

Peter Ampe
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Great Minds Think Unlike

The Benefits of ADHD, Autism,
Dyslexia and OCD

Lannoo

**My difference
is my talent**

Who is this book for?

This book is for anyone who may be facing difficulties or uncertainties in life and is struggling to identify the root cause of this unease. You might feel socially awkward in group situations, have zero interest in the school curriculum, or have colleagues who question your unconventional thinking and behaviour. Perhaps you're somewhere on the spectrum of a neurodivergent condition without even realizing it. That might be a shock, but this book shows that a realization like this can come as a relief, even a revelation. A lot of things will suddenly become clear. Things about yourself. About your environment. And you'll also get to know the strengths associated with your atypical brain. In other words, your difference points the way to your talent.

This book will also be of interest to business leaders and HR managers keen to promote greater awareness and appreciation of neurodivergent profiles in the workplace.

Welcome to the spectrum

Drawing on personal experience, we aim to show that neuropsychological conditions such as AD(H)D (attention-deficit (hyperactivity) disorder), ASD (autism spectrum disorder), dyslexia and OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) can also have a positive side. Our aim in this book is not to emphasise the downsides of these conditions, but to highlight the upsides.

Our target audience includes individuals with a diagnosis of AD(H)D, ASD, dyslexia, and/or OCD who have average or above-average intelligence. However, as mentioned in the first paragraph, this book aims to go a step further. We also wrote it for anyone who doesn't have a diagnosis (yet) but does have enough symptoms of a neuropsychological condition to benefit from the special powers that are associated with it. Our approach is based on the observation that all of the above conditions lie on a spectrum. There's nothing binary about neuropsychological conditions. This is very different from, for example, a pregnancy test, which gives either a positive or negative result. In other words, you cannot be a little bit pregnant, but you can have a little bit of ADHD or exhibit some compulsive obsessive behaviour.

Maybe, without realizing it yourself, you lie somewhere on one of these spectrums. That might explain why you've been running up against certain things or hearing certain comments from friends or colleagues all your life. Maybe it also shows the path to your talent and the environment in which you thrive best.

This is not an academic textbook. But we do want to take a fresh look at where the boundary lies between the normal and the atypical brain, and – above all – at the possibilities that this fresh look opens up. But as facts are more convincing and correct data remain important, we have had this book reviewed in its entirety by Theo Compernelle, medical doctor, neuropsychiatrist and former professor.

I = we

This book is written in the name of Peter Ampe because it started out as my personal confession. But due to my ADHD I was never able to finish it. For that I needed my wife Emily Rammant, whose touch of OCD means she hates to see things left unfinished. Thanks to Emily, existing chapters have been reworked and new chapters and testimonies added. So although you'll read 'I' throughout, know that it always means 'we'.

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Confessions of the author

Short attention span

‘Smells on all sides, bunched together. Each street different smell. Each person too. Then the spring, the summer: smells. Tastes? They say you can’t taste wines with your eyes shut or a cold in the head.’ – James Joyce, Ulysses

Starting a book with a reference to James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* is never a good idea. While many people are familiar with the title, very few have actually read the book because it’s so difficult to follow.

Maybe you frowned too when you read the first few sentences of this introduction. You’re not the only one for whom Joyce’s literary ramblings are such a struggle. This is because the author experiments with a narrative technique known as stream of consciousness or internal monologue. Joyce employs this technique to illustrate the myriad thoughts and feelings running through the narrator’s mind. They cause the protagonist to jump from topic to topic without warning. Hard to read. But also hard to live with. Because this stream of

Accept your difference, find your talent

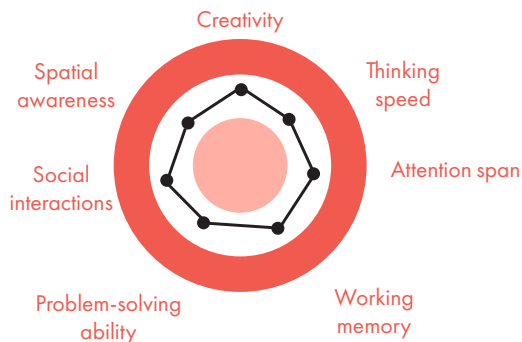
While reading this book, you may come to realize that you too are closer to a particular condition than you initially thought. If you already have a diagnosis, you may find it easier to focus on the positives. Always assuming, of course, that the condition is mild enough to not significantly hinder your professional performance. We certainly don't want to minimize the difficulties that can come with neurodivergence. But there's no shortage of books about those. That's why we mainly aim to highlight the other side, the positive side.

It's a law of nature: for every negative, a positive. Neurodivergence comes with cognitive differences from the norm, and that goes both ways. There can be outliers in a good sense, as well as in a bad sense. Professor Amanda Kirby talks about a 'spiky' profile or peak profile because there are peak and valley features. In the example on the next page you can find the profile of a neurotypical person on top and the peak profile of a neurodivergent person below, where certain traits are overdeveloped and others underdeveloped.

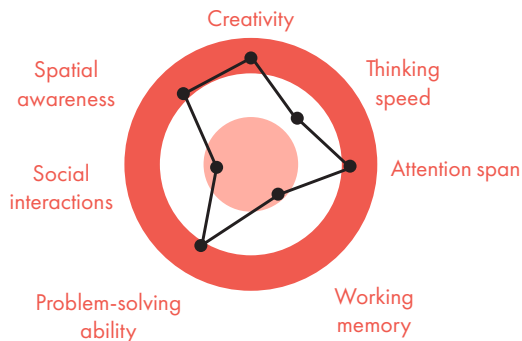
This book invites you to explore and chart your differences. The next step is to accept your difference and, yes, even embrace it. We will help you identify what makes you different and reframe it as a talent. Then, using that talent, you will hopefully find a vocation where you can not only make a difference but also find fulfilment. By taking this unusual route, we invite you to use your difference to discover your strengths, and then apply them

in order to map out your ideal career path. Still too many people spend a lifetime searching for what they're good at and the environment they can thrive in. While all the time they're simply great minds who think unalike.

Neurotypical cognitive profile



Neurodivergent cognitive profile



Rejecting

**Not accepting
your difference**

- Denial
- Angry, anxious
- Depressed
- Bitter

Accepting

**Learning to live with
your difference**

- Reconciled
- Resigned
- Passive

SATISFACTION SUCCESS HAPPINESS



Improving

**Making the best
of your atypical
brain by training
and compensating**

- Ambitious
- Challenged
- Open to experiment

Transcending

**Using the talent
of your atypical brain**

- Appreciation
- Gratitude
- Integration

**Develop the talent
you have,
not the talent you want**

John C. Maxwell

PART I

**Welcome to the
spectrum**

Chapter 1

On the left of the spectrum

Books on neurodivergence mainly offer coping mechanisms to help people handle their condition better and live as normal a life as possible. Unfortunately, they often forget to stress that there are also positive features associated with neurodivergence.

In 2018, Greta Thunberg told the TEDx conference in Stockholm that she had been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and Asperger syndrome (a form of ASD associated with high IQ). She ascribed the doggedness of her commitment partly to her autism. It makes it much easier for her to be, in her own words, ‘laser sharp’ and to say bluntly what she thinks. In other words, she can make purely rational statements without any sense of the social consequences. Only someone who is free of social anxiety can stand up and talk to the media about ‘our leaders behaving like children’, thereby becoming a role model for climate action by thousands of school pupils all over Europe.

If you look in a different way at the pronounced ways of thinking, seeing and organizing of neurodivergent individuals, it becomes possible to distinguish talents or gifts in addition to the limitations of an atypical brain. This is something that is still talked about far too little. But it is exactly what we are going to do in this book.

No diagnosis, but on the spectrum

Of course, you don't need to have a diagnosis, like Greta Thunberg, in order to have access to a different, special way of thinking. As mentioned in the introduction, I feel backed up in this by the term 'spectrum', which refers to the fact that traits can be classified and described according to a sliding scale. A spectrum contains every colour of the rainbow and every transition in between.

People with autism are placed on a scale ranging from left – very mild symptoms – to right – very severe symptoms. This is called the 'autistic spectrum', hence the term autism spectrum disorder or ASD. A similar approach is taken in ADHD, but there the scale is referred to as the ADHD continuum. Both conditions have sliding scales from very mild to severe.

Nowadays, people who fall on the right of the spectrum are given a diagnosis. But what if you're looking more towards the left? There you don't have a diagnosis, but you do have certain traits of neurodivergent behaviour, including the strengths and weaknesses. People on the left of the spectrum are often aware of their mild problems, which don't necessarily have a name or label, but unaware of the strengths or even talents associated with them.

As an important side note, there are, of course, other factors that help to determine whether your atypical brain will lead to a successful career. Examples are your environment or level of education. Another key factor is IQ. An IQ below 70 indicates a

marked impairment of intellectual capacity. Our argument is not relevant to this particular group, and this book is intended for a different audience: people with average IQs and above. The book is also not for people whose condition affects their quality of life to such an extent that they are unable to function professionally.

Another point to consider is that many mental health conditions are sometimes challenging to differentiate. There are various transitional forms that resemble each other.

A condition doesn't necessarily stay within the box that medicine has devised for it. So it's possible to show traits of different conditions. To express it as a metaphor: just because you have big legs and a trunk doesn't mean you're an elephant. Psychiatrist Menno Oosterhoff writes about this in his book *Ik zie anders niks aan je (You look perfectly normal to me)*: 'A classification sits at symptom level and should not be confused with the condition as a whole.' Classifications of psychological conditions are based on establishing a number of symptoms. After all, a blood sample can't tell you whether someone has ADHD, for example. These classifications are purely a convention; they make it easier for service providers to work with these conditions. But in reality, things are more complex. Oosterhoff therefore argues that we should refer not to a disorder or an abnormality but a picture, a clinical picture that best describes your symptoms. We ourselves have struggled with the right choice of words, but we consciously choose to speak of a difference or an atypical brain. Precisely because we see these differences as

something positive. Please note: we don't mean to glorify them. Living with neurodivergence is often anything but easy. And in our experience, daring to name your condition or difference is a crucial first step towards accepting and embracing it.

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