National Autistic Society

The Spectrum

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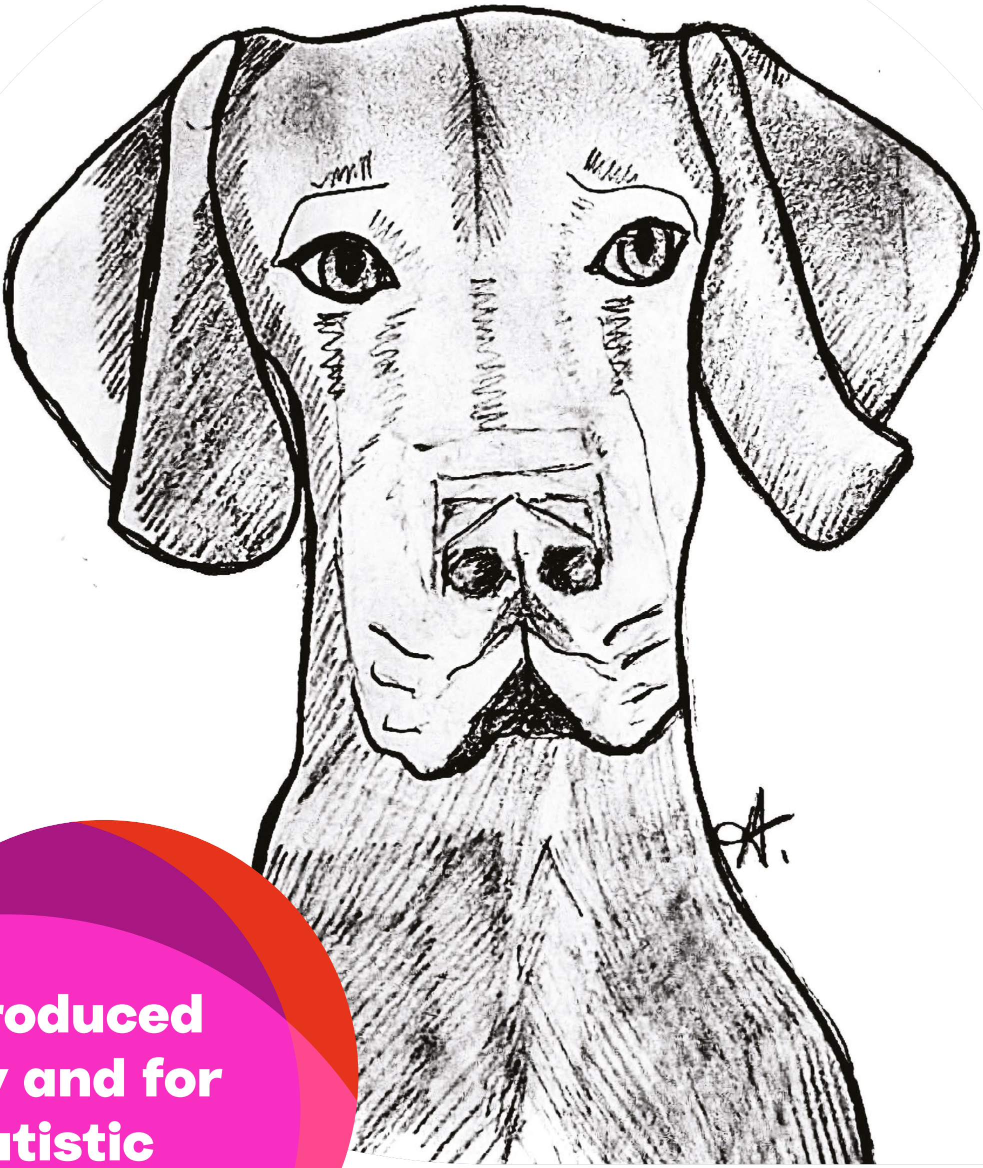


produced by and for autistic people

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 July issue

Hello,

From the gorgeous doggie on the front to the colourful insects on page 15, July's issue is full of nature and the outdoors. As well as articles and poems full of wonderful insights into being autistic.

We hope you enjoy the selection as much as we have.

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

This will be the last issue co-edited by Charlotte. From October, Helen, another autistic member of staff, will be co-editing.

Yours,

Fiona and Charlotte

the Editors

Contents

Article

Autism

By Wildrew

I was diagnosed last year. That's autism in addition to an existing diagnosis of ADHD. BANG! WELCOME TO THE WEIRD WORLD OF AuDHD, LET YOURSELF OUT. Forty-odd years on the planet and only now am I checking under the bonnet. There's a savage kind of relief in it, though. A brutal validation. Yes, you weren't just imagining the whole bizarre spectacle.

Hearing and vision for me are not just senses, they're portals to states of being. Ever since I can remember, sounds and sights have been hammering at my brain like submachine guns, spraying pleasure and pain in equal measure with no off switch in sight. A mundane street corner erupts into a kaleidoscopic carnival of fascination that I want to tear apart with my bare hands. Other times, the squeal of bus brakes sends me into Code Red terror mode, fight-or-flight synapses firing wildly, mute – online but not operating.

The overwhelming enormity of it all! I've navigated this reality for decades before realising that not everyone's brain is a psychedelic amplifier cranked to 11. Regardless, I've had to kludge some coping mechanisms over the years – albeit flimsy levees against the flood.

My commute to a city centre is a grotesque odyssey through the twisted bowels of urban chaos. Beginning at home, the tranquillity of the hills slowly evaporating and giving way to the disorder of the city. Even with headphones pumping pink noise and podcast directly into my skull, the sensory barrage is relentless. The teeming masses, the construction racket like the death throes of mechanical dinosaurs, the weird babble of tongues, the assault of advertisements – they pile up like radioactive waste until I reach the relative sanctuary of the office.

Sometimes I get lucky and snag onto something curious – a bizarre architectural detail or snippet of overheard conversation – and I can fixate on it, chew it into submission until it stops screaming. Without these, the stimulation tsunami overwhelms the circuits. I retreat, I regress, hollow-eyed, a meat puppet running on empty. The effect is cumulative – at the end of the return journey, it can be a coin flip whether I'll make it home as a functioning human or a shambling zombie.

But wait! The diagnosis provided a roadmap through this neurological minefield. Last Thursday at the local pizzeria, waiting to collect the order my wife had phoned in, I felt the familiar sensory ambush closing in – the muzak, the clattering plates, the howling pizza oven, all conspiring to drive me toward catatonia.

In a moment of awareness brought about by a post-diagnosis education course, I forced my brain to process from the top down – like those straight neurotypicals supposedly do. FOCUS ON THE MENU BOARD! It's a restaurant. Restaurants sell food. The menu board is a priority item. This is logical. THIS MAKES SENSE.

Meanwhile, my natural instincts clawed for dominance – the grain of the wood, the typographical abomination of the font, the uni-strut ceiling fixtures, the cacophonous kitchen symphony. TOO MUCH INPUT! But I wrestled control, forcing myself down the menu's hierarchy like following a treasure map drawn by a child. Pizza sizes. Toppings. Sides. Prices. Vegetarian options. The blessed simplicity of it!

It felt utterly clunky and unnatural, like trying to comb a dog backwards, but it worked! The overwhelm began to recede like morning shadows. This, apparently, is how the normies navigate reality – context/concept first, details later. Forcing myself to process top-down like this is a fight, it's exhausting, it's not how I am built – but perhaps it is a tool I can use to survive in a world built for different brains. A machete to hack through the noisy jungle of autistic perception. Had I been there to select pizzas for the family rather than simply collect, this might not have been such a revelatory tale. I am happy however to have found something I can experiment with when the familiar overwhelm closes in – maybe we can beat it back with its own weapons. It's a small grace in a savage journey, but sometimes small graces are all we need.

Photo

Shadow

By Lisa

Artwork

The quiet journey

By Jennifer

This piece captures a moment of stillness within movement - a lone bird gliding across layered skies and fields, carried by unseen winds. The quiet journey reflects the quiet strength found in transitioning as a late-diagnosed autistic person - the process of rediscovery, of reframing a lifetime through a new lens. It speaks to the peace of solitude, and the beauty of passing through light and landscape. As with all stained glass, it shifts with the day, reminding us that even the quietest journeys are full of colour and change.

Blah blah blah

By Grace

Artwork

Article

Life as an autistic vet student

By Laur

I am currently at the end of the first semester of my vet school journey. I implore to celebrate every milestone that I reach during my studies and the hard work that has accompanied them.

After a busy ten weeks of adapting to a brand-new routine, meeting new people and cramming my brain with information, I am curled up on the sofa with my weighted blanket in decompression mode, with no social interactions and ready to engage in my special interests over the Christmas period. After my last exam, I felt quite emotional and reflective of the experiences I had endured thus far. These would not have been possible without 1) My tenacity, 2) The incredible support network I have been learning to adapt to and 3) The ability I have to talk openly about my diagnosis and personal needs.

A venture that has already been filled with doubts, new friendships, fixations (currently the respiratory system!) and the overseeing of coming face to face with my comfort zone and its limits. It wasn't long before I began using my noise-cancelling headphones and fidget toys, which I had the joy of sharing with my coach in our last meeting! An understanding of growth vs fixed mindset with the recognition that, as an autistic individual, my mindset is very fixed, routine-orientated and fearful of failure. The idea of a growth mindset seems thrilling, yet is accompanied with uncertainty, 'what ifs' and ideologies that my autistic brain tends to stray from. I generally require encouragement to embrace the unknown; the concept of embracing uncertainty resembles hugging a cactus, and there have been numerous scenarios in which I have been presented with this challenge.

Another challenge includes conversation starters. I required support with learning how to begin a conversation, so regularly ask "How are you feeling about exams?" The Christmas break challenge is to come up with an alternative question!

There have been times where I have succeeded at removing my autistic mask, whereby I have found comfort in stimming, utilising sensory aids and being my 'authentic self' (perhaps too direct at times) with the joy of opening up about my diagnosis to my new peers and offering fidget toy recommendations (Nee-Doh is a personal favourite!) with many "You've got this!" emails received. Followed by periods of masking, exhaustion and comparison that have left me feeling vulnerable and, at times, embarrassed. Situations where I have felt overwhelmed and have needed to take myself away from the situation to regulate, followed by times when I have felt utterly proud of myself and my big or small wins.

At the end of week one, I went to bed at 7.30pm after the newness had completely wiped me out and have since sent my lecturers debriefs about my days, which is now an integral part of my routine and a way of info-dumping. It took me a while to communicate verbally with my lecturers, and I felt incredibly anxious about the way I may be perceived. I found that reaching out through Teams/email helped me to break the barrier down, and all of my lecturers have been compassionate, patient and understanding as they become accustomed to my chaos.

I have found a love of spending time on the farms during animal handling sessions. I feel comfortable and unmasked as I successfully move and tip sheep and acknowledge my limited muscle mass as I attempt to move calves, while simultaneously experiencing new situations that I struggle to tolerate initially, such as my first formative Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) and the pressures of an unfamiliar assessment method. I face setbacks that often feel like personal failures as I tend to observe and to jump to the conclusion that everybody else has it all figured out. It is during these times that I share my experiences with others and learn that nobody has it all figured out. We all have bad days; mine are perhaps more transparent. Though they can be used to encourage others to talk openly about their experiences and the worries that they may be keeping isolated.

The hugs of reassurance and words of encouragement have helped significantly during the times where I have doubted myself and wanted nothing other than to combat my autistic brain for the, often trialling, ways that I navigate life and crippling anxiety levels I (reluctantly) carry as a result. Has it been a smooth sailing journey? No, absolutely not. I'm learning that it'll never be; life is messy, and I reach out. But does a smooth sea make a skilled sailor? A vital component of my autism acceptance journey has been just that, acceptance - acceptance that I will experience challenges, triumphs, times where I feel defeated and times where I feel motivated. It is the exposure to these obstacles that will make me a better-equipped vet and the liaising with other neurodivergent vet students, and professionals, that has spurred me on.

Prior to vet school, I assumed that I had my autism 'figured out', mainly because of the confidence I had developed with accommodating myself, advocating and reaching out. Yet I am uncovering more about myself and my disability every day, along with the newness that vet school brings. As I type this, I picture an onion that symbolises unwrapping layers upon layers to understand the way that my brain processes, operates and digests information. I am learning that alternate ways of doing things doesn't make them wrong - unless you're working on a horse from the right-hand side or kneeling down when restraining a sheep.

My first semester has been a whirlwind. I cried, I laughed, I experienced meltdowns, and the influx of newness felt as though I was on a beach being hit by a gigantic wave. At times, it felt consuming, particularly after seeing my large cohort size and my team based learning (tbl) group being situated in the middle of it all, but I slowly began adapting and learning how to ride the wave of uncertainty. With the knowledge that if I want to become a vet, I will sometimes be required to do things that my autistic brain feels apprehensive about. I have benefited massively from the structure and routine that my vet school timetable brings and find comfort in miniscule changes to lecture rooms and teaching staff. For example: I love knowing that I have clinical skills on a Wednesday in the same rooms, that animal handling is always on a Friday and that my TBL group is the same all year.

All in all, I have learned an assortment of lessons throughout the semester, both in terms of academia and my personal life. I have learned about the importance of unmasking as much as possible in an attempt to avoid burnout and have prioritised downtime at home for times when I have been unable to unmask. Moreover, I have been extremely grateful for the kindness and patience of those around me. With each challenge, although met with reluctance at times, I grow and have the joy in sharing that with others while being applauded for doing so. The decision about whether or not to disclose neurodiversity can seem daunting, and I comprehend that I may not always be met with such acceptance. Right now, I am thankful to be learning in an environment where I am celebrated for being me and hope that this can be a word of encouragement for others. Embrace the glorious person that you are, everything will be okay, give yourself time.

Poem

Autism acceptance

By Tegan

I'm learning that self-acceptance isn't
something that happens all at once.
It's the small, quiet things
reaching for my worry stone or my
sensory toy,
because they ground me,
not because I should hide them.
It's swaying gently, pacing back and forth,
tapping my fingers, the rhythm of my
movements,
letting my body do what it needs to do,
even when the world says it's too much.
It's wearing soft fabrics that hug without
tightening,
feeling the weight of the world lighten
just by allowing myself to be comfortable.

I didn't know how to do this at first.
I didn't know how to stop hiding parts
of me,
folding them into silence to make others
feel at ease.
I didn't know how to untangle the guilt
of not keeping up with the rush of the
world,
when the endless to-do list feels like a
mountain I can't climb,
when socialising is draining,
when unfamiliar places overwhelm my
senses,
when I can't find the words to speak
or can't stop talking,
the flood of thoughts spilling out
too quickly
for anyone to follow.

But now, I'm learning.
I'm learning that I need things others don't,
the soft hum of a quiet space,
a slower rhythm, a softer pace.
And that's okay.
I'm learning to trust myself,
to listen to what I need without apology,
even if that means bringing my comfort
items,
even if that means headphones in a
crowded room,
the world a little quieter, a little gentler.
Even if it means stimming,
tapping, rocking, pacing, swaying,
fiddling with my fingers, twisting a toy,
stroking something comforting in my
hands,
without shame, without fear of being seen
as 'odd.'

And sometimes, it means accepting that I
learn differently.
I'm learning that it's okay to need different
explanations,
to need time to process things in my own
way,
to not be ashamed if I need to hear
something more than once
or approach a task from a different angle.
It's okay to ask for help,
to seek out the methods that work for me,
and to not beat myself up for needing
extra time or support.
The world doesn't always understand,
but I'm learning to give myself permission
to do things at my own pace.

Acceptance, for me, is learning to find joy
again.
It's remembering what it feels like
to exist in my body without the weight of
expectations,
to move in ways that make sense to me,
even if others think it's strange or
disruptive.
Autistic joy is in the quiet moments,
the simple pleasures of stimming freely,
the comfort of a soft blanket or a quiet
space,
the satisfaction of being exactly who I am
without pretending to be anything else.

But acceptance is a two-way street.
It's not just about me learning to accept
myself
it's about the world learning to make
space.
It's about understanding that we can exist

in ways that don't fit the traditional mould
and that's okay.
It's about the world accommodating our needs,
quiet places when we're overwhelmed,
spaces to stim freely without judgment,
time to process at our own pace,
and understanding when words fail or flood.
It's about workplaces, schools, and public spaces
making room for neurodiversity
and recognising that we are more than our struggles,
we are capable, we are valuable,
and we have unique strengths to offer.

I've been called a lot of things,
too loud, too quiet, too sensitive,
too stoic, too fidgety, too still,
too much.
But the truth is,
I'm not too much.
I'm autistic.
And maybe the hardest thing to accept
is that I don't need to be anything other than myself.

There's still a lot of work to do,
but I've come so far.
This journey is teaching me
that self-acceptance isn't about perfection:
it's about embracing the parts of me
that don't fit into a world that wasn't built for me,
about giving myself permission to exist fully
with all my quirks, all my stims,
all the things that make me, me.

For so long, I've tried to fit in,
tried to mask, to meet expectations
that never fit my rhythm.
I've been misunderstood,
called "too much" by those who didn't see
that I was only trying to make sense
of a world that always felt like it was
moving too fast.
But now, I don't need their approval.
I just need mine.
And that's enough.

Maybe one day,
the world will move at a pace
that allows all of us to thrive.
Maybe one day,
we won't have to fight for space
to exist in ways that feel right for us.
Maybe one day,
autistic people won't have to hide
their needs, their joys, or their differences.
Maybe one day,
the world will understand
that we don't need to change who we are
just to be accepted.

But for now,
I see small steps forward,
spaces beginning to soften,
people slowly learning to accommodate.
It gives me hope,
hope that these changes will grow,
deepening into something enduring…
something that will last.

I'll keep learning to let myself be,
moving through the world
as my authentic self:
quietly powerful,
and fully me.

Keep being yourself, and in time,
the world will learn to meet you where
you are. But don't wait for it, your
true self is already enough.

……

Autism and me

Article and photos

By George

I have autism, which means that I experience and process the world differently to neurotypical people. Crowds become a loud and frenetic mob, and change is deeply unsettling. To make things worse, when I see that people around me are at ease, it just alienates me more. To manage the anxiety, I block out my immediate surroundings and hyperfocus on small, seemingly insignificant details, as this counteracts the confusion and frustration I am feeling.

Photography helps me to visually express myself when I am overwhelmed and find it hard to vocalise my emotions. It gives me the freedom to be creative and interpret life from my perspective.

This series of shadow images represents the soothing stillness I seek when confronted with chaos.

There are no titles attached to these shadowy shapes, as each viewer should have their own perception.

Capturing these images was a very impromptu exercise. The sun could disappear at any moment, and it was fascinating to see these fleeting shadows change in front of my eyes and create a different mood or shape. I hope that my work sparks your imagination and encourages you to look at shadows and autistic people with an open heart and mind.

Autism and me contd

By George

Photo

How to be perimenopausal and autistic

By Ros

I guarantee that you know someone who will experience menopause, which is when the female reproductive system has shut down. No more periods. No way to make a baby.

Because half of the people on this planet go through menopause, it would be easy to think it is not a big deal. If indeed you have thought about it, which would be unusual as most people don't.

However, it is a big deal and particularly for autistic people. Did you know that while the reproductive system is shutting down - during perimenopause - autistic traits can become more pronounced or harder to mask? So a lot of women realise they are autistic at the same time as realising they are perimenopausal.

Did you also know that autism and perimenopause share three troublesome traits? They are hard to diagnose, often misdiagnosed and historically under-researched. According to the NHS, menopause usually happens between the ages of 45-55; the shutting down process can take months or years, and you can only be sure that you've gone through the menopause 12 months after your last period. The many different symptoms also change over time. That's a lot of scope for uncertainty.

The lack of awareness and interest in these rather common human conditions can intensify feelings of loneliness and worry. So here is my guide for navigating perimenopause whilst being autistic.

The big things to tick off your bucket list:

Have a burnout and be on antidepressants. Be very confused about what happened and why.

Shrink your world as much as possible, and when you can't get it any smaller, jump inside your smartphone and find ways to hide in there.

Be useless or worse than useless. Spend more while earning less. Don't pay bills and don't get better deals. Don't plan ahead, and get stressed because you know you need to plan ahead.

Do not involve someone else by asking for help, but make sure you are a burden to them.

Daily practice: make sure you do at least five of these every day, and do each one at least once a week:

Be in the wrong. Everything is your fault.

Set standards and rules and break them, but don't let anyone else break them.

Have an argument. Genuinely believe your relationship with that person is over.

Don't hold onto a thought, unless you find a negative one that you can wallow in and develop into a nightmare hallucination.

Either sleep, want to sleep or not be able to sleep. There is no awake.

Swell, sweat, smell and be spotty.

Do whatever you can to avoid being touched or close to someone. Long for a warm word, a sympathetic smile or an intimate moment of kindness.

Jump and burst into tears in response to any noise above a whisper. Do this as often as you can.

Be confused and distracted by straight lines.

Get a migraine from any light source.

Embarrass yourself constantly. Ask the wrong question, say the wrong thing, react weirdly, tell someone off.

Appear fine until you're not, and then frighten everyone around you.

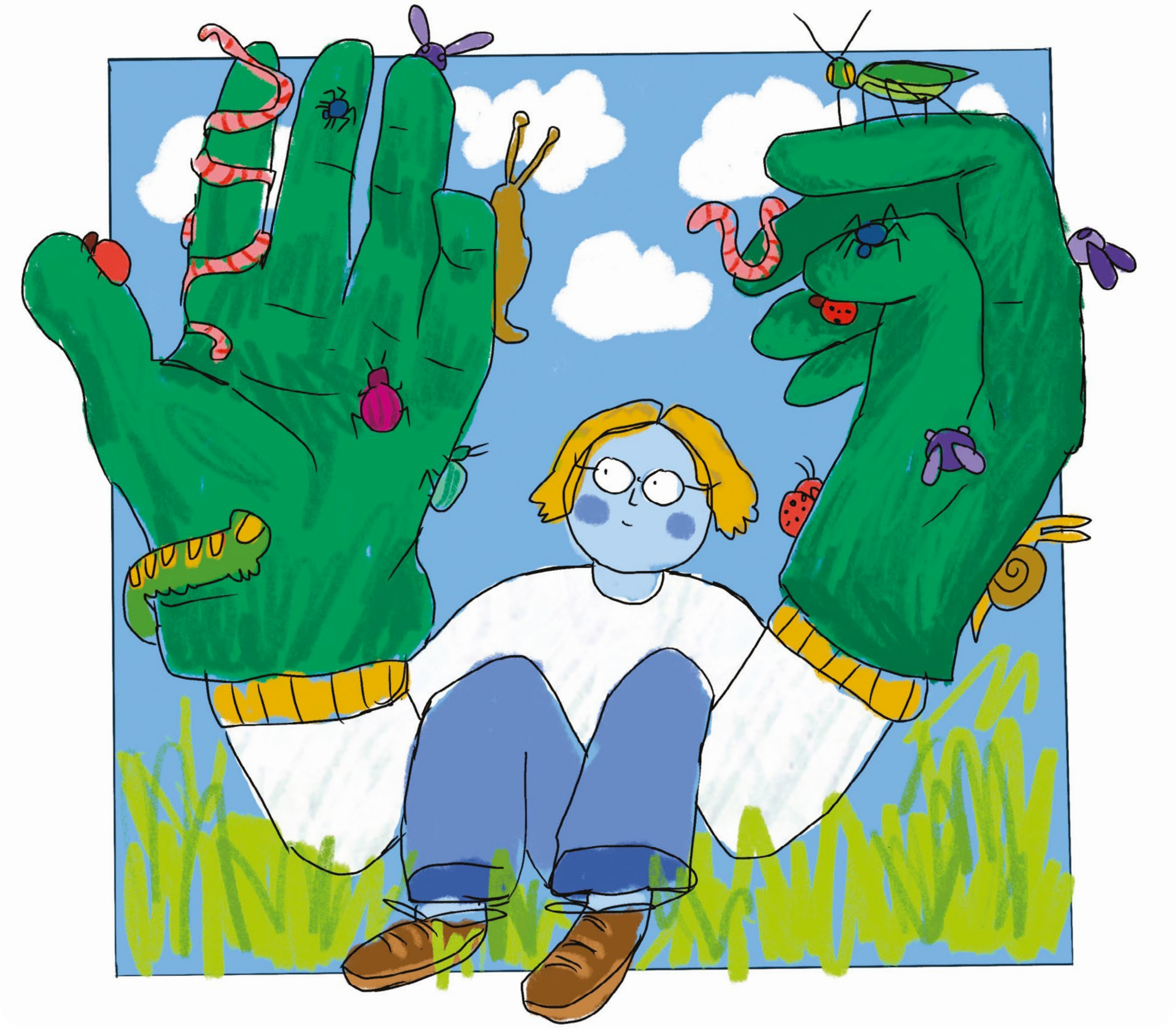
To successfully follow this guide, you may find it helpful to gather the right people around you: they should be kind and curious; have a keen sense of humour; be reliable and present.

Finally, why not try this as your mantra: "I didn't sign up for this either!"

Artwork

In the garden

By Sophie



Book review

Why *unmasking for life* is essential reading for autistic adults

By Leigh Ann

I'm a huge fan of Dr Devon Price's book *Unmasking autism*, so when I heard he had a new book, *Unmasking for life: The autistic person's guide to connecting, loving, and living authentically*, coming out, I was sold without needing to hear any details! I called my local bookstore on its release day to make sure they had it and stopped by soon after. After spending a couple of weeks with this fantastic book, I can wholeheartedly recommend it!

Unmasking autism truly changed my life, and I can already tell that *Unmasking for life* will as well. I recently looked back over *Unmasking autism*, to prepare for the new book, and was surprised by how much of it I've integrated into my life. I remember its concepts feeling completely revolutionary when I first read them a few years ago. It was exactly what I needed to start me on my anti-ableist unmasking journey.

I recommend *Unmasking autism* to every autistic adult, and I do recommend reading it before *Unmasking for life*. The anti-ableist concepts in *Unmasking autism* are foundational to unmasking as an autistic adult. Of course, you could skip it and be perfectly fine, but why miss out on such a wonderful book?

Unmasking autism focuses mainly on undoing our internalised ableism, getting in touch with our true selves, and challenging the world's ableism by showing ourselves to the world proudly. So when I saw that *Unmasking for life* focuses on five skills that autistic adults can develop to continue the process of unmasking, I thought at least some of those skills would come up in the new book. But they're completely different! These new skills accomplish the same goal of being unapologetically ourselves, but define that work in more specific, actionable ways.

For example, the fourth skill is 'tolerance of distress, disagreement, or being disliked'. Many autistic adults stop unmasking when faced with the ableist reactions of others. So I absolutely love this framing that a key skill we need in order to continue unmasking is to tolerate those reactions. This specific skill is very necessary for long-term unmasking, even though it is quite challenging to build. There is certainly some tough love in this book! (That's another reason I recommend starting with *Unmasking autism* – it sets up the trust and understanding needed for taking that hard look in the mirror with Dr Price as a guide.)

In addition, after detailing these five core skills for unmasking, he goes into the five areas of our lives where we can use these skills: friendship, family, work, romantic relationships and greater society. With a chapter on each of these, this book contains so much helpful information on how to use the five skills in each area so that we can be our unmasked selves in all parts of our lives. I especially love the chapter on work and how to survive in a capitalist and ableist society.

One thing I love about Dr Devon Price's writing is his use of helpful examples from the lives of diverse autistic adults. I don't know about you, but I remember concepts much better when given these examples.

His writing is a bit academic (he is a professor, after all), but the examples make it much more digestible and clear.

If you are on an unmasking journey of your own, I think you'll get a lot out of *Unmasking for life*. It feels like the natural progression in my own effort to unmask after integrating what I learned from *Unmasking autism* over the last few years. Those of us who are figuring out we're autistic in these times are so fortunate to have Dr Devon Price's writings to guide us toward authentic, proud autistic living.

Poem

Small degrees

By Tia

Small degrees
Who is that girl?
Could she be me?
Perhaps in part
In small degrees

Incremental
Change it chips
Away at me
Until I miss

Myself, the whole
What makes me, me
Those small degrees
How big they seem

A front, for real
For true or false
One, another
The same result

Accept, except
In my own case
Forgive, forget
Myself, replaced

It's time to change
To stay the same
Awake, don't hide
Don't be afraid

Come take my hand
Your own to hold
My heart it's yours
And mine, your soul

I am that girl
And she is me
Embrace it all
Each last degree

Echolalia

Poem

By Lara

© Lara 2025

There can be comfort in repeating words.

Repeating words.

Sounds can make you feel.

Make you feel.

The act of repetition helps me process.

Helps me process.

Hearing the sound of my voice is familiar.

My voice is familiar.

Don't get upset I need time.

I need time.

Everyone's brains work on a different speed.

Different speed.

It is okay to be different.

Be different.

I am not making fun of you.

Making fun of you.

I just need to repeat.

Need to repeat.

I accept you, please accept me.

Please, accept me.

I am autistic.

I am autistic!

Acceptance

Poem

By A.M

© A.M 2025

To be accepted is to be loved,
To be accepted is to be known,
To be accepted is to find people who make you feel at home.

It may take you years to find it,
Many sparks may fizzle out,
But when you find your people you will know without a doubt.

To go from never fitting in,
To wanting to be loud,
That's how you know that those people are the ones to stick around.

When the world seems so different,
Through your eyes than through theirs,
There's a strength to being accepted because above all - it means they care.

Poem

A love letter to my body - I thank you...

By Sally

Dear Body,

I thank you for loving me back when I didn't love you
I thank you for carrying me through the places we didn't belong
I thank you for healing my heart from the inside out
And I thank you for helping me dance to the end of each song

I thank you for remembering how to give me deep joy
And I thank you for gifting me the freedom of choice
I thank you for not turning to cold rock or stone
And I thank you for the chance of empowering my voice

I also give thanks for your impartial forgiveness
And I thank you too for your steel-hard strength
I thank you for holding my soft soul with tenderness
And I thank you for affording me a life well spent

So what a truly admirable body you are
And know I shall respect you right up to the end
For this is my sincerest pledge to you
Forever together, my ardent and hardy very best friend

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Arlo

By AJ Illustration

Artwork

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