

WAYS I'VE STOPPED AUTISTIC MASKING

BY HOLLY SMALE

1. My face moves less: I no longer consciously animate to look more "human" - (This includes in photos) - I don't rehearse everything I say to make sure it sounds "normal" - I respond more genuinely, without a script.

2. I don't fake "laugh" just because everyone else is laughing - But I do laugh if it's funny even if others aren't. - I don't fake emotions (as often - still working on it) - I allow myself to be unlikeable instead of faking it to be loveable.

3. I no longer tolerate situations that upset me, including sensory overwhelm - And I am not ashamed to manage pain even if it draws attention - I say "no" much more easily - I don't people please. At all. I prioritise myself - I have removed toxic people from my life.

4. My language is returning to its natural form: blunt, direct, without caveats. (OMG it feels delicious.) - Criticism no longer bothers me - Or changes me - And I no longer internalise it. My neurological difference to you is not my problem - "Labels" bounce off.

5. I don't force myself to socialise if I don't want to - And I rest when I'm overwhelmed - I trust who I know I am over who others tell me I am (this is brand new) - I believe in my empathy and compassion without trying to "perform them" so others know they're there.

6. I am no longer "mirroring" as much. (I've mostly stopped auto-copying the expressions, movements, speech and attitudes of those around me.) - I am honest with those I love - And I tell them when I need something - Or when I need them to go away.

7. I ask for clear instructions, time to process, written rather than verbal communication - I ask for quiet and space - I do not tolerate being treated poorly (even if it sometimes makes me a bit aggressive - I'm working on it) - I allow myself to be as "weird" as I am.

8. And it has been LIFE CHANGING. Social anxiety and mental health issues are way down. My body is in less pain, and I sleep and eat better. I am more grounded, calm and stable than I have ever been before. Full meltdowns have stopped. My relationships are stronger.

9. Unmasking is not an easy process. It's taking me solid investment, therapy, hard work, self-reflection. Some people don't like it (I am "behaving more autistic now"). But for the first time in forty years, I'm starting to remember who I am. And my god, is it WORTH IT.

10. So unmask, my autistic comrades. Unmask, let go, stop pretending - slowly, at your own pace, where you feel safe and comfortable. You're perfect as you are.