

Autism and Expectations

I am Finite



I am finite: This is the lesson I have been slowly learning. We all have our own limits, we are all finite in our own ways. I can stretch and twist and turn as much as I want to, but it won't change who I am.

Autistic people have different edges to non-autistic people. I recently realised that I have built a life in which I can do all the things I need to within my framework so long as nothing additional comes along. There is a balance there that was lacking before. I can spend my energy on home-life and work and maintain that ebb and flow from week to week.

Working from home leaves me enough energy to work full time and to look after myself and share the load of family life.

I have one evening exercise class I go to every week. I know the people who go and am familiar with the location. I go on a Monday night and I keep my Tuesday night free to restore the energy I've lost. The exercise improves my body's health and helps keep me on an even keel.

I start work at 7:00am at the latest – I aim for 6:00 but take my time to rise as I choose on that particular day. By 3:00pm I've done a full day's work. Those early hours when most people aren't at work yet mean I can focus without interruptions.

There's a culture of messaging rather than calling people at my work. We are still all working from home but there is no plan to force anyone to return to the office. Most people will check you're free before picking up a phone. Not once have I been called out of the blue and most video calls are scheduled well in advance. Those that aren't are with people I know well.

All meetings are via Teams, which suits me – not because I don't find them exhausting, but because they seem to exhaust everyone more equally than in-person meetings did. In-person meetings left me with a deficit that others didn't share.

On Teams there are clear start times and end times and reminders. It's within the rules to leave at the allotted time. If things get too much I can turn my camera off and decompress. It's not perfect, but it feels less imperfect than being in an office.

I try to block out time in my work day to allow me to focus on one thing for a decent period of time. It doesn't always work, but when it does I can find flow and focus and that feeds my energy levels.

I have flexi time, so that I can work up my hours when I'm in a state of flow, and then take my time back when I need to recuperate. I have a supportive team and there's an Autism Support work chat to fall back on if things get hard. Everyone there is lovely and supportive and understanding.

I live in a world where I can walk out my front door and be alone with minimal chance of interruption. I have spaces I can escape to. I have a life that I have filled, and that is no longer overflowing. There is balance here.

There are days when I can find myself wondering if I'm even autistic anymore. Where are my shutdowns? Where is the pain in my head? Where is the uncertainty and discomfort that should always be there? Where is my burn out?

The answer to that is always just a step away. If I forget to keep the balance it is always waiting. The exhaustion, the stress, the headaches, the overwhelm, the inability to process, the complete stop.

Underneath it all, I am still finite. All it takes is an additional invitation or engagement that needs me to step outside of my limits and I am borrowing from tomorrow.

I can see these things loom on the horizon, threatening to unbalance my carefully crafted world, my perfectly stacked house of cards. Then it happens and I'm tired, and I'm still tired, and I'm tired again. I find myself wondering if I've got the energy to go to my class, but if I miss it I miss out on my fitness and my health, and next week I will be out of my routine and more likely to miss it again, which will make me unhappy and upset the shape of my week.

The work day begins and I can't seem to balance my time. I don't have the energy to state what I need and so my boundaries bend and buckle and the work that was neatly set into streams, breaks its banks and floods my desk.

There are solutions; I try to keep to my routine as much as I can. I don't cancel my class unless I have no choice but to cancel it – but importantly I always give myself the option to cancel. The more permission I have not to go, the more likely I am to go.

Physical exhaustion and mental exhaustion are both exhausting, but don't always run concurrently. Sometimes mental exhaustion feels physical, but it's only when I physically exhaust myself too that I can find the equilibrium I seek.

I have set re-focus time at work. Every week I take time to think about what it is I am doing and why. When the world is flooded and it's hard to see where the detail lies, it always helps to be able to see the source of the water and its destination. It's an efficient use of my time and often results in overall improvements in what I am working on. I rediscover my thread and I hold on to it.

I am finite. I end at my skin, unless I shout, then I end at my sound waves, unless you can see me wave, then I end at my reflected light, unless you read my words, then I end at your thoughts.

I am finite but it's not as straightforward as not being able to do something. It's not as clear cut as I can do this and I can't do that. It's not that I have *this* much energy to spend every week. It's not that I will crumble when I'm outside of my routine. It's not that the world I have built is perfect – I need those extras, those interludes, those changes. I need art and friendship and fun and newness, I just need to balance how often and how.

I am finite, but what I can do is not; the variety of things I can spend myself on are not; my life is not. It's one of the things I find hardest to communicate, is how varied I am.

When I say I find something hard or painful or difficult, I always want to qualify it with, 'But that doesn't mean I can't do it.' Different things come with a different cost, and that cost will be different based on the day it falls. Some days I will not be able to do them at all. Other days I may find them hard, but with planning and scripting and preparation, and recovery time, I can achieve my aim.

Everything is a linked net of variable costs and energy sources; if I can fit in a walk alone in the woods just after a meeting with a multitude of people, then I may come out the other side balanced. Finding work that allows that balance is everything.

I have created a world that mostly works for me. It is not a world that would suit everyone, it is quiet and gentle and full of nature and soil and wood and birdsong.

My world has creativity in different forms. I have swapped much of my writing for more practical creations; I build my energy designing spreadsheets, furniture and my garden, with occasional flashes of poetry to centre my thoughts. I miss spending so much time on words as much as I missed spending so much time on logic when that was my deficit.

I mostly don't mask in my own home, but as all parents will know, sometimes parenting means masking. You can't share every fear or pain or struggle with small children, sometimes you have to be the together-adult when you feel fragmented. Sometimes you have to be a safe space for others, when you feel unsafe. There are many joys to parenting, but the balance of energy exchange will ultimately favour the child over the adult. They're the ones being nurtured after all.

There are adjustments there too. We are as considerate as we can be to each other's sensory needs, stimming is always safe, and where possible we respect each other's need for time alone, but no matter what kind of day I am having if they need me I have to be there, or I have to have made sure my husband can be. It is an additional thing to balance and consider. But when their joy and enthusiasm sparks mine, those times are the best times.

When it comes to adjustments I can be reluctant to ask for them on a day-to-day basis, because I am so very variable. Meeting new people is exhausting and draining, but also fun, engaging and world-expanding. What I need is to be able to plan for recovery time around those meetings, not avoid having them. I need balance, not a small, empty world. I need networking on my terms, not isolation.

I will always find it hard to flit from job to job, I will always find it hard to be the person dealing with a constant stream of queries, I will always find it hard to be interrupted when in flow; but that doesn't mean that I'm not available to help and support and nurture and connect and enable.

When I feel most disabled, those are the times when helping other people energises me. Reaching out to give support means reaching inside myself and nurturing that feeling of doing good in the world. Not always, not when the words won't come and even the dimmest of lights is too bright, but in this balanced world those days are rare.

I am finite. I have an iron-will forged in the seas of misunderstanding and wrongness in which I formed. What I can cope with is immense – even if you wouldn't have to cope in such a way, because the environment doesn't test you the way it does me. If you could feel it and stay standing you would be in awe of autistic people.

I am a duck; calm on the surface, and paddling frantically beneath it. I am an iceberg; what is visible is a fraction of my whole. I am a Tardis; so much bigger on the inside. I am finite, but within that finality is all of me and that is no small thing.

I miss many of my frantic past worlds, but none suited me as my current universe does. I'm not even certain that my current world would have worked for me a decade ago. My limits, energy drains and energy fountains, have all changed over the years.

There can be a stereotype that autistic people are halted in their development, I suspect that we are as likely to develop outwards as we are to develop onwards, and that masks just how much we change over time. We expand within our routine, within our interests, within our self-taught, self-developed, self-directed worlds.

Whilst other people grow in one direction, when allowed to be who we are, autistic people are bubbles, expanding our worlds to fit more in. Driven by our fascinations and pattern-finding, that world can become immense, but if all you ever measure is the growth in a single direction, you'll miss the truth.

My balance will grow and shift and fall into new routines. My bubble will expand to fit in new fascinations and loves. For all that I am finite, I do not plan to ever be finished.



Published by Rhi

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4 thoughts on “I am Finite”

1. **CATHYTEA** SAYS:

March 24, 2022 at 5:04 pm

This is so beautiful. It describes the adjustments my life's gone through during the pandemic, too. I often wonder if I'm autistic now, too, because so much in my life fits me now, and then I have a morning like today where my sensory processing is sort of hyper and hypo simultaneously, or I get interrupted while doing something and sort of struggle or I have to talk with someone on the phone and need a few days to recover. But overall, it's mad me reflect on how much of “autism” is socially constructed.

↪ **Reply**

RHI SAYS:

March 24, 2022 at 7:42 pm

So true! It really is the environment that makes all the difference

↪ **Reply**

2. **STEPHANIE ASCOUGH** SAYS:

July 4, 2022 at 11:53 am

This is beautifully written and relatable. Every so often, I'll realize I've been pretty calm, rested, creative AND productive, and I think, “wait...am I sure I'm autistic?”. Then I realize I've been home for several days on end, had no needs other than my family's or my own, etc. and it makes sense. “Ah. Right.” Thanks for sharing parts of your story.

↪ **Reply**

3. Pingback: **Overload season approaches – My Blog**

