A fact sheet about

Friendships without performing

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Friendships without performing

What performing in a friendship is, why shared interests help, and one way in.



Key points

- Performing in a friendship (definition below) means hiding or changing how you are so that you fit in, and it can wear you out even after a good time.
- Many autistic adults say friendship is easier with people who communicate the way they do, because there is less to hide and less to explain.
- A shared interest can carry a friendship, because it gives you something to do and talk about together, and being different matters less.
- One place built around something you love, at a pace you choose, may be the easiest way in.

What performing in a friendship is

You may have friends you like and still come home from seeing them tired. You spent the evening watching your face, laughing at the right moments and planning the next thing to say. Nobody asked you to, but it still felt needed.

Some people have one or two friends they can just be with. You can sit in silence, share one topic for an hour, or leave without a long goodbye. Friendships like these often start from something you both care about, and not from small talk.

‘Performing’ is a word many people use for masking. Masking means changing how you come across so that you fit in: your face, your voice, how you move and what you share. You can read more about what masking can cost you here.

Masking often grows out of how other people have treated you in the past. So you may not need to try harder at friendship. It may help more to find the people and the places where you do not need the mask.

Why shared interests and shared ways of being help

In a small study, autistic adults have said that time with autistic friends and family felt easier. They felt better understood, they felt they belonged, and they could be themselves. With people who were not autistic, many felt they had to fit in with what the others wanted.

Part of the reason is that people who communicate in very different ways can find each other hard to follow, and the gap goes both ways. You can read more about the double empathy problem here.

Young autistic adults were asked how they made friends. They said it went best in two ways: with people who accepted their differences, and through shared interests, where those differences mattered less.

In one survey, feeling part of the autistic community went along with feeling better overall. But it did not take away the cost of masking in other places.

Autistic adults have also said that people who are not autistic can make it easier too. It helps when they accept you and are open to other ways of communicating. So your people do not all have to share your neurotype.

Most of this research is with autistic adults. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of this too.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: one place built around something you love

Pick one interest you already have. Then find one place built around it, where people meet to do the thing rather than to chat. Some ideas to choose from:

- an online group, forum or chat server for a game, a show, a craft or a hobby
- a club where you do something side by side, like board games, a choir, a walking group or a repair café
- a group run by and for neurodivergent adults, online or in person
- a class where doing the thing fills the gaps in the conversation

Go at your own pace. You can read along for a few weeks before you post, or go once and leave early. Small talk matters less when you are both looking at the same thing.

When you feel ready, you can share a little about how you work, and how someone takes it can tell you a lot. You might say: "I'm not great at small talk, but I could talk about this all day."

For some people telling others is not safe, so it is your call, and only where it feels safe.

Friendships like these do not need constant contact. A link, a photo of your latest project, or an hour doing the thing together once a month can be enough.

It is also okay to step back from friendships where you always have to perform.

You can keep a list of groups to try in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app. You can also set a reminder there for the day a group meets.

This step comes from what autistic adults say helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Somewhere new can use a lot of energy, so start with one place and not three. You can read more about protecting your social battery here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether you feel lonely most days or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you think about friendship and connection, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

In Australia, autistic adults have said they feel lonely more often than other adults do. So if you feel lonely, you are far from the only one, and it is worth raising with your GP.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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