

Opinion: Gus Walz's unbridled emotion on the DNC stage opens the door to more understanding of neurodiversity

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"That's my dad. That's MY DAD!" a visibly emotional Gus Walz exclaimed, with tears in his eyes, at the Democratic National Convention. It is rare to see this kind of wholesome love and admiration, especially in a public setting, from a teenager toward their parent.

For most Americans, this was their first introduction to Gus, the neurodivergent son of Minnesota Governor and Democratic vice presidential nominee Tim Walz. In a [People interview](#) published during the convention, Tim Walz and his wife, Gwen, described Gus' specific type of neurodivergence. They noted that he has been diagnosed with nonverbal learning disorder, attention-deficit/[hyperactivity disorder](#), or ADHD, and anxiety.

The public reactions to Gus' display of emotion were mixed. There were negative responses like that of [conservative pundit Ann Coulter](#), who posted, "Talk about weird ..." in a now-deleted post on the social platform X. Others initially mocked Gus, a male teenager, for crying, but then apologized when they learned he was neurodivergent.

But there were also positive responses, such as that of former first lady Michelle Obama, who posted on Instagram: "I was touched to see Gus Walz's joy when his dad [@TimWalz](#) took the stage last night. Thankful for you showing us all what real love looks like, Gus." Some of the positive responses came from [other families with neurodivergent members](#) who saw themselves represented in that moment.

[As a researcher](#) of applied behavior analysis and disability studies, I see this moment as an opportunity, particularly for people whose brain functions, behaviors and processing [are considered "standard" or "typical"](#) by much of society to learn how to better understand and support neurodiversity.

The breadth of neurodiversity

[Neurodiversity](#) in and of itself is simply a biological fact. No two brains work in exactly the same way, and there are a range of brain and [behavioral differences](#) that lead to human variation, similar to race or sexual orientation. Neurodivergent is a term used to describe people whose brains differ [in the way they develop and function](#). Neurodiverse people may be diagnosed with any number of related conditions such as ADHD, autism and dyslexia.

Research suggests that [15% to 20% of the U.S. population](#) is neurodivergent, and this is likely an underrepresented number. That's potentially 1 in 5 people.

When it comes to [neurodevelopmental disorders](#), there are many co-occurring conditions. You can think of various diagnoses as being on a spectrum with other diagnoses. For example, anxiety and depression often have overlapping symptoms or can be thought of as a spectrum of one mental health condition. Neurodevelopmental disabilities such as nonverbal learning disorder [often exist alongside](#) anxiety and ADHD.

What the DSM has to say

In order to learn more about neurodivergencies like nonverbal learning disorder, ADHD and anxiety, you might think a mental health professional like myself would recommend turning to the [Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders \(DSM-5\)](#), the gold standard reference for the mental health field.

However, I don't recommend this, for two reasons. First, [nonverbal learning disorder](#) is a broad category that is not actually in the DSM-5. Researchers describe it as a [developmental visual-spatial disorder](#),

[discovered in 1967.](#)

Its symptoms overlap with many other diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorder, developmental coordination disorder, specific learning disorders and ADHD.

Second, the standard criteria for most of these diagnoses are created entirely by professionals who may not themselves know what the experience is like. Traditionally, the [medical and psychological understanding](#) of neurodivergence characterizes these differences as deficits that must be treated or cured.

Maybe Gus experienced some of these symptoms at the DNC, maybe not. This type of response from society, in which a difference is characterized as a deficit, has led to societal oppression by forcing the [neurodivergent person](#) to change their behaviors to align with neurotypical behaviors.

This attitude that any difference from the perceived societal norm should be shamed or mocked persists in our society to this day, as evidenced by posts on X like Coulter's. Unfortunately, those views have become deep-seated in society due to the [medical model of disability](#), which suggests that neurodivergent people should learn how to "fit in" rather than the rest of society creating more inclusive communities.

Shifting the paradigm

While the DSM can provide information about the symptoms of neurodivergence, I believe it's important to go beyond this sort of textbook information, which treats neurodivergence as a deficit, and learn from the lived experiences of neurodivergent people.

Neurodivergencies, like autism or ADHD, can be better understood by

[directly speaking to neurodivergent people](#) so that society and therapists alike can understand their desires and support needs, rather than projecting neurotypical norms on them.

This approach led me to co-author a book, "[Understanding the Lived Experiences of Autistic Adults](#)," with Adam Paul Valerius, an autistic adult and advocate in California. My conversations with Valerius over two years taught me more about autism than 10 years of studying psychology, and we now often collaborate and present at professional conferences together.

The Walz family demonstrated on a global stage that while there may be obstacles related to neurodivergence, there are also great strengths. Just as neurotypical people have the autonomy to choose which of their challenges to seek support for and how to receive this support, research shows that [neurodivergent voices should be central](#) in determining which supports and solutions best fit their needs.

This [paradigm shift](#) moves away from a medical, or deficit, model of disability into what is called the [social model of disability](#). This outlook centers the voices of disabled people and understands disability as being influenced by societal and cultural expectations.

The social model puts the responses to Gus' show of emotion at the DNC in a new light. It makes space to explore questions like, why was it acceptable to make fun of a teenage boy for showing emotion, but not acceptable once they found out that person is neurodivergent?

Resources for learning more

In the classes I teach at the [University of Southern California](#), I ask my students to read one book [from a list of about 50 autobiographies](#) by neurodivergent authors.

I also invite neurodivergent guest speakers to my classes to speak to the students about their hopes, dreams and challenges. We study the history of disabilities in America, their various diagnostic criteria and how support plans are largely influenced by the societal and cultural understandings of neurodiversity and disability during that time period.

The mocking and shaming responses to Gus Walz's show of emotion at the DNC demonstrate that society still has a long way to go in both understanding and accepting neurodivergent behaviors.

The good news is it's now easier than ever to learn. You don't have to be a clinician or student to work on better understanding the experiences of neurodivergent people. There are many blogs, YouTube channels, social media sites and [autistic autobiographies](#) where you can learn directly from a neurodivergent person.

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