at the time of this project, and so there was no time or options to gather any sort of money to raise, to fund the purchase of sensory kits.

So instead, we used some of our summer reading program decorating budget to create a sensory wall, and that we will house in a very quiet spot in our youth services department.

In the basement, we have a pet turtle who is very soothing to be around, and we will be putting the sensory wall near him to help our patrons and give them a quiet space to reconnect with their bodies, calm down, stim, self-soothe, whatever they may need, with those sensory wall items.

And finally, the library tour program. The library tour's purpose is to take the anxiety out of a trip to the library. Oftentimes, people have a preconceived notion of what the library does and the services that it offers, and so this library tour program essentially was there to take the guesswork out of the library. I wanted to show people every single aspect of the library.

The behind the scenes, the front of house, the back of house, the nitty gritty. And I think the only rooms that were not available for the tour were some of the supply closets, the janitorial closet, and our riser room, which is where we keep a lot of our maintenance storage and things like that.

But otherwise, everybody's office was open. Meeting the staff members is very important, and talking about the the services that the staff offer in addition to what the library offers, as well. So, taking the anxiety out of the library was the major goal with the library tour program.

So, for our current situation, the only neurodiverse services that currently exist are an off-site book club. Our assistant manager runs a book club with Community Connections Incorporated. Members of the neurodiverse community can meet at an off-site location, but they don't have a designated space at the library.

So, I wanted to unite the purpose of libraries with serving a specific marginalized company community. A huge tenant of the library is, a library should be welcoming to all abilities. All libraries have to be ADA compliant, and while ADA is often the bare minimum, there is nothing that bars libraries from going above and beyond.

And this was a situation where I wanted to go above and beyond, and really serve patrons that were not being served at the time. So, for my results with my stakeholders, first of all, the library staff are providing better customer service for neurodiverse patrons through training.

Most of this training was very brief, just explaining a couple things at staff meetings. And also, a lot of the training happened through informal talks of just chatting with librarians about what my capstone project was and why I was passionate about it, and how they could help. But again, we did have some formal training at staff meetings, as well.

Things like "don't use flowery language or idioms" and things like that. Try and talk literally, bluntly, if you need to. Straightforward, as people who have neurodiversity function better and communicate better with that, as they are often that in return. And you know, people are people, and you treat them with respect as well.

Neurodivergent patrons have built connections with the library staff, gained confidence in library spaces, and have used free services, which is a huge goal of mine. Families with neurodivergent individuals have found a place that caters to all of their family needs, and I have the pride to be able to say that I helped make my library more accessible.

Some of the feedback that I received from specific people. Lauren was a patron who appreciated having her family learn more in depth about services the library provides, and she looks forward to the sensory friendly browsing hour at its approval. Kristen is a patron who works with neurodiverse children, and she's excited to network with a Facebook group about the sensory friendly browsing hour.

Derek is a library staffer who learned about neurodiversity. He was one of my informal chats about how to interact with neurodiverse patrons and, as he is a purchaser at our library, he purchased adult non-fiction books on neurodiversity as well.

Rachel is another library staffer who recently discovered that she was ADHD, and she helped with the creation of the sensory wall. And she was very excited for the library to become more accommodating for neurodiverse community members.

So, some of the pictures of my results. This is the picture of the library tour. Basically, I had this at front and center at the very beginning when you walked in, so that we could start there with our tour of the library. This is a picture of the finished sensory wall. As you can see, there's nine things, there's nine different textures.

Some of them are soft, some of them are rough, some of them are all very exciting, and this just helps patrons if they need to stim, which is a form of self-soothing. If they need to stim or have a moment to themselves, they can use these textures that they prefer, to kind of help self-soothe and become more comfortable with their surroundings.

And this is a picture of our adult fiction section with the lighting dimmed. As you can see, we still have lighting. It's very ambient. And we also have sunlight available. But without the harsh fluorescent lighting, it really allows people who have photosensitivity to browse the stacks and to be able to utilize the library as well.

My conclusion. This was a community project focused on making the library more accessible for the neurodiverse community. The library tours were actually available during National Library Week, in April of this year. The sensory wall will be unveiled for our summer reading program, June 1st of this year.

The sensory friendly browsing hour is under review by the library director and the board of trustees at this time, so the implementation of that will be announced at a later date. Something that I learned through this project is that there is more bureaucracy than I previously thought.

When I went into this project, I thought I would chat with my manager, and she and I would work together to get all this implemented. But nope, it turns out that you have to run things by your library director and your board of trustees, and that can be pretty daunting. But one thing that I also learned is that, when you bring passion to a project, it hardly feels like work.

These past five weeks have really flown by, and definitely I believe that enthusiasm and excitement can carry you through even the worst barriers or challenges to your project. And I also learned to be stressed outside my comfort zone.

I had to cold-contact experts, I was asking staff members and my managerial staff for support, and I had to market an event, which is not something that I'm usually comfortable with. I'm usually comfortable putting on an event, but not marketing it, and so doing that from the ground up was really challenging.

The skills that I learned were cold introductions to experts, event planning, in coming up and marketing my own library tours program, and then learning that, when you reach out to experts, it gives your projects depth.

They have specialties and perspectives on topics that you may not have been able to initially consider, and so it's really valuable to bring them in and to get those really special, differing perspectives.

This is my bibliography, and a lot of my research focused on sensor friendly browsing hours, and how to serve neurodiverse patrons in libraries, and also how to just better serve them in general. Thank you so much for listening.

END OF TRANSCRIPT.