



Open in app

Get started

You have **2** free member-only stories left this month. [Sign up for Medium and get an extra one](#)

An Autistic Social Butterfly's Guide to Making Friends

Interpersonal skills for a proudly disabled life.



Photo by [Chris Montgomery](#) on [Unsplash](#)



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

This was my first conscious attempt at masking my Autism, though I did not know I was Autistic yet. I wouldn't discover my disability, or learn about the psychological toll of masking it, for almost two decades after that.

My grumpy, aloof mask protected me from rejection for quite a long time. No one could view me as pitiful or socially inept if I never betrayed any desire to connect in the first place. It was easy to extract myself from confusing and overstimulating situations if I was already known as a gloomy loner. I froze people out, but sorrow and longing ate away me, and slowly ruined my life.

All of this slowly began to change in my late 20s, after I learned I was Autistic and began researching masked Autism. I came to understand that I didn't dislike people as a matter of course, I just couldn't handle unexpected plans, or erratic noise, and was not adept at following social scripts and rules of politeness that did not make sense to me. All this time, I had been frosty to people in order to hide my vulnerability and my disability, not because I hated people. I started to consider that maybe I wasn't innately broken and unlovable, I just hadn't been seen and appreciated for the person I really was.

It was then that I began making a dedicated effort to connect with people as my genuine self. I started visiting a lot of different social groups and clubs, and testing out many new hobbies. I began dressing and moving in a way that felt less restrictive and false, and soon I realized I was transgender as well. The more I expanded my social horizons and loosened the restrictions I had been putting on myself, the easier making new friends became. It took years of work and practice, with many stumbles, but I slowly developed the social skills necessary to form real bonds with people I actually liked, and enough self-respect to believe I deserved their friendship.

Today, I have a rich network of friends who really love me. When I'm feeling down, I always have multiple caring people whom I can reach out to for distraction or comfort. Making plans is shockingly easy — my social calendar is nearly always filled with experiences I'm truly excited about. And when I went through a very painful breakup a few months ago, I was enveloped by the attention and love of a rich network of friends.



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

Most Autistic people that I meet are pretty lonely. It's difficult to form healthy, supportive relationships when you've been told since childhood that you're unacceptably awkward and clueless and need to pretend to be more 'normal.' But what I've discovered through years of trial and error is that unmasking Autism and developing 'social skills' don't have to be diametrically opposed goals. In fact, the best way to make new friends as an Autistic person is by unmasking, and sharing more of your weird, distinctive disabled self with the world. The process is lengthy, and it's challenging, but for me, it has been life-changing. So without further ado, here is my advice for Autistics who want to make new friends, and to do so in a genuine, unmasked way.

Know that this process will take years.

I find that lonely Autistic people often long for an idealized concept of a "found family" or a "community" that it seems like they'll never attain. But the truth is, nobody just wakes up and builds intimate connections in a flash. It takes years to develop that kind of trust — and to find people you really want to bond with on that level.

I remember when I was first starting to become a more social person, I thought I needed to radically change everything about who I was. I wanted to accrue as many friends as I could, become overwhelmingly popular and outgoing, and establish one of those tightly-knit chosen families I always heard other queer people talking about. The intensity and urgency of my expectations were unrealistic, and left me acting like a total fake, befriending people I didn't even enjoy the company of, and trying to conform to standards that just did not suit me. It was exhausting and messy.

In reality, building new social skills and forging supportive friendships takes a lot of time, work, and discernment. The vast majority of people you meet will not wind up playing a large role in your life. And that's fine. You won't always know, upon initially meeting somebody, whether they will become important to you. That's fine too.

Don't expect yourself to become a radically more extroverted or well-connect person instantaneously. Don't hold new friendships to the idealistic standard of "found family" or "community" either. A community is not a thing that you find, already fully formed, and



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

Find a lot of social events and attend a lot of them.

If you've ever found yourself desperately Googling "how to make friends" late in the middle of the night (as I have), you've already read this piece of advice. It's unfortunately true: if you want to make new friends, you will need to enter new social environments, encounter new groups of people, and try out new activities. You'll have to do these things *a lot*.

Use Meetup.com, Facebook, Google, and other social media to find local groups related to your interests. Check out what your park district, public library, local universities, community colleges, churches, bars, and community centers have listed on their events calendars. Really be *expansive* in the interests and activities you try and look up. Any subject you want to learn about, any hobby or craft you've ever wanted to perfect, every TV show or game you enjoy, sport you play, or kink that you have is an opportunity to find people a little bit like yourself.

If you have niche nerdy interests, you can get a lot of mileage out of Tumblr, Discord, Reddit, and other social media and chatting platforms. ***Digital socializing counts as socializing.*** Many Autistic people prefer to socialize online; you don't have to socialize the way neurotypicals tend to if you don't want to. Just be sure to be honest with yourself about what your social needs are, and if making new friends who live far away will be satisfactory for you.

The more you pursue niche interests that you are passionate about, the more likely you are to find a space where you can truly fit in. You're Autistic, and that's great — go find your fellow freaks and revel in your freakiness together. I have made excellent friends on discord servers devoted to erotic hypnosis, and on subreddits for people interested in financial independence. I've made lifelong friends by participating in Tumblr's online writing community, and by attending a local genderqueer discussion group. I benefited a lot from casting a *wide* net, and pursuing both virtual and in-person social opportunities.

Finding this many social engagements might all sound like a lot of work — and it is!

Meeting new people and investing in new relationships requires a lot of logistical



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

promising and add events to your calendar. Then go to those events. Several times. This brings us to the next step:

Go to an event at least three times.

I was given this piece of advice many years ago, and it has served me very well. You can't just show up to a pub trivia night or a book club one time and then give up because the vibes were a little off. You have to give a new group a couple of tries to determine if it's worth your continued social investment.

The first time you go into an unfamiliar social space as an Autistic person, you are likely going to be overwhelmed. You'll be inhibited and will have trouble processing every face and physical detail, and figuring out what the norms are for the space. It's easy to mistake this entirely normal and common discomfort for a sign that the space itself is unwelcoming. Plus, even if you absolutely hate everyone who shows up to the group on the first try, there's no guarantee that the same folks will show up the second time you go. People are constantly filtering in and out of a space. You don't have to befriend everyone in a pre-existing community. Even meeting one new person that you like is a victory.

You can meet lovely people at events that suck. Commiserating in the corner can be a great way to bond. I've met some of my best friends by hanging on the margins of an over-hyped social scene, bitching about its problems to sympathetic fellow haters. So, even if you don't enjoy a new social activity or club that you've joined, give it a couple of tries. You never know what worthwhile connections will emerge from it.

The big, bright red exception to all this is experiences of racism, transphobia, ableism, fatphobia, and the like. ***You should go into social spaces with clear standards in mind of how you deserve to be treated, and a plan for how you'll behave if someone violates those standards. You get to decide whether to confront the person, end the interaction, or leave the space entirely.***

If you routinely experience prejudices like anti-Blackness, sexism, or homophobia, you probably have really strong self-protective instincts, and part of unmasking means



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

I first met Mel as a fellow shit-talker on the fringes of the Tumblr Writing Community in the early 2010s. We were bored to tears by the exact same insipid, trope-ridden stories posted on the platform. We bonded over our mutual snark, started talking regularly, and then when she moved to the same city as me, we became close friends.

Mel has always been great at thrusting herself into new social experiences. She volunteers in the park district and at a food pantry, and for a while also did volunteer shifts at a used book store. She throws excellent Christmas parties that bring a wide array of disparate friend groups together: comedians, writers, queer folks, buddies from her boxing class. Recently she started branching out into the latex scene. Melanie's a reflective, at times downright quiet person, but she's also a total social butterfly.

Recently, Mel told me the secret to her calm, quiet social boldness. Whenever she feels uneasy entering a new social space, she tells herself this: ***you don't have to do shit, say shit, or feel shit.*** Meaning that as long as she shows up to the event and stays there for a while, she has done enough. There is no need to get anything positive out of the experience, or to give any kind of reaction or performance to anybody else.

I think Mel's Rule is absolutely killer advice for any Autistic person looking to unmask and make new friends. If you've had to hide your disability in order to fit in, faking positive emotions and ignoring your own discomfort probably feels instinctual to you. But you can't truly befriend people (or even *enjoy* being around others) if you ignore your own desires and stifle your own consent like that.

You don't have to put on a placating performance for the benefit of neurotypicals anymore. And you throw yourself into new events and social engagements, always remember Mel's Rule. You don't need to participate in any activity that makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to talk to anybody you don't want to, and *you don't have to pretend to enjoy a single second of anything that happens.*

Far too often, neurodivergent people exclude ourselves from social settings because the pain of conforming to neurotypical standards is so profound. This just leaves us more



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

In 2019, I went to a Dorian Electra concert at Emporium in Chicago. I was hoping to link up with my friend August while I was there, but they ended up needing to cancel. I stood alone in throngs of young, stylish hyperpop fans, all dolled up in my crop-top, leather collar, and fishnets, wanting to commune with my fellow trans weirdos but feeling uncertain and alone.

For a few hours, the concert was uncomfortable. I got a drink and hung around the bar, messaging a acquaintances who I thought might be there in hopes of finding someone to cling to. I wanted to move out into the dance floor and enjoy the music, but I felt out of place. Eventually though, I let go, acknowledged I'd be spending the evening alone, and wandered into the middle of the crowd.

I relaxed a bit and began to let myself dance. *It's okay that I'm here alone*, I told myself. *It's fine for me to just enjoy the performers and do my own thing*. The moment I really started feeling at ease and rocking back in place to the music, a tall, long haired woman in a black cowboy hat called out from behind me, complimenting my outfit.

Her name was Maddie, and she had driven from Michigan for the concert along with her spouse, Megan. Megan had short-shorn hair and wonderfully kind eyes. The couple was enthusiastic and friendly and overjoyed to be there. I immediately felt safe in their presence. We hung out for the rest of the night, dancing together, gushing about our favorite songs and performances, and lining up after the show to meet Dorian Electra themselves.



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

Me and Dorian Electra, after the concert where I met Megan & Maddie.

Megan and Maddie stayed in touch with me after that night — we talked on Facebook and then met up for another concert months later. I introduced them to other friends of mine. Over the course of the pandemic, we socialized online a lot, and my connection with them and our mutual friends deepened. A random hello at a concert turned into a years long, beautiful friendship.

I didn't need to do anything difficult to develop this lasting, warm connection. All I had to do was be myself, remain present despite feeling anxious, and give myself over to the possibilities.



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

Maddie saw me moving comfortably, at ease with myself, and they responded to me with warmth and kindness.

Magic like that doesn't happen most times that I go out alone, but it doesn't really have to — *all I have to do is keep throwing myself into opportunities where it might happen.* The more I surrender to the social world and allow myself to receive kindness, the less afraid of strangers I am. This, in turn, makes befriending new people easier.

Notice who is good for you.

The writer Samuel Dylan Finch has an excellent thread on Twitter about his process of finding his “strawberry people” — the close friends who nourish his wellbeing and help him to grow. Finch says that in the past, he used to push away people for seemingly being “too nice” to him; he doubted their overtures, preferring to the comfortable familiarity of the aloof and unreciprocating.

Because I spent most of my life masking, I also got accustomed to my relationships being unnatural and hard. I trusted people who were frosty and judgmental, because I figured that meant they were *real*. If someone kept me at a distance or was too busy for me, I prioritized them, because that meant they were cool. Whenever someone was kind to me, or invited me to hang out with a lot of enthusiasm, my initial gut response was to find them *creepy* and *overbearing*, and to worry that they were a desperately friendless *loser*, just like I secretly was deep down.

It goes without saying that these are incredibly cruel, ableist thoughts. I'm a little bit ashamed to even write them. But I know that these reactions come from my own experiences of being told that I was too weird, too intense, and too pathetic to be loved, and it's not my fault I absorbed them. But to move beyond my biases, I had to do what Samuel Dylan Finch did: *I asked myself who in my life seemed “too nice” to me — and I started working on embracing that niceness.*

My social life changed pretty dramatically once I did. I stopped blowing off the people who were consistent in messaging me and expressing an interest in hanging out.



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

cuddling with them, and letting them see me when I was stuck in a slack-faced, dead-eyed Autistic shutdown.

If you're a masked Autistic, it's likely that you are pushing your own "strawberry people" away too. Reflect a bit on who appears in your life reliably, and doesn't expect perfection or neurotypicality out of you. Of the new people you've been meeting, who shows a real interest in getting to know you better? Who carefully listens when you speak? Who challenges you to grow in positive ways, rather than making you feel deficient? Those might be your strawberry people. Try watering those plants with greater attention.

Get comfortable disappointing people.

As an Autistic person, your social energy is finite. If you are going to start nourishing healthy relationships with your "strawberry people" more actively, you'll also have to pull away from the people who waste your time and treat you in a demanding, disinterested, or invalidating way. So ***ask yourself: who always makes me feel like shit? Who is never satisfied with me no matter what I do?*** Who makes me feel like I'm constantly swimming upstream against a deluge of endless judgement? Who never pays back all the effort and care that I give them?

Most Autistic people do not trust our own social instincts. But when we ignore how being around a person actually makes us feel, we set ourselves up for alienation and social hypervigilance. Constantly scanning a person's face and body language for signs of unspoken disappointment and bending over backwards to satisfy them is no way to be loved.

In my case, I know it's a red flag when I absolutely *dread* spending time around somebody, but keep trying to persuade myself that I should be easier on them anyway. I hear myself thinking things like:

"Sure, she never lets me get a word in edgewise or asks me about my life, but she said really nice things about the play I was in three years ago!"

"Yeah, he only ever calls me when he needs something, but he's a really busy person, and it's



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

“They talked about me behind my back, but I’m sure they thought they were doing the right thing. I should be the bigger person!”

That reflexive self-invalidating is my masking talking. I don’t need to defend the people who have hurt me in the courtroom of my mind. If I can’t even advocate for myself in my own head, I’m never going to find friendships with people who take my side, either.

Instead of fighting to win everyone over (or to please the perpetually dissatisfied), *set out to disappoint them*. Don’t laugh at jokes that aren’t funny. Say “no” when they ask for help carrying a couch up the stairs. If they make repeated negative comments about your eating or body size, or they misgender you, walk away. Ignore their texts. If they say something offensive, give them a cold stare instead of pretending everything is fine. No message *is* a message.

At first, you will feel guilty or maybe even *panicked* when you let people down. Let yourself experience these feelings — and continue maintaining your boundaries anyway. Practice riding that initial wave of discomfort and your distress tolerance will grow. It is fine for another person to be mad at you, or even sad about your behavior. It’s fine for an interaction to become awkward because you refuse to minimize bad behavior. It is only through disappointing people that we learn to feel where their boundaries end and ours begin.

Let your passion shine through.

Masked Autistics are typically quite afraid to talk “too much” about the topics that obsess us, and we tend to reign in our stims and filter out any emotional displays that might be seen by neurotypical society as overly “intense.” We repress our heel-bouncing and chair-wiggling. We get accused of being too chatty or interrupting at the wrong moments, and so we simply fall silent. When a potential new friend brings up an anime or a video game that excites us, we pretend to only like those things a ‘normal’ amount, and may even take pains to hide how much we know about them.

It is impossible to be loved when you are suppressing that much of yourself. **It may seem**



[Open in app](#)[Get started](#)

I used to be utterly paranoid about double-texting. I worried that if I messaged a friend or a potential romantic partner beyond whatever arbitrary, unspoken limit they viewed as “too much,” they would think I was a demanding freak. I would closely analyze old messaging chains, keeping meticulous track of who messaged first, and how long the messages were, always making sure that I was not the more eager-seeming person on the ledger. After chatting with people at parties, I would replay every conversation aloud on my walk home, picking apart everything I’d said and the intonation in which I’d said it. I was forever looking for ways to become less strange — trying to make myself stand out less and less.

Today, I find people are actually *drawn* to me when I rant and rave about fragrances and internet drama and enjoy it when I let my true feelings show. Last month, my friends Minmo and Maddie both told me that they find my laugh (which sounds very unusual and recognizably Autistic) to be cute and infectious. Of course my real friends love my weirdest traits! They’re what makes me distinctively me.

My friend Emmie tells me that she came to a similar realization, but in the context of her dating life. She explained it this way: “I’m somebody who needs a lot of comforting, and I also like to be really affectionate and silly with my partners. As a young woman I used to ‘play the game’ and play it cool. And that did not help me find someone who would actually meet my needs. When I started being openly ‘needy’, that’s when I found partners who love that about me.”

...

There are people out there who will love the way you twirl your hair and bite the corner of your mouth. There are potential friends out there who dream of being sent dozens of puns and *Dragonball Z* memes every day. Someone out there will adore you the way you are, listening to the same song twenty-seven times in a row, unable to start a conversation verbally but always ready to send a lengthy text.

You belong in the social world exactly as you are, even if you don’t know always know what to do or say in a crowded room. You don’t have to change who you are to be worthy.

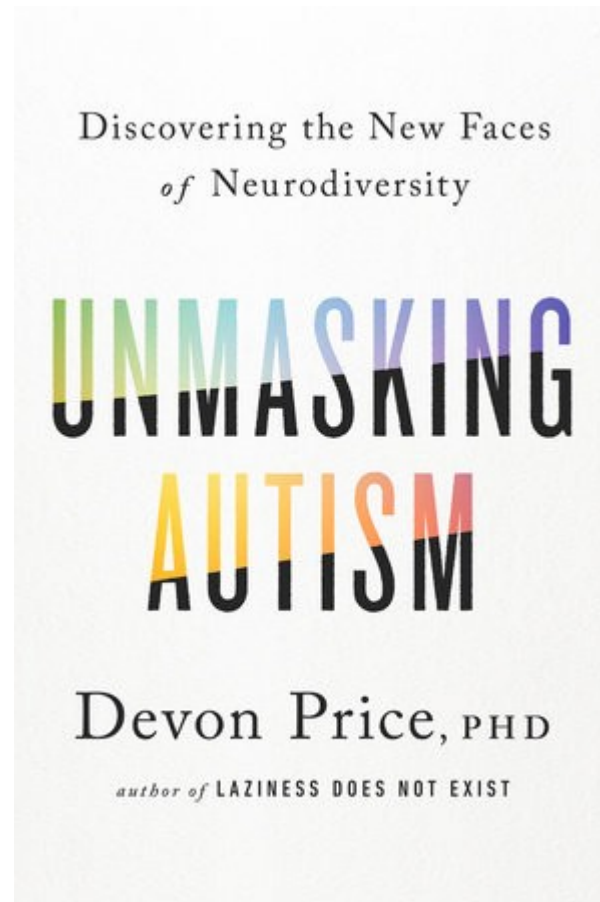




Open in app

Get started

proactive steps to find the people who will appreciate you, allow yourself to receive their love, and feel unafraid in radiating that love back.



My second book, *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* is out April 5, 2022! You can preorder it [here](#), or anywhere books are sold.

Want to receive my latest pieces by email? Subscribe for free here!

I publish at least two pieces per month on topics like neurodiversity, radical mental health,





Open in app

Get started

Subscribe

By signing up, you will create a Medium account if you don't already have one. Review our [Privacy Policy](#) for more information about our privacy practices.

