

The cover features a large pink shape on the left and a teal shape on the right, both partially overlapping a central white rectangular area with a thin brown border. The text is centered within this white area.

Sparkly Frog
See Your Story
A Guided Journal
for late-identified autistic women

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See Your Story - A guided journal for late-identified
autistic women

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See Your Story: A Guided Journal for Late-Identified Autistic Women

Written and created by Francesca Percival

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Thank you for respecting the care and creativity behind this work.

See Your Story

A guided journal for late-identified autistic women

Francesca Percival

WELCOME



Hello, and welcome,

I'm so glad you've found your way here.

I'm a late-diagnosed autistic woman, a parent to an AuDHDer, and a senior HR professional.

For years, I felt like I was constantly adapting

- never quite fitting, always slightly out of sync.

My autism diagnosis brought deep relief, but also confusion, grief, and a quiet storm of questions I didn't know how to answer. That's why I became a coach-to support others like me. And it's why I created this journal: so you don't have to navigate this alone, or without a map.

Love,

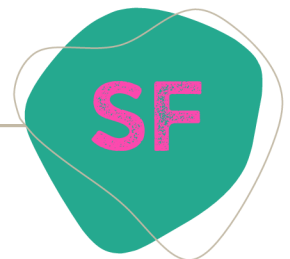
Francesca x

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SEE
YOUR
STORY

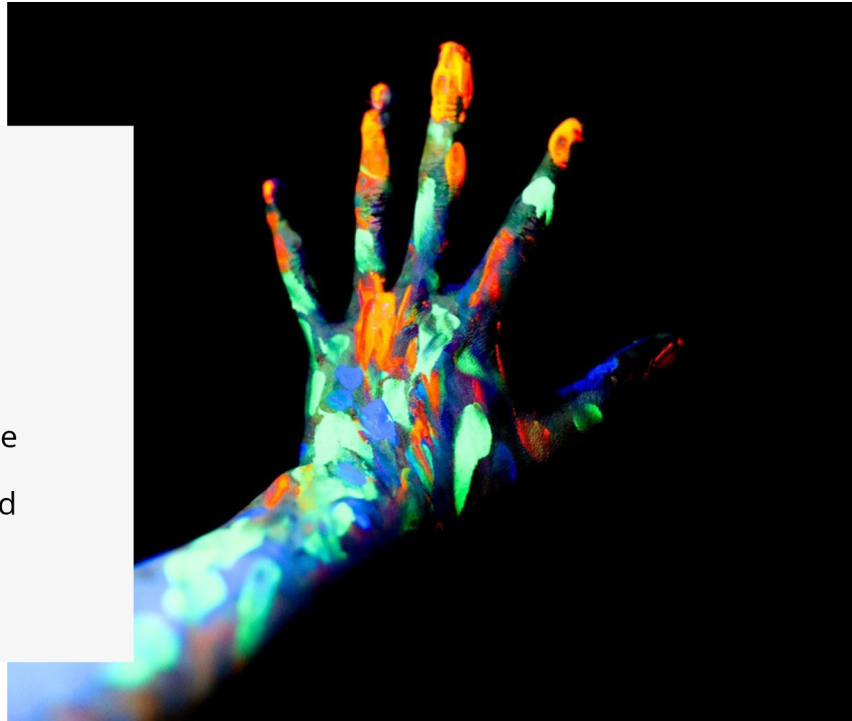


Introduction and About this Guided Journal

Introduction

This journal is built around Step One of my SPARK Emerging framework:
See Your Story.

It's designed to help you begin making sense of yourself - not the version of you the world expected, but you, beneath the mask.



You'll gently explore:

- What led to your diagnosis or self-identification
- The strategies that once kept you safe, but now feel heavy
- Where you feel most like yourself - and where you don't
- Traits and experiences that resonate with you
- Concepts like masking, fawning, rejection sensitivity, and autonomy
- The grief of being misunderstood - and the grace of self-forgiveness
- You don't need to have it all figured out. You just need space to start.

How to use this journal

Go at your own pace.

There's no "right" way to do this - only your way.

Find a quiet space, let the prompts guide you, and meet yourself with curiosity, not judgement.

Come back to pages as new reflections emerge.

You're not too much.

You're not not enough.

You're already exactly who you're meant to be.

Let's begin to see that - together.

Support while you journal

This journal invites deep reflection - and that can bring up a lot. Memories. Emotions. Realisations. Sometimes relief, sometimes grief. Sometimes all at once.

It's important to know: you don't have to process it all alone - and you're not expected to. This guide is here to support self-discovery, but it's not a substitute for therapy or clinical support.

Support while you journal

💡 This is not therapy.

Journalling can be powerful, but it's not the same as working with a mental health professional. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, stuck, or emotionally dysregulated for long periods, it may be a sign that you'd benefit from additional support.

If that's you, I encourage you to reach out to:

- An autistic-informed therapist or counsellor
- Your GP or mental health practitioner
- Local or online neurodivergent support communities

Here are some UK-based places that may help you find the right support:

- National Autistic Society – Find a Therapist: www.autism.org.uk

(Offers helplines and guidance for autistic adults seeking support.)

- Counselling Directory: www.counselling-directory.org.uk

(You can search for neurodivergent-affirming or autism-informed counsellors.)

- Autistica's Adult Support Resources: www.autistica.org.uk

(Research-based information, lived experiences, and resources.)

- Local NHS talking therapies service (England):

www.nhs.uk/service-search

Simple ways to soothe as you reflect

As you work through the journal, here are a few grounding practices that may help if you feel wobbly, activated, or emotionally tired:

- **Pause and Breathe:** Gently place a hand on your chest. Inhale for four, exhale for six. Repeat a few times.
- **Sensory Reset:** Use comforting textures, fidget tools, or weighted blankets to regulate your nervous system.
- **Movement:** Shake out tension, stretch your limbs, or walk barefoot to ground yourself.
- **Name it:** Simply saying “This is a lot, and that’s okay” can reduce shame and bring perspective.
- **Stop if needed:** There’s no rush. You can close the journal and return when you feel ready. Your pace is valid.

Trust your process

Some days this work may feel liberating. Other days, tender. Be kind to yourself in both. Every feeling you meet with compassion is part of your healing. And remember: **You’re allowed to ask for help.**

Being supported doesn’t mean you’re weak. It means you’re human.

Use this your way

This journal is here to support you - not to overwhelm you.

There's no right place to start and no pressure to finish every page.

Some days, you might write a lot. Other days, you might just pause to think, doodle, or highlight a phrase that resonates.

You are allowed to:

- Skip prompts that don't feel right today
- Come back to chapters in any order
- Use this with audio, art, or movement instead of writing
- Take breaks - days, weeks, months, or longer

Let this be a space where your needs and pace are honoured.

Where You Begin

*"I begin with honesty, not perfection. I am allowed to
take up space in my own story"*

Where You Begin

Welcome.

However you've arrived, you're exactly where you need to be.



This journal isn't about fixing you - it's about helping you see what's already true, and gently uncover the pieces of your story that may have been buried, masked, or misunderstood.

You don't have to rush. You don't have to do it all at once. This is your space to be curious, kind and honest - and to begin exactly where you are.

You might feel excited, overwhelmed, tender or unsure. All of it is welcome. Let this be a starting place that honours how far you've already come.

Let's start by exploring what brought you here to ground the journal experience and set personal intentions:

What brought you to this journal today?

What are you hoping to understand or feel more clear about?



Take a breath

Before moving on, give yourself a moment to pause.

There's no need to rush.

You can reflect.

You can rest.

You can jot something down.

Or you can simply sit with what's stirred.

You don't need to do it all in one go.

Your story will wait for you.

Let this page be a breath between chapters.

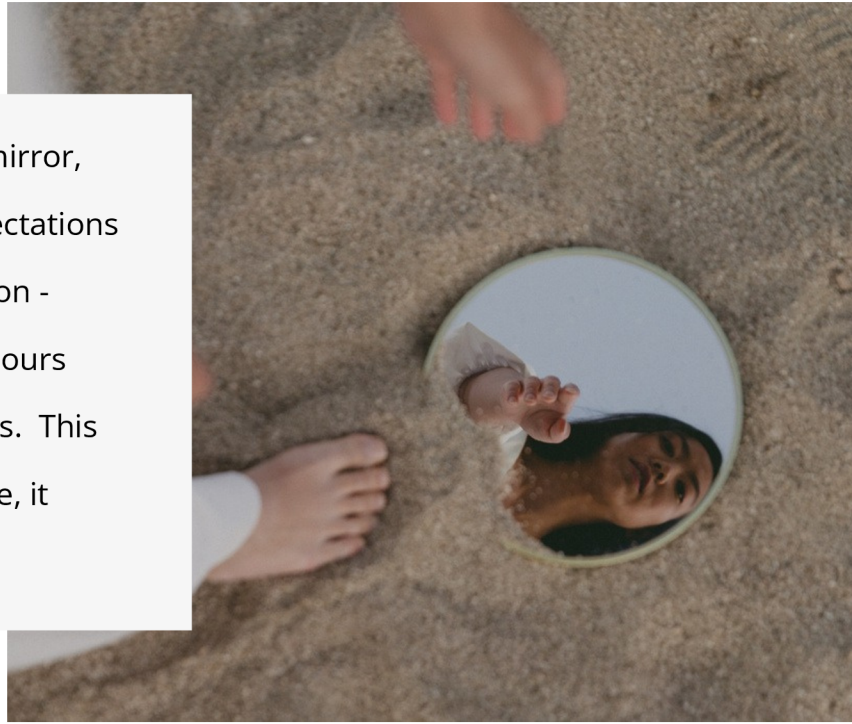


Behind the Mask

"My adaptations were intelligent. My truth is valid."

Behind the Mask

Many autistic women grow up learning to mirror, adapt and mould themselves to fit the expectations of others. It's like a constant act of translation - turning natural thoughts, feelings or behaviours into something the world expects or accepts. This often happens unconsciously, and over time, it becomes second nature.



In this chapter, you'll begin to explore what you've had to do in order to feel safe, accepted or successful and whether those strategies are still serving you now.

What parts of you were shaped by pressure? What was hidden to stay safe? Masking might feel automatic, like a habit formed over years or decades. But while it can sometimes be a survival strategy, it often comes at a high emotional and physical cost.

This chapter is about beginning to notice the difference between what is true and what is expected.

Why Masking Develops

Masking often develops because the world isn't built to recognise or accommodate autistic people - not because there's something wrong with you.

Masking can help people survive education, employment, relationships, or family systems that don't understand autism. Masking develops to avoid being bullied or excluded; to gain approval or avoid punishment; to avoid attracting unwanted attention or because it never felt safe to be different.

Masking is the process of consciously or unconsciously **suppressing parts of yourself** to appear more neurotypical. It's not just acting - it's often *a full-time effort* that affects how you speak, move, react, and relate to others.

Examples might include:

- Forcing eye contact even when it feels unnatural
- Copying other people's expressions, tone, or body language
- Hiding stims (like fidgeting, pacing, or vocal sounds)
- Memorising social scripts
- Staying silent when confused or overwhelmed
- Saying "yes" to avoid conflict, even when it's not true

You might notice:

- Your masking "automatically switches on" in certain spaces
- You feel drained after socialising or work
- You struggle to even know who the "real you" is

Many people don't even realise they're masking until it starts to break down.

Somatic clues you might be masking:

Sometimes, your body knows before your brain does. When you're masking or people-pleasing, you may notice:

- 🦷 Jaw tension or teeth clenching
- 😞 Holding your breath or shallow breathing
- 🧑♀️ Stiff posture or over-controlled movements
- 🥵 Sweaty palms or flushed skin
- 🤯 Headaches or a tight scalp
- 🧠 Mental fog or difficulty focusing
- 💬 Delayed responses — needing to pause before replying
- 😊 Smiling or laughing reflexively, even when you're not feeling it
- 😞 Suppressed stimming (not letting yourself do what feels regulating)
- 🤔 Overanalyzing what you just said — the “post-social replay”

These signals are not “bad” - they're your body trying to help you navigate a world that often isn't designed for your nervous system. Over time, learning to notice these clues can help you understand your needs and move toward settings where you can feel more at ease.

Keeping a masking diary can be helpful to:

- Identify patterns and triggers
- Recognise safer, more affirming environments and celebrate the spaces (and people) where you feel most like yourself
- Explore small ways to increase unmasking where it feels possible

A tool is available in the appendices to help you with this.

Camouflaging is a broader term that includes masking but also covers more strategic or adaptive behaviours, like pretending to understand things or over-preparing for conversations.

Fawning (a trauma response) is about people-pleasing to avoid perceived danger - saying or doing things to keep others happy at the expense of your own needs. For many late-diagnosed autistic people, fawning becomes deeply ingrained over time.

These behaviours often start as safety mechanisms. They are not your fault. But as awareness grows, so does your power to choose what you want to keep - and what you might want to let go of.

The Cost of Survival

Survival isn't the same as living. Long-term masking is exhausting and often contributes to:

- Autistic burnout
- Identity confusion
- Anxiety and depression
- Delayed diagnosis or misdiagnosis
- Feeling like an imposter - even after diagnosis
- Difficulty knowing your own needs or preferences

Unmasking Slowly, Safely & Authentically


Sometimes, when people start unmasking, they worry they're "regressing" - but really, they're beginning to decompress after years of effort.

You haven't changed. You're just allowing your real self to emerge.

Unmasking doesn't mean "letting it all out" at once. It means:

- Noticing where you feel most able to be yourself
- Giving yourself permission to stim, rest, or say no
- Asking for adjustments that support your true needs
- Letting go of scripts when you feel safe enough

Unmasking can feel vulnerable - especially if your environment doesn't feel accepting. That's okay. Go gently. You are not doing this wrong if you still find yourself masking in some settings.

 **Want to track your masking patterns? Use the Masking & Coping Strategy Reflection Log in the appendix to start spotting patterns in your week.**

CHAPTER TWO

Use this space to reflect on your experience of masking or adapting:

When do you feel you are performing or putting on a version of yourself?

What are some rules or scripts you've learned to follow socially?

CHAPTER TWO

Use this space to reflect on your experience of masking or adapting:

What would it be like to let go of some of these rules or scripts?

What does masking feel like in your body?

CHAPTER TWO

Use this space to reflect on your experience of masking or adapting:

Is there anything you've stopped doing or suppressed for fear of judgement?

Are there people or places where you feel safer to unmask? Where do you feel most like yourself?

CHAPTER TWO

Use this space to reflect on your experience of masking or adapting:

Are there situations where you've stopped masking, even a little? What changed? What did you notice?

How might you support yourself through the discomfort of unmasking? Who or what could help?



***Permission
to Pause

You're doing brave, beautiful work.

Even noticing what's coming up takes energy.

You don't need to push through.

You don't need to finish.

You don't need to be anywhere else but here.

This is your permission to step away.

Stretch. Rest. Re-regulate.

Or just sit with what's stirring.

You can return whenever you're ready.

You are enough - even in pause.



The Clues Were Always There

"The moment I recognised myself was not the beginning of me - it was the beginning of understanding."

The Clues Were Always There

Realising you're autistic - whether through a formal diagnosis or personal recognition - often brings a strange mix of clarity and grief.

You may begin replaying your life through a new lens, spotting signs that were always there but never named.

For many late-diagnosed autistic women, the clues were misunderstood or overlooked. You may have been labelled "shy," "sensitive," "gifted," "too much," or "hard to reach."

You might feel anger or sadness that no one put the pieces together or guilt that you didn't see it yourself.

In this chapter, you'll begin to reflect on how the signs were missed, and more importantly, start reclaiming your story with new understanding.

Why it took so long

Autistic traits often present differently in women and girls - especially those socialised to blend in.

Many late-identified people were:

- praised for perfectionism, compliance, quietness, good behaviour, their ability to blend in
- labelled with anxiety or depression (but not asked why)
- dismissed because they “did well” academically
- misdiagnosed with something else entirely

The system isn't built to recognise quiet struggle, especially in people who seem to be “coping.” But you weren't imagining it. And you weren't wrong.

You didn't slip through the cracks because you weren't autistic “enough”. You were missed because the system wasn't made to see you.

The following journal prompts invite you to reflect on what others missed and why. This might include reflection on how gender, race, class, masking, trauma or cultural norms may have shaped how you were perceived.

This is a powerful step toward making peace with the past and understanding: You were always there. They just didn't know how to look.

CHAPTER THREE

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

When I think back to school, I remember feeling...

I used to think I was just..., but now I wonder if I was actually...

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What signs of autism do you now recognise in your childhood or teen years?

What traits or behaviours were misunderstood or mislabelled?

CHAPTER THREE

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

How were you described by others growing up? What didn't they see?

If someone had noticed sooner, maybe I would have...

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

Were you ever praised for things that were actually signs of struggle?

What traits or behaviours were misunderstood or mislabelled?

CHAPTER THREE

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What was the perception, understanding and knowledge of those around you?

What were these perceptions based on? How have things changed?

CHAPTER THREE

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What first made you wonder if you might be autistic?

What resonated most when you learned more?

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What feelings came up when you started to realise you might be autistic?

How does it feel to look back with new understanding?

CHAPTER THREE

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What would you say to your younger self if you could go back?

What would you say to those who didn't notice?



Set it * down for a moment

Let yourself soften.

You've been holding thoughts, memories, questions.

You don't have to carry them all right now.

Try noticing:

- *The feeling of your feet on the floor*
 - *The weight of your body in the chair*
 - *One colour you can see*
 - *One sound you can hear*
 - *One breath in... and out*
- Nothing is urgent.*

This page is a pause.

A place to set it down and just be.

Come back when you're ready.



Am I *Really* Autistic?

"I don't have to prove my truth. My lived experience is enough."

Am I *Really* Autistic?

Even after a diagnosis - especially a late one - doubt can creep in.

You might ask yourself, “what if I’m just making this up?” “What if I don’t belong here?”



These thoughts are incredibly common. It is probably universal to question your autistic identity at some point.

Underneath these questions is often a deep longing: Can I trust myself? Do I really get to claim this truth?

You do.

In this chapter, you won't try to convince yourself, but you will listen, reflect, and begin to notice what's real beneath the doubt.

Many autistic women and marginalised neurodivergent folks have spent years being misunderstood, minimised or missed altogether. It makes perfect sense that self-trust might feel shaky.

You might feel like you don't fit the stereotypes or that you're not "autistic enough". You might worry that you're making it up, that you're wrong, that others won't believe you.

This isn't a sign that you're not autistic. It's a sign that you've lived in a world that hasn't reflected you back to yourself clearly. It's also a sign of how deeply you've internalised the pressure to "prove" your needs.

The Imposter Loop

Late-identified autistic women often:

- Worry they're taking up space that isn't theirs
- Feel invisible because their traits don't "look" like the stereotype
- Compare themselves to diagnosed friends or online voices
- Doubt their own experiences because they've become so good at hiding them

Having spent years feeling like they don't fit the allistic mould and feeling like an imposter in that world, you may find yourself thinking: "What if I'm just broken?"

But that question reveals something important. You're not broken. You've been surviving without the full story.

Am I Autistic? Sitting with the Question

You might be here because you're wondering if you're autistic. You might be here because you've confidently self-identified. Or you might be newly diagnosed - holding a report and a swirl of feelings.

Wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here.

Some days you might feel sure of who you are. Other days, uncertainty might creep back in. That's completely normal. There's no one right way to explore your identity. Some people self-identify. Some go through formal diagnosis. All of those experiences are valid.

Many of us spend a long time thinking deeply once this idea surfaces. It can feel like every waking moment is consumed by this new possibility - this puzzle piece that finally seems to fit. There might be relief, excitement, grief, or disbelief - and often, they all arrive at once.

If you're waiting for an autism assessment, you may be in a strange kind of limbo. You might feel cautious about exploring too deeply, in case the result isn't what you expect. That waiting period can feel long, uncertain, and emotionally exhausting. Please know you're not alone in that.

Wherever you are - whether newly curious, fully self-identified, or post-diagnosis - your thoughts and feelings may shift. That's okay. You can come back to these pages again and again, adding new insights as they come. You don't need to be certain to start. You just need to be curious.

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What thoughts come up when you ask yourself, "Am I really autistic?"?

What would change if you believed you are autistic, just as you are?

CHAPTER FOUR

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

Where (or by whom) do you feel most unseen or invalidated?

Why do you think this is?

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What would it feel like to stop questioning and start accepting?

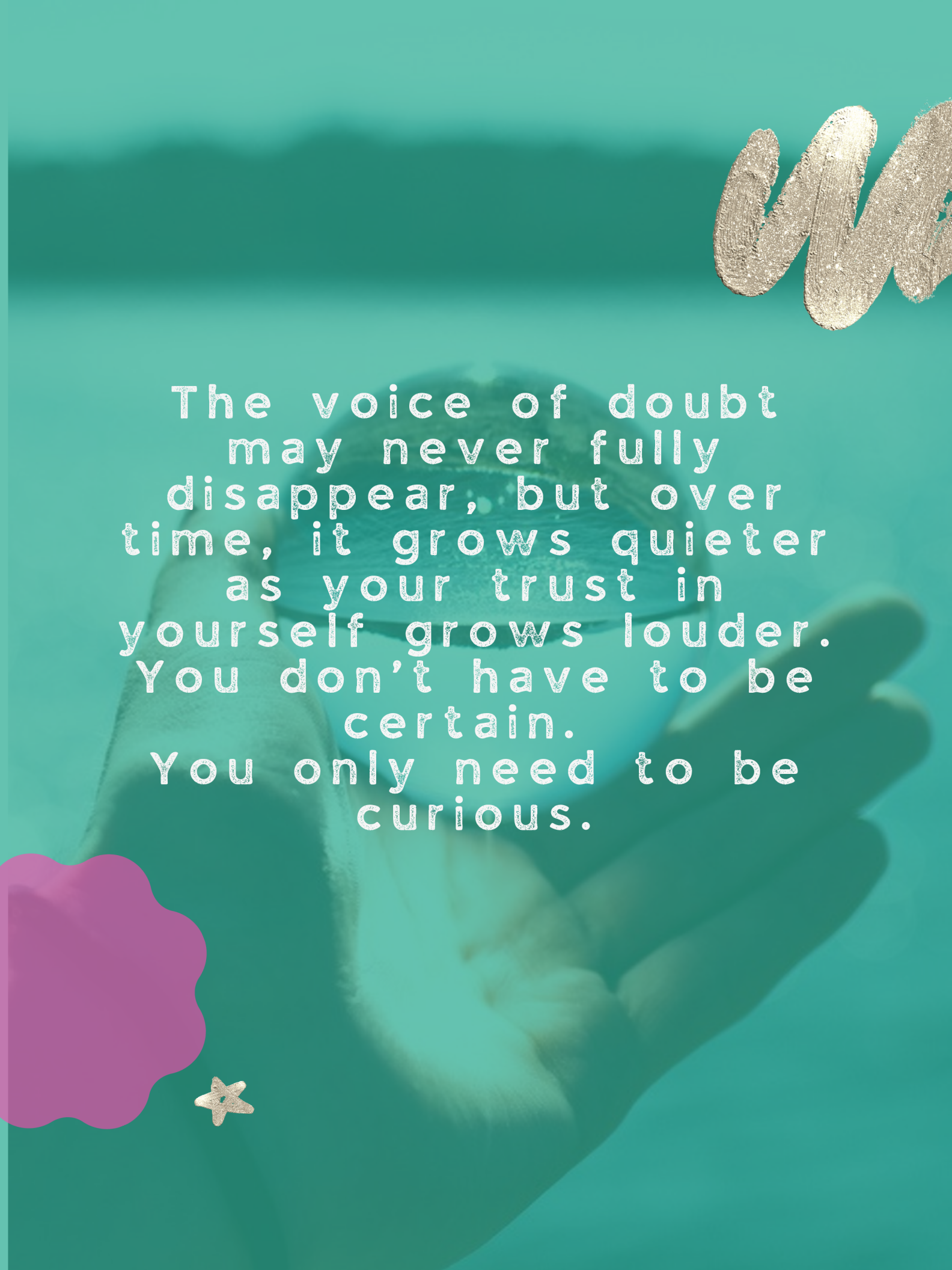
Who do you imagine won't believe you and why?

CHAPTER FOUR

Use this space to reflect on the signs you now recognise with new understanding and compassion.

What would it feel like to stop questioning and start accepting?

What proof are you waiting for that might not exist?

A hand is shown holding a small green plant in a teal background. The text is centered in a white, typewriter-style font. There are gold brushstrokes in the top right and a gold star in the bottom left, next to a purple scalloped shape.

The voice of doubt
may never fully
disappear, but over
time, it grows quieter
as your trust in
yourself grows louder.
You don't have to be
certain.
You only need to be
curious.



Take a breath

Before moving on, give yourself a moment to pause.

There's no need to rush.

You can reflect.

You can rest.

You can jot something down.

Or you can simply sit with what's stirred.

You don't need to do it all in one go.

Your story will wait for you.

Let this page be a breath between chapters.



Your Autistic Self

“There is no one right way to be autistic. My way is valid.”

Your Autistic Self

Autism doesn't look just one way. And yet, many of us grew up with narrow definitions that didn't reflect us.

Some traits will resonate deeply; others won't. Some days it will feel obvious; others, less so.



You'll explore the traits, patterns, sensitivities and ways of being that resonate for you as well as consider co-occurring experiences.







This is not about fitting a mould. You get to define what being autistic means in your life. You might begin to understand why certain noises make you flinch, why group conversations feel exhausting, why you've always craved structure or struggled with transitions.

This chapter gives you the space to notice, name, and honour your differences and preferences, as part of your unique neurodivergent profile. It's about reclaiming your understanding of autism through your lens. This isn't a diagnosis checklist. It's a mirror. Take what fits. Leave the rest. The goal is resonance, not perfection.

A note before you begin...

This chapter is a little bigger than the others - because there's so much richness in getting to know your autistic self.

You'll explore several key areas:

-  Recognising your traits and patterns
-  Your sensory experiences and needs
-  Emotional intensity, RSD, and burnout
-  Communication differences and preferences
-  Structure, rhythm, and autonomy (including PDA)
-  Joy, glimmers and special interests

Each section stands on its own, so you can move through at your own pace - or skip to the parts that call to you first.

You don't have to do it all at once. Let this be a chapter you return to over time, adding layers as you go.

Recognising Your Traits

Some traits, common in late-diagnosed autistic women that may resonate with you:

- Needing time alone to recover from social interaction
- Having strong preferences (clothes, food, routines)
- Feeling overwhelmed in busy or noisy environments
- Feeling “on alert” in unfamiliar settings
- Deeply focused interests - often described as obsessions or passions
- Difficulty identifying or expressing feelings
- Struggling with transitions, interruptions, or unpredictability
- Being seen as “sensitive,” “shy,” “too much,” or “too intense”
- Feeling like you’re always performing - even with people you like

These traits may have been praised, misunderstood, or masked throughout your life. Now, you're invited to see them as part of your whole self; not flaws to fix, but signals to understand.

What I was told	What I now see
"You're too sensitive"	I have strong sensory awareness
"You're overreacting"	I feel things deeply and intensely
"You're too quiet"	I communicate best in calm, clear ways
"You think too much"	I process information thoroughly
"You're so organised"	I rely on structure to feel safe

Use this space to reflect on traits common among late-identified women that resonate with you:

What's one trait you now understand differently through an autistic lens?

How does it feel to reframe it?

💬 **A Little Note on Language: “High” and “Low” Functioning**

You may have heard terms like “high-functioning” or “low-functioning” used to describe autistic people. While they may seem like a way to understand support needs, these labels are misleading and often harmful. They might reflect what other people can see and not what our lived experience is.

Someone labelled “high-functioning” might be silently struggling with exhaustion, sensory overload, or suicidal thoughts, but because they mask well, their needs get ignored.

Someone described as “low-functioning” may be deeply self-aware and capable of joy, connection and communication, but is dismissed because they don’t express themselves in expected ways.

Functioning isn’t fixed. It fluctuates, sometimes day to day or hour to hour. Labels can erase nuance, prevent support, and reinforce shame. Labels tend to:

- Ignore the spiky profile of autistic strengths and challenges
- Invalidate the support needs of people who mask well
- Create unhelpful divides within the community

It’s more helpful to talk about support needs in context, and remember that people’s abilities can change depending on environment, energy, and support.

- “You seem fine” ≠ “You are fine.”
- Support needs are not a measure of worth.
- You can be capable and still need help.
- You don’t have to prove your struggles to be believed.

Your internal experience matters more than how others perceive you.

Use this space to reflect on high-functioning and low-functioning labels:

Have you ever been praised for “coping well” when inside you were actually struggling?

What feelings do the terms “high-functioning” and “low-functioning” bring up for you?

Sensory Experiences: Navigating a World That Feels Different

Many autistic people experience the world through a unique sensory lens. You may notice certain sounds, lights, textures, or movements feel intensely uncomfortable - or deeply calming. Sensory experiences can vary greatly between individuals and even within the same person over time, depending on factors like stress, environment, or hormonal changes.

The more you notice what calms or drains you, the more you can start honouring those needs and making daily life work better for you.

Sensory Needs Can Shift

- Your sensory profile might change over time - even hour to hour - depending on:
 - Hormones (e.g. menstruation, perimenopause)
 - Sleep, nutrition, or hydration
 - Emotional state
 - Environment (lighting, noise, crowds)
 - Transitions or change

It's okay if something you normally enjoy suddenly feels "too much" - that doesn't mean you're regressing. It means your needs are changing, and that's human.

The Eight Senses

Most of us grow up learning about the five senses, but there are actually eight! Autistic people may experience differences in any or all of these:

Sense	Description / Examples
Visual (sight)	Bright lights, cluttered spaces, strong colour contrast
Auditory (sound)	Background noise, overlapping speech, certain frequencies
Tactile (touch)	Clothing textures, tags, hair brushing, hugs
Olfactory (smell)	Perfume, cleaning products, strong food smells
Gustatory (Taste)	Texture sensitivity, strong flavours, food aversions
Vestibular (Balance)	Movement, spinning, escalators, sudden shifts
Proprioception (Body Awareness)	Knowing where your limbs are, pressure, resistance
Interoception (Internal Sensations)	Hunger, thirst, emotions, temperature

✨ **Meltdowns and Shutdowns Are Physiological**

When sensory input becomes too much, your nervous system may go into fight, flight, freeze or fawn mode - not by choice, but by biology. You might:

- Feel panicked, angry or unable to think clearly (meltdown)
- Go quiet, shut down or become unable to speak (shutdown or situational mutism)
- Fawn - people-please or overcompensate to defuse perceived threat

These are not overreactions or “bad behaviour” - they are signs your body is trying to protect you from overwhelm. Sensory regulation can help you prevent or soften these responses.

🧠 **Sensory Profiling: What Do You Notice?**

You might like to:

- Keep a sensory diary for a week or two
- Notice what feels grounding vs draining
- Pay attention to when overwhelm begins (time, place, people, sounds, lighting, temperature)
- Identify helpful tools: sunglasses, noise-cancelling headphones, weighted blankets, fidget items, etc.

A tool is available in the appendices to help you with this.



Your sensory preferences aren't random - they're how your brain processes and protects you.

There's no "wrong" here, only patterns to learn from.

Use this space to reflect on your sensory experiences.

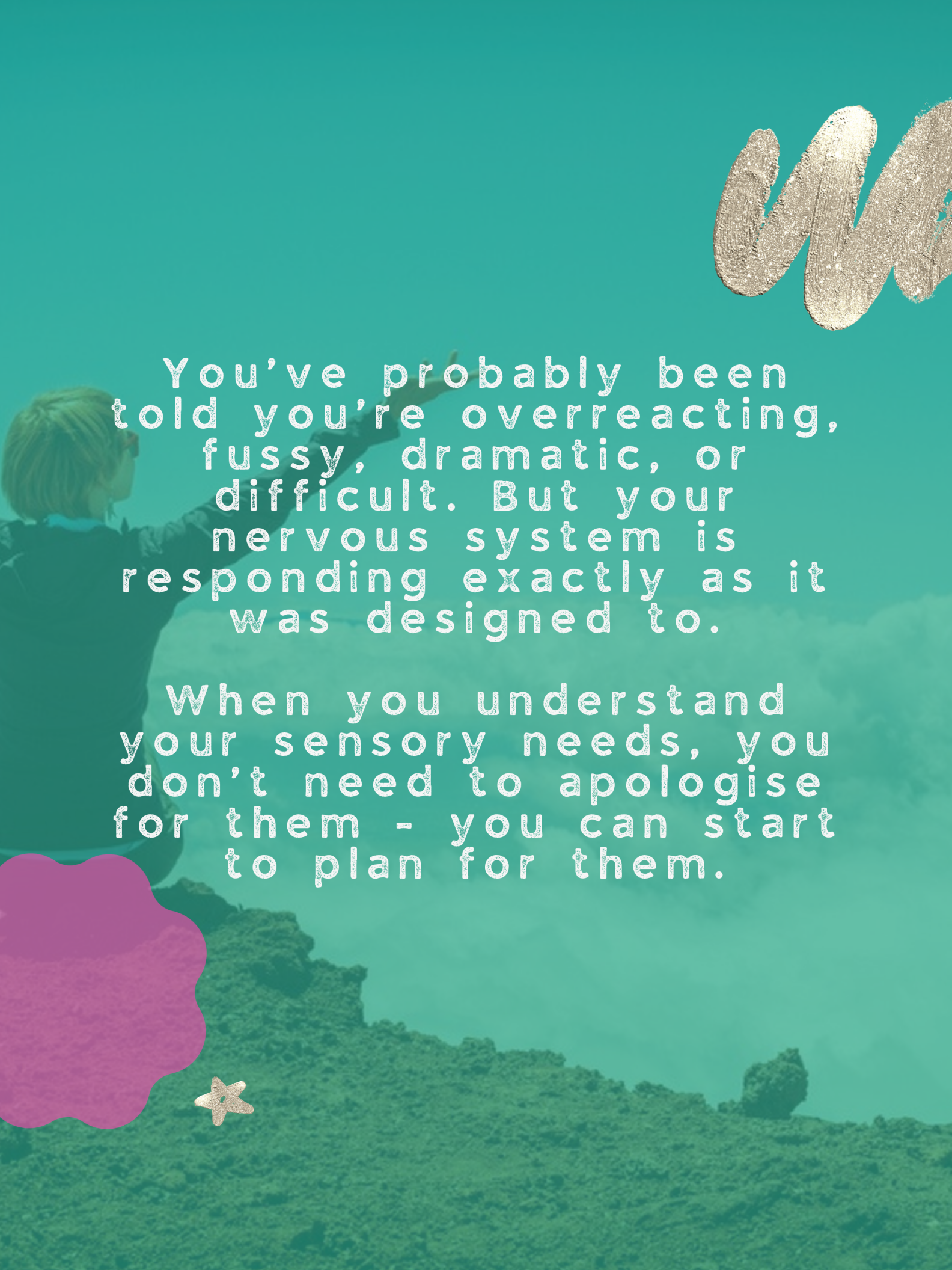
What sensory input do you find soothing? What do you avoid - and why?

When do you feel most regulated and at ease in your body?

Use this space to reflect on your sensory experiences.



How do your sensory needs affect your energy, focus, or mood?

What adjustments help you feel safer, calmer, or more like yourself?



You've probably been told you're overreacting, fussy, dramatic, or difficult. But your nervous system is responding exactly as it was designed to.

When you understand your sensory needs, you don't need to apologise for them - you can start to plan for them.



Emotional Intensity

You feel deeply - and that has shaped your relationships, your energy, and the way you move through the world. Here's where you begin to make sense of it.

Emotional intensity is a common - and often misunderstood - experience in autistic people, particularly those who have spent years suppressing or over-rationalising their feelings. You might experience big, fast, or hard-to-name emotions. You might shut down, explode, or freeze. Or you might not notice what you feel until long after a situation has passed.

These patterns aren't character flaws. They're often signs of deeper nervous system patterns - like Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD), Alexithymia, or emotional burnout.

In this section, you'll start to notice how emotions show up in you, and explore how to shift from feeling confused or ashamed of your emotions... to understanding and supporting them.

Emotional Burnout or Shutdown

- Emotional exhaustion after too much masking or coping
- Feeling numb, disconnected, or emotionally "flat"
- Avoiding relationships or social settings that feel too complex
- Feeling like you can't "catch up" with your own feelings:
"I'm so tired of feeling everything. Or nothing."

Burnout isn't weakness - it's your system calling for rest and realignment.

◆ Alexithymia

Alexithymia means having difficulty identifying, naming, or understanding your own emotions. It doesn't mean you don't have feelings - just that it can be hard to put them into words or know what they're trying to tell you.

- You might struggle to answer "how are you feeling?"
- Feel overwhelmed but unsure why
- Experience emotions physically (tight chest, tears, nausea) without words
- Sometimes know what you feel only hours (or days) later

Journalling can be helpful here - not to "solve" your feelings, but to notice and accept them as they come.

🌀 (RSD) Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

RSD is often experienced by autistic (and ADHD). It describes an intense emotional response to the perception - real or imagined - of rejection, criticism, or disapproval.

- You might replay social interactions over and over
- Feel ashamed or furious after tiny feedback
- Avoid taking risks in case people disapprove
- Feel "cut off" or abandoned, even in small moments

Use this space to reflect on your experiences of emotions:

What's your relationship with your emotions? Have you felt "too much" or "not enough"?

When do emotional reactions surprise you - either by their size or delay?

Use this space to reflect on your experiences of emotions:

What helps you feel emotionally safe, understood, or seen?

Which emotional traits or tendencies make more sense now that you know you're autistic?



You're Not Broken.

Emotional intensity, shutdowns, delayed processing, and sensitivity aren't signs of dysfunction. They're often signs that you've been pushing through without support.

When you understand your patterns, you can stop judging yourself and start supporting yourself.

Communication Differences

You've always communicated, but maybe not in the ways people expected. Communication is often one of the most misunderstood aspects of autism, especially for those who've masked or adapted for years. You might have always felt out of sync, overly literal, easily overwhelmed by conversations, or misunderstood by those around you.

Autistic preferences don't always match social expectations. You might pause before replying. Need time to process. Avoid eye contact. Speak bluntly when others expect subtlety. Or get lost in nuance while others skim the surface.

This isn't poor communication. It's your way of being in the world. And it deserves to be recognised, respected, and understood.

Double Empathy: The Double Empathy Problem

This idea flips the old stereotype that autistic people "lack empathy." Instead, it says that autistic and non-autistic people may just struggle to understand each other - because they experience the world in different ways.

Milton, D. (2012). On the Ontological Status of Autism: The 'Double Empathy Problem'.

Common Communication Preferences

- You find small talk exhausting or pointless
- You prefer depth, clarity, or honesty over social niceties
- You sometimes miss sarcasm, indirect language, or vague instructions
- You feel anxious to interrupt or struggle to hold back when you're passionate
- You pause before replying, or need extra time to process speech
- You feel more confident writing than speaking
- You communicate best when you're calm, not rushed or "on the spot"
- You might find it easier (and less exhausting) to speak plainly, without hints, hidden meanings or emotional guesswork.
- Eye contact can be uncomfortable or distracting, and looking away is often what helps you stay present.
- You might mask in social settings, rehearsing conversations, mimicking typical body language or tone to blend in.

Communication is a two-way street. When autistic people are misunderstood, it's often because neurotypical people don't recognise autistic ways of connecting. This isn't a "deficit" in empathy; it's a difference in perspective, rhythm, language and expectation.

The Double Empathy Problem (referenced on the previous page) helps explain why you might feel deeply connected with other neurodivergent people, even if neurotypical interactions feel awkward, draining or misaligned.

When Communication Feels Difficult

You might find that it's not the conversation itself that's hard, but everything surrounding it. Sensory overload from noise, lighting, crowds, or multiple voices can make it feel almost impossible to stay present.

Communication challenges can also show up in how language is interpreted. You might take things more literally, or need people to be more direct or concrete. Hints, abstract phrases or sarcasm might feel slippery like everyone else has the translation key and you're left guessing. Conversation rhythm can be another source of friction. Maybe you talk quickly and passionately and sometimes interrupt because your ideas come all at once and fast. Or maybe you pause longer, needing more time to process before responding. Either way, these pacing differences can lead to misunderstandings.

Others find their facial expressions don't always 'match' how they feel inside. Your communication might not look like others', and that's okay.

And if you're highly sensitive to rejection, small things-someone's tone, a delayed text, or an offhand comment-can spiral into hours of second-guessing and self-doubt. This isn't overreacting. It's how your nervous system processes social risk and safety.

Recognising your communication style and preferences is the first step in advocating for what you need, reframing the 'problem,' and learning what environments and people support your natural style best.

Use this space to reflect on your communication preferences:

How do you describe your communication style? Has it changed over time?

What types of conversations or settings leave you feeling drained?

Use this space to reflect on your communication preferences:

What helps you communicate most clearly and comfortably?

What would it look like to communicate without having to mask?



It's a difference; not a deficit.

You're not bad at communicating. You may simply have a style that's been misunderstood, overlooked, or undervalued.

Once you understand your preferences, you can advocate for them and begin having more nourishing conversations on your terms.

Structure and Certainty

You're not rigid. You're regulated by rhythm. This section explores how predictability helps you feel safe and what happens when the world doesn't flow the way you need it to.

Many autistic people feel most comfortable and grounded when there's a sense of predictability in the day. Routines, structure, and familiar patterns can act like anchors in a world that often feels fast-moving, inconsistent, or overwhelming. Having a clear plan or knowing what to expect can reduce anxiety, support focus, and free up mental energy for other things.

This preference isn't about being inflexible or controlling. It's about creating a sense of internal safety. For some, change - especially unexpected or last-minute change - can be incredibly destabilising because their brain, which seeks coherence, needs time to recalibrate. Repetition, routines, or even special interests can offer emotional regulation, sensory balance, or a sense of meaning.

Not everyone's version of structure looks the same. You might thrive with detailed schedules or prefer loose rhythms that flow the same way most days. What matters is recognising what you need in order to feel steady and knowing it's okay to advocate for those needs.

You Might Notice...

- You feel anxious or unsettled when plans change last-minute
- You have daily routines or rituals that help you feel grounded
- You like to know what's expected before starting something
- You need time to mentally transition between tasks or environments
- You create structure through lists, systems, or prep work
- You're labelled "rigid" or "resistant to change" even when you're just trying to cope
- You may "over plan" as a form of self-protection

Use this space to reflect on your own routines, rituals and rhythms:

What routines or rituals bring you a sense of calm or control?

How do you respond to unexpected changes - emotionally or physically?

Use this space to reflect on your own routines, rituals and rhythms:

What have you been told about your need for structure? and what do you believe now?

How could you begin honouring your natural need for rhythm without judgement?



Structure isn't
about control.

It's about safety -
reducing
uncertainty in a
world that already
feels unpredictable.

Understanding PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance or Pervasive Drive for Autonomy)

Some autistic people experience an extreme need for autonomy, which can cause intense distress or resistance when they feel demands - even small or internal ones - are being placed on them. It's not about being difficult or oppositional. It's often a trauma-informed, nervous-system-based need for safety and control.

This might show up as:

- Procrastinating things you want to do
- Feeling panic when someone gives you instructions
- Struggling with pressure, even if it's self-imposed
- Avoiding tasks, plans or expectations, even enjoyable ones

For people with PDA profiles, the issue isn't the demand itself - it's the perceived loss of autonomy - the sensation that something is being imposed on you - even when it's self-generated or something that you want to do. Everyday tasks like replying to messages, starting a project, or taking a shower can trigger a sense of internal rebellion, panic or paralysis.

This is exhausting, confusing, and often misunderstood - both by others and by yourself. You may be highly motivated, creative, driven... and yet unable to begin. You might describe it as:

- "I want to do it; I just can't."
- "As soon as I say I have to, I can't do it anymore."
- "I'm avoiding the pressure, not the thing."

(Many autistic people prefer to refer to PDA as Pervasive Drive for Autonomy.)

Use this space to reflect on your own experience of demands and preferences for autonomy:

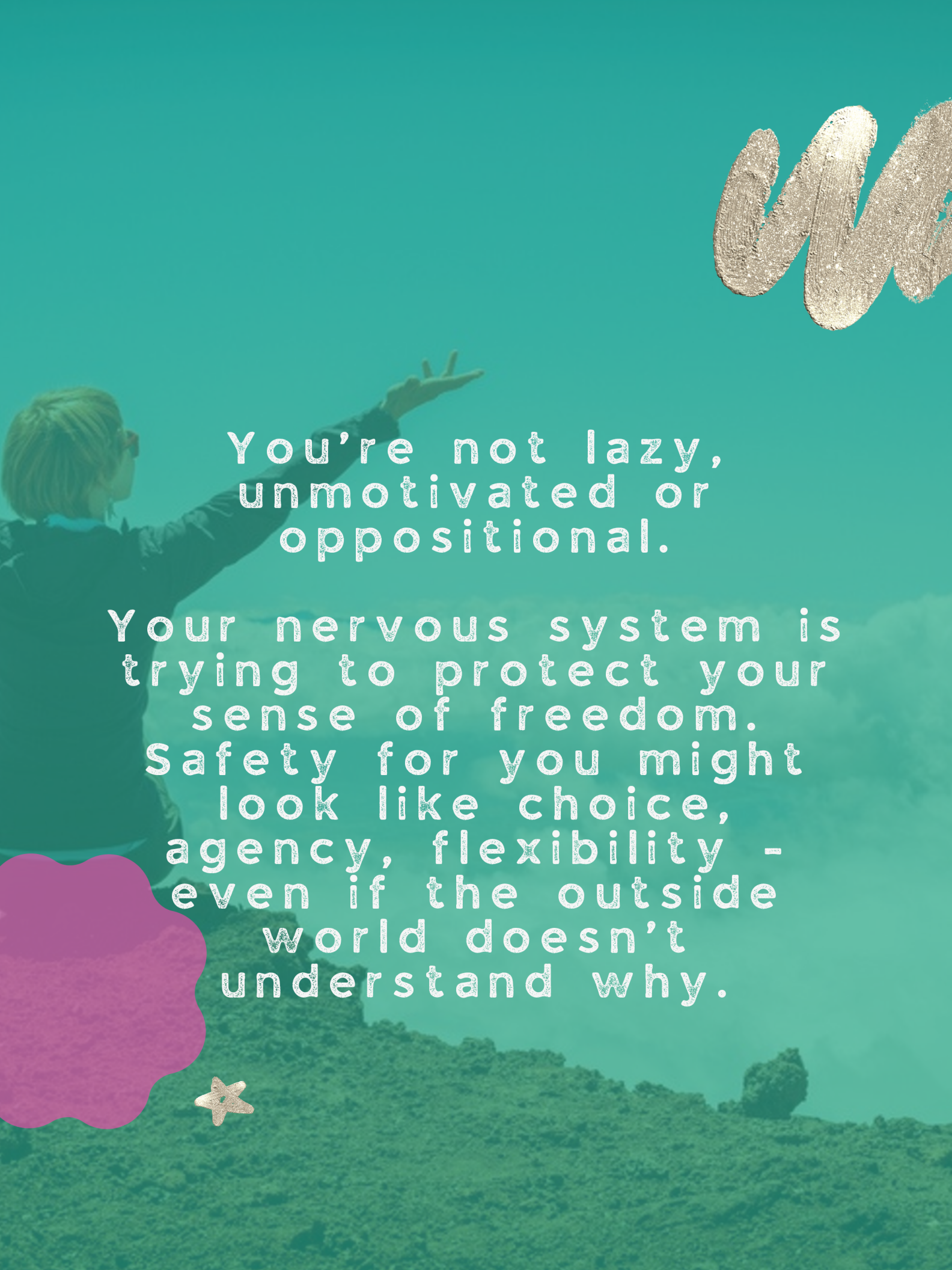
What kinds of demands feel overwhelming - even if they seem small?

When have you felt most in control of your time, your energy, or your needs?

Use this space to reflect on your own experience of demands and preferences for autonomy:


Are there “shoulds” in your life that feel heavier than they need to?

How could you experiment with autonomy-based language? (e.g. “I choose to...” instead of “I have to...”)



You're not lazy,
unmotivated or
oppositional.

Your nervous system is
trying to protect your
sense of freedom.
Safety for you might
look like choice,
agency, flexibility -
even if the outside
world doesn't
understand why.



Joy, Glimmers and Special Interests

You weren't made only to cope. You were made to feel joy, flow, and meaning. In this final section, we explore what lights you up and why that matters.

Sometimes, autistic identity is framed only through struggle, but autistic joy is real, and often found in the very things that were once labelled "obsessions", "quirks" or "too much."

Special interests, comfort items, stimming, creative focus, intense curiosity aren't just coping tools. They're sources of regulation, connection, even liberation.

And then there are the small things: sensory pleasures, patterns, textures, sounds, moments of ease. These glimmers - tiny sparks of calm, delight or resonance - matter too.

In this section, you're invited to reconnect with what feels good, meaningful or "you" — not for productivity or performance, but because joy and self-expression are essential parts of understanding who you are.

Special interests are often a beautiful, meaningful part of the autistic experience. They can bring comfort, structure, creativity, learning, and joy. You might have one or two lifelong passions, or you might move from interest to interest with curiosity and intensity. Some are practical or academic, others are sensory, niche, or playful.


Sometimes referred to as autistic joys, deep joys, focused passions or deep interest. You get to choose the language that fits your experience.

Did You Know?

Special interests can support emotional regulation, boost self-esteem, and provide a sense of mastery. Engaging with them may reduce anxiety, enhance focus, and even help during transitions or recovery after overwhelm.

Connecting Through Joy

Sharing special interests can be powerful - but you don't have to speak about them to feel connected. Simply being in the presence of others while you each enjoy your own interest can bring about a unique, calming connection. Coexisting joyfully without pressure to perform or explain can be a meaningful way to relate - especially in neurodivergent community.

 **Glimmers: Tiny Moments of Safety & Spark** are small sensory or emotional moments that bring calm, clarity or joy. Often overlooked, but powerful. Examples:

- The feel of warm sunlight
- A favourite mug
- Rewatching a comforting show
- Perfect texture of a blanket
- A song that resonates just right
- A repeated sound, word or rhythm

These moments are worth noticing. They're your nervous system's way of recognising safety, joy, or resonance. They may be fleeting, but they matter. Over time, you can begin to notice and collect them - making space for more of what helps you feel you.

Use this space to reflect on your own experience of joy:

What are your lifelong or current special interests? How do they make you feel?

What glimmers have you noticed recently (even very small ones)?

Use this space to reflect on your own experience of joy:

What have others misunderstood about the things that bring you joy?

When do you feel most “yourself”?

My Joy List

Things I could talk about for hours:

Things that calm me when everything feels too much:

Things I return to again and again:

Things that feel like me:



You are not here to
prove your usefulness.

You're here to be fully
yourself, which
includes honouring the
things that bring you
joy, comfort, and
ease.

These are not extras.
They're essential.



***Permission
to Pause

You're doing brave, beautiful work.

Even noticing what's coming up takes energy.

You don't need to push through.

You don't need to finish.

You don't need to be anywhere else but here.

This is your permission to step away.

Stretch. Rest. Re-regulate.

Or just sit with what's stirring.

You can return whenever you're ready.

You are enough - even in pause.



The Cost of Survival

"I honour the ways I kept myself safe. I get to choose new ways now."

The Cost of Survival

Chronic adaptation takes a toll - physically, emotionally, mentally.

Maybe you've felt this toll but couldn't name it. Maybe you've lived in burnout for years without realising it wasn't your fault.



This chapter creates space to notice the cost: the exhaustion, the overthinking, the recovery time after social interaction. The deep sense of disconnection from yourself.

Autistic life often involves navigating a world that isn't designed with our needs in mind - socially, sensorily, emotionally. Over time, this can take a toll. You might find that your energy varies wildly, or that certain environments drain you in ways that others don't experience or understand.

This chapter is all about understanding your energy, protecting it with boundaries, and recognising burnout before it builds.

🔑 Spoon Theory: A Language for Energy

The Spoon Theory (originally by Christine Miserandino to describe chronic illness fatigue) has been widely embraced by the neurodivergent community.



Here's how it works:

- Imagine you wake up each day with a limited number of spoons - each one representing a unit of energy.
- Every task - getting dressed, talking on the phone, commuting, making a decision - might cost you 1, 2, 3, or more spoons.
- Some days you start with fewer spoons than others. Some activities give you spoons back.

When you run out of spoons, you might hit shutdown, meltdown, irritability, brain fog, or complete exhaustion.

Learning what costs you spoons - and what restores them - can help you advocate for yourself and pace your energy in a sustainable way.

▶ What Burnout Might Look Like

Autistic burnout is real - and often misunderstood. It is more than being tired. It is physical, emotional and cognitive exhaustion. It can involve:

- Intense fatigue or emotional numbness
- Loss of skills or executive function
- Shutdowns or social withdrawal
- Sensory overwhelm at much lower thresholds
- Reduced capacity to mask or “function”
- Feeling like you’ve lost your sense of self

Burnout may creep up gradually or hit suddenly - especially if you’ve been pushing through without rest, masking heavily, or enduring invalidating environments.

Keeping an energy log can be helpful

By noticing and recording what uses energy (spoons) or gives you energy spoons, you can start to:

- Identify what is costing you and how much
- Identify what is giving you energy and how much
- Explore how you can best manage your energy needs

A tool is available in the appendices to help you with this.

All the Work No One Sees

Burnout doesn't always come from doing too much visibly.

Sometimes, it comes from the effort no one notices - the kind that happens inside your head and body, every day, just to make it through.

You might be:

- Silently filtering background noise while trying to focus
- Rehearsing and editing your words before you speak
- Suppressing stims, emotions, or needs to keep others comfortable
- Holding back a meltdown or shutdown in public
- Pretending you're okay when you're close to collapse

This is labour. Real, valid, energy-consuming labour.

And it deserves to be recognised - especially by you.

You are not lazy. You are not failing. You may be doing far more “background work” than others realise - and your body needs rest and care.

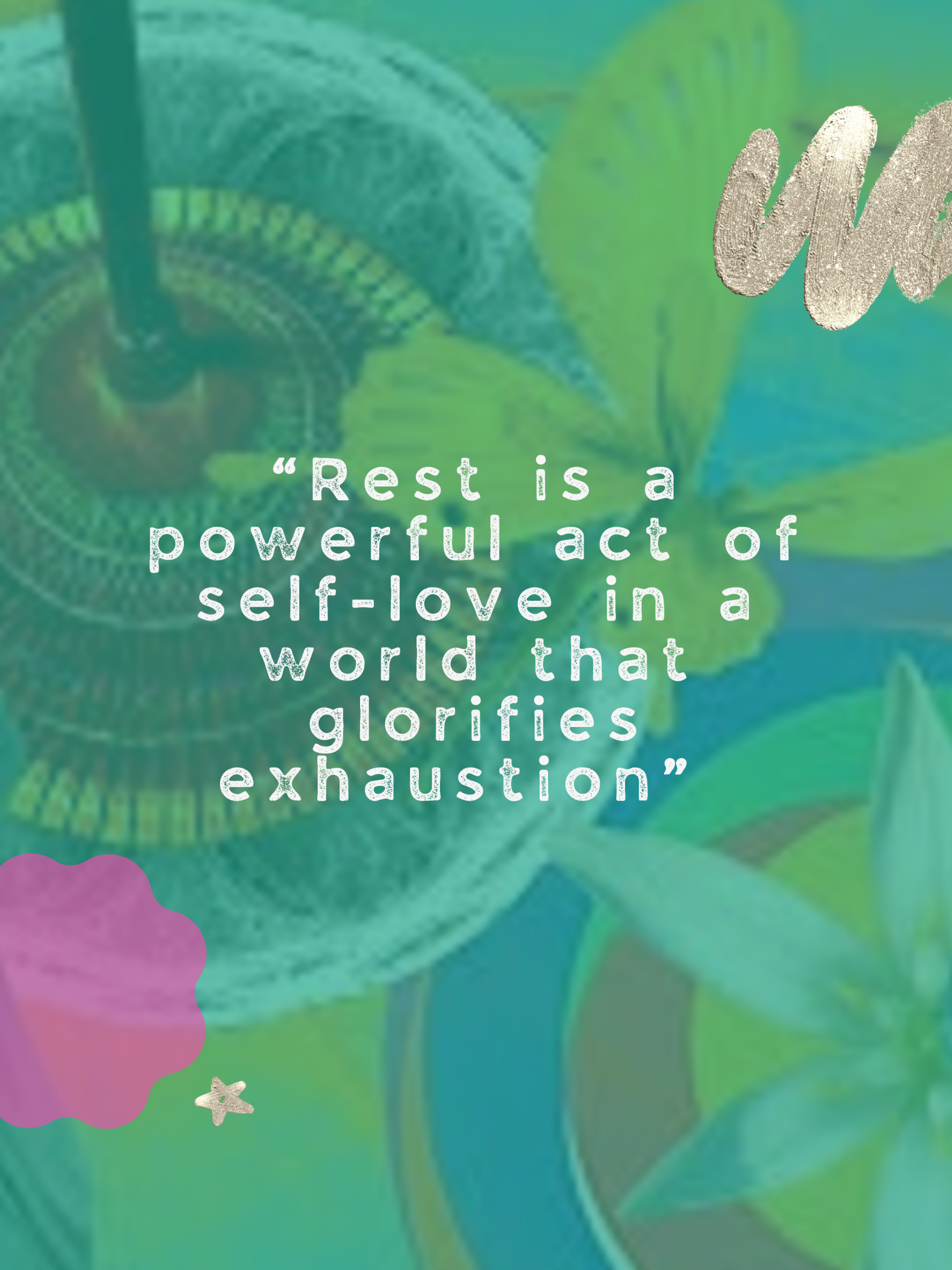
● **Boundaries: Not Barriers, But Bridges**

Boundaries protect your energy, joy, and wellbeing.

They can look like:

- Saying “no” without apology
- Leaving early
- Taking breaks
- Not responding to messages immediately
- Choosing silence over small talk
- Prioritising your needs over others’ expectations

Boundaries are not rejection. They are communication. They say: “This is how I can safely and fully show up.”



“Rest is a
powerful act of
self-love in a
world that
glorifies
exhaustion”

Coping Strategy Audit Table

Use the table to reflect on the strategies you have been using to cope, how they have served you and what they have cost you. Some examples are given to help you get started.

Strategy I used	What it protected me from	What it's costing me now
Masking emotions	Making others uncomfortable	Disconnection from how I really feel
Over-preparing or over-working	criticisim or being "caught out"	Constant anxiety and burnout
People-pleasing (fawning)	Conflict, rejection, being left out	Exhaustion, resentment, lack of boundaries
Avoiding social invitations	sensory overload or awkwardness	Isolation, guilt, loneliness
Smiling, pretending to be okay	making others feel reassured	Lack of support, being unseen

Use this space to acknowledge the toll of chronic adaptation:

Which strategies once helped you survive, but now feel too heavy to carry?

What new supports or permissions could take their place?

Use this space to acknowledge the toll of chronic adaptation:

What does burnout look and feel like for you? What might others notice?

What kinds of situations leave you feeling completely drained?

Use this space to acknowledge the toll of chronic adaptation:

What have you done or stopped doing in order to appear okay?

What boundaries do you already have? Are there any you'd like to try setting?

Use this space to acknowledge the toll of chronic adaptation:

When have you overridden your own limits to meet expectations of others? How did that feel?

What might you say to advocate for your needs or maintain your boundaries? (e.g. "I'm low on spoons today; can we talk another time?")



Set it * down for a moment

Let yourself soften.

You've been holding thoughts, memories, questions.

You don't have to carry them all right now.

Try noticing:

- *The feeling of your feet on the floor*
- *The weight of your body in the chair*
- *One colour you can see*
- *One sound you can hear*
- *One breath in... and out*

Nothing is urgent.

This page is a pause.

A place to set it down and just be.

Come back when you're ready.



Where You Go From Here

*"I give myself permission to feel it all - and to heal at my
pace."*

Where You Go From Here

You've done something powerful - you've made space to see yourself clearly, maybe for the first time.

But this isn't the end. It's the beginning of a relationship with yourself that's rooted in truth, gentleness, and strength.



This chapter helps you reflect on what you've discovered, what you want to explore next, and how you'll continue honouring your needs.

You've taken time to explore your identity, reflect on your experiences, and engage with your inner world with honesty, courage and care.

You don't need all the answers right now. Just one next step. You're not starting over - you're emerging. It's about honouring where you are right now and trusting that you'll keep discovering, redefining, and returning to yourself.

Whether you're newly diagnosed, confidently self-identified, or still navigating uncertainty, you are valid. Your experience is real. You belong.

There's no "correct" pace to understand your autistic identity. You haven't missed the boat, and you're not too late.

If you've felt regret, grief or confusion, that's valid too.

These feelings are part of processing.

So is joy, relief, and deep clarity.

You might revisit earlier chapters. You might write things here you're not ready to share with anyone. You might return in a month, or never again.

All of this is okay.

You Can Come Back To This

Self-understanding is not a linear journey.

As life changes - your environment, your relationships, your work, your sensory needs - new thoughts and emotions may emerge.

You might want to:

- Revisit earlier prompts with new insight
- Add layers to ideas you explored before
- Create your own pages and reflections

This is your space. Return whenever you need.

Use this space to reflect on what you have discovered:

What parts of yourself are you learning to embrace?

What have you learned about yourself that feels important to remember?

Use this space to reflect on what you have discovered:

What would you say to someone else who's just beginning to explore their identity?

What do you want to keep exploring, noticing or practising going forward?

Use this space to reflect on what you have discovered:

What are you most proud of in your journey so far?

What do you want to keep exploring, noticing or practising going forward?

Use this space to reflect on what you have discovered:

What are you taking with you from this journal?

What are your next questions or intentions?

Use this space to reflect on what you have discovered:

How will you honour what you have discovered?

♥ A Note on Self-Trust

There may be moments you doubt yourself. Moments where you question your diagnosis, your traits, or your right to identify as autistic.

That doubt doesn't erase your truth.

You are the expert on your experience.

Over time, self-trust can grow. Not because everything becomes certain, but because you get better at listening to yourself.

✉ A Note to Future Me

The journey doesn't end here.

It will twist, loop, pause...and pick up again.

Some days you'll feel strong in who you are. Other days, you might doubt, grieve, or forget.

That's okay.

This page is for the you who might need reminding:

- of how far you've come
- of what you've learned
- and of how worthy and valid you've always been

Write to your future self with softness, honesty and compassion. Some suggested prompts are included to help you start:

Dear future me,

Here's what I want you to remember about who you are...

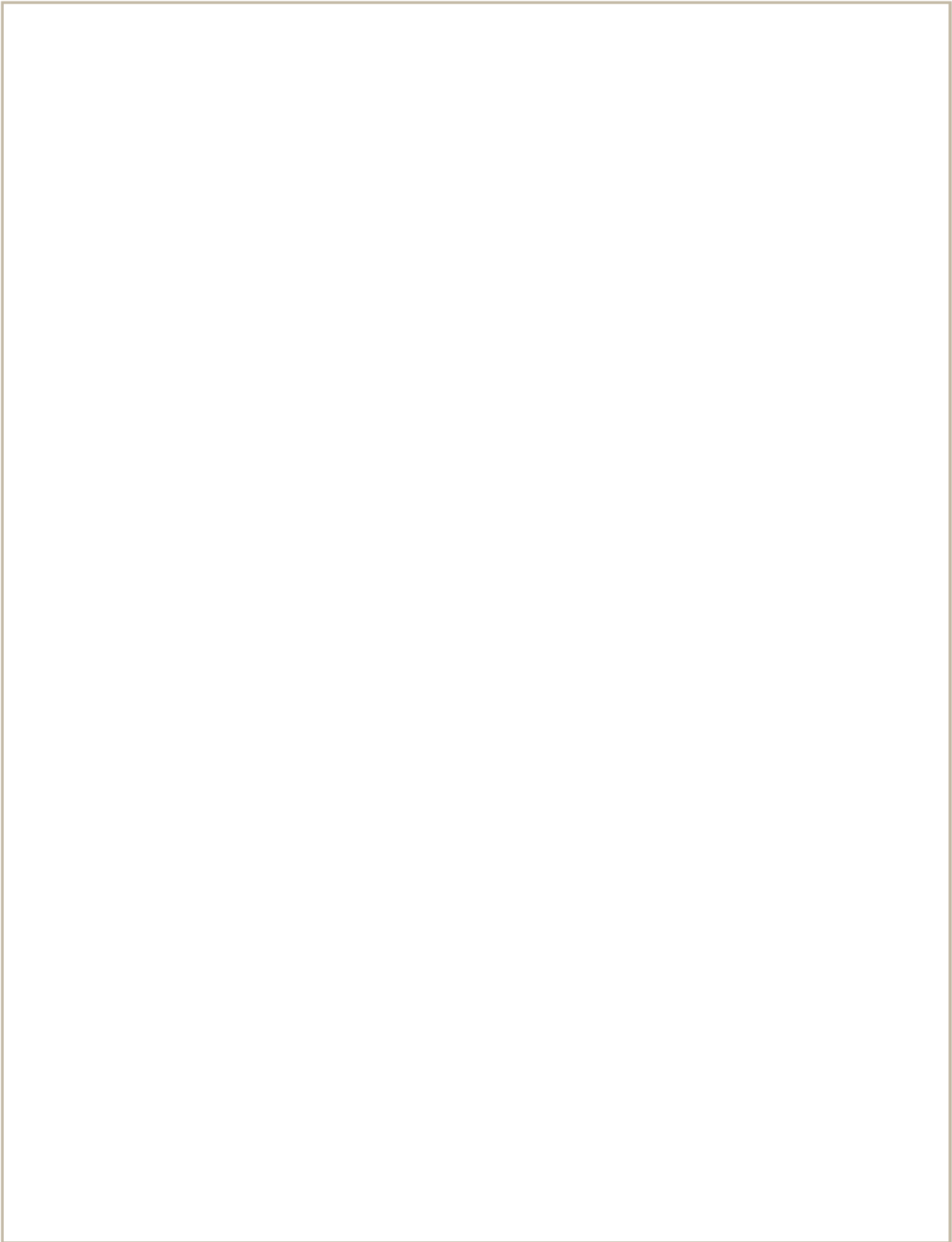
Here's what I'm proud of today...

When you feel lost again, come back to this...

You are...










(more space overleaf)

CHAPTER SEVEN



What Comes Next (if and when you're ready)

This isn't a checklist. It's a gentle map of possibilities. You don't need to follow every path - just the ones that feel right, in your time.

-  Revisit chapters and prompts with fresh eyes
-  Start a regular sensory or energy check-in journal
-  Practise self-advocacy in one small area of your life
-  Learn more about traits, needs, or co-occurring experiences
-  Rest. Without guilt. As an act of resistance and care
-  Connect with others who get it - even just one person
-  Create: a playlist, a poem, a drawing - something that feels like you
-  Consider coaching, therapy or community spaces that affirm your neurodivergent identity
-  Get curious about the next layer of your story - without pressure to "fix" anything

This journal has helped you begin to see your story - in all its complexity, beauty, and truth. You've looked behind the mask. You've made sense of old patterns.

And maybe, you've begun to imagine a life that works with your neurology, not against it. But you don't have to take the next steps alone.

When you're ready for support

You're not alone and you don't have to figure this out by yourself. My work is here to help you live life on your terms - with confidence, clarity, and compassion.

I offer:

- 🗣️ 1:1 coaching for late-identified autistic adults

For people who are tired of over-functioning and second-guessing. Together, we'll build rhythms, boundaries and systems that work for *your* energy.

- 🏠 Courses, workshops and group spaces

Gentle spaces for reflection, learning and connection - where you don't have to mask, explain, or prove yourself to belong.

- 🏢 Consultancy and advocacy

I also support workplaces in becoming more inclusive of neurodivergent people - so you can thrive and make change.

- 📖 Educational content and resources

I share insights that help autistic adults feel seen - and help the world understand us better.

♥️ My Mission

I envision a world where neurodivergent people don't have to justify their needs, mask their truth, or carry the weight of misunderstanding.

Through this work, I want to spark a ripple of confidence, self-acceptance, and empowerment - so that late-identified autistic adults feel seen, supported, and safe to be fully, unapologetically themselves.

You're already on your way.



Take a breath

Before moving on, give yourself a moment to pause.

There's no need to rush.

You can reflect.

You can rest.

You can jot something down.

Or you can simply sit with what's stirred.

You don't need to do it all in one go.

Your story will wait for you.

Let this page be a breath between chapters.





I am not too much.

* I am not not
enough.

I am exactly who
I'm meant to be.

I am learning to be
me - fully.



Appendices

“You are allowed to be known - and you are allowed to be private. Your identity belongs to you.”

Tools you might find helpful

Beyond the Journal

This journal may be ending, but your self-understanding is still unfolding.

The following pages are here to support that unfolding with tools, concepts, and resources to help you make sense of your experience in a world that often didn't.



You don't need to read or use everything here. These are invitations, not instructions.

Use what helps. Leave what doesn't. Come back when you're ready. You're building a life that finally fits and these pages are here when you need them. You set the pace.

Appendix One: Sharing (or not) - talking about being autistic

Appendix Two: New Worlds, New Words - common terms you might come across

Appendix Three: Masking Log, Energy Accounting Journal, Sensory Mapping Tool

Sharing (Or Not): Talking About Being Autistic

When you first identify as autistic - whether through self-discovery, informal affirmation, or a formal diagnosis - a big question often looms:

“Should I tell people?”

This journal has been all about seeing your story. You might have reached a point where you feel ready to share. This further section is here to help you explore that gently. There’s no right answer, no deadline, and no rulebook. This is your identity. You get to choose when, how, and whether to share it.

“Coming Out” as Autistic

Some people compare disclosing their autism to “coming out.” It’s a personal and sometimes vulnerable process - especially if others have outdated views about what autism is “supposed” to look like.

You might choose to share:

- with no one
- with a few trusted people
- publicly and proudly

Any choice is valid. You don’t owe anyone an explanation.

Preparing for Conversations

Before sharing, it can help to consider:

- Why do I want to share?
- Is it to be understood? To access support? To honour who I am?
- What might I need in return?
- Acceptance? Curiosity? Practical adjustments?
- How might they respond - and how will I look after myself if they don't respond well?

Some people will surprise you in positive ways. Others might take time. Some may not understand - and that can hurt.

It's not your job to educate everyone, especially if you're still learning about yourself. But you can choose to share gently and on your terms.

Words You Might Use

Many people feel unsure about what language to use - especially early on.

- "I'm autistic."
- "I've been diagnosed as autistic."
- "I recently discovered I'm autistic."
- "I self-identify as autistic."
- "I'm exploring the possibility that I'm autistic."

Choose what feels true for you. You can change the wording as your confidence grows.

You don't need permission to describe your experience.

Work, Education & Legal Rights (UK context)

In the UK, being formally diagnosed as autistic means you're protected under the Equality Act 2010. This includes the right to:

- Reasonable adjustments at work or school
- Protection from discrimination
- Access to schemes like Access to Work

Self-identified individuals may have similar protections - you don't necessarily need a diagnosis and you still deserve support. Some employers and institutions are open to adjustments even without formal diagnosis - especially with increasing awareness.

If you're considering disclosure in a formal setting, it might help to:

- Write down what you'd like to say
- Ask for someone supportive to be present
- Know your rights (organisations like ACAS, National Autistic Society, and Disability Rights UK can help)

🙄 Not Sharing Is Okay Too

There are many reasons not to disclose:

- You're still processing
- You're not sure how someone will respond
- You're in a space where it doesn't feel safe or supported
- You just don't want to - and that's enough

You are not "hiding" or "dishonest" if you choose privacy.

You are allowed to be selective, thoughtful, and protective of your energy.

● Common Fears (and Reassurances)

"What if they don't believe me?"

This is especially common for self-identifiers or people who mask well.

→ You don't need to prove your autism. Your lived experience is valid.

"What if they start treating me differently?"

Sometimes people will - and sometimes that's actually a good thing. Other times, it may be uncomfortable.

→ You are still the same person - only now, you're showing more of your true self.

"What if I change my mind later?"

→ You're allowed to. Sharing isn't irreversible. You can always adjust your boundaries.

When thinking about sharing your identity, it might be helpful to think about the following:

Who (if anyone) do I feel safe sharing my autistic identity with - and why?

What am I hoping to receive when I share this part of myself?

When thinking about sharing your identity, it might be helpful to think about the following:

What might I want to say in a future situation, like a job interview, friendship, or family setting? (Feel free to script or role-play it out.)

When thinking about sharing your identity, it might be helpful to think about the following:

What would I say if someone responded with confusion or doubt?

New Words, New Worlds: Understanding the language of your experience

When you first start learning about autism, it can feel like people are speaking a different language.

Some of these terms may be brand new. Others might describe things you've always experienced - but didn't know had names.



This area offers a gentle introduction to some common words and ideas you might encounter. Some of them have already been talked about in this journal, but are brought together here for easy reference.

You don't have to memorise them. You don't even have to use them. They're just here to help you make sense of your own experience, one piece at a time.


Survival Strategies


Masking, Camouflaging & Fawning


Masking means hiding or minimising your autistic traits to fit in or avoid negative attention.

Camouflaging is a broader term that includes copying others' social behaviours or suppressing stims.

Fawning means people-pleasing in order to feel safe or accepted - often at your own expense. These are survival strategies. They aren't your fault. But over time, they can lead to exhaustion, burnout, and identity confusion.

 **Perfectionism:** Many autistic women develop perfectionism as a way to stay safe or avoid criticism. Doing everything “perfectly” can become a survival strategy, even when it's exhausting. Perfectionism isn't always about achievement; it's often about avoiding rejection or scrutiny. Over time, it can lead to burnout, indecision, and a fear of getting things wrong.

 **Emotional Suppression:** If you've learned to hide, minimise, or dismiss your feelings, it's often because expressing emotion didn't feel safe, welcomed or understood. Many autistic people are deeply emotional, but have been taught to keep it inside. Emotional suppression becomes a way to avoid judgment or protect relationships, even when it leads to internal overload.

 **Over-functioning:** You might have been the one who always took care of things - the responsible one, the organised one, the one who didn't ask for help. Over-functioning often develops as a way to stay in control, avoid conflict, or make up for invisible struggles. But carrying too much for too long comes at a cost — and you don't have to keep proving your value by doing more than is sustainable.

Nervous System Responses

Meltdowns, Shutdowns & Situational Mutism

These are physiological responses to stress and overwhelm, similar to the fight, flight, freeze (or fawn) responses in the nervous system. They are not tantrums, weakness, or failure.

- A meltdown might look like tears, yelling, throwing things, or needing to escape.
- A shutdown might feel like going blank, freezing, or becoming non-verbal.
- Situational mutism is when speaking becomes too difficult or impossible in certain environments.

You are not broken. Your nervous system is asking for care, not criticism.

Stimming

Stimming (short for self-stimulatory behaviour) is often a natural way for autistic people to regulate emotions, express excitement, or calm down. Stimming is self-care.

You might stim by:

- Rocking, pacing or bouncing
- Flapping hands or flicking fingers
- Repeating sounds or phrases, humming
- Chewing, tapping, doodling, hair-twirling or fidgeting
- Playing the same song or video on loop

Stimming is natural and healthy. You don't need to suppress it unless it's causing harm.

What stims feel good to you? Which ones help you feel grounded or joyful?

Co-occurring Experiences

PDA (Pervasive Drive for Autonomy)

PDA describes a need to feel in control, often expressed as an extreme resistance to demands - even everyday ones, or ones you place on yourself.

This isn't defiance. It's often a response to anxiety, overwhelm, or fear of being controlled.

You might hear this described as Pathological Demand Avoidance, but many prefer to reframe it as Pervasive Drive for Autonomy.

(RSD) Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

RSD is often experienced by autistic (and ADHD). It describes an intense emotional response to the perception - real or imagined - of rejection, criticism, or disapproval. For many late-diagnosed autistic women, this hypersensitivity can feel like a deep, physical wound, triggering shame, withdrawal, or people-pleasing behaviours. It often stems from years of masking, micro-traumas, or having needs misunderstood or invalidated. Recognising this pattern isn't about labelling yourself as 'too sensitive' - it's about understanding where your emotional responses are coming from so you can begin to meet yourself with compassion, not self-criticism. This awareness is a vital first step in reclaiming your story and starting to heal from the inside out.

Alexithymia

Alexithymia means having difficulty identifying, naming, or understanding your own emotions. It doesn't mean you don't have feelings - just that it can be hard to put them into words or know what they're trying to tell you. If you've ever said, "I don't know what I feel," or "I'm overwhelmed but I don't know why," this might resonate.

Journaling can be helpful here - not to "solve" your feelings, but to notice and accept them as they come.

Co-occurring Experiences

Other Things That Might Show Up

Some autistic people also find out they experience other things too - things that may or may not be part of their autism. This journal is not about overwhelming you; you might want to explore these when you feel ready.

- ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- OCD - Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, Dyslexia and Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (formerly known as Dyspraxia)
- Acquired Neurodiversity
- PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and Complex PTSD
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating differences and ARFID (Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)
- Tics
- Hypermobility / Ehlers-Danlos / chronic pain
- Sleep challenges
- Demand avoidance (not just PDA)

You don't have to figure all of this out right now. This journal isn't about labelling everything; it's about being kind to yourself as you learn what helps you feel understood and supported.

Misunderstood or Misused Language

Some commonly used terms are outdated, misleading or just misunderstood:

- **“High-functioning”** and **“low-functioning”**: These don’t reflect actual needs or experiences. Someone can appear “high-functioning” and still be deeply struggling.
- **“Asperger’s Syndrome”**: This diagnosis was once common, but is being phased out in the UK. It’s associated with Hans Asperger, whose history is ethically troubling. Most people now use the term “autistic” instead. However, many people who were diagnosed with Asperger’s still identify with the term and see it as part of their identity - that is a personal and valid choice.
- **“Everyone is somewhere on the spectrum.”**: Autism is a spectrum condition, but that doesn’t mean everyone has some level of autism. It covers a wide range of characteristics that vary from person to person.
- **“Superpowers”**: well-meaning, but often othering. It puts the focus on a single strength, implying deficits elsewhere, rather than seeing people as whole individuals.
- **Autism v ASD**: ASD is the medical or diagnostic term used in clinical manuals like the DSM-5. It frames autism as a disorder and is often used in formal assessments. Autism is the identity-first language preferred by many autistic people because they see autism not as something “disordered” or separate from who they are, but as part of their core identity. Autism Spectrum Condition (rather than “Disorder”) or ASC is also a common preference in the autistic community.

Misunderstood or Misused Language

- **Self-diagnosis:** Not everyone can access a formal autism diagnosis. For many adults, the process is costly, lengthy, invalidating, or outright harmful. Self-diagnosis (or self-identification) means coming to understand and claim your autistic identity through lived experience, research, and personal reflection. In many parts of the autistic community, self-diagnosis is valid. If the traits resonate, the patterns make sense, and your journey toward self-understanding is grounded in curiosity and care, you don't need someone else's stamp of approval to know yourself.

Some key language considerations:

- Identity-first vs. person-first – autistic person vs. person with autism - respecting individual preferences.
- Social model vs. medical model – differences vs. deficits - removing barriers, not “fixing” people.
- Co-occurrences vs. co-morbidities – social model vs. medical model.
- Adjustments vs. accommodations – small changes can have a big impact.

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Double Empathy: The Double Empathy Problem

This idea flips the old stereotype that autistic people “lack empathy.” Instead, it says that autistic and non-autistic people may just struggle to understand each other - because they experience the world in different ways.

Communication is a two-way street. When autistic people are misunderstood, it’s often because neurotypical people don’t recognise or value autistic ways of connecting.

This isn’t a “deficit” in empathy; it’s a difference in perspective, rhythm, language and expectation.

The Double Empathy Problem helps explain why you might feel deeply connected with other neurodivergent people, even if neurotypical interactions feel awkward, draining or misaligned.

Milton, D. (2012). On the Ontological Status of Autism: The ‘Double Empathy Problem’.

You might want to make some notes or consider some of the following prompts:

- Which of these words or concepts stood out to you most - and why?
- Have you experienced things you didn't have a name for before? How does it feel to name them now?
- Are there any terms you feel unsure or uncomfortable about?
- What's one thing you want to learn more about - gently, in your own time?

Masking & Coping Strategy Reflection Log

You might find it helpful to keep a log of when you are using masking and coping strategies. Start by noticing the moments when something feels “off” during your day. Was your body tense? Did you feel far away from yourself? Use this log to name what was happening, how you responded, and what it cost or offered you. This is not about judgment - it’s about awareness and self-care.

Activity / Situation	How I felt during	What I did to cope or mask	How I felt after	Did this serve me?	What might I try next time?
<i>E.g. meeting with colleagues</i>	<i>Disconnected, tense</i>	<i>Smiled a lot, kept quiet, mimicked others</i>	<i>Exhausted, overthinking for hours afterwards</i>	<i>No. I felt drained and unseen</i>	<i>Make space to pause, stim subtly</i>

Masking & Coping Strategy Reflection Log

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Energy Accounting Journal

Your energy is precious. This tool helps you spot patterns in what fills your cup and what empties it. Track a few days or weeks and see what changes when you give yourself permission to honour your needs.

Activity / Situation	Energy Gained (+)	Energy Drained (-)	Sensory / Emotional Notes	Was Masking Involved?	What Do I Want to Shift or Protect?
<i>E.g. walk in the woods</i>	+4		<i>Felt calm, loved the quiet</i>	No	<i>Protect time to do this weekly</i>
<i>E.g. video call with team</i>	0	-5	<i>Bright screen, lots of small talk</i>	Yes	<i>Block recovery time after</i>

Energy Accounting Journal

Activity / Situation	Energy Gained (+)	Energy Drained (-)	Sensory / Emotional Notes	Was Masking Involved?	What Do I Want to Shift or Protect?

Your Sensory Mapping Tool

Sense	I enjoy / seek out	I avoid / feel overwhelmed by	My current coping tools	What helps me feel regulated
👁️ Sight				
👂 Sound				
👐 Touch				
👃 Smell				
👅 Taste				
🌀 Movement				
🦋 Body Awareness				

Final Thoughts

"I am valid, whole, and worthy - exactly as I am."

You've seen your story. Now you get to keep writing it...your way!

There's no neat ending here.

No box to tick. No version of "done" to chase.

What you've done by showing up to these pages - with honesty, with doubt, with tenderness - is already enough.

You've looked behind the mask. Named the patterns. Felt the cost. And maybe, just maybe, started to glimpse who you are beneath it all.

That matters. You matter.

You are not too much.

You are not not enough.

You are exactly enough.

You are wonderfully, beautifully, authentically you - and you are allowed to take up space as that person.

There is no finish line for self-understanding. You get to revisit, rest, return, and reframe as many times as you need. You are allowed to feel joy and grief at the same time. You are allowed to grow at your own pace. There is no finish line for self-understanding. You get to revisit, rest, return, and reframe as many times as you need. You are allowed to feel joy and grief at the same time. You are allowed to grow at your own pace.

Let this journal be a beginning. A return. A reclamation.

Come back when you need to.

Come back when you're ready.

You don't have to do it all at once and you don't have to do it alone, either.

THANK YOU!

A personal thank you!

for spending time with this journal, for walking through these pages with me, for showing up in your own way, in your own time. Whether you completed every page, skipped around, or simply read through, this journal has been yours.

You have explored your identity with **curiosity**, **courage**, and **compassion** - even if it didn't always feel that way.



As a late-diagnosed autistic woman myself, I know how disorienting, validating, bittersweet and beautiful this part of the journey can be. You've likely navigated a lot just to get here - not just in this journal, but in your whole life.

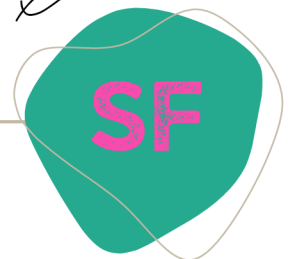
I hope this space has given you a moment to pause, reflect, and begin to see your story more clearly - on your terms.

You don't need to have it all figured out. You just need space to be, and to keep becoming. That's what I want to offer you - through my work, through community, and through connection.

This journal may end here, but your journey does not. And you don't have to travel it alone.

With warmth and solidarity,

Francesca x



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SEE
YOUR
STORY



You are not behind.
You are not broken.
You are not too much.
You are not imagining it.

You are learning the language
★ of who you've always been.
You are allowed to take your
time.

You are allowed to take up
space.

You are allowed to need what
you need.

You are not alone.
You are not too late.
You are already enough.

Exactly as you are.

