

I was taught it was bad to be:	So I had to pretend to be:	I did this by behaving this way: (add your own using the blanks)
Arrogant	Humble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pretending I didn't know the answers to questions</li> <li>Keeping silent when people said things that weren't true</li> <li>Softening statements with phrases like "if that makes any sense" or "maybe" to make myself sound less certain</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
Cold & Unfeeling	Warm & Friendly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smiling all the time no matter how I felt</li> <li>Asking people about their feelings and not talking about myself</li> <li>Taking care of other people whenever they were upset</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
Annoying & Loud	Agreeable & Quiet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only experiencing big emotions in private</li> <li>Solving problems by myself</li> <li>Not getting "too excited" about anything, including good things</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>

Childish	Mature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Serving as a confidant for adults and authority figures</li> <li>Carrying myself in a restrained, "proper" way</li> <li>Acting like a "teacher's pet" or "little professor" and distancing myself from my peers</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
Awkward	Cool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Withdrawing from any activity I wasn't instantly good at</li> <li>Pretending to be aloof and uncaring</li> <li>Rehearsing fake conversations in my mind so I could make talking to people seem effortless</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
Clueless, Pathetic	Independent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nodding or laughing, even when I have no idea what's going on</li> <li>Developing unique, private habits and "hacks" that make it possible for me to hold my life together</li> <li>Making sure my life looks "put together" on paper, even at the expense of my health or happiness</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
Sensitive	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not voicing my needs</li> <li>Feeling ashamed whenever I wanted to cry or express anger</li> <li>Fighting internally with every "disruptive" emotion I felt</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>

I was taught it was bad to be:	So I had to pretend to be:	I did this by behaving this way: (add your own using the blanks)
Weak	Tough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mocking or being aggressive with other people</li> <li>Thinking of myself as superior to others</li> <li>Showing distaste for anything society considers feminine, soft, or tender</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
Weird	Normal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studying what other people like in a systematic, analytical way</li> <li>Imitating people or characters' mannerisms, style of dress, tone of voice, etc.</li> <li>Mocking those who are more obviously "weird" than I</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>

There are massive psychological consequences to adopting strategies like these, which go way beyond the anxiety, depression, and burn-out we've already discussed. To maintain their masks and compensate for the challenges they're facing, many Autistic people fall back on an array of destructive and compulsive coping mechanisms, including substance abuse, calorie restriction, excessive exercise, emotional co-dependency, and even joining cults. I think if we want to really confront the role the mask has played in our lives and work on parting with it, it's important we face just how unsustainable and costly masking has been. We sacrifice a lot of our well-being and individuality in order to seem "normal." In the next chapter, I'll review the research showing how damaging that is, and share the stories of a few Autistic adults who've begun to question whether all the effort they've been putting into compensation and camouflage has really been worth it.

## Reframing Autistic Stereotypes

I was told I was:	But actually I am:	I value this quality in myself because:
Arrogant	Confident Principled Independent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It helps me stand up for what's right</li> <li>• I'm often the first person to speak out about a problem</li> <li>• I can set a positive example for others</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Cold & Unfeeling	Analytical Rational Thoughtful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I notice things others miss</li> <li>• I don't get swept away in the heat of the moment like others do</li> <li>• I'm good at noticing connections and systems others can't see</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Annoying & Loud	Enthusiastic Alive Outspoken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am my own best advocate</li> <li>• I raise other people's energy levels</li> <li>• I experience intense happiness and recognize beauty</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

I was told I was:	But actually I am:	I value this quality in myself because:
Childish	Curious Open-minded Joyful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm great at learning and growing</li> <li>• I experience the full range of human emotion</li> <li>• I take pleasure from the small things in life</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Awkward	Authentic Unique Don't Blend in with the Crowd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If something is hard for me, other people probably need help with it, too</li> <li>• My way of moving through the world is entirely its own</li> <li>• I don't conform to unfair standards</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Clueless, Pathetic	Reflective Unassuming Open About Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I recognize we all need one another</li> <li>• I know how to ask for the help I need</li> <li>• I value my connections to other people</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

I was told I was:	But actually I am:	I value this quality in myself because:
Sensitive	Perceptive Emotionally Attuned Compassionate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I recognize mistreatment very well</li> <li>• I'm good at taking the emotional temperature of the room</li> <li>• I'm in touch with my feelings and with the feelings of others</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Weird	One of a Kind A Trailblazer Unconventional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I make the world a bigger, broader place</li> <li>• I challenge old conventions and unfair rules</li> <li>• I'm the ultimate authority on how my life should be</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>



<b>Everyday Unmasking:</b> Daily Challenges for Being Radically Visible
Disappoint someone: Practice saying "no," "I'm not available to do that," "I'm uncomfortable with that," or "I have to go now" without any explanation or apology.
Express disagreement in a situation where you'd normally just nod along to keep the peace.
Notice when you feel pressured to do something you don't wish to do. Practice observing this aloud: "I'm not sure why you are pushing this, because I already said no."
Try to go an entire day without guessing or anticipating anyone's emotions.
Try to go an entire day without controlling what messages your facial expressions or body language is giving off.
Ask for something you usually feel too guilty to request.
Go through an entire conversation without faking any reactions or emotions.
Sing along to your favorite music while walking down the street.
Bring a stim toy with you to a social gathering or public space, and use it without shame.
Wear a fancy outfit or costume you absolutely love, instead of waiting for an event or an "excuse" to wear it.
When a friend asks you how you are doing, give them an honest answer.
Take action without running it past anyone else for approval.
Share big emotions with safe people: find someone you can cry with, or vent to a friend about something that fills you with rage.
Tell someone you trust about your neurodiversity, and what it means to you.

<b>Common, Healthy Autistic Behaviors</b>
Intense studying of a new favorite topic
Not noticing sounds or social signals when focusing on an engrossing task
Needing to know exactly what to expect before entering an unfamiliar situation
Sticking to a very rigid schedule, and rejecting deviations to that schedule
Taking a long time to think before responding to a complex question
Spending hours or days alone sleeping and recharging after a socially demanding event or stressful project
Needing "all the information" before coming to a decision
Not knowing how they feel, or needing a few days to figure out how they feel about something
Needing a rule or instruction to "make sense" before they can follow it
Not putting energy toward expectations that seem unfair or arbitrary, such as wearing makeup or elaborate grooming

Here's a table summarizing some common Autistic communication needs. You can share this table with neurotypical people in your life or organizations that are aiming to be more accessible, or simply request some of these specific adjustments for yourself.

Common Autistic Communication Needs	
Overall Need	Some Accommodations You Might Request
Clear Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific plans with details about time, place, and what is likely to happen</li> <li>• A clear "yes" or "no," no euphemisms like "I'll think about it"</li> <li>• Meeting agendas that are handed out in advance, and then adhered to</li> <li>• Reading materials, questions, and discussion topics being provided in advance of a panel, interview, or other high-stress public event</li> <li>• Step-by-step, detailed instructions on how to complete a task</li> <li>• Specific, measurable outcomes or goals.</li> </ul>

Overall Need	Some Accommodations You Might Request
Explicit Messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not assuming people can use facial expression, tone of voice, posture, breathing, or tears as indicators of emotion</li> <li>• Giving direct explanations of feelings: "I am disappointed right now because . . ."</li> <li>• Recognition and respect of boundaries: "It doesn't sound like Sherry wants to talk about that right now."</li> <li>• Not punishing or judging people for failing to read between the lines.</li> <li>• Using clarifying questions: "What would you like me to do about this?"</li> </ul>
Reduced Sensory/Social Load	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having no expectation of eye contact during intense conversations</li> <li>• Giving space to talk about challenging topics while driving, taking a walk, or doing something with one's hands</li> <li>• Allowing people to express emotions and opinions via text, email, or handwritten note</li> <li>• Giving people time alone to reflect on their feelings and beliefs</li> <li>• Learning to recognize fawning, and signs of an upcoming meltdown</li> <li>• Providing frequent breaks from socializing, or quiet spaces people can retreat to</li> </ul>

## **Building Sensory-Friendly Public Spaces**

Advice from the Autistic Self Advocacy Network

### **Visual**

- Make lights dimmable
- Use diffused light sources rather than overhead or fluorescent lights
- Restrict use of flash photography
- Use clear, contrasting colors for presentation slides
- Make signage and handouts easy to read and simple
- Limit "visual noise": remove distracting graphics, posters, etc.

### **Auditory**

- Remind people to silence phone notifications
- Replace applause with "sparkle fingers" or another quieter alternative
- Ensure speakers use microphones consistently—yelling is much harder to understand than speaking evenly into a mic is
- Equip spaces with materials that absorb and dampen echo, when possible. Even a large rug can make a big difference!

### **Tactile**

- Make elbow bumping or waving the default greeting, not handshakes or hugs
- Adopt a relaxed dress code, so people can dress comfortably
- Normalize the use of stress balls, fidget spinners, doodling, etc.
- Fight the idea that makeup, uncomfortable formalwear, high heels, or bras make a person more "professional"
- Space out chairs, provide semiprivate seating near corners or barriers

### **Olfactory and Gustatory**

- Ban the use of strong perfumes or colognes at events
- Use physical distance, barriers, or fans to keep kitchen and bathroom smells out of other areas
- Use sensory-friendly, green cleaning supplies
- For catered events, tell attendees the exact menu beforehand
- Provide "bland" foods as a backup