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An Autistic Women's Survival Guide:

Or “I’m still standing”

Sarah Hendrickx

Let me introduce myself...

- Diagnosed autistic aged 43
- By the time I was diagnosed:
 - Masters degree in autism
 - 6 autism books published
 - 1000+ autism training delivered
 - Managed autism mentoring project
 - Partner diagnosed autistic
 - Many family members diagnosed or suspected

Why did it take so long??

...because I am female, old... and really good at pretending...



The Beginning... One Weird Kid

- 'Gifted' child – IQ 153
- Speaking sentences at 9 months old
- 'Shy', 'neurotic' 'in a world of her own', 'Sarah Snail'
- Tomboy – aircraft models, wood work, fishing, cars
- Sorter – Lego, sweets, buttons
- One bossy friend at a time



The Middle... Why is this so difficult?

- Teen – naive, vulnerable, poor judgement
- Wanted to fit - copying
- Mediocre educational achievement
- Alcohol – self-medicating to socialise
- Multiple relationships, two marriages, Mum by 19
- 35+ jobs...
- Lifelong anxiety, self-harm, stress, exhaustion, physical and mental health issues



And then... autism explains everything

- Anxiety, stress and exhaustion
 - Relationships and social stuff
 - Job failures
 - Confusion, poor decisions
 - Physical & mental health
-
- Why I'm right about everything
 - Why I don't have a file in my brain for handbags



And it means I wasn't wrong... Just different

But Sarah, you look so 'normal'?

- Limited social contacts
 - Infrequent, low maintenance, similar
- Other people deal with the world
 - Answer phone, door, deal with people
- Precision far-future planning
 - Schedule, diary, lists, no surprises
- Fixed behaviours
 - Food, clothes, routes, work
- Low arousal environment
 - Headphones, country life, solitude
- Playing to my strengths
 - Words, logic, information exchange, limited people relationships



Managing Life

Issue

- Poor memory
- Say Yes to everything
- Need to be productive all of the time
- Easily overwhelmed to paralysis
- Can't cope with unexpectedness

Strategies

- Online calendar
- Diary
- Weekly schedule
- Daily schedule
- Pens
- Delegate tasks to future days to reduce overwhelm and panic
- Allocate time to tasks to work out what will fit in to a day



Travel and New Places #1

Issue

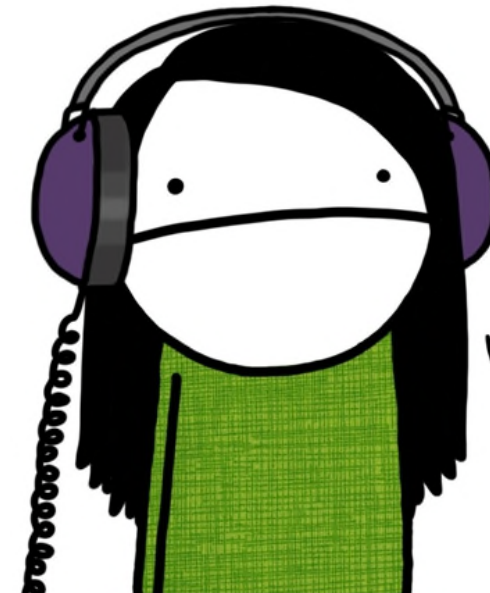
- Disorientated and dizzy alone in public
- Easily overloaded by visual and auditory stimuli
- Low capacity – easily exhausted
- Cannot travel on public transport alone
- Constantly lost inside buildings
- Cannot ask for or process directions
- Food – choices/change
- Dislike unfamiliar set-ups



Travel and New Places #2

Strategies

- Ensure phone charged + charger
- Google Maps and Streetview are my friends
- Photograph landmarks, route maps, floor plans, fire exits
- Look backwards when entering building to get mental picture of objects of reference for the way out
- Silicon earplugs/Noise-cancelling headphones
- Cutlery and Tupperware
- Take own food and drink
- Locate nearest preferred shop (M&S)
- Locate known restaurant – choose from online menu
- Nap – a lot
- Take familiar object / book / toy / pillow
- Allow recovery time after return home



I'm actually not listening to anything, I just really like it when people don't talk to me.

Natalie Dee.com

Clothes

Issue

- Need to look vaguely presentable and not smell
- Shopping – visual/air con/people/choice
- Clothes – comfort/plain/no fripperies

Strategies

- Buy everything from one or two shops you like
- Dresses don't need to match anything else
- Black is always good - goes well with more black
- Good quality clothes last longer - less shopping trips
- Buy multiples of items that you love
- Don't feel that there is pressure for make-up/hair/heels etc.
 - Mostly there is not. Keep it simple. Nobody notices
- Wash/shower often



People

Issue

- Wanting to be alone whilst feeling intensely lonely
- Wanting to belong, but can't find where

Strategies

- Don't compare yourself to non-autistic women
- Infrequent meetings with clear end point
- Minimal maintenance
- Activity-based
- Not everyone will want to be your friend – and that's OK.
- The ones that like you will probably be a bit like you
- No one posts online to have their mind changed
- Non-autistic people judge/like in range of 4-7
- Autistic people judge/like at 0 and 10



Socialising with Craft

Issue

- Can't stand pointless social gatherings
- Need to stay awake – sleeping in company = rude

Strategies

- Also origami, knitting etc.
 - Craft = engineering for autistic women
- Less need to speak
- Makes you look 'present'
- Productive and efficient use of time
- New special interest?
- Repetitive
- Focused
- Sensory – visual, tactile, comfort – sit under blanket
- Anxiety management



Exercise

Issue

- Constant thinking
- Headaches
- Anxiety/Stress
- 'When I run, it is the only time my brain and my body are going at the same speed'

Strategy

- Simple and free: a walk every day in nature
- Find one that suits requirements:
 - Social
 - Sensory
 - Physical
 - Financial
 - Schedule



It Helps To Know:

- That my desperation to be liked + limited social understanding makes me vulnerable
- What I need and make sure I have it with me
- That being clever does not protect me
- That many of the things that I worry about never happen
- That I can do both less and more than others
 - Less: indoors, people, pointless things
 - More: focus, physical, analysis
- ***That I am OK as I am***

