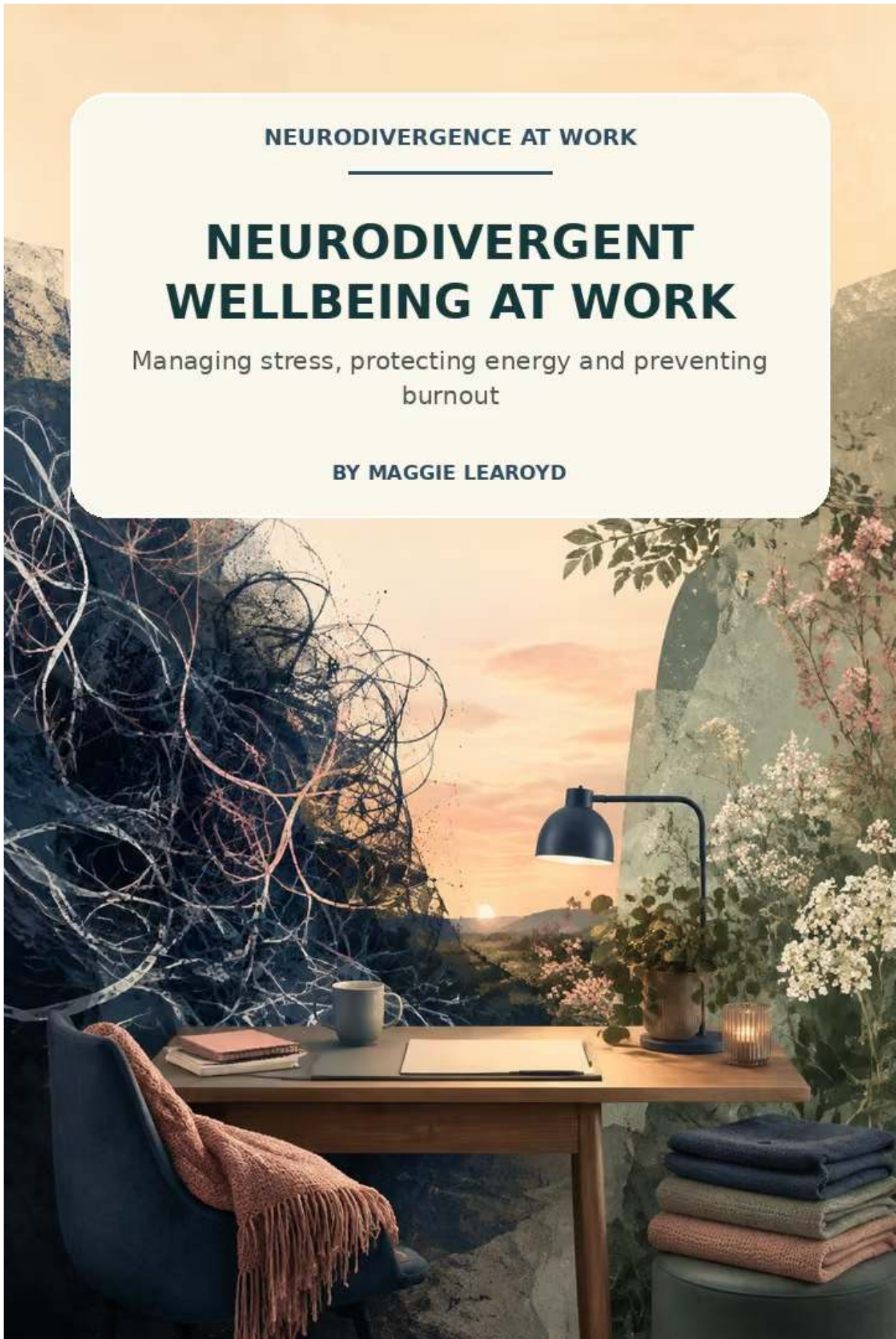


NEURODIVERGENCE AT WORK

NEURODIVERGENT WELLBEING AT WORK

Managing stress, protecting energy and preventing
burnout

BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



Neurodivergent Wellbeing at Work

Managing stress, protecting energy and preventing burnout

Work can provide purpose, routine, social connection and opportunities for personal and professional growth. However, it can also be a significant source of stress. Tight deadlines, changing priorities, sensory demands, workplace politics and high expectations affect everyone at times. For neurodivergent employees, these demands may be experienced differently and, in some cases, more intensely.

This does not mean that neurodivergent people are less resilient or less capable. Rather, workplaces are often designed around neurotypical ways of thinking, communicating and working. When environments fail to accommodate neurological differences, the effort required simply to get through the working day can become exhausting.

Over time, prolonged stress without adequate support can contribute to burnout. For some neurodivergent individuals, burnout may develop differently from traditional occupational burnout and can have a profound impact on physical, emotional and cognitive wellbeing.

Supporting wellbeing is not about expecting neurodivergent employees to simply "cope better." It is about recognising individual needs, reducing unnecessary barriers and creating sustainable working environments where people can perform at their best without compromising their health.

Understanding Workplace Wellbeing

Workplace wellbeing is about more than the absence of illness.

It includes:

- Physical health.

Emotional wellbeing.

Psychological safety.

Meaningful work.

Positive relationships.

Feeling valued.

Having appropriate support.

Being able to recover from stress.

When these areas are supported, employees are more likely to remain engaged, productive and resilient.

Why Neurodivergent Employees May Experience Workplace Stress Differently

Every individual experiences stress differently, regardless of whether they are neurodivergent or neurotypical.

However, additional stressors may include:

- Sensory overload.

Constant interruptions.

Unclear expectations.

Frequent changes in routine.

High levels of multitasking.

Social communication demands.

Long meetings.

Masking or camouflaging.

Executive functioning demands.

Feeling misunderstood.

The cumulative effect of these demands can significantly increase fatigue over time.

Masking and Camouflaging

Many neurodivergent people describe masking (also called camouflaging) as one of the most exhausting aspects of working life.

Masking may involve:

- Hiding natural behaviours.

Forcing eye contact.

Suppressing stimming.

Copying colleagues' communication styles.

Pretending to understand unclear instructions.

Hiding sensory discomfort.

Constantly monitoring social interactions.

Although masking may help someone appear to "fit in," it often comes at a considerable emotional and cognitive cost.

Long-term masking has been associated with increased stress, anxiety, exhaustion and burnout.

Creating workplaces where people feel accepted reduces the need for masking and supports long-term wellbeing.

Sensory Overload

Many neurodivergent individuals experience differences in sensory processing.

Workplace environments may become overwhelming because of:

- Bright lighting.

Background conversations.

Phones ringing.

Open-plan offices.

Strong smells.

Visual clutter.

Constant movement.

Sensory overload can affect:

- Concentration.

Emotional regulation.

Energy levels.

Productivity.

Communication.

Providing quieter spaces or allowing flexible working arrangements can significantly reduce sensory demands.

Executive Functioning and Cognitive Load

Executive functioning refers to the mental processes involved in planning, organising, prioritising and managing tasks.

Some neurodivergent employees may experience challenges with:

- Starting tasks.

Switching between activities.

Working memory.

Time management.

Organisation.

Prioritisation.

This does not reflect motivation or intelligence.

Often, reducing unnecessary cognitive load through clear systems and structured support allows employees to work far more effectively.

Emotional Regulation at Work

Stress can make emotional regulation more difficult for anyone.

For some neurodivergent people, emotions may be experienced more intensely or require additional time to process.

This may include:

- Feeling overwhelmed during conflict.

Difficulty recovering after stressful situations.

Needing quiet time after meetings.

Emotional exhaustion following prolonged social interaction.

Recognising these experiences without judgement allows individuals to develop healthier coping strategies.

Understanding Burnout

Burnout is more than simply feeling tired after a busy week.

Occupational burnout is characterised by:

- Emotional exhaustion.

Increased cynicism or detachment.

Reduced sense of effectiveness.

For neurodivergent individuals, burnout may also involve:

- Loss of previously manageable skills.

Increased sensory sensitivity.

Difficulty communicating.

Greater need for recovery.

Reduced ability to mask.

Increased fatigue.

Difficulty completing everyday tasks.

Recovery often requires more than taking a few days off work.

Early Warning Signs

Recognising burnout early allows action to be taken before it becomes more severe.

Possible signs include:

- Constant fatigue.

Difficulty concentrating.

Increased irritability.

Feeling emotionally numb.

Forgetfulness.

Sleep disturbances.

Frequent illness.

Reduced motivation.

Feeling overwhelmed by routine tasks.

Avoiding work or social interaction.

These signs should be taken seriously rather than dismissed as simply being "busy."

Supporting Wellbeing at Work

Wellbeing is strengthened through small, consistent habits.

Helpful strategies include:

Protecting Energy

Recognise which activities increase or reduce your energy.

Schedule demanding tasks during periods when you function best.

Taking Meaningful Breaks

Regular breaks improve concentration and reduce cognitive fatigue.

Short, intentional pauses are often more effective than working continuously.

Managing Sensory Needs

Use practical strategies such as:

- Noise-cancelling headphones.

Quiet workspaces.

Natural lighting where possible.

Sensory aids.

Flexible working arrangements.

Prioritising Recovery

Recovery is essential rather than optional.

This may include:

- Time in quiet environments.

Physical activity.

Hobbies.

Rest.

Time away from screens.

Spending time with supportive people.

The Importance of Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy involves communicating your needs respectfully and confidently.

This might include:

- Requesting reasonable adjustments.

Explaining communication preferences.

Asking for written instructions.

Discussing workload.

Seeking clarification.

Self-advocacy helps create environments where individuals can work more effectively.

The Role of Managers

Managers can support wellbeing by:

- Encouraging open conversations.

Checking workloads regularly.

Providing clear expectations.

Supporting reasonable adjustments.

Promoting flexible working where appropriate.

Recognising signs of burnout.

Focusing on strengths rather than deficits.

Supportive leadership significantly improves employee wellbeing.

Creating Sustainable Work

Sustainable work means creating conditions where employees can perform well over the long term without sacrificing their health.

This involves:

- Realistic workloads.

Clear communication.

Appropriate support.

Flexible working practices.

Respect for individual differences.

Opportunities for recovery.

Inclusive workplace cultures.

Success should never come at the expense of wellbeing.

Benefits of Supporting Wellbeing

When organisations actively support neurodivergent wellbeing, they often experience:

- Increased staff retention.

Reduced sickness absence.

Improved morale.

Better engagement.

Higher productivity.

Greater innovation.

Stronger teamwork.

Increased psychological safety.

Healthy employees contribute more effectively and sustainably.

Key Takeaways

Neurodivergent employees may experience workplace stress differently because of environmental and organisational demands.

Masking, sensory overload and executive functioning demands can increase fatigue.

Burnout is more than ordinary tiredness and should be recognised early.

Supporting wellbeing involves reducing barriers rather than expecting individuals to simply cope better.

Self-advocacy and reasonable adjustments play an important role in sustainable working.

Managers have a significant influence on employee wellbeing.

Inclusive workplaces support both individual health and organisational success.

Final Thoughts

Supporting the wellbeing of neurodivergent employees is not about reducing expectations or treating people differently—it is about recognising that sustainable performance depends on creating environments where individuals can work in ways that align with their strengths and needs. When workplaces acknowledge the impact of sensory demands, executive functioning, communication differences and the cumulative effects of masking, they become better equipped to support long-term health and productivity.

Preventing burnout requires more than encouraging resilience. It requires organisations to examine how work is designed, how success is measured and whether employees feel safe to ask for support. By focusing on flexibility, clear communication, meaningful adjustments and psychological safety, employers can reduce unnecessary stress while helping individuals thrive.

Ultimately, when wellbeing becomes a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden, everyone benefits. Neurodivergent employees are more likely to remain engaged, confident and fulfilled, and organisations gain from the creativity, innovation and diverse perspectives that a truly neuroinclusive workforce can offer.