A fact sheet about

Being hard on yourself

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Being hard on yourself

Where the harsh voice in your head comes from, and one way to question it.



Key points

- Many neurodivergent adults are hard on themselves, and the harsh voice is often repeating rules they took in over many years.
- Internalised ableism (definition below) means taking in the message that the common way of doing things is the right way, and that you fall short of it.
- The harm sits in that message and in a world built around one way of working, not in you. If the words in your head are “broken” or “too much”, this page disagrees.
- One thing to try: when a harsh thought comes, ask whose rule it is quoting, and check that rule against how you actually work.

What internalised ableism is

The washing has waited for three days, and the word "lazy" turns up in your head. You cancel a plan because the week has used up your energy, and you call yourself too much, or not enough. Nobody else said it today, but it is still loud.

These words can feel like your own, but often they started as someone else's.

Ableism means beliefs and habits that treat disabled people unfairly. It can also treat one way of moving, sensing, thinking or communicating as the right way. It shows up in daily words too, like calling a difference a "deficit".

Internalised ableism is when you take that message in over many years, and start to say it to yourself. In research it is often called internalised stigma. In plain words, you learned that the common way is the right way, and that you fall short of it.

The social model of disability says that what disables people is often the world around them, not the person. So the "should" in your head is often a rule made for a different kind of neurotype. It is not proof that something is wrong with you.

You are not lazy, broken or too much. You have been measured against rules that were not built for how you work.

Why so many neurodivergent adults carry it

Autistic people in one study saw being autistic as a plain fact about themselves, like the colour of their hair. But they felt the world gave it a bad meaning, and then gave that meaning to them. Many felt caught between how they saw themselves and how they thought others saw them.

In another study, autistic adults were, on average, less kind to themselves than other adults were. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

Experts on ADHD in girls and women say many were missed as children. One reason is that many worked hard to hide what they found hard. They note that low self-esteem is common, and that some young people try to be perfect to make up for it.

This can stack up for people who are treated unfairly for more than one part of who they are. In one study, some Black autistic young adults named both race and being autistic as reasons they were treated unfairly.

In an Australian study, autistic adults who knew themselves better after an assessment carried less of this stigma. They also felt better overall, so knowing yourself may help. That study looked at formal assessment, but the core idea, that understanding yourself matters, holds however you get there. Self-identification is valid. Many autistic adults come to understand themselves through their own reflection, research and community, with or without a formal assessment. Understanding Zoe is here to help you explore who you are and how your mind works, at your own pace through its blueprint.

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

The one thing to try: ask whose rule it is

When a harsh thought turns up, catch it in a few words. You can write it, type it or record a voice note. Then ask yourself three things:

- Whose voice is this? A parent, a teacher, a boss, an ad, or "everyone".
- What rule is it quoting? For example "adults answer the phone", "rest has to be earned" or "a tidy house means you are coping".
- Does the rule fit how I work? Think of your energy, senses and attention.

Then write the rule again so it fits you, for example:

- "Adults answer the phone" might become "I reply by text after lunch, when I have more energy."
- "I should cope with the shops like everyone else" might become "Shops cost me a lot, so I go at a quiet time or order online."

A new rule often points to a change that would help. You can make some changes at home. At work or study you can ask for some, such as written instructions or a quieter space. You can read more about

asking for adjustments in study here.

If someone supports you, they can go through the questions with you. You could also use written choices or pictures for each question, and point.

You do not have to believe the new rule straight away, or feel proud of anything. Writing it down is enough for now. A fairer rule may also be easier to hear from other neurodivergent people. In one study, autistic adults who felt part of the autistic community felt better in general.

You can keep the old rule and the new one together in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app. Then they are there the next time the harsh voice turns up.

If you would like a gentler voice too, you can read more about being kind to yourself here.

This step comes from what autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults say has 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. And lived experience is valid too.

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 the harsh voice is there every day 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, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if the harsh voice has turned into hating yourself, or if you feel low or hopeless most days.

If you are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night.

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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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