

## Creative Writing Workshops for Late-Diagnosed Neurodivergent People – A Flavour

**Helen:** The Arts Council want a sense of what our workshops will be like. Seems to me one key element is neurodivergent-affirming space aka NDAS. Quiet environments with low lighting are only a small part of NDAS. NDAS begins in the preparatory phase, such as by working to meet people's dietary and access requirements, ensuring they have as much information as possible to help reduce anxiety, and so on. Then at each event I think NDAS includes warmly welcoming each participant, showing them care and giving permissions: yes you can stim, yes you can use swear words in your writing, yes you can use Gen AI to check your spelling and grammar. What else do you think is relevant? Can you identify any significant differences between NDAS in person and online?

**Kate:** Giving people the option of reading material and exercises in advance feels really important (it's not my favourite ADHD thing to do but when I surveyed participants, they appreciate it so much).

NDAS online allows participants to show up according to their energy levels and capacity in a given moment. I encourage them to experiment too. If they would usually be on camera, how does it feel not to be? You could just contribute by audio or in chat. Or by "lurking" – I feel people are just as present that way (though we can also manage any need to take breaks). I am wondering how you could give people that flexibility in an in-person workshop though?

**Helen:** From my experiences at other neurodivergent-led events such as the Playing A/Part conference in 2019 and several Autscope conferences, I would say that one good way is to encourage people to manage their energy and capacity in whatever way they need. This might mean wearing sunglasses indoors, playing with a sensory toy to alleviate anxiety, knitting or stitching as a concentration aid – any number of things really. I guess neurotypical facilitators might find this kind of thing disruptive, but for me it's reassuring to know that everyone present is taking care of themselves. After all, it's not school, we are all adults, and each of us knows better than anyone else what we need at a particular time. So that's the preparation and the space; what about the content? How do we make that neurodivergent-affirming too?

**Kate:** One of my things has been to use example content from other published neurodivergent writers (not only and exclusively, but I think it's a radical centering of neurodivergent voices and opens up the transformational power of "If you can see it you can be it" in terms of raising aspirations around publishing).

I think asking questions around what neurodivergent styles of writing might look like is important too. Of course it's not one thing – it's *many* things, as research like Emma Robdale's recent PhD has shown. But is there something about unmasking in writing forms? This could include elements like the power of fragment and collage, and short focused pieces over longer pieces. Though how do we help people to write from a neurodivergent consciousness and think about neurodivergent-friendly forms without getting stuck in self-voice or narrowing horizons?

**Helen:** Seems to me one of the ways to do that is to keep it playful, so that people don't get hung up on the idea that writing is a Very Serious Business. A number of

the creative writing exercises I use lend themselves to this, such as one where I get people to write short pieces of prose on one topic, then cut those pieces up into individual words and make a poem from some of those on another topic. (I should credit Alison Fell here; it's an adapted version of an exercise she did on an Arvon course I attended 20 years ago.) People don't always realise how experimental writing can be in practice; how much trial and error goes on, and this exercise really helps to underline that. Also I often say things to participants such as "just have a go and see what happens" or "there is no way you can get this wrong". And perhaps another thing that would be helpful is simply reinforcing to participants that if you are neurodivergent and you are writing, then your writing is a neurodivergent style of writing! We will be modelling this because we are quite different writers, and quite different people. You know in the community we say "if you've met one neurodivergent person, you've met one neurodivergent person." What else should we consider?

**Kate:** Well in that spirit – two caveats to the last thing you said. Just as late-diagnosed neurodivergent people will usually have masked a lot of their lives, then their writing might reflect that and isn't automatically and easily reflecting their neurodivergent ways of thinking (so playfulness, as you say, is important). And, although neurodivergent people are as individual as anyone else, we're quite likely to meet distinct categories in our workshops. I've never noticed the differences between people with a primarily ADHD and a primarily Autistic profile as much as in a writing workshop where I'm conscious of some people's need for stimulation and some people's need for peace!

**Helen:** Oh yes I recognize that too! Even within the Autistic community there are sensory seekers and sensory avoiders. And good point about masking – maybe we can devise a gentle exercise around that because it will be relevant for everyone. Including us! So we're building a picture here, of a well-prepared, welcoming, accepting, joyful workshop. I think that, plus the outputs to follow, gives enough of a flavour. Do you agree or, from your viewpoint, is there anything we still need to add?

**Kate:** Absolutely agree. I'm not feeling a jot of doubt that it'll be hugely valuable and transformative in all sorts of ways for us and the participants. We will also be making communities that many late-diagnosed neurodivergent people are really thirsting for; these will be set up as temporary for the workshops, but may well lead to longer-lasting communities too. I'm looking forward to capturing lots of rich, rich data about all of this through neurodivergent-friendly processes, both in the moment and when people have had time and space to process the living tapestry of connections and interconnections we'll all be sparking!

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On the next two pages is *The Verbarium Zine*, an output from one of Kate's online workshops.

Bring out your ant-shaped joy;  
put it boldly on display  
so that all who pass may admire it and remark how  
they wished they had joy of their own.

Bring out your ant-shaped joy;  
share it around,  
there are those whose joy has shrunk and dwindled  
through lack of use,  
they need but a tiny spark to rekindle the flames of  
happiness.

Bring out your ant-shaped joy;  
sit with it in quiet contemplation,  
hold it close to your heart and feel it resonate through  
your soul.

Bring out your ant-shaped joy;  
and others will be emboldened to bring out their joy  
also.

Their star-shaped joy,  
their octopus shaped joy,  
their word-shaped joy,  
their world-shaped joy.

Rainbows in gutters,  
faces in pavements  
bring bubbles of joy.  
I'm told to look up,  
meet the gaze of the world,  
but this feels invasive,  
awkward and shameful

So my eyes and my focus  
fall to the ground,  
my world at my feet  
I become lost in its patterns.  
The cracks in the concrete  
filled with pink blossom snow

Nature finds a way  
finds its path  
out of darkness  
seeks the light  
seeks the air,  
pushes through  
the cracks in the concrete,  
gaps in the wall.

Nature takes its place

I will find my place

Here comes a question - The Question!  
A question that needs a response  
Everyday people ask the question  
The same question every time  
The eternal question  
How Are You?  
The social nicety not a genuine concern  
Do they really want to know how I feel  
Do they care how I feel  
Do they care if life is good  
Do they really want to know  
I don't think they do  
So, I just respond I am Fine Thank You!



VICTORIA BAINBRIDGE / VICTORIA  
BUSUTTIL / SONYA COLLINS / KATE  
FOX / WILLOW HOLLOWAY / SALMA  
LYNCH / ROX NICHOLL / ALICJA  
NOCON / SEF

I didn't know how an online course in Neurodivergent self acceptance through creative writing and reading (snappy title) would go. I only knew that reading and writing about my own journey throughout my post-diagnostic identity sorting-out and unmasking, had helped me. So had talking to other neurodivergent people and realising I wasn't alone. I could see and hear the magic of that kicking in throughout the six sessions. How one sharing sparked another. How there were different types of unfurlings. I didn't know "presence" in a group could happen online in so many ways. Some people we never saw or heard but they were still with us. I'll never forget the soft-creature showing in the final session. We had, sometimes tentatively, shown the soft creatures of ourselves, and they had been accepted. "There should be an anthology" remains my frequent response to the wonderful writing I read, and this zine Sef has kindly put together illustrates why.

INTRODUCTION  
KATE FOX

Ah, I eventually belatedly realise  
as I see someone else's eyes  
flash up to the ceiling,  
they're following mine,  
but it's gone there  
perhaps to escape them,  
or so I can think  
and now both our gazes  
are stuck on this far corner,  
like spy cameras which, if they could  
send back footage of us to us,  
would see us in a recursive loop  
glances bouncing back and forth,  
meeting somewhere slower than light.

LORD  
KATE FOX

How do you rank potatoes and why?  
 If strawberries were turquoise would you give them a try?  
 What's your favourite bounding animal and why is it a squirrel?  
 Can you find a rhyming word (or should it be referral?)  
 What is your opinion on seamless bamboo socks?  
 Have you ever pondered why a flock of birds a flock?  
 Would you live below the sea, alone, for a whole year?  
 Are answers sometimes easy, and sometimes quite unclear?  
 Do you have a favourite mug, and spoon and even bowl?  
 And favourite knife, fork and plate and maybe hole?  
 Do you enjoy weird questions and give a proper answer?  
 Do you still dream at night of being a ballet dancer?  
 Did you think that perhaps this poem would never end?  
 And that perhaps would have seen you driven round the bend?

Do your questions ask questions?  
 Do you ask clarifying questions?  
 Follow-up questions?  
 Do you collect things? Like colours?  
 Do you wear an Autistic uniform and is it comfortable?  
 Have you ever sworn off bras?  
 How much anxiety are you when socialising?  
 Do you wish you had a superpower and is it invisibility?  
 Do you ever experience a quiet mind? And is it ever when immersed in water?  
 What's your special interest and why is it psychology?  
 Are you highly intuitive? Or do you call it strong pattern recognition?  
 Did you ever have an obsession with horoscopes and personality tests?  
 Do you binge eat? Or sensory seek with food?  
 Pre-diagnosis did you think you were just quirky?  
 What is your relationship with authority?  
 How much shame are you?  
 Is your notes app full of scripts?  
 What is the shape of your unmasking? What does it look? Feel like?  
 Does lying sit inside you like a piece of hot coal?  
 How much of yourself has survived your childhood?  
 How do you manage the fatigue of not being yourself?

This feeling comes in waves  
 And like being trapped in a wave  
 I submerge, I suffocate  
 to then emerge  
 ever so slightly, I gasp  
 for breath and I can see the line  
 of the horizon

and then I meet  
 another wave  
 I'm swept again, I try  
 not to drown  
 though the shivering body tricks the mind into thinking  
 oh thinking - it's dangerous to be thinking  
 in the middle of a wave

I try not to drown  
 the thoughts - they're heavy, like boulders  
 the world is on my shoulders, I try  
 to be bolder  
 And I hold her  
 Air-tight

I whisper in her ear  
 It's alright, we can ride this wave  
 This tide,  
 yet again,  
 will change.

Hold on hold on tight.

One day you knew there was a path you could walk that wouldn't lead to black.  
 But that's not yet. I accept.  
 One day you knew that the next step would be stronger, the next sentence truer.  
 But that's not yet. I accept.  
 The muddled puddle curdles.  
 The soft animal needs to stay layered, just a little bit longer.  
 I want to come back out to play one day.  
 Will someone take my hand in the sun and run with me into a warmer sea?  
 I want to step into a line or circle and speak my name through grounded voice.  
 That's not yet. I accept.  
 Though I would like to know when the hell it will be.

You do not have to accept. You can be. You can find your own words for things that do not exist. You can count your longings. Your body can be rough and sharp, or hard and textured. In your world only blue may exist on some days and only grey on others. There is a soft animal beside you, who stretches and yawns. Above you, around you, are lives and footsteps. Beyond you are skies and concepts. You can focus your gaze on a branch or a cloud. You can translate images into sentences. At the end of a sentence there is another sentence and when you reach the end of sentences you are ready for what comes next.