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Breaking the Stigma

A Booklet of Stories for Neurodivergent Youth

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C-SKILLS

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Abstract



Unlike in much of Western Europe, **neurodevelopmental conditions such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and ADHD are still rarely recognized or openly discussed.**

Many individuals remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed due to limited professional understanding, a lack of institutional support, and persistent social stigma. As a result, **children and young people with these conditions are often wrongly labeled as lazy, inattentive, or undisciplined.** This can harm their confidence, restrict their opportunities, and impact both their personal and professional development.

Let this booklet be a reminder that these conditions are not a limitation, but a different path forward—one that holds its own strengths and possibilities.

What You'll Discover?

This booklet shares **stories of young people with learning and attention differences.**

Here you'll read about the **challenges they faced**, including stigma and misunderstanding.

You'll also see **how support from teachers, parents, or mentors helped them succeed.**

Why it Matters?

Neurodevelopmental conditions like dyslexia, ADHD, and others **affect how people learn and process information.**

These aren't signs of low intelligence—just different ways of thinking.

With the right support, these individuals can thrive. Therefore, please **be informed.**

What to Remember?

Neurodiversity is the idea that brain differences—like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia—are natural variations, not flaws to be “fixed.”

Neurodiversity encourages acceptance and inclusion by recognizing that there's no single right way to think, learn, or experience the world.



The Story of DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a learning difference that makes reading, spelling, and writing more difficult.

The Slow Reader

A 10-year-old student in Skopje, North Macedonia, struggled to read aloud. **Despite being bright and curious, he was constantly called out by the teacher for being “lazy” or “not trying hard enough.”** His classmates laughed when he mixed up letters. He began skipping school out of shame.



Hello to Audiobooks

A new school librarian noticed a boy skipping classes and spending time alone. **Realizing he might have dyslexia, she introduced him to audiobooks and spoke with his teacher, who then adapted lessons with audio materials.** Today, that student is a museum educator, bringing stories to life for young visitors.



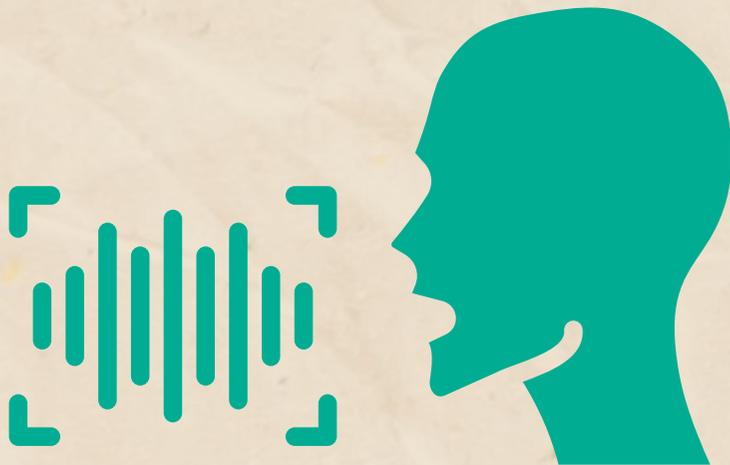
The Struggling Writer

Mila, a high school student from Novi Sad, was known for her sharp insights in class debates, easily explaining complex ideas and impressing everyone. But on written exams, her work was full of spelling errors and jumbled sentences. When a teacher accused her of cheating, her self-esteem dropped, she stopped participating, and even considered quitting school.



The Return of a Voice

Mila's school counselor noticed she was bright but withdrawn. After reviewing her work, she suspected a learning difference and recommended that Mila try using a voice-to-text program for writing. A literature teacher agreed to let her submit her essays in this format. Rapidly, her grades improved. Encouraged, she applied to university and today she works as a communications officer for a youth NGO, helping others find their voice.



The Misunderstood

In a small village in Bulgaria, a boy had trouble reading. His parents thought he just wasn't trying hard enough. They pushed him harder, using punishment to "fix" his reading. Instead, he developed anxiety and withdrew from friends and school. No one knew he had dyslexia.



Hello to Scratch Notes

A retired teacher noticed the boy had grown quiet and withdrawn. **Using games and storytelling, she helped him with reading and explained to his parents he likely had a learning difficulty, not laziness.** Her persistence changed their view, and the boy rediscovered learning joy. He later became a primary school teacher.

The Overlooked Artist

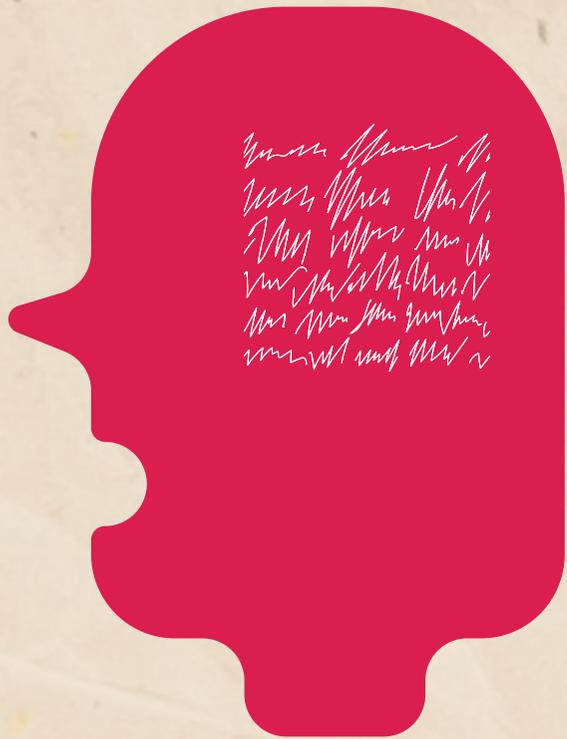
A 12-year-old girl in Brno, Czechia loved art and storytelling but struggled with reading aloud and spelling. Her teachers told her parents she was “not academically gifted” and suggested she should focus on crafts instead of pursuing art. Despite her talents, the low expectations placed on her due to undiagnosed dyslexia discouraged her from applying to art school.



The Return of a Voice

In her last year of primary school, a teacher in an art class spotted the girl’s talent and encouraged her to keep a visual diary. He urged her to enter a youth competition, where she won second place, and later supported her art school application with guidance and a recommendation. Today, she is a book illustrator and visual storyteller, creating inclusive children’s books that celebrate all learners.



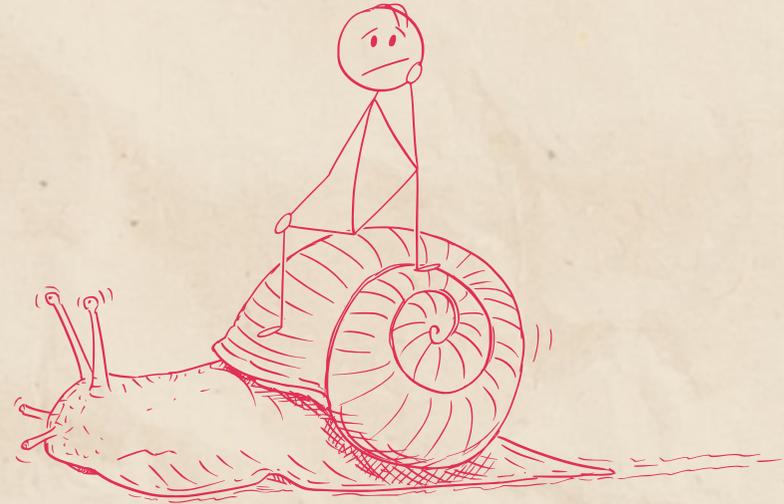


The Story of DYSGRAPHIA

Dysgraphia is a learning difference that makes writing by hand hard.

The Slow Note-Taker

A student in Sarajevo **struggled to keep up because he couldn't copy fast enough from the board. His favorite teacher called him "slow" and "not serious"** whenever he asked for more time, and classmates labeled him "useless." Though he loved science, he began skipping classes that required note-taking or written work.



Hello to Scratch Notes

A new biology teacher noticed the boy's passion for science and gave him printed diagrams with space for short notes. She allowed him to record lessons instead of writing and praised his curiosity. With her support, he regained confidence and is now a lab technician working in environmental research.



The Unseen Storyteller

In Kumanovo, a talented student poured her heart into writing stories, that were always criticized because of her handwriting, spelling, and messy sentence structure. Teachers praised her creativity but still gave her low marks because of this. "You'll never pass with this," one teacher told her. She began to hate writing, fearing her work would always be "wrong."

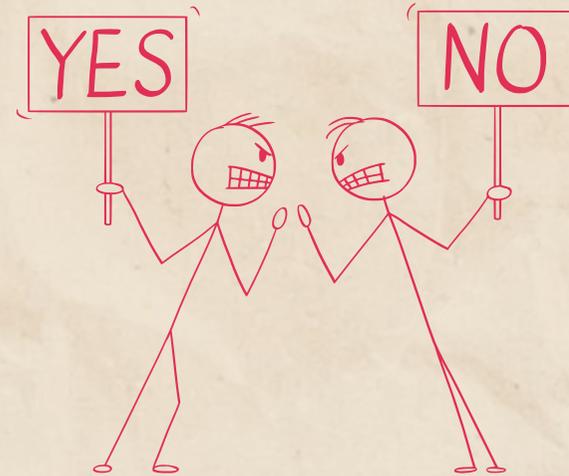
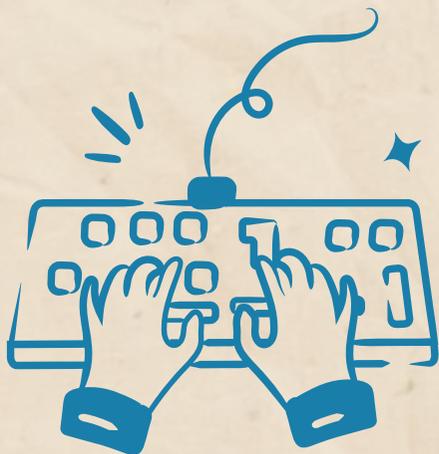


The Return of a Voice

A school librarian saw the girl's creative stories and encouraged her to join a writing competition where typed work was accepted. She won second prize. The librarian mentored her through high school, and today she's a children's book author who writes for kids with learning differences.

The Typing Story

A female student in Prague asked her teachers to submit her assignments typed because her hand cramped during writing, and her handwriting was unreadable. A literature teacher refused, saying, "If you can't write by hand, you shouldn't be in high school." She started staying up late rewriting assignments again and again, trying to make them neater. However, she failed. She started hating the subject and the teacher she once loved.

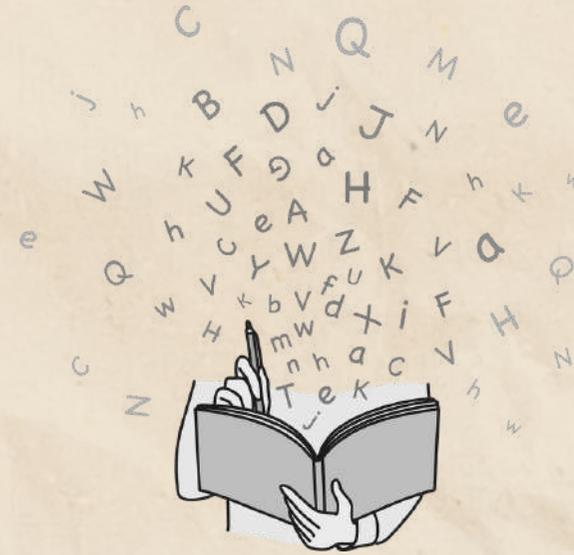
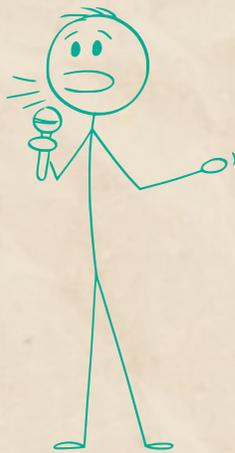


The Thriving

After failing handwritten assignments, the girl met a supportive school counselor who wrote a letter requesting accommodations. Her next teacher accepted typed work and praised her ideas. With the pressure lifted, she went on to study journalism and is now a content editor at an online magazine.

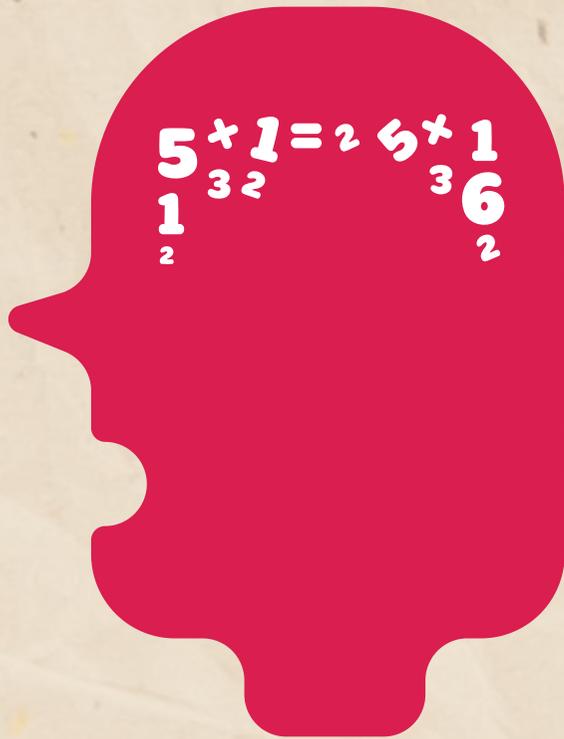
The Chicken-Scratch

A bright boy in Prague had excellent answers on written tests, but his bad handwriting led teachers to mark him down. In the 5th grade, a teacher told his parents: “He has the brain of a scientist but the hand of a toddler.” His self-worth began to slip. He was never formally diagnosed with dysgraphia, and eventually was led to switched to a less demanding school track, believing he wasn’t cut out for academics.



A Comeback

In secondary school, a physics teacher noticed the boy’s sharp thinking despite his messy handwriting. He encouraged him to focus on lab work and allowed oral exams. The teacher introduced him to a STEM mentoring program. Today, he is a data analyst working in renewable energy research.



The Story of DYSCALCULIA

Dyscalculia is a learning difficulty that makes understanding numbers, math concepts, and calculations challenging.

The “Math Dummy”

In Serbia, a boy was humiliated by a math teacher who routinely called him “useless” for failing to memorize multiplication tables. His classmates adopted the same label, and he developed math anxiety that lasted into adulthood.



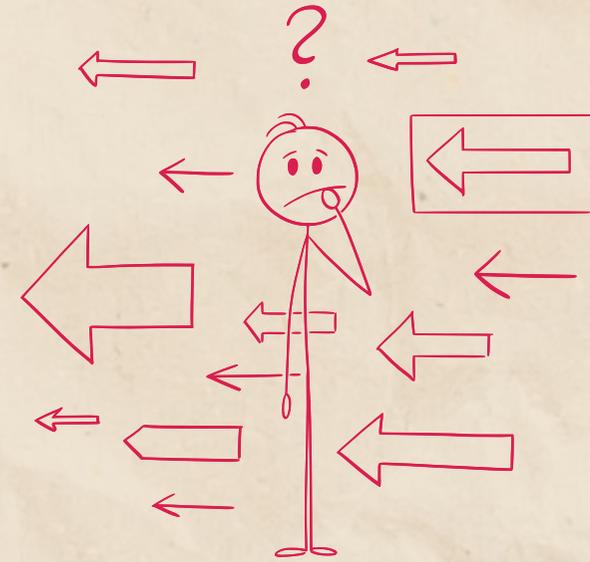
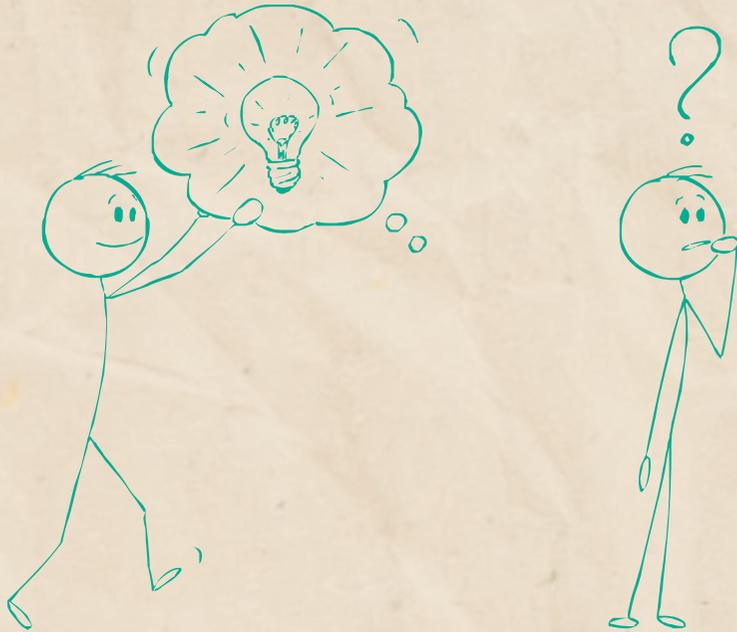
From ‘Useless’ to Useful

Years later, in vocational school, the boy met a supportive carpentry instructor who noticed his hands-on talent. He let him measure using visual guides instead of mental math. Slowly, the boy regained confidence and is now a skilled furniture maker with his own small business.



The Disqualified Dream

A girl in North Macedonia **dreamed of becoming an architect. She excelled in drawing and design but failed basic math courses.** No one recognized her dyscalculia, and she was advised to choose a “simpler” path.

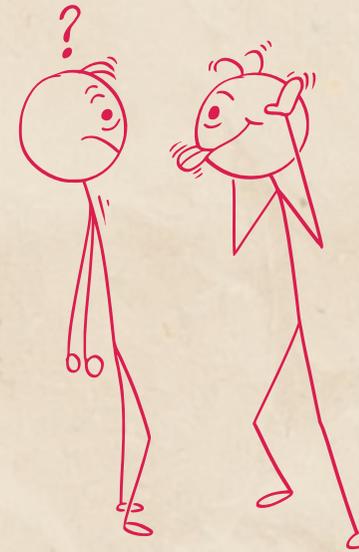
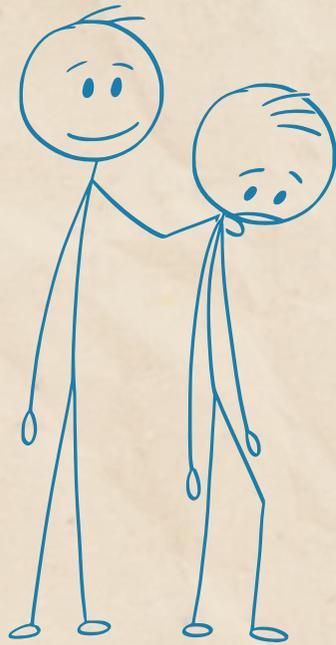


The Different Path

A high school art teacher in Skopje saw the girl's talent and introduced her to architecture software that minimized math barriers. He helped her build a **digital portfolio and apply abroad.** She graduated in interior design and now works as a 3D visual designer for an international firm.

The Public Shaming

A boy in Sofija was regularly made to solve math problems on the board. When he froze or gave the wrong answer, the teacher mocked him in front of the class. He began to associate numbers with humiliation and dropped out at 16.



The Healing

After dropping out, the boy was referred to a youth center where a mentor noticed his fear of math but love for mechanics. The mentor used practical examples—like bike repair—to teach basic math in a new way. The boy completed a vocational program and is now a motorbike mechanic.

The Forgetful

A student in Ostrava was **enthusiastic in all subjects except math, where she repeatedly failed even with tutoring. Her teacher accused her of “not caring enough.”** In reality, she had undiagnosed dyscalculia and couldn't retain basic number facts. No school psychologist ever screened her, and she internalized the idea that she was simply “bad at school.”



Not Just Bad at School

In her final year, a new school psychologist visited the class and noticed the girl's struggle. After screening her for dyscalculia, they created a **learning plan**. A humanities teacher encouraged her writing talent, and she went on to study social work. She now helps others as a school counselor.



The Story of DYSPRAXIA

Dyspraxia is a condition that affects coordination and movement, making tasks like writing, tying shoes, or sports harder.

The Clumsy Kid

A student in Prilep **struggled to tie his shoelaces, catch balls, and ride a bike. He was laughed at in physical education and called “hopeless.”** Teachers assumed he wasn't trying, never suspecting a motor coordination disorder.

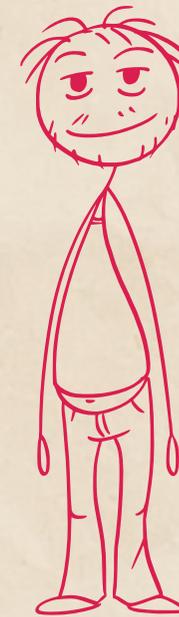


From Shame to Purpose

In 6th grade, a new teacher noticed the boy's **struggle and stopped grading based on speed or skill. Instead, he created activities that focused on fun and teamwork.** The boy slowly joined in and gained confidence. Today, he's a youth sports assistant working with children who have coordination difficulties.

The Untidy Student

A girl in Belgrade had difficulty writing, cutting, including buttoning clothes. Her teacher accused her of being lazy and careless. Her coordination issues were never assessed, and she was labeled as “untidy” and humiliated publicly for it.



Kindness

An art teacher noticed the girl’s frustration with fine motor tasks and gave her tools adapted for easier grip. She praised her creative thinking, not her neatness. With this support, the girl began enjoying school again and is now a graphic design assistant, using digital tools to express her ideas.

The Funny Walker

A dyspraxic teen in Plovdiv had an **unusual walk and poor balance**. Classmates mimicked the way he moved and pushed him during recess. He began to avoid school events altogether, and his academic performance declined fast.



The Shift

A school counselor saw how badly the teen was bullied and invited him to join the school music club. There, he didn't have to move like others — **just feel the rhythm**. Music helped him rebuild confidence. Today, he's a sound technician at a local radio station, known for his focus and calm nature.

The Clumsy Outsider

A student in Prague was teased for being “slow” in tying his shoes and always dropping things in class. Instead of identifying motor coordination issues, teachers assumed he had a cognitive delay. He withdrew socially and avoided sports or creative tasks out of fear of failure and ridicule.



The Breakthrough

A special education teacher stepped in after seeing the boy struggle and offered him a spot in a creative workshop for neurodivergent students. He learned to work with clay and wood, where coordination came with time, not pressure. He's now a ceramics apprentice, proud of his unique style and steady hands.

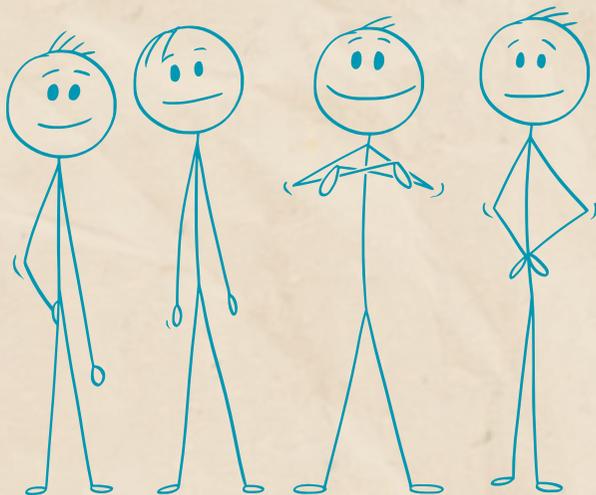


The Story of ADHD

ADHD is a brain-based condition that makes focusing, staying still, and organizing tasks harder.

The Troublemaker

A male student in Ohrid couldn't sit still, **often interrupted class, and lost focus quickly. Rather than being evaluated, he was repeatedly sent to the principal and labeled a "troublemaker."** Teachers warned others to avoid him, which made him angry and aggressive toward classmates and staff.



The Team Leader

A school psychologist noticed the boy's **restlessness and invited him to help organize school events.** For the first time, he was praised for his energy and creativity. With mentorship, he learned how to focus and communicate better. Today, he's a youth coordinator, leading outdoor programs for teens.

The Ignored

A girl in Niš had undiagnosed ADHD. She was overwhelmed by long assignments and couldn't meet deadlines. Teachers assumed she was just disorganized and unmotivated. As time passed by, she felt more and more discouraged, and began to believe that she wasn't cut out for academics.



Breaking the Wall

A new teacher saw the girl's potential and gave her structured deadlines broken into smaller steps. She also let her use visual planners and praised her ideas instead of only focusing on results. The girl regained motivation and now works as a project assistant in a cultural center.

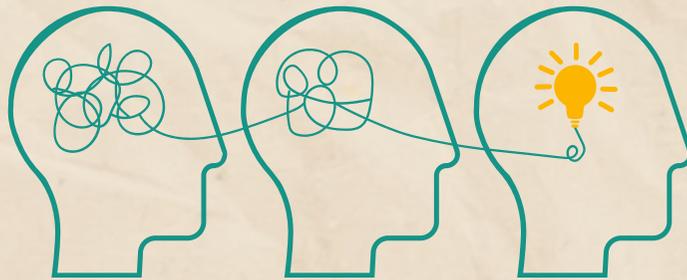
The Misunderstood

In Varna, a young man struggled with long meetings and frequent task-switching. His manager dismissed him as lacking discipline and maturity, which cost him promotions. Though full of creative ideas, he felt forced to leave his job.



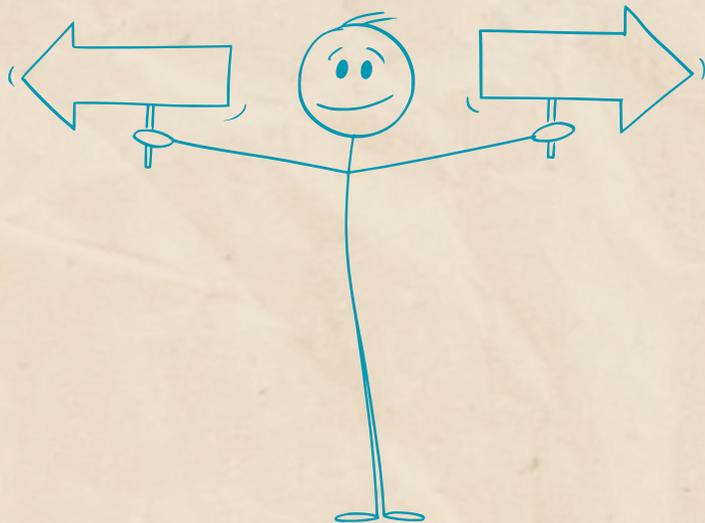
The Creative Outburst

A senior colleague noticed his creativity and suggested a role with flexible tasks and fewer meetings. He also shared ADHD-friendly strategies with managers, which became part of the company's HR practices. The young man thrived in innovation projects and now works as a product designer in a tech startup.



The Distracted

A high school student in Liberec was always tapping his pencil, talking, and daydreaming. Teachers called him “rude” and “disrespectful,” and he was nearly expelled. Only at university, after seeking help abroad, did he receive an ADHD diagnosis. He later reflected, “I wasn’t trying to disrupt—I was trying to survive class.”



The Change

A substitute teacher noticed the student’s constant movement and gave him a role as class discussion leader. She helped channel his energy into debates and student council work. With the right support, he graduated with honors and is now a debate coach and civic engagement trainer.



Famous & Neurodivergent

Steven Spielberg



- 🚫 Has **dyslexia**. Diagnosed in his 60s.
- 📖 **Struggled** with reading.
- 🐢 **Teased** as “slow”.
- 💭 **Loved imagining & telling stories**.
- 🎥 **By 12**, was making movies.
- 👜 **Internship** at Universal launched his career.
- 🎓 **Returned to finish college** in his 50s.

Whoopi Goldberg



- 🚫 Has **dyslexia**.
- 🏢 **Struggled** in school.
- 😞 **Felt scared & anxious**.
- 🎬 **Turned talent & humor** into a career.
- 🏆 **Won Oscar, Emmy, Grammy, Tony**.
- 💛 **Advocates** for learning differences in education.

Albert Einstein



- 🚫 Had dyslexia.
- 🗣️ Spoke late as a child.
- 📖 Struggled with reading & spelling.
- 🐢 Teachers thought he was **slow**.
- 🏠 Saw the world in **pictures & ideas**.
- 💡 **Created** the theory of relativity.
- 🏆 **Won** the 1921 Nobel Prize.

Sir Richard Branson



- 🚫 Has **dyslexia**.
- 📖 **Struggled** with exams, spelling, memorizing.
- 🏢 **Left school at 16** to start Student magazine.
- 💡 Had great **creativity & people skills**.
- 🏢 **Built the Virgin Group empire**.

Agatha Christie



Christie had **dysgraphia**.



Struggled with handwriting & spelling.



She was **great at reading & solving puzzles**.



She **dictated her books**.



She is **author of 80+ detective stories**.



E.g., **Murder on the Orient Express**.

Daniel Radcliffe



Has **dyspraxia**.



Became a star at 12 as Harry Potter.



Struggles with coordination.



Tying shoelaces, writing was **hard**.



Acting & memorizing lines felt **easy**.



His **talent & determination** made him shine.

Benjamin Franklin



Believed to have **dyscalculia**.



Struggled with calculations & math.



Left school early because of it.



Learned best through experiments, not books

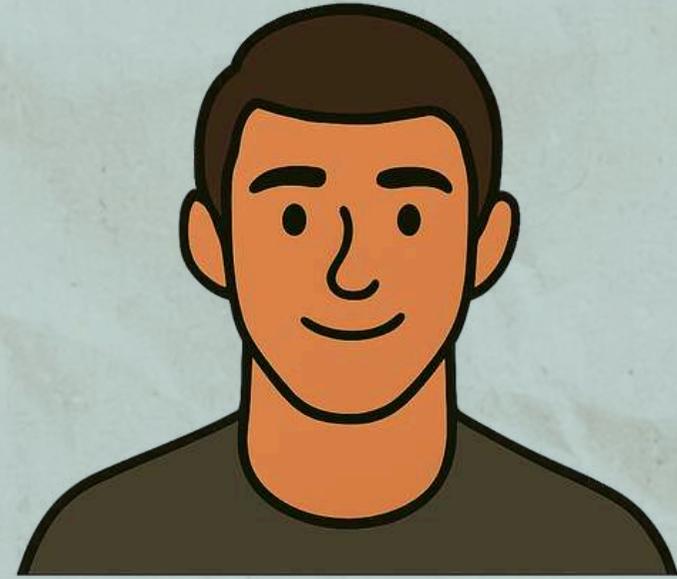


Became a **inventor & scientist**.



He is one of the **Founding Fathers** of USA.

Michael Phelps



Has **ADHD**.



Struggled to sit still & focus.



Swimming became his **superpower**.



ADHD gave him **drive & determination**.



Became the **most decorated Olympian**.

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