MY POSITIVE AUTISTIC IDENTITY

A Zine for Autistic Young People

amaze

VICTORIA State Government

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PART 1

Early Autistic Identity







Everyone's journey starts somewhere. This section is about the early experiences of joy, curiosity, and connection, celebrating interests and the things that make us feel most ourselves.

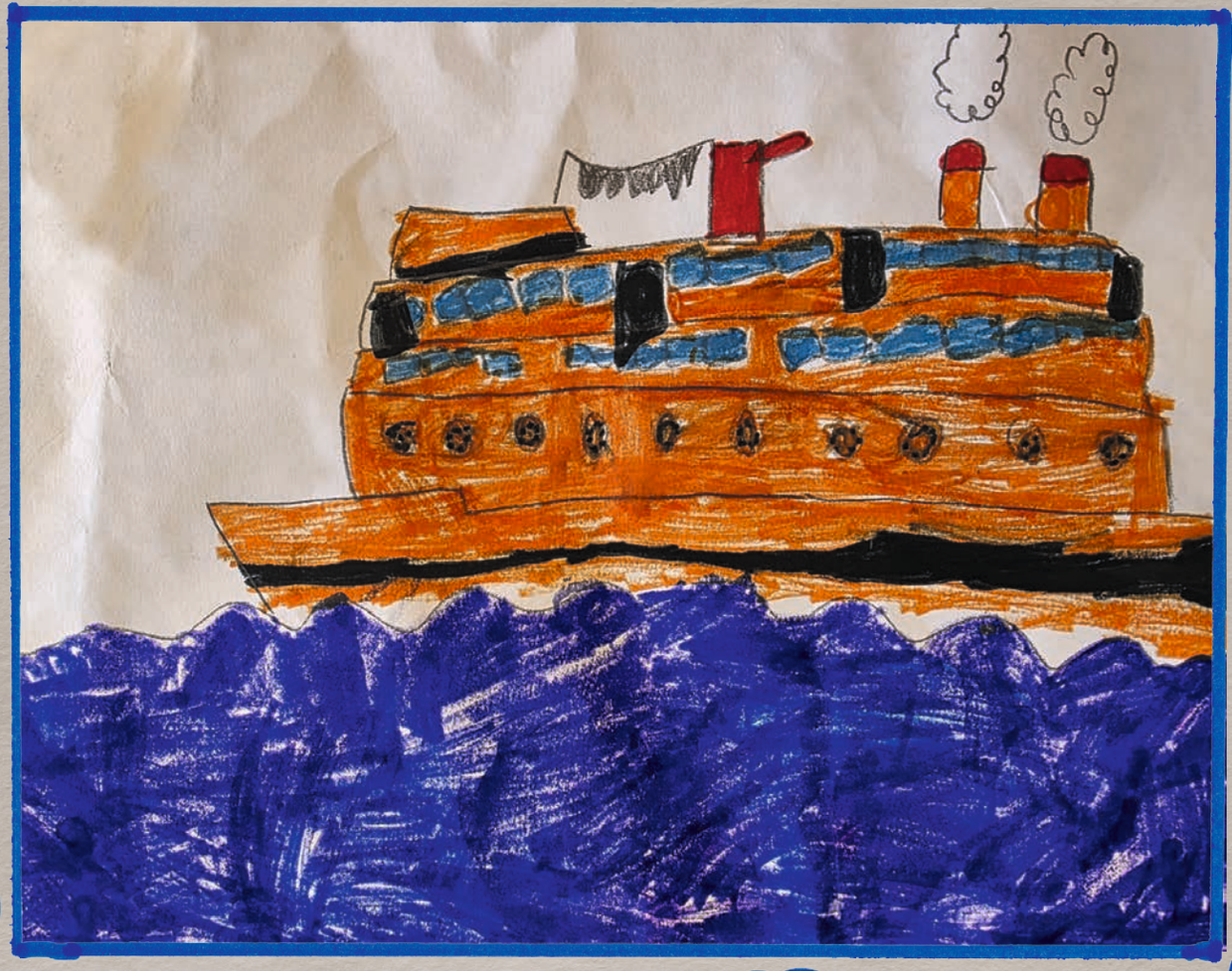
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Zoe

Age 9

Zoe loves all things Harry Potter and wanted to share an artwork she created featuring Hedwig and the Hogwarts crest.


HOGWARTS





Archer

Age 7

Archer wanted to share a drawing he was proud of creating from a YouTube how-to-draw video.

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Nathan



My Autism gives me space and understanding through my emotion. It shows how willing I am to work with people especially ones who help me. This sensitivity gives me space to understand skill through emotion and understanding as long as I'm given space as well.

Understanding art, skill to help me through life, care making it easier to get people to help me, analysing ideas and history to help me gain a lot of knowledge. People love me because I care about other people, I get the same thing from a lot of people and there's nothing I would change about my personality.

Who I am is one thing as a son, but I don't care what anyone says about me doing things differently the more unique I am the better. It's all just a question of understanding as a human and that's all I've needed to build my confidence. The more space I'm given the more I can do and that's certainly come out through family and emotion with care from my family and finding interest in this atmosphere that the most education I've had is through a caring family and life, for multiple reasons;

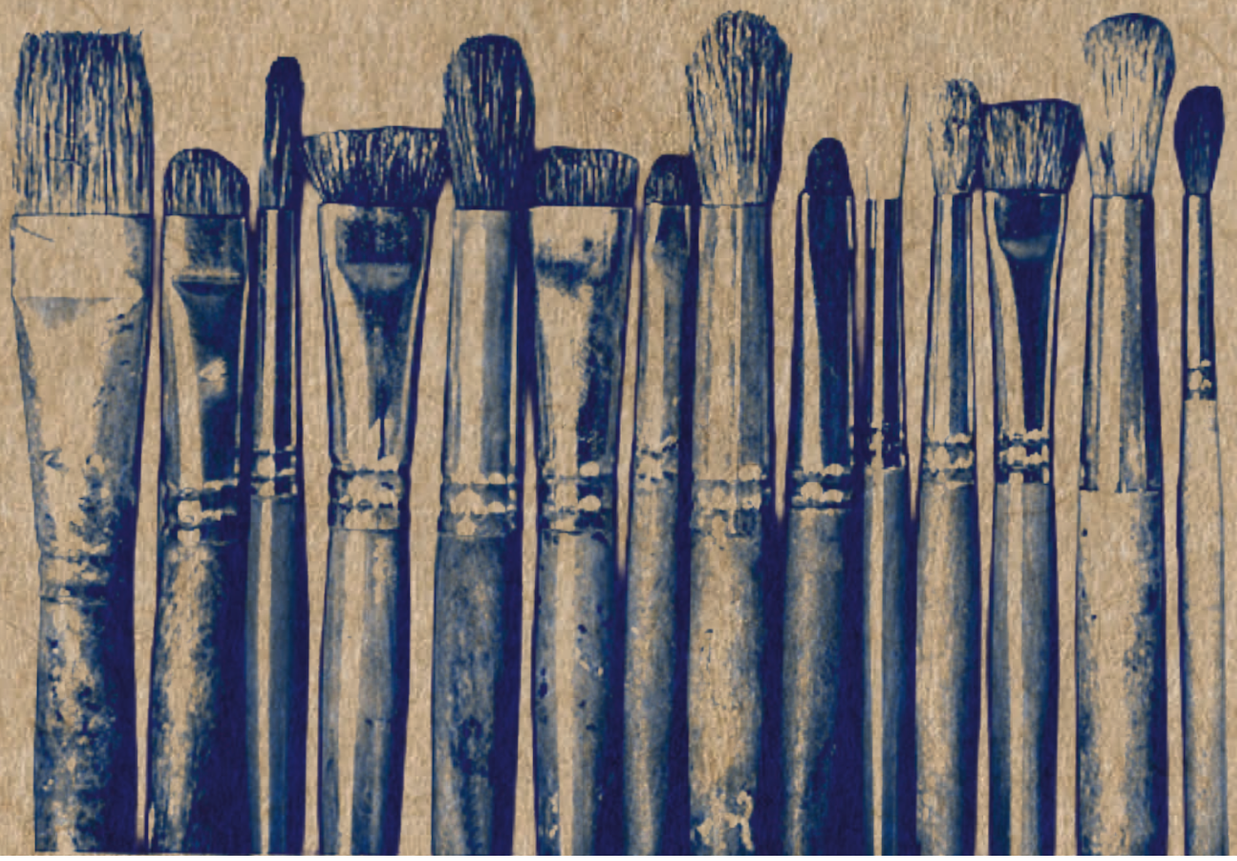
I have worked with the helpful atmosphere, worked with the advice and knowledge through interest and support, worked with myself to believe in myself and my interests. Honestly not caring so much about negativity and being so glad to be working with my limits. I'm glad to have all the positivity in my life and it's what's given me the support, but what it's mostly taught me is only one thing; to be the good person you are.

My emotions teach me that I've got the knowledge and calm atmosphere and I would never change the family life I have or the unique human I am. I don't need to do anything else, the only thing I need to worry about now is to give myself some space and very much be as human as I can.

Thank you for reading, these are the reasons why it's special to have autism.

PART 2

EXPLORING IDENTITY THROUGH CREATIVITY



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As we grow, we start to ask bigger questions about who we are

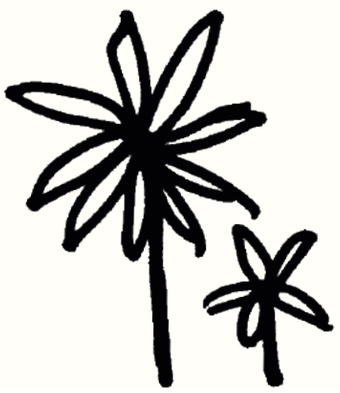
Creativity can be a powerful way to explore identity, express emotions, and show how we see the world – even when words are hard to find.


To do
haylevs

Hayley

Age 16

A girl lost in music
and creativity. It reflects how being
Autistic means experiencing the world deeply
and embracing those
differences as strengths.



Eloise

Age 18

This painting I named *Endure and Survive* I made for my final piece in Year 11 art last year. My artistic influence was the game *The Last of Us*, inspiring the name and subject matter.

This artwork explores the idea of nature reclaiming civilisation through the abandoned space and decay. It symbolises the power and persistence of nature, and the impermanence of human achievement.



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PART 3

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION
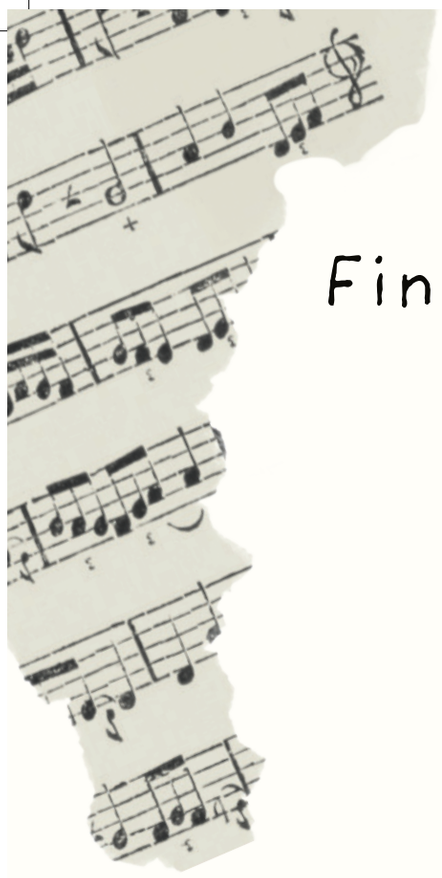


Que vermin ani sal
mi ananimo. Soman

Being Autistic shapes how we create, communicate and connect. In this section, Autistic voices share what it feels like to live, make art and express themselves in their own unique ways.



kermani valiso

San di mintri na
diysa ni asram sue
kana ni kund



Finding your own rhythm

Q&A

with ARIA award nominated
AuDHD musician **Nat Bartsch**

What does it look like to build a creative life as an Autistic person?

In this interview, we speak with AuDHD musician Nat Bartsch about her creative journey – from early piano lessons to composing original music, navigating burnout and finding freedom in doing things differently.

How did your interest in music start, and how has it grown or changed over time?

I grew up in a musical family and I started learning piano at the Yamaha Music School at Keyboard Corner in Boronia when I was 4. My grandfather worked there selling pianos! When you start learning an instrument at such a young age, sometimes it's hard to know whether it was your idea, or your parents' idea! I never felt pressured to do it, though. I've always loved piano, and it's always been a part of my life.

In school I did AMEB piano exams, but I didn't excel at them - I found it hard to sit and practice classical repertoire over and over. After high school I eventually I found my real passion for music, once I started learning to play pop, rock, and jazz at Box Hill Institute. That was the first time music became an intense special interest for me.

> “
> The role music plays in my life evolves through my life.

I went on to study a degree in jazz and improvisation at VCA, and in that course they really encourage you to write your own original pieces. Once I started doing that, I realised I wanted to be a pianist and composer. I started my first band, made some albums, and my career started to grow. But the years after I finished my degree were the hardest, and I couldn't sustain a career as a jazz artist: I burnt out and quit music several times!

Eventually I started working as a solo artist and started incorporating some of the things I love about classical music into my work, such as repetitive patterns. I loved being between genres – this means people have less expectations of what you should be doing with your music. I can be my authentic self a lot more. Many people find solo performance is more scary, but I loved it – I had more agency and autonomy, which supported my wellbeing as an autistic person.

I often think if of music as like a religion – it's something I'll always carry within in me, but the role music plays in my life evolves through my life.



How does your neurodivergence help your creativity?



I didn't know I was AuDHD until I was 38, so I didn't understand the reasons why it was so hard for me to learn music in formal ways: I couldn't remember music theory, I couldn't sit and practice the same pieces for hours on end because my mind would wander.

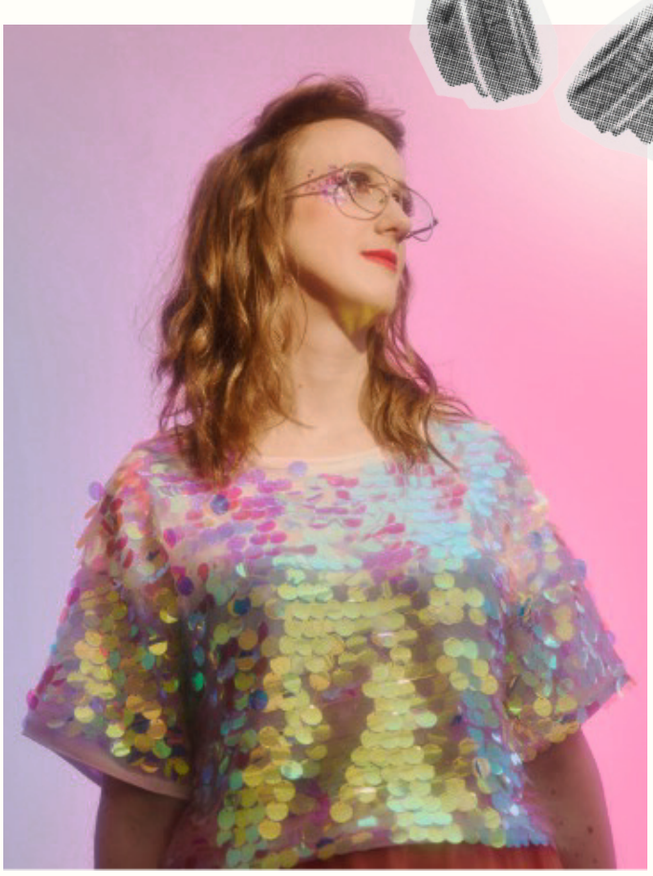
If I didn't have a neurodivergent brain, maybe I wouldn't have become a composer, and would still be playing Mozart sonatas, rather than creating something new and unique.

> “If I didn't have a neurodivergent brain, maybe I wouldn't have become a composer

Because I don't easily recall music theory, I just compose music from the heart, not from the head – this seems to make my music quite emotive, and it's often quite regulating to play or listen to. My neurodiversity helps me get to essence of what I want to say in the song, and be authentic.

In composition and production, my brain is completely at ease, and the process feels effortless. Sometimes I can write a piece of music in a couple of hours, or immerse myself in a major project for months and it never feels like work. I can hear tiny glitches in a recording that no one else has noticed, or copy music by ear very quickly. This deep focus and attention to detail can be an asset.

How has music helped you understand yourself?
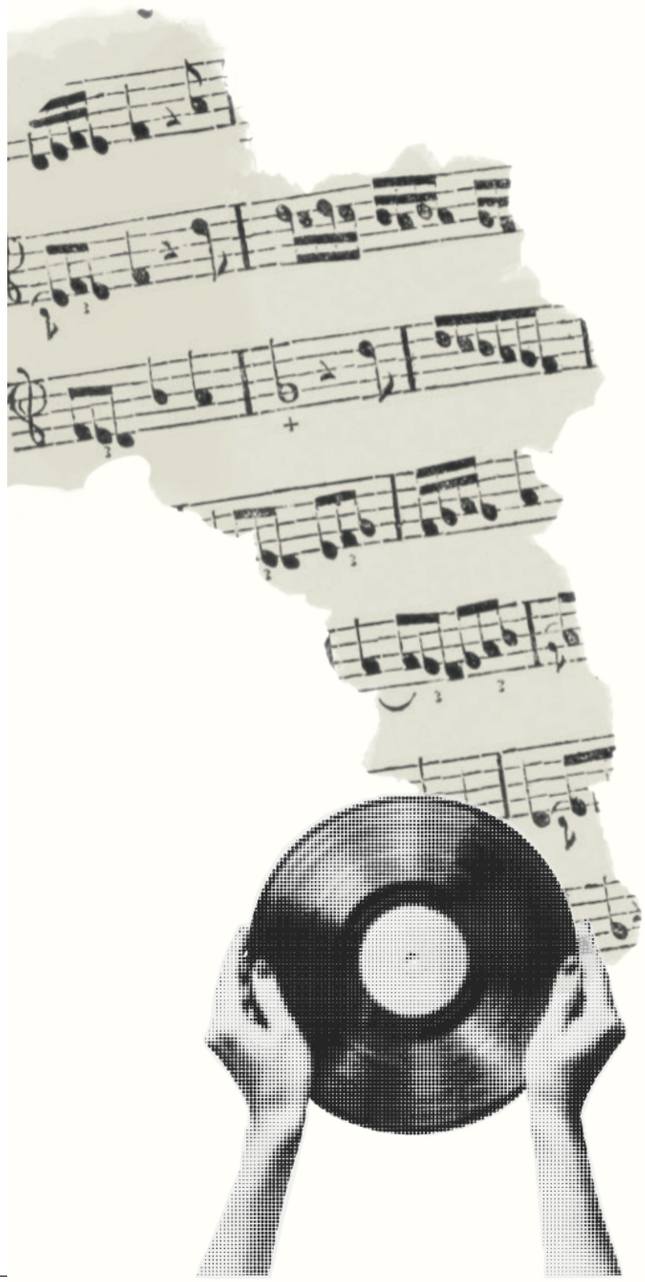


At school it was my love of music that helped me find confidence and a sense of belonging. Music helps me process big emotions and make sense of global events and injustices in the world.

I often compose with repetitive, soothing patterns in the music and use intricate, ethereal ambient effects – this helps me regulate my nervous system, find clarity and calm (and some of my listeners say it helps them in the same way, too).

I feel very lucky to have a career based around my special interest, but it can also completely take over your life! My career has forced me to think about work-life balance and self-care, learning how to take care of important things outside of music, like my health and relationships.

Have your creative interests helped you connect with other members of the neurodivergent community?



The best thing about the music industry is that you are always surrounded by like - minded people. When I started studying music at TAFE, I finally felt comfortable around others! We all share the same skills, ways of thinking, passion for music.

I think there are many neurodivergent people in my industry, some who may never realise they are because they are in an environment where neurodivergent traits are an asset. All musicians are encouraged to be innovative, creative, sensitive, entrepreneurial and to have an intense drive and commitment, an attention to details.

But there are more and more musicians who are becoming diagnosed as autistic or ADHD, too. In the last few years I've hosted some neurodivergent artist meet-ups to create a supportive place to meet others, which has been very special.

What have you learned about your creativity over time?



> “One of the biggest challenges I have as an AuDHD artist is transitioning out of music activities

One of the biggest challenges I have as an AuDHD artist is transitioning out of music activities. I’ve learned that it is better to set aside a day to focus on just one creative task, rather than trying to ‘change lanes’ and do other things as well (like emails or meetings), because this can be very dysregulating.

But this can create a new problem – without support, I will not stop working until a task is finished, even if that is unrealistic or unhealthy. I often get injuries from sitting at the computer for too long, forgetting to eat or drink, or not sleeping enough.

I need prompting from another person to take regular breaks, finish work for the day; I also have to step down from a project – listening to a draft in headphones while I cook dinner or walk the dog, to support the transition.

What advice would you give to neurodivergent young people who want to follow creative pursuits?

“

Have a toolkit of ways to regulate your nervous system



Have the toolkit of ways to regulate your nervous system inside and outside the home, that can help you manage in stressful situations.

Keep an eye on how intensely you're focussing on your project. Are you taking care of yourself, as well as your work? Your art will be better if you're well fed, hydrated, seen some daylight, had some good sleep!

Prioritise working with people who understand you, and with whom you feel safe.

Develop your work at a pace that suits you – the arts is a life-long pursuit, and something special. The most successful careers seem to grow sustainably and authentically.

What would you want others to understand about neurodivergence and creativity?

My neurodiversity is a real asset to my music career, but it is also a hidden disability. Behind every performance, recording or social media post there are many challenges that that public doesn't see.



Some parts of my job are perfect for my AuDHD brain, but in other areas, it's very hard for my access needs to be met.

The workload is often too high, and constantly fluctuates, so it's hard to have routines. It's almost impossible to have a 'sick day' when you are performing your own music, too. There is a common saying, 'the show must go on', which can be harmful for musicians, especially if they are managing an injury, illness or disability.

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Jazzy Autistic Adult

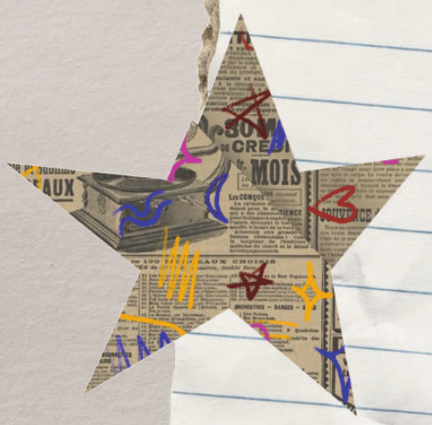
TISM IS BEING ...
creative



PART 4

GROWTH, ACCEPTANCE AND PRIDE





Understanding yourself takes time

This section is about the journey toward self-acceptance, acknowledging challenges while also embracing strengths, identity, and pride in being Autistic.



Ash

Autistic Adult

At 15 years old, I found the name of what I had always thought to be fundamentally ‘wrong’ with me: autism. Suddenly, I had all this information at my fingertips, a rabbit hole of things to learn about myself, telling me I wasn’t wrong, that my experience struggling throughout life was definable, diagnosable, and truly okay.





I was confused, for a while, on how this was missed by others my whole life. I confronted how I masked away my problems when, if I had asked for help, I could have discovered myself sooner. It took me many years after that point to receive my diagnosis, it was a long emotional journey. I found that accepting you are disabled after having such big (neurotypical) expectations for yourself can be the most painful and distressing part of learning you are Autistic. Despite all the growth in information and personal stories of being Autistic online, in media and in research, Autistic people still struggle to fit into this neurotypical-dominated world. How was I to live in a world where I could not keep up or fit in with my peers? It takes time to truly accept yourself in all capacities. Being autistic can be a wonderful thing but that doesn't erase the hardships we will face and the differences we see in ourselves whether you were diagnosed young, or diagnosed later in life like me or not diagnosed at all.

I turned to art and writing as outlets for my feelings. I paint and I write of my challenges in socialising, the tiring experience of masking and trying to fit in my whole life and write informative posts about autism as well, in hopes I can connect with other Autistic people and help them to feel not so alone. That is how I found myself wanting to write this reflection for the Autistic teenagers, who I was not too long ago. My advice on the most foundational level, is to understand yourself. What are your outlets? How can you be as kind to yourself as possible? It can be so valuable to have a grasp on who you are, what your strengths and struggles are so that you may advocate and accommodate yourself where a world is lacking. Channel it into your interests, into sharing your story if you so choose to, find community or enjoy your own company - do not lose sight of what your autistic identity means for you and your life, and remember you are valuable just as you are.

PERFECT
in my own way



Jordy
27 years old

I am enough … I am enough … I am enough,
I shout to myself internally, as I walk my daily commute through Melbourne's Southbank.

I am saying this, as people seem to, to me, breeze through life, like everything for them is taken for granted, super easy, like they got what they wanted at the drop of a hat and didn't have to fight for it.

Their family, their friends, their partner, their job, their social skills. Heck, even confidence.

Whereas 'confidence', is hard for me, someone on the autism spectrum.

That, and communication.

For me, I am a scripter, a sign of masking, a term known in the world of neurodivergence.

Scripting, also known as, pre-planning conversations, so that you seemingly dance through the day, without missing a step in the dance of conversation.

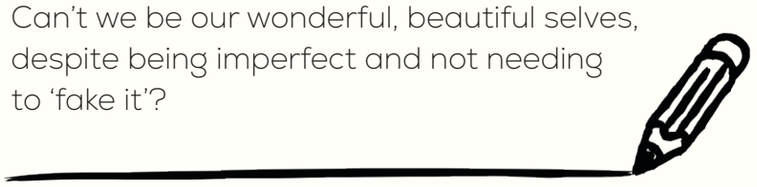


When I have declared to people that 'confidence is hard for me', or 'how can I be confident?, every second person that I have asked, has said, 'fake it 'till you make it', …but that, that is damn hard for someone on the autism spectrum.

Because we're already faking being a 'normal' person in society and fitting in.

And, why should we have to fake it?

Can't we be our wonderful, beautiful selves, despite being imperfect and not needing to 'fake it'?





Maybe we each have our own versions of perfect

I feel a pang of jealousy, a sting of envy, when I see people that seem effortlessly confident, and that the world is their oyster, like they don't have to script. They seem to know the entire menu of the conversation, without having even tasted a sample of the entrée yet.

And still … I feel jealous.

Why can't I be like that?

Perfectly, gliding through life, through conversations, without a care in the world, a care or anxiety that I don't know what's to come yet and that I may fail the dance, and the other person may laugh at me or ridicule me, because I care … I care *too much.*

Maybe I should lose the desire to care too much, and instead go with the flow?

Maybe those 'effortlessly confident people', as mentioned above, and me, maybe we're too *different* … and hey, that's okay.

Maybe those 'effortlessly confident people', can glide through life in their own wonderful, fancy, shimmering way … and so can I, but just *differently.*

We can be perfect, *while* dancing different dances.

Maybe I can be perfect, *even if* different.

And what I have come to the conclusion as of recent is, despite others being 'perfect', I am nothing short of perfect, *rather* perfect in my own way.

And maybe we each have our own version of perfect.



This zine was made by Autistic people, for Autistic people. Every piece of art, every story, every reflection shared here is proof that Autistic identity is something worth exploring and celebrating.

You might still have big questions about who you are. That's okay. So do we. The journey toward understanding yourself doesn't have a finish line and you don't have to figure it out alone.

Wherever you are in that journey, you belong here.



Amaze uses uppercase for 'Autistic' and lowercase for 'autism', and defaults to identity-first language. But language is personal, and we support Autistic people to self-identify in whatever way feels right *to them. The mix of these conventions in this publication is a reflection of those choices.*

Amaze Inc.
678 Victoria Street,
Richmond VIC 3121

Phone: 03 9657 1600
Email: info@amaze.org.au

www.amaze.org.au

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