

WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

See All of Me, Not Just What I Struggle With

"Don't shrink me down to a diagnosis. I'm a whole person."



Please remember...

I'm not just the kid who gets distracted. I'm not just the one who has shutdowns or needs support. I'm also the kid who notices patterns no one else sees. Who feels music in my bones. Who cares so deeply it hurts sometimes.

Please stop only seeing what's hard. Look for the magic too.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might ask: *"What do you like about me that's not about grades?"*
- I light up when someone notices what I care about—not just what I struggle with.
- I go quiet when it feels like people only see what's wrong.
- I avoid eye contact or withdraw when "progress talks" feel too fix-focused.
- I might seem unmotivated—but really, I'm tired of not being seen for what's good in me.



What I need:

- Spotlights on my strengths, not just my support needs
- Recognition for things that don't show up in school reports: my humor, loyalty, creativity, emotional depth.
- Consistent messages like: *"I see you. Not just what's hard, but what's beautiful too."*

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I push away compliments or say "That's not true," I'm not fishing for attention—I'm protecting myself. Instead of arguing, try:

***"You don't have to believe it yet. I'll keep reminding you anyway."
"It's okay if this feels hard to take in. Your value isn't up for debate."***

Hold space for my discomfort. Don't rush me into confidence. Just keep seeing me—and saying it.

When I'm seen as whole—when my strengths are named, when my differences are met with curiosity instead of criticism—my nervous system starts to relax. I can access more of my prefrontal cortex (the part that helps me reflect, plan, and learn) because I'm not in a state of defense.

The more often I'm reminded of what's good in me, the more likely I am to believe I belong—and act from that belief.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Respect What I Know About Myself

“I’ve been living in this body and brain my whole life—you just met me.”



Please remember...

Even when I don’t have the perfect words, I know what feels like too much. I know when my brain’s spiraling. I know when my skin is buzzing, my chest is tight, or my thoughts are foggy. You don’t have to understand it all.

But please, believe me when I say it’s real.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might say, *“I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s just... a lot.”*
- I might leave the room, go nonverbal, or freeze when I feel overwhelmed.
- I might seem irritated, but really I’m trying to stay regulated.
- I might try to avoid certain tasks—not because I’m lazy, but because I already know what they’ll do to me.
- I might get upset when people dismiss my needs with *“it’s not that bad.”*



What I need:

- To be asked about my inner experience instead of having it assumed
- Space to describe how my body and brain are reacting—even if the words come out jumbled
- People who treat my knowing with the same respect they’d give to their own instincts

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I lash out, walk away, or say “You don’t get it,” don’t take it personally. I’m protecting my truth because it’s been dismissed before. Instead, offer:

“I trust that what you’re feeling is real, even if I don’t fully get it.”
“Let’s slow it down. What’s your body telling you right now?”

Trust builds when I’m not argued with or overruled.

When adults override my insight with “I know better,” it activates my threat response system. I may shut down or fight back—not to be difficult, but to protect my inner world. Your trust helps me develop the interoceptive awareness (the ability to sense what’s happening inside my body) that I need to regulate emotions, energy, and decisions.

Validation—especially when I’m unsure—helps me feel safe inside myself.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Let Me Be Different Without Making Me Feel Wrong

"Being different isn't a problem. It's how I'm wired."



Please remember...

Stop comparing me to what's "normal."

My brain moves differently. My body reacts differently. My needs aren't mistakes—they're just different. I don't want to be tolerated. I want to be celebrated.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might ask, "Why do I always have to act like everyone else?"
- I might stim freely when I'm happy, nervous, or trying to self-soothe.
- I might get quiet or upset if someone calls me "too much" or "too sensitive."
- I might avoid group settings where my differences are noticed but not accepted.
- I might feel ashamed of things I used to love—because someone once said it was "weird."



What I need:

- People who show pride in being different—not just acceptance
- Mentors and role models who move, learn, and live like me
- Language that doesn't make my difference sound like a problem to manage

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say things like "I wish I wasn't like this" or "I just want to be normal," please don't try to instantly reframe it as a compliment. Instead, say:

"It makes sense that being different feels hard sometimes. But it's also part of your power." "You don't have to change who you are to be respected."

Help me hold both: the grief of difference in a hard world, and the beauty of difference in a world that needs it.

If I consistently hear that my difference is wrong, my brain may encode that as "I'm wrong." This wires pathways that can lead to shame, social anxiety, or chronic masking. But when difference is affirmed, I activate the brain's reward system (especially the ventral striatum), releasing dopamine when I feel authentically accepted. This builds pride, motivation, and deeper self-connection.

Difference doesn't need to be downplayed. It needs to be dignified.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Make It Safe for Me to Take Off the Mask

"Sometimes I hide who I am to stay safe. Don't rush me, but don't ignore it either."



Please remember...

Masking keeps me safe. It helps me avoid being teased, corrected, judged, or stared at. But it also drains me. It makes me feel fake. Tired. Sometimes, invisible.

If I begin to unmask around you, it means I trust you. Please honor that.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might stim freely in front of you—rocking, tapping, humming—without apologizing
- I might stop saying “*I’m fine*” and finally admit, “*I’m overwhelmed.*”
- I might cry, pace, or go quiet—because unmasking is vulnerable
- I might still mask in public but slowly unmask at home
- I might test the waters by being “too much” on purpose—just to see if I’m still safe



How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say “*I can’t take off the mask*” or “*No one would like the real me,*” please don’t force me out of it.

Try:

“You don’t owe anyone your unfiltered self. But you deserve spaces where you don’t have to filter so much.” “Let’s notice where it feels safest to start.”

If I start unmasking and then panic—don’t tease me or tell me I was brave. Just stay close. Let it be quiet and safe again.



What I need:

- Gentle permission to be my full self without pressure
- Spaces that don’t require constant performance
- People who don’t flinch when I’m dysregulated, quiet, quirky, or different

When I’m masking, I’m in fawn or freeze mode—reading cues, adjusting myself, shrinking to stay safe. Over time, this creates nervous system exhaustion. It can lead to burnout, identity confusion, even trauma.

But when I unmask in the presence of someone safe, my ventral vagus nerve (the “social safety” system) lights up. I move out of survival mode and into connection. My brain learns, “I’m safe as I am.”



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Help Me Find People Who Get Me

"I want to belong, not just fit in."



Please remember...

I'm tired of being the only one. The only person in the group chat who doesn't get the joke. The only one in the classroom who needs extra time or sensory breaks. The only one pretending.

I want friends I don't have to explain myself to every five minutes. People who just get it.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might say, *"I feel left out all the time—even when I'm technically included."*
- I might stop trying to socialize if it always means masking
- I might spend more time online with neurodivergent creators or fan communities
- I might get tearful or shut down after social situations where I felt unseen
- I might withdraw—not because I don't want connection, but because I crave real belonging



What I need:

- Help exploring spaces (online or in person) where difference is normal
- Encouragement to connect with other neurodivergent teens or interest-based communities
- Validation that I'm not "too much" or "too weird"—I just haven't found my people yet

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say, *"No one will ever get me"* or *"I don't need anyone,"* please don't argue. Instead, try:

"It's okay to feel done with trying. And I still believe your people are out there." ***"What kind of person would feel safe to be around?"***

Don't rush me into group settings or parties. Let's build connection slowly, around shared understanding, not performance.

If I experience repeated exclusion or subtle rejection, it wires into my system as chronic social threat. That leads to withdrawal, hypervigilance, and distrust—even when people do care.

But when I find even one relationship where I feel seen as I am, my brain and body relax. My oxytocin levels rise. I enter a state where I can regulate, relate, and rest.

Real belonging heals nervous system wounds. Please help me find it.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Help Me Feel Safe in My Body and Mind

"Before I can talk, share, or learn—I need to feel okay."



Please remember...

If I'm spiraling, shutting down, or zoning out—I'm not being dramatic. I'm not trying to cause trouble. My nervous system is protecting me.

I want to be present. I want to learn. But first—I need to feel safe in my body.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might say, *"I can't think straight,"* or *"I just need a minute."*
- I might stim, rock, shake my hands, or cover my ears
- I might go nonverbal or use one-word answers
- I might lie on the floor, retreat into a corner, or avoid eye contact
- I might need to breathe, bounce, or cry—before I can even start talking



What I need:

- Tools that support emotional regulation (movement, music, deep pressure, silence)
- Permission to step away without being scolded
- Co-regulation: someone nearby who breathes slowly, speaks gently, and doesn't panic when I do

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say *"Leave me alone"* or *"I'm fine,"* when I clearly am not—don't force it. But don't disappear, either.

Stay nearby. Offer quiet support like:

"I'll be right here. Take the time you need." "We can figure this out once your body feels safer."

Let your presence say: *"You don't have to hold this alone."*

When I'm dysregulated, I'm in a survival state—my amygdala (the brain's alarm system) takes over. This shuts down access to the prefrontal cortex, the part of my brain that helps me reflect, reason, or communicate clearly.

If you demand logic, answers, or behavior control in that moment, I'll sink deeper into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. But when you help me regulate—through safety, attunement, and presence—my brain shifts into connection mode.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Let Me Tell My Own Story

“Don’t speak for me. Ask me what I want shared—and what I want to keep sacred.”



Please remember...

I’m not your project. I’m not a case study. I’m not here to be your inspirational story.
I want to be real—not flattened or filtered.
Ask me what I want people to know.
Ask me what I want to keep for myself.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might say, “Don’t tell them that—it’s personal.”
- I might use art, poetry, or music to say what I can’t put into plain words
- I might cringe when I hear my story told in a way that erases the hard parts—or the powerful parts
- I might get quiet or shut down if I’m talked over or spoken for
- I might surprise you with what I do want to share—if I’m given the choice



What I need:

- The right to own my story, my timing, and my voice
- Safe invitations to share in the ways that feel right for me—spoken, written, visual, metaphorical
- Adults who ask: “**What would you like me to say (or not say) when others ask about you?**”

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say “It doesn’t matter what I say—you’ll say it anyway,” pause.
That’s not attitude. That’s grief.
That’s the sound of someone who’s used to being spoken for.

Try:

“I’ve made assumptions before. That wasn’t fair. Can we reset, and let you decide what’s yours to tell?”

Respect builds trust. Trust opens doors.

The brain’s sense of identity develops rapidly during adolescence—and storytelling is central to that. When my story is told without me, it hijacks my narrative memory systems—the way I make meaning of my life.

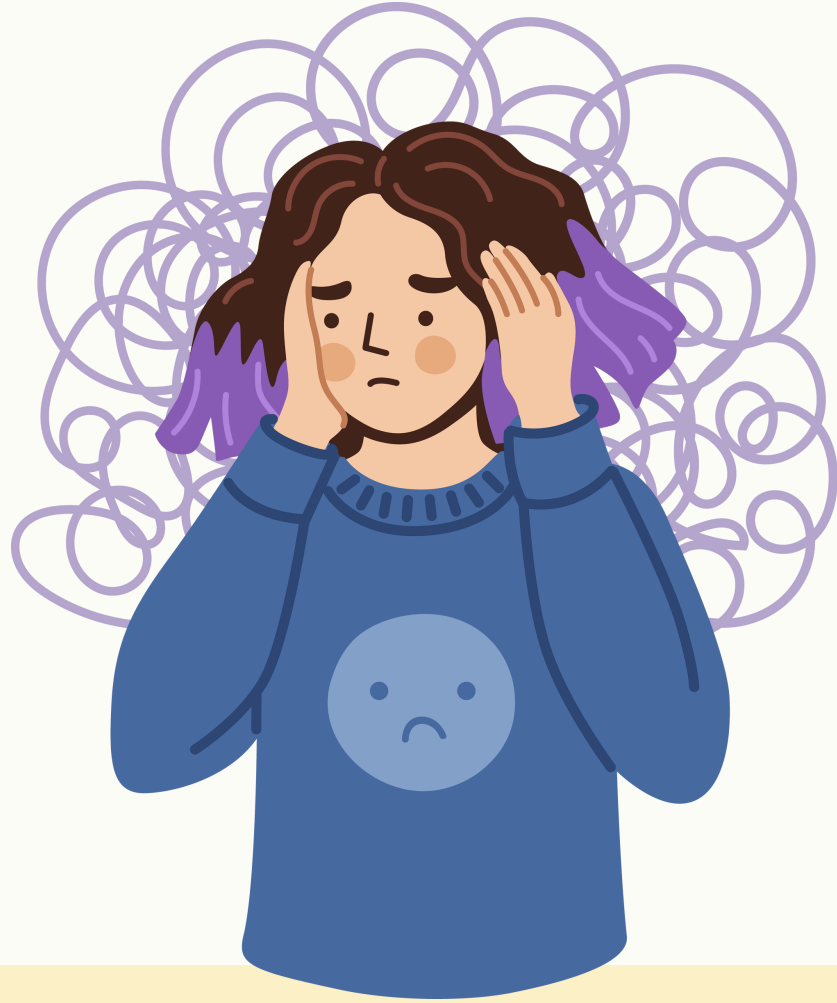
But when I get to choose how my story is shaped and shared, I start to feel ownership, not just exposure.
Storytelling with consent is healing.
Storytelling without it can be harm.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Be Curious With Me, Not Controlling

“Ask me what I need. Don’t assume you know better.”

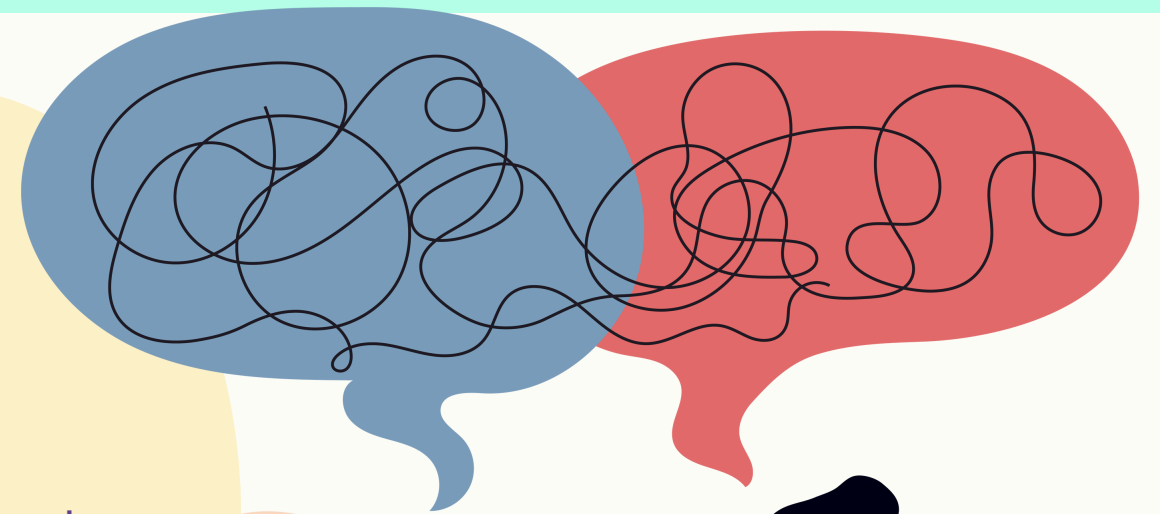


Please remember...

I know I’m still learning. I know I’ll make mistakes. But please stop making decisions about me without me. I don’t want control over everything—I just want to be part of the conversation. I want to learn how to trust myself... with you beside me, not over me.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might ask, *“Can I choose how to do this?”* or *“Can we try it a different way?”*
- I might get reactive or withdrawn if I’m micromanaged
- I might refuse to participate—not because I don’t care, but because I feel powerless
- I might take longer to decide because I’m still sorting out what I actually want, not what’s expected
- I might light up when I’m given choices—even small ones



What I need:

- Voice in decisions that affect me
- Adults who say: **“Let’s figure it out together.”** **“What do you already know about what works for you?”**
- Space to mess up without being shamed—mistakes are where I learn

How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say *“Why do I even have to do this?”* or *“You never listen anyway,”* hear the question behind it: *“Do I matter in this relationship, or am I just being managed?”*

Try:

“This isn’t about control—it’s about care. What would help this feel more doable for you?”

Collaboration is not weakness. It’s strength.

When I’m invited into decisions, my pre-frontal cortex (which manages planning, self-awareness, and future-thinking) activates. I’m more likely to follow through on something I’ve helped shape.

But when I’m controlled without collaboration, my amygdala (threat detector) flares up. I enter fight, flight, or shutdown—not because I’m defiant, but because I’ve lost connection to choice.



WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

Be Honest About What You're Learning Too

"I'm watching you. Be someone who's still growing, not pretending."



Please remember...

You don't have to be perfect.
I just want you to be real.
If you mess up, admit it. If you're still learning about neurodiversity, tell me what you're learning.
Let me know I'm not the only one figuring things out.
Let me know you're human too.

What this might sound like, look like, or feel like:

- I might say, *"Why don't you ever admit when you're wrong?"*
- I might call out when something feels unfair—even if I don't have the words yet
- I might act like I don't care—but secretly, I notice everything you model
- I might soften when you say, *"I got it wrong."*
- I might lean in when I feel like we're both learning, side by side



How to support me when resistance shows up:

If I say, *"You don't understand,"* don't rush to prove that you do. Instead say:

"You're right. I'm still learning. What am I missing?"

Humility is regulation. It brings us closer.

What I need:

- Honest reflections, not performative perfection
- Adults who say: ***"I'm still figuring this out too." "I didn't know that—thank you for teaching me."***
- Room to grow together, instead of being policed

When you show up with honesty, when you admit mistakes or say *"I'm still learning,"* you help regulate my nervous system. It tells my brain and body: *"This person is real. I don't have to perform to stay connected."* From a brain-based view, this builds co-regulation—a process where your calm and openness help settle my stress response. It also supports relational neuroplasticity: the brain's ability to rewire through safe, authentic connection.

