

THE **NeuroDiversity** **PODCAST**

with Emily Kircher-Morris

[Does Personality Impact Neurodiversity](#)

EPISODE #147

Narrator 0:00

This episode is brought to you by Bridges Academy Online, an online high school for twice exceptional students find them at bridges.edu.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 0:09

That's what I love about looking at everything through the lens of neurodiversity, because we can see typical deficits and turn it into strengths and see okay, up to what point is it making you not function the way you want to?

Emily Kircher-Morris 0:30

It's something that we've been considering for a long time, and it's kind of a chicken and egg question. Does personality impact neurodivergence? Or is it the other way around? Today we're talking with Dr. Alex Vuyk. Alex is a researcher and psychologist who specializes in giftedness and neurodiversity, and she's joining us today from Paraguay. We'll break down what we know and what we're hoping to learn from research. That's all straight ahead on episode 147. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, and this is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Intro 1:04

What is neurodiversity? This is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Emily Kircher-Morris 1:20

As we move into the holidays, we'll all be experiencing different kinds of stress, and it's nice to know that you're not in it alone. It's a perfect time to meet new friends and share thoughts and experiences. That's what our Facebook group is all about. It's called the "Neurodiversity Podcast, Advocacy and Support Group," and we put a link to it in the description, so click through and hang out with us. Dr. Alex Vuyk is a pioneer in gifted education, research practice and advocacy in Paraguay. And in a minute, she'll be

joining us to talk about the confluence, and common ground, of personality and neurodiversity stay right there.

Narrator 2:10

On a previous episode of the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Promo 2:13

Even before you seek professional advice, or consultation, evaluation, etc, you could start by having a conversation with your kid and have that conversation in a calm way. You know, if you seem stressed and scared or panic or angry or upset, then you're going to convey that to your kid as well. You could just start by asking some questions like, how are you doing? What is on your mind? Share a little bit of your experience and model to your family that it's okay to go through difficult emotional experiences, and we all do sometimes. You know, sometimes we're so determined to show our kids that we're there for them that without realizing it, we may also be giving the message it's bad to be rattled, or it's not okay to be upset.

Narrator 3:00

That's episode 110. Find it in your favorite podcast app. You're listening to the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Emily Kircher-Morris 3:18

Today we're talking to Alex Vuyk. Alex is a researcher and psychologist specializing in giftedness and neurodiversity. And she is joining us today from Paraguay. So Alex, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us today.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 3:30

Thank you for having me here. I am very excited that we can have this conversation.

Emily Kircher-Morris 3:35

We've been working on it for a while trying to get his schedule, I'm glad we were finally able to to make it all happen.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 3:39

Absolutely.

Emily Kircher-Morris 3:40

One of the fascinating things that you've studied is how personality impacts a wide range of factors in a person's life. And one of those is related to what's called the Big Five personality model. So to start off our conversation, can you share just a little bit about the Big Five personality model because even though this is widely known and understood in the field of psychology, a lot of our audience is probably unfamiliar with it.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 4:05

The Big Five personality model is the model that has the strongest research support so far. And it states that pretty much every personality trait that you can think of can be modeled in, in a continuum of five traits, and those are the big five. And those traits are like a continuum that go from zero to 100 so to say. And from the combination of where you fall in each one of those, that's where your unique personality comes. So one of those is extraversion and of it we have extroverted people that get their emotional energy revealed through interaction with others. And on the other extreme, we have introverts who get their emotional energy through being with themselves or a small group of people, they recharge in time alone. It doesn't like being an introvert doesn't mean that you don't like other people, but that you expend energy being with others. And so in that continuum from both extremes, you have a million shades of gray. Another one of the big five personality factors is agreeableness, which is on one end, how nice how agreeable the tendency to trust others, a tendency to be modest and humble, and to care about the well being of others. And on the other extreme, we have people that are more realistic that put judgment first that puts their needs first, and that have a little mistrust in others, and they tend to be a bit wary in their interactions. And again, that goes from zero to 100, and we can have all of the combinations in there. Another one of those is conscientiousness, which is one that is very valued in this society, to the point that one of the extremes is a person that is very responsible, very achievement oriented, goal driven, and puts duty first and play comes later, and he like has a very big sense of order and organization. On the other extreme, we have people that are a bit more happy, go lucky and they're more playful, and they go with the flow and see where life takes them. Not so achievement oriented, not so much goals driven, but they just see where life takes them and are a bit more unorganized and not so keen on order and organization. Another one of those, it's the one that gets called neuroticism on one extreme or neuroticism and the other extreme is emotional stability. So people that are more neurotic tend to be more vulnerable to stress tend to feel more negative emotions have more anxiety have more depression, and not as disorders but as states, okay, as states of being that they just feel more naturally drawn to that they can have a bit more angry hostility and feel a bit more more vulnerable to stress and perhaps more impulsive even. And on the other extreme, we have people that are very emotionally stable, and the ones that you want to be with if there's a fire, because they'll be like, oh, like, they'll keep their cool, and know what to do. And they are not very vulnerable to

stress, and they don't have a tendency to feel many negative emotions. And last but not least, let's go with my own personal favorite to the point that it's a big topic in my research, which is openness to experience. Openness to experiences, a tendency to engage with the world through cognitive exploration, it's I want to know more about the world, I want to have different experiences be outer, like experiences or inner experiences. And on the other extreme, we have people that are very traditional, very conservative, and like they do the things as they're told, and they like to have it settled for them. And they like to have it decided they like the way it's always been, and that's what they go for. And so again, we have a whole range in there. Those are the big five in general, and then each of those actually can be split into smaller sections that are called facets that relate to specific parts of those factors. So that's why I think it's so fascinating. I would love to see more commercial products based on the Big Five as there are for other personality tests that can make it more accessible to the public.

Emily Kircher-Morris 8:39

Yeah, because we hear about Myers Briggs. And another big popular one I see now is like enneagrams and different things, but really, if you want to talk about research, if you want to talk about things that are that really have value and stability, even across cultures, the Big Five is the way to go.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 8:57

Absolutely, and so I one of the one of the problems I see is that right now, the way it's presented to the general public, is if you want to know about the Big Five, you have to do a test that can only be administered by a psychologist, right, you have to have what is called a C level qualification that requires a PhD basically, right, or a master's and intensive training. And so that is not accessible, as opposed to other personality tests that just go online and click, click, click, click, click, you pay \$40, and here's your report.

Emily Kircher-Morris 9:29

Yeah, there's some value to understanding some of those things. I mean, obviously, that's why these types of different tests are so popular. And one of the things that you've really researched those specifically, is about how cognitive giftedness is, is interacting with or influenced by the Big Five personality model and specifically, the trait of openness to experience. So can you share a little bit about that?

Dr. Alex Vuyk 9:55

It originally started from the idea that families, parents, teachers, like everyone that came across intellectually gifted people were saying like, they're intense, and they need

to know, and they have a drive to know, and they won't stop until they figure out everything, and they feel so many things. And so there was only one explanation at one point that is overexcitabilities posited by customers, the broski of Polish psychologists in the 60s. And that was the only theory that could explain that, and that theory has very little empirical support. And so in the light of the little empirical support, and the observations that so many people were making, in the sense that this is happening. So if you're telling me that this theory doesn't have a lot of support, then what explanation are you giving me for this? So we realized that it was pretty much identical. Like, if you the definitions to openness to experience in the Big Five, especially the traits as named one specific test that is called the Neil, I did a little game one time at NADC, at the conference at the Graduate Student Research Gala, where I put the definitions of openness facets, and of overexcitabilities and ask the in a poster and ask the people that passed by to map it and to figure out where they went. They couldn't really differentiate because they were pretty much the same. So if they're conceptually similar, if they're the same, then do they hold up in tests, and we found out it did. So a lot of research says that general intelligence and openness are moderately related, which means more often than not cognitively gifted, people will tend to be open, but there's a lot of them that may not be open, like it's not an unnecessary trait. But if you take them in, as a group, people with high cognitive abilities tend to be more open to experience than the general population. You can absolutely be very open and not have high cognitive abilities, but more often than not, it happens that way.

Emily Kircher-Morris 12:19

Understanding also, it might vary between those different facets that you mentioned. So there are six facets to openness to experience. If I'm recalling correctly, there's the intellect piece, which is like curiosity, right, and that one, I think, is always the most strongly connected with that cognitive giftedness. But what are the other facets? And how does that kind of interplay with where that giftedness may or may not interact with that personality trait?

Dr. Alex Vuyk 12:47

Yeah, so there's many different models to measure openness, and so some are more aligned than others. But the one that is more closely aligned is the one that costs three and McCray, the Neil, that personality test. And so that one talks about six different facets, one of them is called openness to fantasy, high scores and that trade have like very intense imagination, they can conjure up vivid images in their mind, they can make it make up elaborate stories, they can look into the future, they can create, like imaginary worlds and follow the like the lot of characters in their minds. And so their inner world is very rich, and that is mostly seen in people who have creativity. Then there's another facet, it's called openness to aesthetics, that is the second one, which

has everything to do with art, beauty and the senses. Being moved by images that come through your senses, to the point that there's a marker for aesthetics, that's called aesthetic chills, just if you see a piece of like, look at a piece of art or hear a piece of music that really moves you and that you get like pylori action and all the little hairs and you get the chills, and so that has a lot of empirical support and has been tested in experimental settings. Then there's another facet that is called openness to feelings, a lot of feelings, both in depth and in variety, a big intensity of emotions. And that doesn't necessarily mean being able to regulate those emotions just means that you feel a lot. The fourth facet is called openness to actions. And that is the one that in our collective imagination we think about the most when we think about openness to experience, because it's that person that wants novelty that this likes routine that will go to a restaurant and try something new on the menu, that will want to take a trip to a different place every year, as opposed to going to that beach that we know and we love, why go somewhere else. Do you stick with the tried and true or do you'd rather go and see something else, even though it might not be as good? And that preference for like that it's basically a preference for novelty in your actions. So not being afraid of changing and actually loving change, like being your best when you're constantly changing and evolving. Then the fifth facet, that is the one that is openness to ideas, that is intellect, to the point that is so strong, there's a movement to call it openness intellect, because it's so different from the others. And that is all about intellectual curiosity. I cannot be still until I understand everything that is going on, I will not rest until I know the theory behind it, I will not stop, I will try to understand the mechanism, I am curious, I want to learn. That drive to learn that motivation, that love of learning, that is all encompassed there in openness to ideas. And then the last that is the one that doesn't have a direct correspondence to over excitability is called openness to values. And that is the willingness to revise values, political values, social values, religious values, cultural values, community values. And it's not a lack of values, but revising them to reflect what the community and the person needs. So it is usually related to rebelliousness, and not like some questioning of authority and just like who are you to tell me these things. So all in all, all those things together, they make up openness, and a person can be very high in one facet, and very low in the other. So their general openness score might look average, but if you look at it more closely, you will see some areas in which they are way higher than the rest.

Dave Morris 17:19

More in a minute.

Emily Kircher-Morris 17:19

With neurodivergent kids identification is important, but then the education experience is vastly different from one school district to the next. And although there are some very

good programs out there, many parents have limited options locally. So maybe it's time to look beyond our friends at Bridges Academy who have been educating 2e and other neurodivergent learners for over 25 years. But now they've adapted that model to a really amazing online space. Bridges Academy Online features synchronous instruction, small class sizes, and because 2e kids really thrive when they can focus on their areas of interest, Bridges highlights talent development as a bridge to college and career. And Bridges is a diploma granting institution. If you haven't thought about the online option, you'll definitely want to talk to Bridges Academy, just go to bridges.edu.

So this might be a little bit of a chicken and an egg type of discussion. But I'm curious what your thoughts are.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 18:28

Go ahead.

Emily Kircher-Morris 18:28

Do you think that giftedness influences personality? Or do you think that personality influences cognitive ability?

Dr. Alex Vuyk 18:38

Ooh, that is a loaded question. I actually think they both influenced each other, they both influenced each other in the sense that you're born with a cognitive potential and a temperament. And then that potential will later turn until your full cognitive abilities and that temperament will turn into your personality, and that's where they play together. For example, let's say you have very high potential, and you are very open to experience, you're very curious. So you will go on learning and you won't stop and you will feel that drive and that passion and you will fall in love with an idea and with a subject. And so that will actually lead to talent development in that domain that you're falling in love with. So you will increase your potential and you will reach the top of your abilities if we think in the Vygotsky sense of the zone of proximal development. As opposed to if you're more close to experiences, so to say and you are just more traditional and you wait for things to be given to you and you don't feel that need to understand everything and so you will be content not pursuing every opportunity that comes your way.

Emily Kircher-Morris 19:59

Can you look at other types of, say neurodiversity, and identify personality characteristics that are associated with those. I don't even know if there's really been any research along those lines, I haven't looked at it before.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 20:12

Actually, there's fascinating research being done with adult ADHD and openness.

Emily Kircher-Morris 20:17

Because that, when you talk about that novelty specifically, like that was the thing that was ringing the bell when you're talking about the need for novelty, like that's such an ADHD kind of characteristic.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 20:26

The studies have conflicting results, because some studies show that they have lower openness, and some studies showed that they had higher openness. And so it wasn't until they, like there was a study I just read, it was kind of recent, that they were digging a bit deeper, and what they did was find actually three cognitive profiles associated with ADHD a bit beyond the hyperactivity, impulsivity, inattentive and combined, it was more, one more related to impulsivity and orbital medial activity, one more related to delay in activities were related to procrastination type things, and the other more related to hyperactivity. And so they, it was separated from those profiles and so it was seeing that the ones that tended to delay the most, that was the profile that had lower openness in general, whereas the others had way higher than the general population. And so that was a new way of looking at it in the sense of, okay, how do I make this work for me, as opposed to against me. That's what I love about like, looking at everything through the lens of neurodiversity, because we can see typical deficits and turn it into strengths and see, okay, up to what point is it making you not function the way you want to and the way it's aligned with your goals and your values in life, with the life that you want to lead? And from what point is it something that we can make sure you enjoy and use it as a strength and novelty to me is one of great examples of that.

Emily Kircher-Morris 22:17

It's fascinating to think about how that all interacts and, and really how much more we have to learn about all these things, as well, like how it all kind of, can be reframed from that deficit model.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 22:29

Think about it. If we're talking about novelty seeking, and we are giving someone with ADHD a task that involves a lot of novelty, like they are not stuck in a job that requires so much routine and rechecking things over and over again. But they have a more

creative type of job, something that relies on novelty, like, I don't know, being a location scout for movies, where your job is to travel and talk to people and figure out where we can make this happen. And then you tell someone, and then they make it happen. As opposed to being stuck, I don't know sitting in a bank where you have to check every cent that goes in and out. That is not a good use of your abilities.

Emily Kircher-Morris 23:26

Right! I want to talk a little bit about counseling and therapy, because the most widely known type of therapy, I think, is cognitive behavioral therapy. That's like the go to like label. And so people say, oh, you gotta go get CBT. But I think personally and professionally, that this is not necessarily the most neurodiversity affirming framework that's out there. And you've kind of had some ideas about what might be a little bit better, and how we can use different types of therapies, more effective and different frameworks. What do you feel like are some of the modalities that are most effective when providing some of that neurodiversity affirming care from a clinical standpoint?

Dr. Alex Vuyk 24:07

I like a lot of the third wave behavioral therapies, because they integrate more than just behaviors, more than just cognitions. And they like to integrate a sense of like mind body awareness, being in the moment and of being out of your mind all of the time. Yeah, in that regard, I've actually found, in personal experience, that is not by any means scientific, that is just anecdotal. But in a lot of aggregate anecdotal experiences from a lot of therapists that work with a diverse population CBT is not the optimal framework. Number one, because not all cognitions are rational, right? And because sometimes it's not just about the way we frame things, and especially not with people who are cognitively gifted, because if you're a master with words, and you can think of a good reason to do anything, you can bring up your best lawyer type arguments to defend pretty irrational beliefs.

Emily Kircher-Morris 25:25

That's true, they do that, yes.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 25:27

Not to mention the parts where you sometimes have to fill in workbooks. And they can feel a little bit demeaning and a little bit like, really, are you asking me this, like this, you think of my intellect and my capabilities of working on myself. And so I particularly like a lot working with ACT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy with DBT, dialectical behavior therapy. And right now, even the fourth wave of behavioral therapies, which is process based therapy, not just relating to diagnoses, or on conditions or situations, but thinking about the underlying emotional processes, and just being able to apply a

framework, so all of that. And so I think that is a lot more affirming, and it helps you find strengths as opposed to having a set of predetermined therapeutic goals that you have to meet

Emily Kircher-Morris 26:26

With ACT, for example, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, how would you describe that? Like, what's different about it from other types of behavioral therapies?

Dr. Alex Vuyk 26:35

It doesn't focus so much on the symptoms that are bringing the person to therapy. It immediately centers everything around the values that the person has, okay, what is the life that you want to live? How does that look? And how can we make it happen despite your depression, despite your anxiety, despite your ADHD, despite your chronic pain, despite your OCD, despite all of these conditions that we may or may not be able to, quote unquote, fix. And so it puts you on a path to living a life that you actually value without having to wait until you don't have it anymore depression until your anxiety remits, or you are down 10 points on whatever anxiety scale they're using. And so you don't need to postpone it anymore. You just start now you start where you are, you start at the point where you are. And they work a lot with psychological flexibility. So it's the concept of being flexible and accepting what happens to us in life and moving in the direction of our values moving closer to what we think is important. What I think is interesting about that, is that it gives you a reason that it's more motivating than being free from depression. So okay, being free from depression, okay, what for? Oh, because I want to do X, Y, and Z. Oh, so you're just postponing doing X, Y and Z until you feel better? Yeah, that's procrastination, right? There's gotta be a better way than that, the typical when I lose 10 pounds, I'm going to whatever, no, life happens today, life has already started. Life doesn't wait for you to do whatever changes you want to make, and so how can you move in the direction of your goals. Of course, if I am in medical school, I will still need my degree to practice, but I it's not, oh, I want to go and cut brains today, but I can move in that direction of the things that I value and reconnecting with the activities I'm doing, from a point of view of a purpose. I'm doing this for a purpose, it's not because I love reading a million notes that I'm doing this, it's because I hope to be a neurosurgeon one day. And so it focuses a lot on the connection with purpose, and being flexible with the difference of what is today and what we hope it will be one day, it separates you from your thoughts, like those therapies don't put a lot of importance on your thoughts, and usually a lot of intellectually gifted people are they have capital T thoughts.

Emily Kircher-Morris 29:34

That is also true.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 29:35

They give a lot of importance to their thoughts. And that is a very easy way to get enmeshed in those thoughts. When they start becoming a little bit more complicated, and then you get stuck in that eternal feedback loop that can be problematic. And so wave behavioral therapists help you to take a step back from those thoughts and you are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are happy about something that happened to you. And so it's easier to move away from the thoughts to take some distance and to choose a different course of action than what the thoughts are saying. And we don't even need to change the thoughts, what we changed is our relationship to them. The analogy that I like to use, because a lot of people say like, oh, so it's okay that I have those thoughts that I'm worthless, you're telling me that it's okay. I'm like, um, nope. But you're saying that I have to accept them. You have to accept that the thoughts are coming.

Emily Kircher-Morris 30:33

Right. They're happening.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 30:34

Yeah, not that the content of the thoughts is automatically true. Because when we have thoughts, capital T, trademark thoughts, we tend to believe that just because a thought came into our mind, it must automatically be true. And newsflash, we sometimes have thoughts that are not necessarily true, sometimes they're bogus, a load of nonsense. And so that is what these types of therapy help us do. It's like, we're in a train station. And the trains are passing, when we have a thought, and we jump on that train of thought, metaphorically, it's like a train is coming and we automatically step into the train just because. And so CBT would be like, okay, let's make the trains go somewhere else, we will close the station, there are no more thoughts, like no more trains like that coming in. And with ACT, what we learned to do is we're at a train station, oh, look, a train is coming, I don't like it, I let it go, I look at it, and it goes, yeah, look, I had an intrusive thought that I'm worthless, oh, yeah, it's a thought, and you let it go. It's not like, I am worthy, I am worthy. It's not you fighting with your thoughts, it's like oh, look, thought came again, silly thought. You just let it pass, you just don't jump on that train of thought. And so it's changing our relationship with the thoughts. And that leads to so many changes, that I think it's fascinating to witness.

Emily Kircher-Morris 32:12

I think it's a good reframe of all of those, all of those things that maybe we feel like we've quote unquote, learned, and that that it's not useful in some contexts, but it's just not the end all and be all.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 32:25

And that's why I'm happy that there's a lot of research being done on many types of therapies. So now a lot of approaches are evidence based, and so insurances are happy to pay for it.

Emily Kircher-Morris 32:41

Yes. Well, Alex, I'm so happy that we've had this chance to talk today. Thank you so much for your time.

Dr. Alex Vuyk 32:48

Thank you for having me here, I had a blast.

Emily Kircher-Morris 32:55

Sometimes I like to get into the weeds and think about a lot of the questions we have about neurodiversity, giftedness, and psychology. But I also recognize that there are times when we can get so far into the conversation, that we can lose sight of the bigger picture. Even when some of the ways that we understand and conceptualize neurodiversity differ from each other, the bigger picture still remains, we recognize that there are individual differences within our neurodiverse world. And we want everyone to be supported, accommodated and successful. I'm actually preparing to leave this afternoon to head to the annual conference for the National Association for Gifted Children. And I'm looking forward to connecting with Alex and some of your other favorite guests that we've had on the show, as well as connecting with some new folks that you'll probably hear eventually. Getting together with like minded people is such a fulfilling experience, but we can't lose sight of that longer term goal of creating a neurodiversity affirming world. And that means taking the ideas that we debate when we're in the weeds, and helping to do the work by advocating for our neurodivergent friends, colleagues, children and selves. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Dave Morris 34:52

This episode brought to you by Bridges Academy Online, a high school program for 2e students find them at bridges.edu. Thanks to Alex Vuyk, we have links to our work on the episode 147 page at neurodiversity.podcast.com. Our host is Emily Kircher-Morris. Our production assistant and office manager is Krista Brown. The executive producer

and studio engineer is me, Dave Morris. For all of us, thanks to all of you for listening and we'll see you next time. This is a service of the Neurodiversity Alliance.