

The trouble with normal

People like me on the autism spectrum are often misunderstood in the workplace. But the situation isn't hopeless.

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One of my favorite cartoons growing up was [Really Rosie](#), the 1975 television special based on Maurice Sendak's books with songs by Carole King. The song that I remember the most is ["Pierre, the Boy Who Doesn't Care."](#)

Pierre is a little boy who seems to go through life not allowing himself to feel for people or events that happen in his life. The climax of the song and the story has Pierre willfully getting into the belly of a lion, not caring what happens.

I've started a new job that supplements my pastoral gig. I think it will be a wonderful fit, but as the first day approached, I was filled with anxiety. It's an anxiety that I think has to be common for people on the autism spectrum; that fear that you are going to mess things up and make people disappointed in you.

The thing that I've learned over the years is that neurotypical people can never really understand those of us on spectrum even when we are honest about who we are. They still won't understand because it is not them or someone that they love. They see slip-ups as a sign of being a bad worker or even worse, someone who doesn't care.

An article from a [Gwendolyn Kansen](#) explains the challenges people on the spectrum face when they enter the job market and why it can be a challenge to have a full time job:

You start out upbeat. You were excited about this. You got through the interview just fine because you were so happy to be there. They might have even called you a good communicator.

You chat with your coworkers. People compliment your work. You might miss a few things, but you're doing such a good job that they forgive you for it. People help you when you can't do something.

For a while, you're golden.

Then it gets harder.

As the work piles on, you start making mistakes. You lose something. You send a poorly-worded email. You realize that everyone is working faster than you are.

The multitasking is killing you. You ask your supervisor for help. You've been asking her that a lot by the way. Especially with sequential tasks. And she's getting annoyed. She says you need to "work more independently."

If you do your work without help, she says you need to "show more initiative."

Either way, you are clearly not handling this well.

You don't make small talk anymore. You don't have the energy for it. Those people who were so nice to you at first are now starting to avoid you. The important assignments are now given to somebody else.

You know you look disinterested. And vaguely creepy. But you also know there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

None of this means my new job is going to head south, but there is always that fear that my brain won't be able to keep up.

None of this is better in the church world. Churches are supposed to be places of grace and mercy, but since it's a human institution, it means that people don't understand you and your "shortcomings" even when you try to explain it to them.

Which is why “coming out” to your employer is not always the best thing. Even when you tell them, they don’t seem to understand and they get angry when you miss something during your work.

I think that’s because people with Aspergers or high-functioning autism appear normal. That means people can’t see our disability. What they see is a person that seems normal enough doing a poor job on whatever project out there and someone that seems to not care.

You yourself know you are trying, but it seems lost on others. They may have given up on you, believing you are utterly hopeless.

This then leads to you wondering if maybe they’re right. Maybe you start to believe you really did something wrong. Maybe if you were better, tried some trick to remember tasks, learned to smile more and kept your head down you wouldn’t be in this mess. Maybe it means being more ... normal.

But there’s the rub. You aren’t normal.

Yes, you can mask some of your idiosyncrasies, but at the end of the day, you are going to be you, and those things that place you on the spectrum are going to come out.

What I’ve come to learn is that in the workplace, you have to do a few things. First, you have to accept you aren’t normal and never will be. And that’s OK. This is who you are, who God made you. Therapy and medication can temper some of the behaviors, but you are still going to do things that will piss off your coworkers.

I’m a pastor on the autism spectrum. I’m a web content specialist and on the autism spectrum. This is who I am and it won’t change and I don’t want it to change.

Second, we need to urge people around us in our workplaces to learn more about autism. But don’t expect that they will learn. People think they know what autism is, and they don’t really bother to learn about how autism can show itself in people. But keep telling them. Maybe it will sink in.

Third, learn from your mistakes. You are going to make mistakes in the workplace. When you make a mistake, learn what you did wrong and correct it. And know you will make another mistake again. And you will learn from that. People might not like that you make those mistakes, but they are the only way we learn.

Fourth, we have to learn to have a thick skin. Because people think you don't care, because for some reason you make them angry, people will say some things that will sting. You have to learn how to not allow it to control you. It's easy to let those words ruin your whole day, but you have to be able to do your work even with the pain. As I've said before, people don't understand, so as hard as it is to admit this, you can't expect sympathy from people.

These are just a few tips I've learned over time. Following them doesn't mean your job or vocation will be smooth sailing, though. People will always notice that something is off. They will always notice you aren't normal.

But we don't have to be normal. We can't be normal. Just do what you can for the glory of God.

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