

# From Disability to Diversity: A New Chapter for Neurodiversity in Switzerland

***Recognition is powerful – but it's also time to change the story of what it means to be human.***

***By Susan Mackay***

Earlier this month in Zurich, the Neurodiversity Support Network of Switzerland received a Swiss Diversity Award in the Disability category. It was a powerful moment of recognition. For the first time, our community of neurominorities – so often overlooked, stigmatised, or misunderstood – was honoured on a national stage. I felt immense pride. And I also felt unease.

Because while it is welcome progress to be celebrated, it is also bittersweet to be categorised as “*disabled*.”

History shows us that categories of pathology are not, in fact, fixed truths but social constructs. Homosexuality, for example, was once listed as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual – the DSM. It took decades of activism – and one extraordinary act of courage – for that to change.

In 1972, a gay psychiatrist disguised himself in a mask and wig and, under the pseudonym “Dr. H. Anonymous,” addressed his colleagues at the APA's annual meeting. Speaking with a voice shaking with both fear and defiance, he told them that the real sickness lay not in homosexuality, but in society's prejudice. Just one year later, homosexuality was removed from the DSM. Psychiatry had shifted the question from “*What's wrong with you?*” to “*What's wrong with our assumptions?*”

We face a similar turning point with neurodiversity. Differences such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia are not rare abnormalities; they are as common as one in five – or even one in four – variations of human wiring, strongly genetic and deeply woven into humanity's collective story. To frame them as “*disorders*” is not only scientifically inadequate – it is socially harmful.

As the eminent psychiatrist, Dr. Ned Hallowell once put it: “*A kidney doesn't mind being told it's sick. A mind does.*” To pathologise minds is to risk making them sick. I know this from my own late diagnosis just a few years ago. On the one hand, it brought relief: finally, an explanation for the intense energy, the creative surges, and the struggles that had shaped my life. On the other hand, it also brought grief: the realisation of how much energy had gone into masking, into trying to “*fit in*” to systems not designed for people like me. Reframing was crucial to reclaiming my identity: I was not broken. I was wired differently. And in that difference lay both challenge as well as my most valuable contributions.

At the same time, reframing does not mean denying reality. For many neurominority people and their families, the challenges are immense and lifelong. At last weekend's ceremony, Autismus Schweiz was represented by a mother who spoke movingly about raising a non-speaking autistic teenager. Their story was a powerful reminder of the extraordinary capacity of neurominorities and those who love them. We must never minimise the challenges faced in this lived experience.

At the same time, disability is not only about an individual's differences. It is also about the environments we build. According to the social model of disability, when schools, workplaces and communities are designed around narrow neuronormative standards, far more people

experience 'disability' than need to. If we reduce barriers, widen access, and embrace different ways of being, fewer people will be disabled by society – and many more will be empowered to thrive.

This is why the work of the Neurodiversity Support Network of Switzerland, founded by Dr. Elisabeth Frei, is so important. Through her vision and determination, she has built a community where individuals, families, coaches and employers can connect, learn, and act. Elisabeth has given Switzerland a platform to not only support neurominorities, but also to recognise their unique value.

That's why the Swiss Diversity award truly matters. But it should not be the end of the story. Recognition under the Disability category marks an important milestone, not the destination. The next step is to reframe how we think, to reduce what harms, and to recognise what helps us all thrive. We can do this by moving from a deficit model to a strengths-based one, from pathology to possibility, and from "*special needs*" to embracing human diversity.

And here's the bigger prize: this shift is not just about inclusion for a minority. It's about unlocking resilience, creativity, and innovation for everyone. Research shows that cognitively diverse teams are better at solving problems, adapting to change, and generating breakthroughs. In a future shaped by artificial intelligence, climate disruption, and social fragmentation, we will need the full spectrum of human thinking more than ever.

In this, as in many other areas, Switzerland has an opportunity to show the way. Imagine workplaces redesigned for all kinds of minds, schools that nurture difference instead of punishing it, and a society where belonging is the norm, not the exception. These are not just moral aspirations – they are strategic necessities for building a future where innovation and compassion go hand in hand.

Because the future of this country – and our world – will not be built by uniformity. It will be built by the unique spark of every mind.

And thanks to Swiss Diversity – that spark was finally seen and celebrated.