

100+ Ways to Recharge, De-Stress, and Unmask!

SELF-CARE
FOR
**Autistic
People**

Dr. Megan Anna Neff

Neurodivergent Psychologist and Creator of @Neurodivergent_Insights

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Preface



A friend once asked me, “If there was a pill you could take that would make you non-Autistic, would you take it?” I’m not going to lie; I thought about it. It would be nice to be able to be in a room of more than five people and not automatically be sensory overloaded. It would be nice not to brace in pain every time a truck passes by my home office. It would be nice to be able to form (and maintain!) connections with more ease. But I told my friend, “No, I wouldn’t take that pill.” At the end of the day, I love being Autistic, and... it’s hard being Autistic. It’s hard navigating a world that wasn’t built for me.

I love the creativity and interweaving of my mind. I delight in the dopamine I get from spending hours learning about my special interest. My ability to understand complex things and find patterns enlivens me. My ceaseless curiosity makes life a never-ending wonder.

People with a surface-level understanding of autism often reduce autism to “being socially awkward.” However, autism is so much more than social-communication differences. Difficulty with allistic (non-Autistic) communication has certainly caused me some pain, but for me, it certainly isn’t the hardest part about being Autistic. *For me, the hardest part about being Autistic is my relationship with my body.*

My body is often a place of too-muchness and not-enoughness—sensory overload, fog, discomfort, and body alienation. Alternatively, many Autistic people stay frozen in the space of perpetual too-muchness and are constantly overwhelmed by the world. To be Autistic is to frequently be intruded upon by the world. The smells, tastes, sounds, and demands for chitchat can feel like constant invasions.

This way of living left me feeling unfulfilled and disconnected. After my autism diagnosis at the age of thirty-seven, following the diagnosis of one of my children, I put my psychological training to work to cultivate a more meaningful, grounded, and value-consistent life. I shifted my focus

to working primarily with fellow Autistic adults in my private practice and found connection and support in the online Autistic community. As an Autistic psychologist, I take great pleasure in helping fellow Autistic people develop lives that work for them.

As I became more knowledgeable about my diagnosis, I realized I needed to prioritize self-care. I began to learn how to take care of my body, mind, and spirit in a way that helps me feel grounded, relaxed, and happy. Creating and sharing these education and wellness resources with the neurodivergent community has brought me a sense of purpose and belonging. Thanks to these experiences and learning how to integrate self-care that works for me, I've had less burnout and a deeper connection to others. I hope the ideas in this book help you in your Autistic journey.

You can engage with the ideas in this book in many different ways, depending on your preferences. You might want to skip around to various topics or entries that address needs you have at any given moment, or you can choose to focus on practicing just one exercise for a while. I always advise my clients to be patient with themselves as they learn new things—don't expect perfection immediately (this can be especially difficult for us Autists!). Trying things again and again and learning what works for you and what doesn't is an important part of the process.

What I share in this book has been influenced by my own specific circumstances. I am an Autistic-ADHD individual, which places me in the neurominority category, and I also hold multiple privileged identities, including the ability to speak. While some of this book may have relevance for non-speaking Autistic individuals, I acknowledge that my experience means that this book primarily caters to speaking Autistic individuals without co-occurring intellectual disabilities. In sharing this book from my context, while also holding in mind the complexities of the many intersecting human experiences that I'm aware of, my hope is to provide insights and tools for self-care that resonate with you and that you can apply to your specific context while acknowledging the inherent limits within this text.

Your body is doing amazing things for you every day, and self-care is one way that you can show gratitude and appreciation for all its hard work.

Introduction



Many Autistic people experience life in survival mode, trying to avoid and deflect the too-muchness of the world. When you're Autistic, it's as if your nervous system exists on the outside of your body, fully absorbing every single sensory input, social interaction, and piece of information. Although this heightened sensitivity can be a strength—perhaps making you observant, intelligent, and curious—it can also quickly overwhelm your body and mind. It's like your internal battery is always being used, and so it depletes faster than those of your neurotypical peers. That's why you need unique ways to rest and rejuvenate that coordinate with your body's specific preferences. Self-care can act as a protective buffer from the intensity of the world, enabling you to recharge your battery and live a full and engaged life.

Masking, in particular, can drain your battery even faster. Due to the stigma associated with autism, you might mask or repress your natural ways of self-soothing in order to look less Autistic. For example, your body probably wants to avoid eye contact, stim, and/or move to help you ground and regulate. But if you spend your life masking and suppressing this natural instinct, you might experience more sensory overload and become disconnected from your body.

Whether you mask or not, it's important to learn how to take care of yourself in ways that actually reward and nourish your brain, instead of using self-care ideas that are created from a neurotypical lens.

That's why the tips, ideas, and information in *Self-Care for Autistic People* are tailored specifically to address sensory, emotional, relational, and professional challenges so you can feel more aligned with who you are and build a grounded and expansive life.

Self-Care for Autistic People includes information on how to work with your sensory and nervous systems, find practices to help you self-advocate, and discover ways to limit burnout. Starting a self-care practice may seem

overwhelming, so take your time and focus on the chapters that resonate with you. You can also start by implementing a few practices at a time. Here are just some of the dozens of practices you'll find in this book:

- **Manage Your Sensory Needs**
- **Unwind Tension in Your Muscles**
- **Support Your Gut Health**
- **Put Your Mind to Sleep**
- **Drop Unnecessary Demands**
- **Identify Red Flags and Green Flags in Friendship**

As an Autistic psychologist, I know that fostering a healthy relationship with your autism is key to living a fulfilling life—and self-care can help you do that. You have so much to offer this world, but to do that, you first need to listen to your body, process your emotions, and truly embrace all the wonderful things about yourself. Get ready to build the balanced and joy-filled life you deserve!

CHAPTER ONE



Cultivating Sensory Safety

Self-care is undoubtedly important for everyone. But for Autistic people, it's especially necessary because of the way our bodies interact with the world. Within this chapter, you will explore the significance of self-care for Autistic people and learn how to overcome common obstacles that might hinder your self-care pursuits. This chapter will also go into detail on what is the bedrock of self-care for many Autistic people—sensory self-care. Sensory self-care helps you learn to listen to your body's needs regarding what you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell and then address those needs in a way that works for you.

This chapter prepares you to begin incorporating self-care into your life and establishes the framework for your journey toward holistic well-being. You'll likely find that proactively taking care of yourself feels empowering and enables you to create more situations where you feel calm, focused, and connected.

An Important Note

Self-care is not a one-size-fits-all solution. So much of the self-care conversation seems detached from the complexities of real life—after all, what happens when someone doesn't have access to fresh vegetables to make a green smoothie or when the air quality in their neighborhood is so poor that taking a walk would be harmful? Self-care is intricately woven into the fabric of our intersecting identities, which then interact with the surrounding social structures. While I've tried to select self-care activities that can be adapted to various contexts, some of these entries may feel misaligned with your specific circumstances. Systems of oppression that influence BIPOC, disabled people, genderqueer people, and women also need to be addressed to support human thriving. Since these systemic issues are beyond the scope of this book, the entries will focus on the things within your influence that can help foster resilience as you navigate these systems and as we continue to build a more inclusive and safer world for all.

WHY SELF-CARE IS SO IMPORTANT FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Living in a world that wasn't designed for you can be incredibly exhausting. On a daily basis, you may need to navigate physical, emotional, cognitive, digestive, or other vulnerabilities that many Autistic people experience. Plus, you might find that your specific sensory needs often go unconsidered, your communication and thinking styles are often disregarded, and you are frequently misunderstood. The weight of stigma and negative stereotypes further compounds these daily struggles. On top of that, you have all the “regular” responsibilities and stress that come with being a family member, a romantic partner and/or friend, an employee, and so on.

When you add up all these factors, they can result in you feeling tired, overwhelmed, and/or burned out. You deserve to relax, recharge, and reset your body. That's where *Self-Care for Autistic People* comes in. Taking time to assess how you feel and address your needs is a vital way to restore your energy and tend to your health and overall well-being. Practicing self-care can help you improve your physical health, strengthen your relationships, enjoy more peaceful moments, set boundaries, and achieve goals.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF PRACTICING SELF-CARE

Practicing self-care isn't always easy for Autistic people. Two obstacles might stand in your way when it comes to self-care:

1. Masking

Masking can pull you away from your authentic experience and make it challenging to connect with your needs and preferences.

2. Interoception difficulties

Many Autistic people grapple with interoception—the ability to understand your body's internal signals. This further complicates self-care, as you might struggle to accurately gauge your physical and emotional states.

Both of these experiences distance you from your body and its needs—which is the core of self-care.

Self-care starts with self-attunement, which is the practice of tuning into your inner experiences at any given moment. For example, if you're feeling overwhelmed, you might take a step back and ask yourself what specific influence is causing this feeling. What is your body asking for right now? Or, if you're feeling anxious, you may take a pause to notice and name the story your mind is spinning at that moment. For Autistic people, however, the intricacies of masking and the innate challenges with interoception can make self-attunement particularly difficult. Without the ability to assess your internal states, your needs remain obscured, preventing you from addressing them. Complicating matters, you might even dissociate from your body, a protective response stemming from the overwhelming nature of the world around you.

If, like me, you discovered your autism later in life, by the time you realize this about yourself, you may be so disconnected from your body and core needs that you don't even know where to start! This is why, for many Autistic people, self-care starts with rebuilding trust with your body. Your first steps will involve learning to listen to what you need, improving your

communication with your body, working through past traumas, and learning to take your needs (and pleasure) seriously. You might not have previously treated your needs with much importance if you are someone who masks. If this is the case, then prioritizing your self-care is actually a profound step toward unmasking and overall well-being. Your body deserves loving care, and you're the best person to provide it. After all, you know yourself better than anyone, so lean on that expertise to put yourself and your needs first.

WHAT IS SENSORY SELF-CARE?

For most Autistic people, sensory regulation is the fundamental building block of self-care—it's like the foundation of a house. The entire structure will fall apart if the foundation is off. If you lack sensory regulation, all your other systems will be off, and you might experience anxiety, irritability, or meltdowns. You might also struggle to focus when your sensory system goes haywire.

Sensory self-care refers to the intentional practice of managing and meeting your sensory needs. Some common sensory needs include sensory detox, managing sound and smell sensitivity, deep pressure or strong physical sensations, and repetitive movement. When you practice sensory self-care, you'll recognize and respond to these needs in order to create a more balanced and regulated sensory experience. For example, to address the need for deep pressure and sound regulation, you might lie under a weighted blanket with headphones on, listening to your favorite song on repeat. By practicing this type of sensory self-care, you can foster more agency to regulate your emotions, executive functioning, and relationships.

GET TO KNOW YOUR SENSORY PROFILE

While you have more than five senses, there are typically the “big five” that come to mind when we talk about sensory sensitivities: taste, smell, touch, sound, and sight. These five senses have a powerful influence over how you experience any given moment.

The first step in prioritizing sensory self-care is getting to know what bothers you (your triggers) and exactly what your ideal sensory experience

entails (your preferences). Collecting this information may sound simple, but it can be a bit of a complex task for many Autistic people because:

1. You may have paradoxical or conflicting sensory experiences.
2. Many Autistic people struggle with body awareness, so you may have a hard time decoding what your sensory experience even is.

If this task is challenging for you at first, know that you'll get better at it as you practice. Getting clarity about your sensory triggers and preferences in each of these five domains can equip you to accommodate your needs and cultivate an ideal sensory environment. (See the *Manage Your Sensory Needs* entry in Chapter 2 for more ideas on managing your five traditional senses.)

Identifying Your Sensory Triggers

Sensory triggers are the things that grate on your nervous system and cause sensory overload, such as loud or unexpected noises, bright lights, certain textures, unexpected touches, and strong smells.

If you struggle with body awareness, you may not even know when or why you're feeling sensory overload; you might simply register that you feel bad or have a headache. This is a problem because if you aren't comprehending that your sensory system is overwhelmed, then you won't take steps to regulate yourself! It's as if odorless poison were slowly creeping in and you didn't realize it. Learning to identify your sensory triggers helps you be more proactive in removing yourself from sensory-triggering situations if possible and addressing overload that does arise if not.

Working to identify your specific triggers is sort of like being a detective. For example, the next time you have a headache or a wave of anxiety (note that sensory overload may feel like anxiety), do a quick scan of your body and surroundings: Is there anything bothersome about your environment? Are you under a bright light? Is there a strong smell near you?

Again, you are the expert on yourself, so get curious and use that agency to improve your experiences. Discovering your sensory triggers can take some time and attention, but it's well worth the effort. Here are some ways to begin identifying your triggers:

- **Keep a sensory-trigger journal:** Jot down how you feel throughout the day and what experiences cause discomfort or distress.
- **Conduct a mindful environment scan:** Do a scan of your environment whenever you have a wave of discomfort to see if you can identify potential triggers.
- **Notice muscle tension:** Pay attention when your body is clenching or bracing, and note what is happening around you at that time.
- **Seek professional support:** Consider working with a trained professional, like an occupational therapist, who can guide you through identifying your sensory triggers and developing strategies to manage them.

Knowing your sensory triggers will help you manage your environment and self-advocate for spaces that work for you. For example, when you enter a restaurant, you might say something like, “I have light sensitivities. Is it okay if we sit in that corner rather than under this light?” Taking control of your experiences in this way can empower you and help build self-advocacy confidence—which are also forms of self-care!

Identifying Your Sensory Preferences

Many Autistic people find it easier to identify sensory triggers than sensory preferences. However, sensory preferences are just as important as sensory triggers. Your sensory preferences are what help you feel calm in your surroundings and soothe you when you're upset. Creating a soothing sensory environment helps you focus more effectively, stay grounded, and engage with people around you.

Sensory preferences will vary a great deal from person to person. Someone who is highly sensitive to visual input may enjoy dim lighting in a clean and organized environment with no visual clutter. On the other hand, someone who is a visual seeker may enjoy disco lights, LED lights, spinners, and other visually stimulating elements. There are no right or wrong answers here; you decide what works best for you.

There are a variety of ways to explore your sensory preferences. You can:

- **Cultivate self-awareness:** Take time to reflect on your experiences and how you respond to different sensory stimuli. Notice how certain sounds, textures, smells, tastes, and visual stimuli affect your mood, energy levels, and overall well-being.
- **Keep a sensory journal:** Create a journal where you document your observations and reflections on your sensory experiences.
- **Get feedback:** Ask trusted friends and family members how they think you respond to different environments.
- **Use sensory checklists:** A sensory checklist is a comprehensive list of sensory options, usually categorized by the different senses. You can find several free sensory-preference checklists online (simply search “sensory-preference checklist,” or go to my website, NeurodivergentInsights.com, where I have several free sensory checklists).

When you get a handle on what your sensory preferences are, you can make small changes to your surroundings to create a more peaceful, calming environment; be better equipped to advocate for your sensory needs; and know what soothes you when you are upset or experiencing sensory dysregulation. These are all ways of practicing self-care as well!

UNDERSTANDING BALANCE AND MOVEMENT

Sensory self-care goes beyond your five senses and also includes three hidden or invisible sensory systems: proprioception, the vestibular system, and interoception. Let’s look at each one in more detail.

Understanding Proprioception

Proprioception refers to your ability to know where your body is in space without consciously thinking about it. Proprioception receptors are located in muscles and joints and provide information about where your body parts are and how much pressure to apply. Proprioceptive “under-responders” crave

proprioceptive input and likely enjoy the experiences of pressure, weight, constrictive clothing, intense movement, and more. Proprioceptive “avoiders” are sensitive to the slightest of touches and may be accused of overreacting when someone brushes up against them. Discovering tolerable methods to incorporate proprioceptive input into your sensory routine, while also advocating for your body’s boundaries, is key when you are a proprioceptive avoider.

Understanding Your Vestibular System

Your vestibular system helps you coordinate balance and movement. In your inner ear, there are receptors that not only help you tell how fast you’re moving and in which direction but also assist in deciding how fast to move and in what direction. If you’re a vestibular system “under-responder,” you seek out more movement and vestibular stimulation (things like swinging, rocking, bouncing, and jumping). Over-responders, on the other hand, experience this stimulation to a high degree and experience motion sickness more easily. Things like riding in cars, in elevators, and on escalators and even walking up the stairs can bring on discomfort. If that’s your experience, you will benefit from taking movement slow and not intentionally engaging in activities designed to make you dizzy (don’t be peer pressured into spinning teacup rides!).

Understanding Interoception

Finally, interoception has to do with accurately perceiving what is happening *inside* your body (like your heartbeat, hunger, and emotions). If you have heightened interoception awareness, you likely feel everything at max volume but may struggle to differentiate what is what (for example, what is anxiety versus hunger). If you have lower interoception awareness, you likely struggle to experience things like thirst, hunger, the urge to use the bathroom, and emotions. If you struggle with interoception, putting your body’s basic needs on a schedule is vital because you may not receive the signals when your body needs something.