

A Unique Mind

"For a long time there was no clear explanation for my weirdness," says the author.



Odd Girl Out

Doctors called her crazy. Bipolar. Anxious. Writer Emily Maloney takes you into her (happy) life with an autism-spectrum-like disability.

I live by lists. When my alarm goes off: Get up, brush teeth, shower; shave left leg, right leg, armpits; wash hair. In line at the bank: Make appropriate eye contact; smile at strangers. Around coworkers: Pretend to be interested in the stuff everyone else is—popular music, television, the weather, celebrity gossip, sports; compliment their shoes or outfits, and do so frequently enough that it reads as “normal.”

But I know that I’m wired differently, even if others don’t always notice.

At 24 I was diagnosed with nonverbal learning disability (NLD), a neurological developmental disability that can be similar to autism spectrum disorder, with a cluster of other difficulties thrown in. When I was diagnosed, I received a battery of tests that found that my verbal IQ—my ability to comprehend language and express myself—is much higher than my performance IQ (a score based in part on the speed at which I process informa-

tion). So I’m not great at eye contact or following the give-and-take of conversations. I pay attention to the words people say, but I don’t notice the tone of voice or how they are said. I don’t understand idioms, can’t match analogies, and struggle with slang. I often laugh at jokes long after they’ve been told.

This is what it’s like to be me.

Growing up, I knew I didn’t fit in. I spoke out of turn and couldn’t figure out how far away from someone to stand when speaking to her. I was the last kid on the block to learn to ride a bike. I nearly failed geometry.

By eight I had started to develop lists and scripts to navigate and keep up with the world around me—it made everything easier. As a Girl Scout I created a script for selling cookies, then called all the parents in my school’s directory; I sold nearly 3,000 boxes.

By high school my classmates in preppy Lake Forest, Illinois, seemed to have different lives, peppered with sports prac-

tices, homework, dances, hanging out at the mall. I’d skip school and take the train downtown to visit the Magritte paintings I liked so much on display at the Art Institute of Chicago. Everyone else wore Abercrombie & Fitch and J.Crew and had long, straight hair. I wore Mexican wedding dresses with bleach stains, bowler hats, and combat boots. I flapped my hands when nervous or excited and used a tone of voice that was, I realize now, often inappropriate for the given situation. I probably would have stuck out in any suburban high school, but my differences were especially pronounced at mine.

For a long time there was no clear explanation for my weirdness. My family was unusual in a number of ways (my brother, for example, walked on tiptoe for a while), but I was persistently the strangest of our group. Doctors told me I was crazy or had a personality disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety, and many other problems. In college I saw a psychiatrist and ended up being

prescribed 26 different medications, but nothing helped. In the meantime I struggled to connect with the world.

From high school onward I held a series of odd jobs. I worked in a kitchen, shoveled manure, and set tile. I was a pastry chef's assistant, an E.R. tech and EMT, and a dog groomer. I developed a new script for each situation, cobbled together from what I observed from my coworkers. I practiced in front of the bathroom mirror. If I deviated from these routines, I was often fired (something I also learned to handle well). My NLD became an economic issue: What I really wanted was to find stable, higher-paying employment. To do that, I realized, I would need stronger social skills.

I started with my clothes. A family friend suggested a personal shopper. She taught me how to dress my body and build a professional wardrobe. Shopping for me had always been overwhelming: the lights, the colors, the bustle of the mall, the fact that everyone seemed to know what they were doing except me. When I met her for the first time, she gave me ensembles to model, and I shopped with her repeatedly until a new list of rules cemented in my head: Wear wrapdresses. No low-rise jeans (I'm too short-waisted). Get a good-fitting bra. My closet started to come together.

Next I went to see a job coach. He videotaped mock interviews and showed me how some of my nonverbal gestures—the way I crossed my arms over my chest, bit my lip when attempting to listen, and avoided eye contact at all costs—could be considered hostile. A speech pathologist taught me office-appropriate small talk and helped me learn to script more in-depth conversations. It was working: I started getting hired for steadier, more fulfilling gigs.

I also met my husband. I was 20, and we were taking classes in the same writing program. We met in the media lab, editing stories for radio. Where I am intense, he is kind and sensitive, a kind of grounding force. He remembers birthdays, likes parties, and is as interested in novelty as I am in sameness. We went different ways for a while but met up every year at a writing conference. He asked to see me more frequently than that, and four years and many plane tickets later, we got married. Now we live in a house we bought and remodeled one floor at a

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time. From a distance my life seems predictable, nearly neurotypical now.

Six years ago, when I was finally diagnosed with NLD, I was relieved, grateful to have a name, an explanation, for the way I operate. But it wasn't a lightbulb moment. Instead I was struck by the feeling that no matter what it was I had, *knowing* didn't make the work of trying to be neurotypical any easier. It was difficult to suddenly learn precisely how you don't fit in. In some ways I'm still on the outside looking in.

Most women seem to have an innate nonverbal vocabulary of inflections, facial expressions, and gestures that help them convey sensitivity and compassion, and enable them to be socially engaged with one another. For me that vocabulary is missing. At first glance I don't appear all that different. I think in unusual ways. I'm more practical, less emotional, less sensitive in some ways and more so in oth-

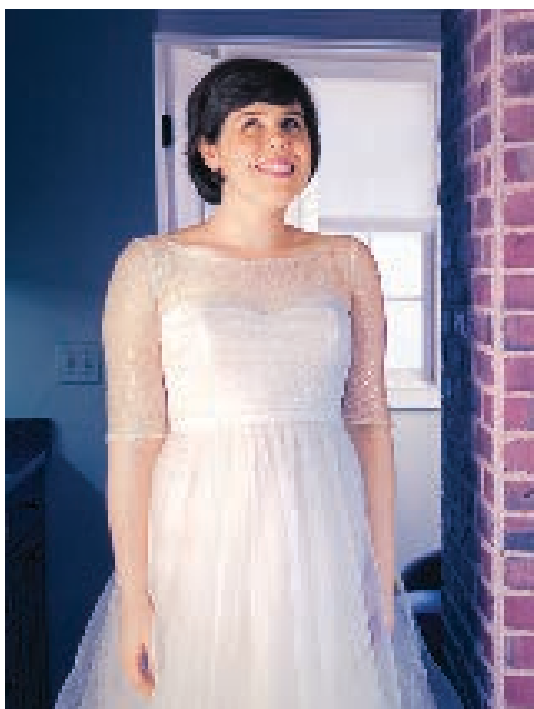
ers. And like many women with NLD, I have a tendency toward awkwardness or seeming immature.

At 30 I get carded for R-rated movies; if I wear a plaid skirt to the grocery store, I am asked when I'll graduate from the local Catholic school. I try to pass for neurotypical as much as possible, but all this trying to fit in has taught me something else: to embrace the parts of me that are different—my wide-ranging interests, my ability to do accents, the fact that I'm a licensed general contractor, the way I write and make ceramics.

These days I work mostly as a freelance writer and project manager, so I can navigate that small space between having to get along with coworkers and doing work I mostly enjoy. Pulling on the neurotypical mask is hard some mornings, but I don't have to do it every day: I work from home occasionally, and it is on those days that I don't have to figure out what my face is unintentionally broadcasting; I can worry less about having to “pass” all the time. I still make lists for my successes—and my errors. If I make a mistake? I tell myself to apologize, smile, make a joke if applicable (usually at my expense), and ask if there's anything I can do to remedy the situation. I look at the bridge of someone's nose instead of her eyes when eye contact is too intense. And I remind myself to move on. Many of us with NLD have a tendency to get hung up on one topic, especially when we make mistakes. These scripts help free me from obsessing.

But even with those scripts, my goal today isn't to be perfect or even neurotypical. I don't quite “pass,” but I've learned a little more about how to close the gap. And I'm happier for it. **G**

Emily Maloney is a writer living near Chicago. She is at work on a memoir.



Wedding Day The author before her 2015 ceremony. “Where I am intense, he is kind and sensitive,” she says of her husband.