

Beyond Autism Awareness: The Effort You Don't See

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People hear the term "autism," and they think they already know my story. However, the truth of the matter is that this is **my story**, and no one can tell it better than me. Autism is a spectrum, with experiences that vary widely, from sensory sensitivities to cognitive differences in how we process the world. I was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the age of three, and I grew up wondering why the world felt so different, as if it were designed for someone else.

The greatest challenges were invisible, but they shaped me into the person I am today. I move through a world that was not intended for the way my mind works. As a person on the autism spectrum, I have learned to navigate life and academics through resilience, self-awareness, and structure. Over time, this has led me to redefine what success looks like. To understand that redefinition, you would need to understand where it all began.

Many questions come to mind: Why do school assignments and exams feel more daunting? Why can I focus on something for long periods of time but then lose track of everything else? Why do I feel anxious about so many things every day? I remember exams where I knew the material, absorbing every detail. However, I would debate back and forth, questioning whether my answers were right or if I was even going to pass the exam at all. At the same time, the clock was ticking; the silence, and the weight of everyone else's pencils moving made it harder to concentrate, which only made me feel more overwhelmed. What nobody tells you and what I wish people around me understood is that autism is not a deficit of feeling, but rather an excess of it. Our world appears brighter, louder, and more overwhelming than it does for everyone else, and because that isn't visible from the outside, the way we navigate daily life remains difficult.

A big part of what makes daily life so difficult has a name that most people have never heard of: masking. Masking is when you learn earlier on that the way you function can make other people feel uncomfortable. You watch how people make eye contact; you learn the expected responses to "How are you?" You learn to do it the 'right' way every time, even when you feel exhausted. You script conversations in your mind before they happen while constantly monitoring your posture, hands, facial expressions, and tone of voice as if they're replaying on a constant loop. This is where my anxiety comes from. After a long day, you go home and crash, not because the day was hard, but because performing neurotypical behaviours for eight hours is exhausting in a way that's difficult to explain to

someone who has never endured it themselves. It isn't manipulation; it's survival, a quiet, daily act of translation between my world and yours. In school, when I would go to class, especially at McGill, I would always feel nervous, and I would think that professors wouldn't care what I was going through either because they didn't know how to help or didn't fully understand. Teacher policies were always making learning equal for everyone, but the reality is that learning is not the same for everyone. We are all different; we all learn in different ways. I just wish that institutions like McGill would make learning customizable for everyone, not rigid.

For a long time, I felt completely alone in this, as if I were fighting a battle no one around me could see nor understand. And this feeling isn't just my experience. Research shows that this kind of isolation is common. A 2024 study by Joshua A. Evans and colleagues found that masking is often linked to past experiences such as being judged or teased for their autistic traits and to higher levels of anxiety and depression (Evans et al.). This contributed to me feeling less confident in myself because I felt so alone for so long, navigating a battle in my mind every day. What I want people to take away from masking is that when someone on the autism spectrum seems fine or high functioning, you may be witnessing someone who has exerted a significant amount of effort that has been made invisible. Please remember that the absence of visible struggle does not mean that there is no struggle at all.

And yet, even through all that, I found myself. For the majority of my life, either people believed in me or they rejected me because of my learning disability. However, as much as I suffer from self-esteem issues and sensory overload, I don't let it define me, and I am working on it every day to make sure that I can go back to feeling better about myself. My autism is a part of me; including the passion and focus I bring to things that matter most to me. I am capable of feeling sadness, empathy, optimism, and humour. I can give thoughtful advice, show manners, and demonstrate determination. I feel emotions just like everyone else. Writing is where I do not have to mask, translate, or perform for anyone; it is the only place where I feel confident in myself and within my element. The same brain that gets overwhelmed with everyday personal and educational tasks can hold an extraordinary number of details. It helps me see patterns others often miss and pursue ideas with a level of commitment that doesn't waver. For instance, although I get easily overwhelmed with schoolwork, simply showing up to school is incredibly draining for me. However, I motivate myself by remembering how many people in the world do not have the privilege to study or even go to school at all, which makes me work that much harder to make

sure that I do it for them. My perspective is different from everyone else's, which is a good example of how individuals on the autism spectrum, such as myself, approach situations uniquely.

I am not asking for pity, and I do not want to be fixed. When someone seems sad in class or at a social gathering, consider that they might be working hard just to be there. When someone tells you that their plans need to be a specific way, accommodating their need for predictability helps them feel safe enough to function. My favourite philosophy is to always be kind to others because you never know what they are going through; your kindness, positivity, and a smile can make someone's day. Ultimately, it is about choosing to see the person in front of you, not despite their differences, but because of who they truly are. We are not puzzles to be solved, but people to know. I am writing this story to raise awareness about autism because it is still stigmatized, and too many people fail to understand what it truly encompasses. That misunderstanding is exactly why awareness matters beyond a single month. There should be more podcasts, talk shows, and open conversations about what autism is and how our brains work.

It is a choice you make every day to look a little closer, assume a little less, and extend the kind of patience that costs you nothing but could mean everything to someone like me. Despite my challenges, I have taught myself resilience, hard work, and how to be social. My biggest challenge was getting into McGill, and I did that. If I can do that, imagine what's possible when people are seen and understood, rather than being underestimated. Every effort, every gesture can truly make a difference.

Works Cited

Evans, Joshua A., et al. "What You Are Hiding Could Be Hurting You: Autistic Masking in Relation to Mental Health, Interpersonal Trauma, Authenticity, and Self-Esteem." *PubMed*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2024, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39139513/. Accessed 23 Mar. 2026.