

HKS

Creating a Brain Healthy Workplace
Through a Neurodiversity Lens:
An ADHD Brain



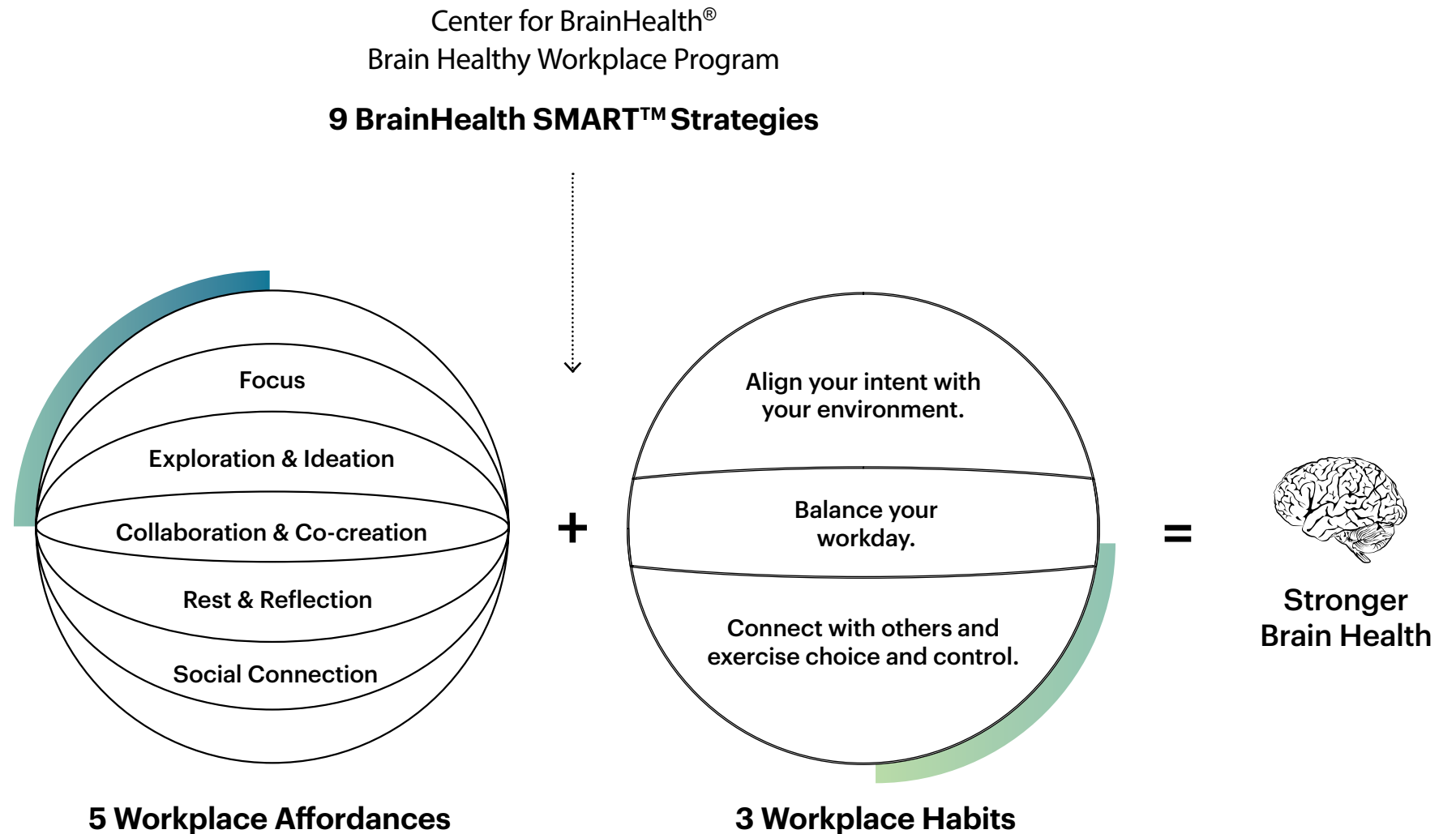
INTRODUCTION

A Neurodiversity Lens on Brain Health

This is an extension to the HKS Creating a Brain Healthy Workplace report, specifically addressing the needs of neurodivergent individuals. We reviewed the framework on getting to brain health outcomes (9 strategies, 5 affordances, and 3 habits summarized on the right) to validate its applicability and identify gaps and opportunities from a neurodiversity lens. Our approach was to review literature and reach out to volunteer HKS neurodivergent employees for their input, expertise, and stories to share here.

We acknowledge that there is a wealth of evidence in this area that should be further leveraged depending on the context. While strategies are currently tailored to neurodivergent individuals already in the workforce, our hope is that implementing these strategies will create a more inclusive environment overall.

This may eventually extend support to individuals who need more assistance and/or are not in the workforce. This work should not be considered as guidelines or a prescription for neurodiversity-friendly workplaces. Rather, it is intended as a conversation starter to help include neurodivergent people and their needs in the workplace and make space for those needs through place-making.



An ADHD Brain

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is historically and predominantly framed within a medical definition that focuses on symptoms like hyperactivity, impulsivity, inattention, and emotional dysregulation that are excessive for a person's age and disrupt various aspects of their life.¹ The social model of ADHD, in contrast, seeks to adapt the societal structure and celebrates the unique strengths ADHDers bring to the workplace.² ADHD is very common in the workplace (although under-diagnosed in the past), and its awareness and prevalence is on the rise amongst the workforce population.³

The content included here covers some commonalities but ADHD experiences and strengths may differ significantly. We highlight how we can work together to create a brain healthy workplace that is neuroinclusive by incorporating more engagement, agency, and understanding.

ADHD Strengths

- **Creative problem-solving** that may bring innovative solutions⁴
- **Cognitive dynamism** to quickly shift thinking and adapt to new information⁵
- **Courage** to take on risks that others might avoid⁵
- **High energy** that keeps the team motivated in moving forward⁵

- **Humanity** to recognize and take on others' perspectives and emotions⁵
- **Resilience** to cope well with stress⁵
- **Hyperfocus**, which are episodes of focused and sustained effort, that lead to great productivity⁶

ADHD Numbers

200 million
of the population
worldwide⁷

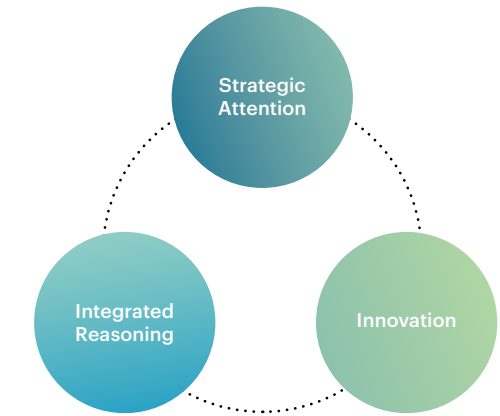
**5.4% of male adults
& 3.2% of female
adults** in the United States. This gender disparity is often due to inherent biological differences and systemic biases in referral and diagnosis.⁸

11 million
of adults in the United States⁸

Activating Brain Health Strategies in the Workplace

We can thrive in the workplace together. Here are some conversation starters that translate research findings related to brain health strategies.* Note that there are significant individual differences amongst ADHDers and not all may apply.

*Adapted from the Center for BrainHealth® Strategic Memory Advanced Reasoning Tactics (SMART™)⁹



Brainpower of Two Prioritized Tasks

ADHDers might get overwhelmed with concurrent tasks and incoming information.¹⁰

How can priority tasks be identified effectively?

Brainpower of One Single Tasking

ADHDers often struggle with multitasking which demands skills in planning, organization, and monitoring performance.^{11,12}

How can cognitive overload be minimized to enhance focus?

Brainpower of None Brain Breaks

Structures for breaks can reduce cognitive fatigue, allowing medication breaks and exercise opportunities for ADHDers.¹³⁻¹⁵

How can work schedules include breaks to help fatigue?

Zoom In What

Focusing on key details aligns with the strength of many autistic individuals, who often pay great attentions to details.¹⁶

What strategies can help balance the team's collective ability?

Zoom Out So What

Autistic individuals might get sidetracked with smaller details and forget about the big picture or the gist of the project.¹⁷

How can the big picture (i.e. goals and objectives) be clearly communicated throughout the task duration?

Zoom Deep & Wide Now What

Holistic processing can be a challenge because of difficulties to integrate diverse information sources into coherent interpretation.¹⁸

What tools can help organize information for easier pattern recognition?

Brainpower of Unknown Curiosity

ADHDers often have an inherent preference for novel and stimulating activities.¹⁹

How can we find continued engagement in novel and stimulating activities?

Brainpower of Paradox Lessons Learned

Error-correction is effective for autistic learners when mentors model correct responses without requiring active feedback from the learner.²⁰

How can we enable learning through observation without the stress of immediate action?

Brainpower of Infinite Endless Options

Cognitive flexibility can be a challenge, which includes difficulty in shifting perspectives or adapting to new cognitive strategies.²¹

How can we improve outreach to incorporate diverse perspectives?

5 Affordances

ADHD employees may have specific needs when searching for brain healthy workplace affordances (i.e., how we perceive environments to meet our needs). We reviewed scientific literature for supporting evidence and interviewed HKS ADHD employees that volunteered to share their experience. Insights from ADHD employees are noted in italics.

“My [ADHD] brain is continuously overworked because there are so many thoughts in at one time and requires time to transition from one focus area to the next.”

Key Considerations

- Circadian rhythm design considerations to alleviate potential high brain activity and help prevent insomnia.^{22,23}
- Provide the option for remote work.²⁴
- Offer a variety of physical work spaces to choose from depending on needs.²⁴



Exploration & Ideation

ADHDers often excel in creative thinking and ideation. Environments that stimulate creativity and offer diverse sensory experiences can be particularly helpful.²⁵ Such spaces can provide the necessary stimulation to keep ADHDers engaged and inspired.

Rest & Reflection

ADHDers frequently benefit from opportunities to take breaks in a quiet, comfortable environment. Such breaks are effective in managing sensory overload and reducing stress, which in turn aids in better regulation of attention and emotions. These rest periods might involve physical activity and may require a longer duration that just five minutes.^{26, 27}

ADHDER Insight: The need for rest is often more than the need to reflect. Shifting to another sensory stimulation can also help.

“I have to resort to activities and other sensory stimulation to relax and to get into the zone to focus.”

Focus

ADHDers often struggle with maintaining attention and minimizing distractions.¹⁰ A workplace that allows control over the environment, such as the ability to work in quieter, less crowded spaces or use noise-cancelling headphones, can be beneficial.²⁸

Collaboration & Co-creation

Group settings can sometimes be overwhelming or distracting for ADHDers. To balance out social distractions, collaborative spaces that minimize environmental distractions may be best. Providing a variety of spaces and tools for different types of collaboration and ideation can accommodate diverse needs.²⁹

ADHDER Insight: Collaboration spaces that have visual and acoustical privacy can help mitigate external distractions and focus on the activity-at-hand.

Social Connection

Social support is important for ADHDers; however, too much social stimulation can be distracting. Offering a balanced social interaction and solitude can cater to the varying social needs of ADHDers.^{30, 31}



BRAIN HEALTHY WORKPLACE & AN ADHD BRAIN

3 Habits

ADHD employees may have workplace habits created to best support their needs. The timeline on the right illustrates an ideal brain healthy workday from an HKS ADHD employee, tracking movements through various locations, both inside and outside the office, as the ADHDer engages in different activities. Below, we add an ADHD lens to the brain healthy habits as supported by scientific literature for additional reference.

3 Brain Healthy Workplace Habits

Align your intent with your environment:

The ability to choose an environment that minimizes distractions and suits the task at hand (whether it's quiet space for focused work or a more dynamic area for creative tasks) can help manage ADHD patterns like distractibility and hyperactivity.²⁸

Balance your workday:

The variability in tasks can help maintain interest and engagement, which is often a challenge for ADHDers.^{19, 32} Scheduled breaks are particularly important as they can help manage the common issue of

mental fatigue and restlessness. Using different spaces to support varied activities can also provide a physical cue to switch mental gears, aiding in the transition between different types of tasks. Time-management software can also help with planning, memory, and scheduling.²⁸

Connect with others and exercise choice and control:

The opportunity to connect with others can offer support and reduce feelings of isolation that sometimes accompany ADHD.³⁰ However, it's important to balance social interactions with the need for uninterrupted work time. The ability to exercise control over one's work environment and choose when to engage with others can help manage distractions. Signaling when not to be disturbed is a useful strategy for managing impulsivity and maintaining focus.

What's your story?

Reflect on your own workday and the differing needs as you chart out your ideal day. Contact research@hksinc.com to request a template.

An Ideal Day from an HKS ADHD Employee

6 AM
Work

Deep work, in the flow

8:30 AM
Commute

Travel to office, listen to podcast, or reflect on work ahead



11 AM
Break

Lunch, walk, nap, decompress



4 PM
Work

Wrap up work from the day, send final emails and get things done



8PM
Work

Focused work without pressure from others

5:30 AM
Personal

Alone time, support mental health, meditate, journal, etc.

7 AM
Personal

Family time, prepare kids for school, etc.

9 AM
Work

The ideal first hours of "on clock" meeting/work: focused learning with small groups, no large meetings. This is also the time for getting organized, gearing up for the day, making task lists, asking clarification questions. This is when I have the most energy.

12:30 PM
Work

Workshop with colleagues, focused work, make progress on deliverables/presentations/work, etc.



5 PM
Personal

Family time

9:30PM
Personal

Bed

Acknowledgements & References

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These efforts covered only Autism and ADHD due to the substantial literature and lived experiences available. While creating a brain-healthy workplace for other neurodivergent conditions is equally important, we will cover those in the future as more information becomes available.

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