

Supporting Your Neurodivergent Staff

Practical Strategies for Camp Leaders



Point your camera at this code to
follow along with a handout

An invitation before we begin: get your needs met

- Sensory and movement:
 - use fidgets
 - move around & shift positions as needed
 - step out without explanation
 - eat, drink, chew gum
- Attention and processing:
 - doodle, take notes, or stim– whatever helps you focus!
 - ask questions any time
 - slow me down if I'm going too fast
- Communication:
 - mask or unmask to your comfort level
 - agreement hand sign



But first... who am I



Dr. Haley Pogachefsky, OTD, OTR/L

- Longtime staff member at Hidden Valley Camp
 - Occupational therapist
 - Doctoral research project: stress management mental health curriculum for camp counselors
 - Owner, Hummingbird OT
 - Helping neurodivergent adults get in the driver's seat of their lives
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Neurodivergent superpowers

- Hyperfocus (when I'm interested in something)
- Humor
- Out of the box thinking & problem solving

Getting on the Same Page

A shared vocabulary makes conversations clear and kind

Neurodivergence

Natural variations in how our nervous systems experience, interpret, and respond to the world around us

Overstimulated

The very real nervous system shut down in response to too much sensory or cognitive input

Anxiety

The body's alarm system in an earnest (yet sometimes misguided) effort to protect us — often louder in neurodivergent brains

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

A neurodevelopmental condition impacting attention, impulsivity, sensory processing, executive functioning, emotional regulation

Autism

A developmental disability that impacts communication, social relationships, executive functioning, flexibility, sensory processing

Executive Functioning

The brain's "management system," controlling planning, focus, impulsivity, achieving goals, time management, multitasking

Gaslighting

Systematic manipulation of the truth that makes a person doubt their experience of reality (*not* asking a counselor to do their job)

Self-Care

Proactive strategies that restore & protect regulation (*not* scrolling endlessly)

Key takeaway:

Neurodivergence is **NOT** an excuse to not participate in a job or community.

It's a lens to collaboratively understand what participation looks like for that individual counselor.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UNIVERSAL → benefits everyone, not just folks with a diagnosis

Multiple Means of Engagement

The “Why” of learning

Staff need to understand how training is relevant to them. Connect content to their own experiences & backgrounds, offer choices in how they learn.

Where can you make clearer how your training content connects to your staff as individuals?

Multiple Means of Representation

The “What” of learning

Present information in a variety of formats & multiple times: visually, auditorily, and through hands-on experience.

Where can you provide more opportunities for staff to customize their learning?

Multiple Means of Expression

The “How” of learning

Consider the different ways staff may show their learning; discussion, demonstration, observation, written reflection.

Where can you offer different ways for staff to show what they know?

Why UDL matters



UDL in Action: Staff Training

Small shifts — big impact on how staff show up & participate

Session Structure

- Build in movement breaks every 20–30 minutes
- State the agenda up front — no surprises (bonus if you can provide it prior in writing, too!)
- Offer (silent) fidgets or movement options during seated sessions

Sensory Environment

- Dim harsh lighting when possible; offer for folks to use sunglasses
- Reduce background noise or offer earplugs
- Give a heads-up & allow alternatives before loud activities (cheering, alarms, etc.)
- Know your own sensory triggers (chewing gum, visual/auditory distractions)

Content Delivery

- Pair verbal instructions with written or visual versions, offer visual cues
- Chunk long trainings into shorter segments with clear goals
- Allow doodling, walking, or other movement during listening
- Vary how staff show what they know: scenarios, written reflections, small group discussions
- Use **sans-serif** (Arial, Helvetica, “sans”) instead of **serif** fonts (Times New Roman, Georgia)

A quick note on fonts

Serif

Sans-Serif

A b c

A b c

The Sensory Strategy Buffet

Different brains, different strategies — offer options, not one-size-fits-all

Movement Seekers

- Pacing during check-ins
- Stand-up option at meetings
- Walk-and-talk supervision

Sensory Avoiders

- Quiet space to decompress
- Noise-reducing headphones
- Previewing & naming transitions

Input Seekers

- Fidget tools in pockets
- Chewing gum during training
- Lap pad, carrying a heavy backpack

Routine Lovers

- Predictable daily schedule
- Visual checklists for tasks
- Same supervisor for debrief

Teaching Real Self-Care

What Self-Care Is NOT

- "Just push through it"
- Vague advice to rest more
- Ignoring sensory needs until crisis
- Only rewarding perfect performance

What Real Self-Care Looks Like

- Co-regulation with a trusted colleague
- Nervous system resets between camper interactions
- Personalized sensory strategies (not one-size-fits-all)
- Permission to use your own tools — no shame

Regulated staff → regulated campers.

Some of my favorite evidence-based self care strategies

Talk to a loved one

Craft

Yoga

Explore somewhere new

Chew something

Go for a walk

Running

Box breathing

Five finger breathing

Knit/ crochet

Doodle or draw

Sing

Do a headstand

Cook

Take a shower

Primal scream

Dance to a song

Jumping jacks

Journal

Cry

5-7-8 breath

Rainbow breaths

15 second plank

Stretch

Paint

Laugh

Quick, positive interaction with an

Wall push-ups

Write

Give yourself a massage

5-4-3-2-1 senses

Director Takeaways

Your role in making this work on the ground



Use shared vocabulary — help staff name & communicate what they're experiencing so you can understand



Apply UDL to training design — vary as much as you can & provide options



Create a sensory friendly environment where staff can get their needs met — make sensory tools available



Model real self-care — leaders set the nervous system tone



Remind your team that neurodivergence is a lens, not an excuse — hold the expectation AND offer the support

Thank you, don't be a stranger!

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