

A guide to receiving feedback for neurodivergent GP registrars

Providing and receiving feedback is an essential aspect of medical training. This can present unique challenges for neurodivergent GP registrars. Neurodiversity is an “invisible disability”, many GP registrars (and their trainers) may be under-recognised and un-diagnosed, so it is important to recognise that feedback should be tailored to the needs of the individual, regardless of diagnostic label. Communication is key to understanding.

Case scenario

Susan Homes is an ST2 GP registrar and is now 3 months into her first post in general practice. She had felt that she was settling in well, and had received positive feedback from her clinical supervisor, whom she found to be supportive and encouraging. However, her clinical supervisor has had to take some unexpected leave, and she is now being supervised by another trainer in the practice.

Susan has experienced challenges in establishing rapport with her new trainer. She feels that her clinical acumen and decision-making skills are being overly scrutinised during debriefs. Recently a patient complained because she was running 30 minutes late, and Susan perceived that the subsequent discussion with the trainer was unhelpful, as she was held accountable for the delay, despite having managed several complex consultations that morning.

The trainer has begun making regular entries in her educator notes, which Susan finds demeaning, and she has started to feel anxious about attending work. Susan wonders why she seems to find the feedback more difficult to receive from this trainer than other GP registrars in the practice do. She also wonders why she found it easier to accept feedback from her original clinical supervisor.

The term ‘neurodiversity’ describes the infinite, natural variation of thinking, learning and processing the world around us (Shaw, 2024). This encompasses the entire range of human neuro-types, including neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals.

Neurotypical refers to the standard way of thinking, while neurodivergent describes those whose developmental profiles deviate from this norm (Doyle, 2020).

Neurodivergence serves as an umbrella term for various neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs), including those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or autism.

Neurodivergent colleagues may encounter differences with communication style, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility, which can influence their interpretation and response to feedback especially if it is delivered by someone who has a traditionally neurotypical communication style. The “double empathy problem” (Milton, 2012), refers

to the communication challenge resulting from a lack of mutual understanding between individuals who have different neurotypes and where neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals find communication more challenging than two neurotypical or two neurodivergent individuals would. A neurodivergent registrar might find it challenging to pick up on social cues (DSM-5-TR, 2013), perceive feedback as overwhelming (Retz et al, 2014; Farone et al, 2019; Shaw et al, 2020), or respond emotionally to criticism (Bedrossian, 2021). Such challenges can make feedback sessions feel more personal or difficult to navigate, potentially resulting in heightened anxiety and diminished performance. A neurodivergent trainer may have similar difficulties and perhaps struggle with the need to be flexible in their own approach to feedback. With an understanding of these challenges and the implementation of tailored strategies, feedback can become a more supportive and effective tool for growth. By establishing clear communication channels, providing feedback in ways that suit the registrar's needs, and creating an open, non-judgmental environment, trainers can help neurodivergent individuals feel valued and understood. Recognising that trainers may themselves be neurodivergent, may help encourage self-reflection, build confidence, and foster a productive learning experience.

This article offers practical advice for neurodivergent registrars, specifically in the context of GP training, on how to request, receive, and accept feedback in a way that promotes personal and professional development. It will also provide useful information for trainers, who will be providing the feedback, and who may themselves be Neurodivergent (whether diagnosed or not). It should be recognised that, whilst we can provide guidance and suggestions that can be widely applicable, a tailored and sensitive approach, that is individualised, is of the most help. These reasonable adjustments to feedback techniques should benefit all learners and all trainers regardless of their neurotypes.

Understanding feelings about feedback

Individuals who are neurodivergent often have unique experiences with feedback, influenced by the following factors:

Cognitive inflexibility

Adjusting from one approach or perspective to another can prove difficult, particularly when there are inconsistencies among trainers. This can lead to ambiguity which may be difficult for neurodivergent individuals to navigate. Conflicting styles can lead to anxiety and you may be resistant to trying new strategies, particularly if previous approaches have been successful. This can hinder your ability to incorporate feedback effectively.

Social communication differences

You may tend to interpret feedback literally or concentrate on specific details, which can complicate the process of grasping broader messages related to improvement. As a neurodivergent individual, you may have specific communication preferences, such as written feedback instead of verbal, or needing more time to process and respond to feedback.

Emotional dysregulation

Neurodivergent individuals often display increased emotional reactivity and express their emotions more intensely (Cai et al., 2018). You may therefore have a heightened reaction to feedback that is perceived to be negative.

Rejection sensitivity/rejection sensitive dysphoria

Sometimes, a profound sense of unease results from feedback that is perceived to be negative (even if that is not how the feedback was intended). This leads to intense feelings of misery, anxiety and ‘unbearable’ pain (Dodson, 2024). You may perceive that you are being blamed for events that you may not have been responsible for, and you may be left with feelings of intense shame. Previous negative experiences with feedback can also shape how neurodivergent individuals perceive and respond to new feedback. If you have encountered harsh or unconstructive criticism in the past, you may be more apprehensive or defensive when receiving feedback in the future.

Executive function challenges

Difficulties with executive functioning, such as planning, organising, and prioritising tasks, can impact how feedback is processed and acted upon. As a neurodivergent individual, you might struggle to implement feedback if you find it challenging to break down tasks into manageable steps. Challenges with working memory may mean you find it hard to retain and apply feedback over time. You may also struggle with initiating tasks, resulting in procrastination.

Given these considerations, it is understandable that you may feel anxious and overwhelmed in these situations. It is important to acknowledge these emotional reactions without allowing them to hinder your ability to learn and grow from the feedback. Recognising that you are not alone in experiencing these feelings is also vital.

Requesting feedback in a constructive way

In the case study Susan is experiencing challenges in receiving feedback from her new trainer, which seems to be more pronounced compared to her colleagues. This may be attributed to the recent change in supervision arrangements, resulting in a new relationship dynamic. It could be beneficial for her to consider re-establishing this relationship and reflecting on her approach to receiving feedback. Requesting feedback

proactively can help set a positive tone and ensure that the feedback received aligns with your specific needs. It may be helpful to consider the following strategies:

Be specific

Instead of waiting for general feedback, try to be specific about the areas on which you would like feedback. For example, ask, "Can you help me understand how I can manage time better when seeing complex patients?" This approach helps your trainer to focus on your specific priorities and needs which prevents the feedback from being overly broad or overwhelming.

Ask for feedback early

It is likely be helpful to have a conversation with your trainer at an early stage in the post to explain your learning preferences, and what you have identified as having been helpful in the past. For example, if you prefer to receive feedback shortly after an event has occurred, rather than the next day, share this preference with your educators.

Set expectations

Discuss how you prefer to receive feedback. For instance, if you struggle with ambiguity, you might say, "I find clear, direct feedback with examples really helpful." It is perfectly acceptable to request a format that works best for you, such as written feedback or a structured one-on-one meeting. If you know you find receiving feedback challenging, be open to explaining this to your supervisor, particularly if you struggle with rejection sensitivity.

Ask for advanced notice

To reduce anxiety about unexpected feedback, consider requesting that your trainer provides advanced notice and detailed information about upcoming meetings or feedback sessions wherever possible. By doing so, you can mentally prepare yourself and reduce the element of surprise, which can be a significant source of stress.

Request regular check-ins

You could consider scheduling regular feedback sessions. You might suggest, "Could we set a regular check-in schedule so I can continuously improve and stay on track?" Using the first ten minutes of every 1:1 tutorial might be an ideal time to do this - there is opportunity for both trainer and GP registrar to reflect upon any key issues that require further discussion, and it enables shared goals and objectives to be set for the weeks ahead.

Use and request clear communication

For example, having the subject of an email clearly state the purpose, such as “Feedback Session on Clinical Skills - Thursday 3 PM,” can significantly alleviate anxiety. This clarity allows you to prioritise and organise your time effectively, ensuring that you are mentally and emotionally prepared for the feedback. Having a clear agenda for meetings will also help alleviate anxiety.

Receiving feedback constructively

Once you have requested feedback, it is time to receive it. Given your neurodivergent traits, here are some tips for processing feedback effectively.

Prepare yourself

If you know you are about to receive feedback, take a few moments to ground yourself. Take a few deep breaths and remind yourself that feedback is an opportunity for growth, not a personal attack.

Ask for clarification

If the feedback is unclear or seems overly critical, don't hesitate to ask for clarification. You could say, “I'm not sure I fully understand, please could you give me a concrete example?” This will help you avoid misinterpretation and better target areas for improvement.

Focus on actionable steps

It can be easy to feel overwhelmed when given negative feedback but focusing on what can be done to improve helps shift the conversation from feeling like criticism to an opportunity for learning. For instance, instead of dwelling on the 30-minute delay with your patient, Susan from the example could focus on solutions like, “How can I better manage my schedule with complex patients?” or “Can we explore time management strategies together?”

Setting clear goals and breaking down tasks into concrete steps can make it easier to tackle by prioritising tasks and focusing on what needs to be done first.

Take notes

Sometimes feedback can be hard to absorb in the moment, so consider taking notes or asking your trainer for written feedback. Having something to refer to later allows you to process it at your own pace. Utilising technology with the use of digital tools may help with task management. Some neurodivergent doctors find recording conversations using transcription software enables them to be confident that they have captured the details of the conversation and enables them to be more fully present within the discussion if they are not worrying about capturing specific information in note form.

Dealing with difficult feedback and trainer dynamics

If you have identified that you feel your trainer's feedback is difficult to receive, there may be several reasons for this, including differences in communication styles or a mismatch in expectations. Understanding these factors can help you navigate the relationship more effectively.

Understand your emotional response

If you experience heightened anxiety or frustration after receiving feedback from your trainer, recognise that this may stem from differences in communication. Different trainers might use different styles that you may find less supportive or constructive. It is useful to acknowledge these feelings and work on processing them.

Seek support from other educators

If you continue to feel unsettled about feedback from your trainer, consider seeking advice or support from another supervisor or from your Training Programme Directors. They may have insight into how the feedback process differs, or they might help you navigate the transition. They may also be able to mediate or provide a familiar face to help you understand the feedback better.

Talk to your trainer about your preferred style of feedback. If you feel comfortable, it might be helpful to discuss your feedback needs directly with your trainer. For instance, you could say, "I sometimes struggle with the feedback process and would like to discuss how we can make it more constructive for me." Expressing how you learn best can foster a more supportive and understanding relationship. Framing the conversation around your needs rather than their shortcomings can be more constructive. It may be that having an open and honest conversation about how you best receive feedback will help your educators to enhance the effectiveness of feedback sessions (Virji, 2024).

Encourage your trainers to utilise educators notes as a training diary

All too often, the Educators Notes section of the portfolio is viewed with suspicion and fear by GP registrars, as it is utilised only to provide negative feedback without follow up. Encourage your educators to use the Educators Notes to document feedback sessions on a regular basis. Encourage them to document positive feedback – or do so yourself as a 'Reflection on Feedback.' Where you have been given feedback and a suggestion of how to improve or develop, use the portfolio to demonstrate how you have responded to this feedback, and give examples of how your practice has improved as a result.

Accepting and reflecting on feedback

The process of accepting feedback can feel more challenging when you are neurodivergent but remember that feedback serves as a valuable tool for personal and professional growth. Here are some strategies to help you accept and internalise feedback more effectively.

Reframe criticism

Instead of viewing criticism as a personal failure, try to reframe it as a natural part of your learning process. Remember, feedback is not about who you are, but about what you can improve.

Be kind to yourself

Recognise that it is not possible to achieve perfection in all aspects of work, and that feedback that you perceive to be negative does not equate to global failure. Give yourself time to accept and digest the feedback, taking time away from the workplace if this is helpful.

Focus on strengths

It is equally important to acknowledge your strengths as well as identifying areas for improvement. Acknowledge and reflect on positive feedback and use it to improve your self-confidence. For example, if your trainer commended your clinical knowledge, recognise that this is a strength you can continue to build on.

Use feedback to create a plan

Once you have absorbed the feedback, create a clear action plan to address the areas needing improvement. Break down tasks into manageable steps, such as focusing on time management strategies or seeking further guidance on clinical decision-making.

Seeking ongoing support

Feedback is most effective when it forms part of an ongoing conversation. After receiving feedback, it is helpful to schedule regular follow-up sessions to ensure progress and provide continuous support. This approach ensures that you feel supported throughout your training and can clarify any lingering doubts or difficulties.

Follow up

After reflecting on the feedback, schedule follow-up meetings to discuss your progress. For example, “I’ve worked on improving my time management since our last meeting; could we review how I’m doing?” This shows your commitment to growth and keeps you engaged in the feedback process.

Summary

Feedback, especially in a medical training context, is a vital tool for growth, but it can feel particularly challenging for neurodivergent individuals. Requesting feedback proactively, communicating clearly, understanding your emotional responses, and seeking clarity when necessary, not only helps you feel more in control but also fosters a better understanding between you and your trainer, ultimately leading to a more supportive and productive learning environment.

Embrace feedback as an opportunity to learn, and don’t hesitate to advocate for yourself by expressing your needs for these small but impactful adjustments. Remember, feedback is a collaborative process. Working with your trainers to create an environment that respects your needs ensures you can grow in your role and thrive as a GP registrar. Open communication can also encourage your trainer to adopt more inclusive practices, benefiting other neurodivergent colleagues as well, leading to a more accommodating and less stressful training experience.

Key points

- Request feedback proactively
- Communicate clearly
- Understand and reflect on your emotional responses
- Seek and request clarity when necessary
- Utilise feedback to create actionable plans
- Practise self-compassion

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