

The Spectrum

Edition **122** April 2025



**produced
by and for
autistic
people**



About the Spectrum

The Spectrum is produced by and for autistic adults. We welcome submissions on any topic from autistic people who are over 18.

The Spectrum is published quarterly, in January, April, July and October, in print and online.

To submit an item to *the Spectrum*, please go to **www.autism.org.uk/theSpectrum** and follow the link to submit your work.

Although most issues are themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the magazine's content will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel and for fitting the space available.

Please note that *the Spectrum* receives many submissions each quarter so it is not possible to respond to every one, nor for every contribution to be printed. Discussions on editorial choices will not be entered into.

Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests an alias. This is done to protect their privacy.

The National Autistic Society promotes *the Spectrum* on social media using pieces selected from the magazine.

Please note: the views expressed in *the Spectrum* are not necessarily those of the Editors, the National Autistic Society or those involved in the publication of the magazine.

The Spectrum online version is available at **www.autism.org.uk/theSpectrum**

You can email *the Spectrum* at **spmag@nas.org.uk**

History

This magazine was founded as *Asperger United* in 1993 by Pamela Yates and Patricia Howlin, in association with the Maudsley Hospital, and Mark Bebbington and Judy Lynch of the National Autistic Society.

This was in response to a recognised lack of services for autistic people and the potential for self-help and networking as a means of support.

The purpose of the magazine was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at.

The name *the Spectrum* was suggested by dozens of people and chosen in an online poll in 2018.

Former Editors and Sub-editors are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the Goth.

In 2024, Fiona and Charlotte, autistic members of the National Autistic Society's Content team, became joint editors.



Welcome to the April issue

Hello,

To celebrate World Autism Acceptance Month, April's edition is full of poetry, articles and artwork on acceptance.

Thank you to everyone who submitted work. We were so impressed by the number of brilliant submissions.

Unfortunately, we are unable to publish everyone's work. If your piece didn't make it into this edition, it might appear in one later in the year or even next year.

If you feel inspired to submit some work, please remember to complete a permissions form for your submission, as we can't publish anything without it.

Please submit your work via: www.autism.org.uk/the-spectrum/submit-work

Yours,

Fiona and Charlotte

the Editors

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Fitting in

By Hannah

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I wasted a huge chunk of my life trying to fit in and find acceptance in spaces that I didn't feel comfortable in. In friendships that I got nothing out of. In relationships, workplaces, situations that felt bad to me.

I always thought it was because I wasn't trying hard enough, or I was doing things the wrong way. Mostly I thought, deep down, that I just wasn't good enough or that I was irredeemably broken in some way.

I never once stopped to question whether I actually wanted to fit into those places or with those people. I never once questioned what I was expecting to get out of it. I certainly never stopped to wonder if there was any responsibility on other people to help me feel more welcome or accepted.

Masking is a word I'm so familiar with, but the feelings that come along with it are really hard to unpack. Because for me it wasn't always conscious. In fact, it mostly wasn't. I assumed everyone felt awkward, but they were better at hiding it than I was. At pushing through, knowing the right things to say, how to set your face correctly, how to do life in a way I just didn't understand. I hoped they were all as lost as I was underneath, but of course it's not something you can ask people.

When I heard the term 'imposter syndrome', used mostly in the world of work, I thought that was proof that everyone else, or at least a large proportion of people, also struggled to feel they were enough. But I now know that I massively misinterpreted that. Imposter syndrome when it comes to your job is a whole different beast to feeling like you aren't really a human being. That you're failing at just existing in the world.

That you missed the lessons everyone else received about how to make your way through life.

I was smart. I was a good mimic and a quick study. I watched other people all the time. People watching has always fascinated me. But for very specific reasons. I feel like if I just watch closely enough, somehow I'll finally spot whatever the thing is I've been missing all of my life. The secret key to getting it right. Now I know that's never going to happen, it's almost a relief.

There are people who I understand, mostly. Those who take the time to build safety with me and who let me ask the questions I need to in order to get a better handle on their thoughts and feelings. Of course, I'll never know for sure if my assumptions and interpretations are always right, even with these people. I definitely still get it wrong sometimes. But they don't make me feel on the outside, looking through frosted glass at a world that is warped and distorted. They make me feel like I have a tiny bubble of clarity, with people who make me feel safe and loved. People who accept me just the way I am.

It was always exhausting trying to fit in. Trying to find acceptance that way, the only way that seemed viable. It was scary every time I got it wrong, and it never got any easier. The few times I seemingly accidentally happened on the 'right' thing to say, I'd be in constant fear of messing up. Because that inevitably happened at some point, and I'd be out on my own again, looking in on a world that was foreign to me.

Now I feel less bothered about fitting in, because I've finally realised that I don't actually want to. Don't get me

wrong, it can still be really painful to be in situations where I don't feel included, accepted or safe. And these do come up, because that's life I suppose. But I don't fight against it so much anymore. I have my little bubble, the people who I feel safe with, and I fit in there. It may be a small space, but it's where I feel able to be myself, and actually, now I'm more attuned to what my own personal wants and needs are, rather than trying to be what I thought was expected of me, it turns out that just a few people is plenty for me. A few people who genuinely accept me and love me for everything I am.

I would love it if the wider world was more accepting and inclusive, but while it isn't, I'm happy with the people who make me feel safe. And I'm slowly finding others who get it, a community of other autistic and neurodivergent folk who seem a lot less frightening and an awful lot more approachable. And the best thing is, they get it without having to explain. I hope that every autistic person has that, or finds that, I really do.

Neurodiversity pride symbol

By Authentic Alis

© Authentic Alis 2025

Artwork



Secret

By Ayshia

© Ayshia 2025

Artwork



The art of being unapologetically me

By Bob Christian

© Bob Christian 2025



You see, I navigate the world like a cat
in a dog park,
With a GPS that only knows the route
to my comfort zone.
Conversations are like trying to solve a
Rubik's cube
While riding a rollercoaster.
Colourful, chaotic, and I'm holding on
for dear life.

People say: "Just look me in the eye"
But my gaze is like a rare Pokémon...
Elusive and often hiding under the
couch.
I prefer the depth of my own thoughts,
Where every idea is a universe
spinning in its own orbit.

Don't get me started on small talk.
It's like trying to swim in a pool full of
jelly.
"Nice weather today. So where are you
from?"
My brain shouts: "Did you know
octopuses have three hearts?"
But I nod, smile and do my best to
reply.

My mind is a playlist on shuffle.
Tunes bounce from Mozart to
Metallica
While everyone else grooves to the
latest pop hit.

And I'm just here. Watching.
Dancing to my own beat.

Social gatherings are like a game of
hide and seek
Where I'm hiding in the snack corner,
Perfecting the art of avoiding eye
contact.
Concentrating on munching on crisps
As if they hold the secrets to the
universe.

I might not always get the punchline
But when I do, it's like fireworks
Exploding wildly on New Year's Eve...
Unexpected, and a bit overwhelming
But oh-so-beautiful in its own way.

So, here's to the quirks; the unique
rhythm;
The moments when I'm too loud. Too
quiet. Too much.
Because being me is not a puzzle to
solve,
It's an art form... a masterpiece in
progress,
And I'm learning to paint it in the
colours of my soul.

The journey to acceptance: unmasking my autistic self

By Meltem

© Meltem 2025



Content warning: this article briefly mentions thoughts of self-harm

For most of my life, I have disguised my autistic self – the part of me I always hid. I was skilled at masking, blending into a world that often felt foreign and overwhelming. But as time passed, the cracks in my mask deepened, and I found myself slipping into an unfamiliar darkness.

When I stay with my autistic self, my identity seems to disappear into a dark rabbit hole. I reached for it, but I could not find it. I have lost my sense of self within the layers of masks I have worn – each one a different role, a different version of me. Which mask? Which identity? Myself? My autistic self? My Aspie self? My true self? My... I... down... down....

I feel as though I have fallen into this cold, dark place. Age or knowledge does not shield me from this experience. I could so easily hurt myself in moments of despair. I could so quickly become lost, cease to exist in a world that doesn't always see me. Meltem was gone. I couldn't reach her or her mind. Was it temporary? Was it real? Why was this happening? Why couldn't I control it anymore? How had I so easily lost myself?

Studies show that women who mask their autism well – successful, accomplished and diagnosed later in life – can experience the sudden collapse of these masks, sometimes against their own will.

For me, the breaking of the mask means I can no longer control the situations that overwhelm my emotions and senses as quickly as before. Suddenly, I am facing functional challenges I hadn't been fully aware of. In a way, I feel more fragile, more vulnerable. The process of adaptation – something I had always excelled at – feels unfamiliar and destabilising.

The events that can trigger this unmasking are many: menopause, emotional distress, disappointment, unbearable stress, sleep disturbances, life changes, relationship struggles, trauma, miscommunication, false accusations, and intense sensory overload. Looking back over the past several years, I realise I have experienced most of these challenges. My mask has wholly cracked, and perhaps the process is still ongoing.

This journey is not easy. Some days, my soul aches. Some days, my heart feels heavy. Some days, I feel it in my very cells. And yet, through this pain, I have glimpsed something new – something I never knew before. A sense of liberation.

The greatest gift of this transformation is that I am learning again, like a child, to approach life with curiosity and enthusiasm. I am re-evaluating everything, peeling away the masks, and reconstructing a life where I no longer need to hide.

I am learning to live without fear. To embrace myself. To accept myself.

Little by little

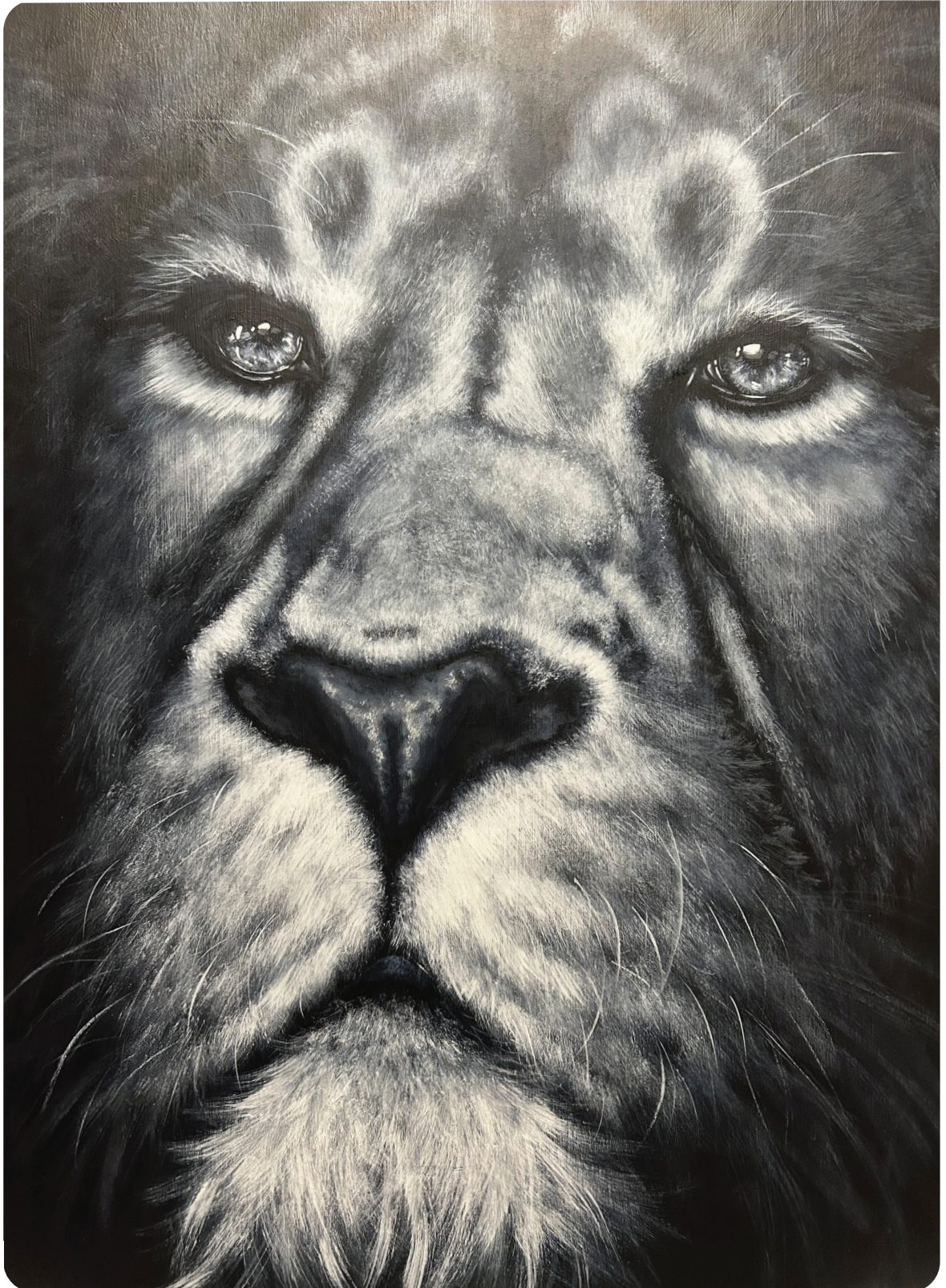
I came into this dark tunnel,
Remembering disappointments,
Remembering lies,
Remembering past years,
Like a song I forgot.
I don't believe
How the story is set –
A world full of hate.
If you stumble, no one will heed.

But I will heed myself. I will listen to my own voice. I will embrace the truth of who I am. And that, finally, is acceptance.

The hidden battle

By Suzanne

© Suzanne 2025



Unmasking

By Lucy

© Lucy 2025

Artwork



Just accept us

By Damien

© Damien 2025

Acceptance is hardly felt,
In this world that we have been dealt.
No matter how loud we try to speak,
We remain hidden, powerless and feeling weak.

Just accept us for who we are,
Don't keep your distance from us too far
We have so much we can give,
If you just allow us in this world to live.

We see the world from a unique point of view,
Taking us for who we are is all you need to do.
With ideas that can change the world,
Come and accept us and break the mould.

Poem

Acceptance is

By Jem

© Jem 2025

Artwork

Acceptance is...

Actions not just words
Caring loudly and proudly
Consciously chosen and fought for
Encouraging and inclusive
People who don't give up
Trust and belonging
All of us in it together
Necessary and nourishing
Challenging and questioning
Ever evolving

It's showing up today and everyday
Somewhere and something we all belong to

The white crow

By Smoltsuki

© Smoltsuki 2025



The beauty of unmasking

By Florian and Vicki

© Florian and Vicki 2025

Artwork



To my first born

By Majella

© Majella 2025



To my firstborn son,
No matter where life takes you,
no matter what you do
I want you to know how proud I am
of you.
When things got too heavy and you
had to remove your mask,
When going to school was too much
to ask,
You listened to your body and you
listened to your mind.
You realised you could only grow and
flow in your own time.
Unable to go against the grain of your
own brain,
You couldn't conform anymore, you
couldn't remain the same
As everyone else. It was making you
anxious and ill.
It took courage and strength to unearth
your free will.
The day you said no to school,
Was the day you said yes to yourself.
You knew you couldn't keep pretending to
be like everyone else.
You recognised your suffering and
couldn't endure the pain.
You knew that in going to school, there
was nothing left to gain.
Every day you'd shut down and lock
yourself away,
Recharging your battery to do it all again
the next day.

I want you to know I see you, and I know
what you went through.
I realise now, that I'd been through this
too
I know what it feels like to pretend to be
like everyone else.
I know what it's like to live in fear of
showing your true self.
I know what it's like to feel like you don't
belong,
To show up every day with no choice but
to be strong.

Unable to learn or listen, so focused on

NOT making social mistakes,
Holding eye contact and conversations
that feel forced and feel fake.
I know what it's like to fight with all the
noise that hurts your ears,
I know what it's like to cry in silence and
weep invisible tears.
I know what it's like when you need to
breathe and to escape,
When your heart is pounding and your
mind is in a race.
I know what it's like to hold it all in until
you get home,
When the lid pops off the bottle and
you're safe to explode.
I know what it feels like when your brain
bubbles and overflows,
When big feelings erupt because you
couldn't bear the load.
I know what it's like to feel that you're
weird or that you're strange,
And what it's like to carry the shame, the
anger and rage.

Your differences are precious, we don't
all have to be the same.
The world would be a boring place if we
all had identical brains.

You don't have to walk back into trauma
You never have to revisit your pain
Home is your safe space and here,
you can remain
For as long as you want to
For as long as you need
You'll always be my baby
Even though you're now 15.

When I told you that you're autistic when
you were just nine,
You were relieved that you had a reason
for the things inside your mind.
I know you've struggled to accept that
you are different from other kids
But there's a full community out there,
other people like you exist.
You've just not met them yet, you've not
been given that chance.

But now is your time to shine, now is your
time to dance
To the rhythm of your own song
The one that was locked inside you and
hidden there all along.
It's time for you to live your truth and be
exactly who you are,
Time for you to shine your light, my
beautiful golden star.
I'm so excited by the direction you've
chosen to take,
For the friends and new memories, you
are going to make.

An online community is waiting there for
you,
A new way of learning with lessons you
get to choose.
I hope that when you get there, you feel
like you're at home,
And never feel like you have to walk this
path alone.
I hope that in time, you feel safe enough
to fully unmask
I hope that you find your tribe and can be
yourself at last.

The way I am

By Amber

© Amber 2025



I can't take in anything you're saying, for
my eyes are becoming unfocused
And do forgive me for leaving early
You thought ringing me out of the blue
would brighten my day, but I never
answered
Because my heart began to pound from
the jarring ringtone
I'd much rather stay at home than go out
for the evening
I won't need to spend the whole of
tomorrow resting, forced to rest, rigid,
aching
Walking to the library on my own, I'm
aware I look like a lonesome being
But I can pace and sway in the warmth of
the open room, surrounded by the blanket
of books, a reassuring presence
I assumed you wanted to meet, you said
that we should, but I never heard back
from you

So why would you say something that you
don't really mean?
It is no wonder I feel permanently
confused in a world of mixed messages
Say what you mean and mean what you
say
I won't apologise for how my mind works
I can only explain so many times before it
gets tiresome
I'm not like others and I don't want to be
Because I have been uncomfortable for
too long, far too long
It's up to you
I won't apologise

From invisible to free: how cycling helped me embrace my neurodiversity

By Fiona

© Fiona 2025



The superpower I used to want

As early as I can remember, I wished I could be invisible. When others talked about wanting to fly, have super strength, or even be rich and famous, my only wish was to go through life unnoticed.

I knew I was different, though I didn't know why. I just wanted to blend in, move through life without standing out - because standing out meant being a target. No matter how hard I tried to fit in, I always seemed to get it wrong.

One of my worst experiences was in high school PE lessons - ironically, considering how much sport is part of my life now. I was bullied so badly that I was excused from all PE lessons. The very thing that would later become my passion - sport, movement, pushing my limits - was something I missed out on because of the way my brain worked and how others treated me for it. But why should I have missed out? Why should neurodivergent people be pushed out of sport?

I remember in middle school, hiding in the toilets all lunchtime because I didn't have friends and I didn't want people to see me sitting alone. I would rather hide than have my isolation exposed.

In lessons, I would sink into my chair, hoping the teacher wouldn't call on me. Not because I didn't know the answer, but because of the deep anxiety around speaking out loud, losing my words, and getting stuck in the moment. I didn't want to be noticed. I just wanted to disappear.

Masking: Trying to become unnoticed

Like so many autistic people, I became an expert at masking from an early age.

- I studied how people behaved.

- I rehearsed conversations before I spoke.

- I hid my real thoughts and reactions if I thought they would make me stand out.

And yet, despite all my effort, it never seemed to be enough. No matter how hard I tried to be 'normal', I always felt like I was failing at being human. And the efforts drained me; by the time I was 16, it would become too much and my mental health plummeted.

The slow realisation that I didn't need to hide

It took years of masking, and finally a late autism diagnosis in my mid-30s, to begin the process of understanding myself. Even after my diagnosis, unmasking wasn't instant. I didn't just wake up one day and know how to be my authentic self - I had spent so long hiding, I wasn't even sure who that self was.

And then, cycling changed everything.

On the bike, I don't have to mask. I don't have to make eye contact, engage in small talk, or navigate complex social rules. It is just me, my bike, and I can be the real me.

Cycling gives me structure. The routine of training, the calming rhythmic nature of pedaling and the numbers - distance, power, cadence - all gave my brain something to focus on.

It is an outlet for my hyperfocus. The very thing I used to feel 'too much' about, that would stop me being able to switch between tasks, my intense, obsessive passion - became an asset. Instead of suppressing my enthusiasm, I leaned into it. Cycling became my special interest, my escape, my way to explore the world.

The solitude of long rides felt like home.

I was no longer hiding - I was choosing to be alone in a way that gave me so much joy and confidence.

Ultracycling pushed my limits, but on my terms. From someone who had been excused from PE lessons, I was now pushing myself to ride distances most people wouldn't even attempt.

Finding my community. Through cycling, I started to connect with others - more than my whole life, I found people who I could truly be myself around.

I've started to realise that:

My brain works differently, and that doesn't mean it isn't valuable.

Hyperfocus and deep interests can be an incredible strength - especially in endurance cycling.

My pattern recognition and logical thinking help me understand my training, data and strategise for long rides.

My ability to feel deeply helps me connect with others one-on-one.

I might need adjustments - quiet space, structure, time alone - but knowing this helps me protect my energy so I can thrive.

Fighting old habits

Even now, my instinct to blend in is still strong after years of trying to disappear into the background. I've conditioned myself to try and be the 'appropriate' version of myself in different groups of people. Fighting that deep-rooted urge to mask is hard.

But I am fighting that instinct.

Because I know that neurodivergent athletes deserve to take up space in sport.

Because I know that being different isn't a weakness - it's a different way of thinking, moving and experiencing the world.

Because I want to show other neurodivergent people that they don't have to hide either.

Embracing visibility in sport

Now, instead of wishing for invisibility, I want to be seen.

To be a visible, proud, neurodivergent athlete.

To share my story so that others don't feel like they have to hide.

To go from the girl who hid in the school toilets and was excused from PE, to the woman who now races ultras.

If I can do that, then sport is for anyone.

Neurodivergent athletes deserve space in cycling.

Neurodivergent people deserve access to sport.

We don't have to mask to belong.

If I could tell my younger self one thing, it would be this:

"You don't have to disappear to be accepted. You are enough, exactly as you are."

Acceptance

By Amy

© Amy 2025

Artwork



How to live now

By Lucy

© Lucy 2025

There it is
The headline news –
Delivered in one delicious diagnosis
Affirming my suspicions:
Forty-five years different.

How do I feel?

Validated, supported even.
But what next?
What do I do with this?

As the news cools
I realise I have no idea
How to live now.



How to subscribe to the print magazine

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- visit our online shop at www.autism.org.uk/shop/products/magazines/the-spectrum
- email our Supporter Care team at: supportercare@nas.org.uk and they will send you a subscription form
- or call our Supporter Care team on 0808 800 1050.

If you move house, please email supportercare@nas.org.uk and include your name and your new and old address.

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The moment you accept yourself, you grow

By Chloe

© Chloe 2025

Artwork

The moment you
accept



yourself, you grow

Email: spmag@nas.org.uk

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