



# WHAT AUTISM LOOKS LIKE AT WORK

RECOGNIZING YOUR PATTERNS,  
UNDERSTANDING THE COST, AND  
MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU



## Start Here: What You're Noticing Is Real

If you're autistic, diagnosed, self-identified, or just starting to wonder... **work** is often where the gap shows up most.

Not because you can't do the job.  
But because of what it takes to do it.

That gap has a name:

**external competence vs. internal cost**

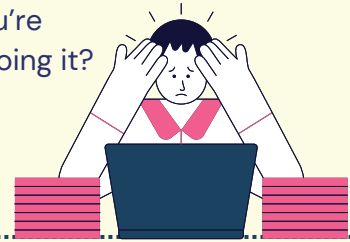
- Others see: capable, reliable, "fine"
- You experience: effort, calculation, exhaustion

That invisible labor is real. And it adds up.

## A Question Worth Asking

How much of your workday is doing your job...

and how much is managing how you're perceived while doing it?



## Before You Go Further: Is This Autism or Something Else?

Work is hard for a lot of reasons.

Before you map everything here onto autism, ask:

### Is this everywhere, or just here?

- Autism → lifelong, across jobs, school, social settings
- Job mismatch → specific to this role or environment

### Is this fear or confusion?

- Social anxiety → fear of judgment
- Autism → effort, decoding, not intuitively "getting" the rules

### Is this attention or processing?

- ADHD → missed cues (attention drifted)
- Autism → caught the cue but didn't know what it meant

## Anchor question

If these patterns are **new, situational, or job-specific**, something else may be driving them.

If they've been there across environments for as long as you can remember, keep reading.



## What You're Experiencing Has a Name: Masking

Masking is the reason you can “function” at work—and the reason you're exhausted.

It includes:

- Performing socially (scripts, rehearsed responses)
- Translating communication (rewriting how you naturally speak)
- Monitoring yourself in real time (eye contact, tone, posture, timing)

Most of what feels hard at work isn't autism itself.

**It's the cost of hiding it.**



### Small Talk

- Requires real-time response tracking
- Scripts help, but don't cover everything
- Unexpected interactions = full improvisation

What looks like “being social” is often active calculation.

### Written Communication

- Email and Slack may feel easier—but not effortless.

If you:

- Rewrite messages multiple times
- Check tone repeatedly
- Use tools to “sound right”

That's not overthinking.  
**That's translation.**



## Before the Workday Even Starts



For many autistic people, the workday begins long before work.

You might:

- Mentally prepare for sensory input (noise, lights, people)
- Rehearse conversations ahead of time
- Choose clothes based on tolerance, not appearance
- Need a buffer before entering (car time, music, quiet)

**This is not laziness.**

**It's preparation for performance.**

## The Social Layer of Work

The hardest part of work is often not the work.  
It's everything around it.



### Meetings

You're not just listening.

You're:

- Tracking who speaks and when
- Monitoring your expression
- Planning your response
- Managing sensory input

Others are running one process.  
You're running five.

## The Patterns You Might Not Recognize

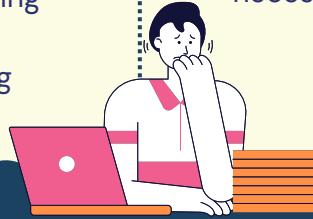
### Repetition as Regulation

- Same song, same shows, same routines
- Disruption throws off your entire day



### Internal Repetition

- Replaying conversations
- Looping phrases or songs mentally
- Rehearsing before speaking



### Subtle Stimming

- Toe movements, cheek biting, tapping
- Quiet, but necessary

### Routines That Aren't Optional

- Specific order of tasks
- Same setup, same process

If disrupted, your capacity drops.



## Sensory Experience: The Strongest Clue

If you're unsure whether this is autism, **start here.**

Sensory differences are one of the clearest indicators.

### At work, this might look like:

- Lights causing headaches or fatigue
- Noise making it hard to think
- Temperature disrupting focus
- Clothing becoming unbearable

### Key distinction:

- Not preference
- Not annoyance
- **Your body cannot ignore it**

**Burnout makes you tired.**

**Sensory overload makes you unable to function.**

## Performance Patterns Nobody Talks About

### The Excellence Trap

You're good at your job  
→ you get more responsibility  
→ more social demand  
→ less sustainable work



### Inconsistency That Isn't Laziness

- Some days: high output
- Other days: basic tasks feel impossible

This is capacity, not motivation.

### The Shutdown After Work

- You hold it together all day
- Then collapse completely at home

Not just tired:

- Can't talk
- Can't decide
- Can't tolerate interaction

**This is a signature pattern.**



## Not All Burnout Is the Same

### Typical Burnout

- Caused by workload
- Improves with rest

### Autistic Burnout

- Caused by prolonged masking
- Rest only helps if you can *stop performing*
- May involve loss of skills

**If rest doesn't restore you, look deeper.**

## Quick Pattern Check

This is not a diagnosis—just a signal to explore further.

You might notice:

- You can do the job, but it takes disproportionate effort
- Social interaction requires scripting or recovery
- You consistently crash after work
- Sensory input affects your ability to function
- You rely on repetition to regulate
- This pattern has existed across environments



## What You Can Do

### 1. Identify the Real Drain

Separate:

- the work
- vs
- the environment + social demands

### 2. Build Recovery (Not Just Breaks)

- Quiet, low-input time
- Reduced social demand
- Nervous system regulation

### 3. Control What You Can

- Adjust your physical workspace where possible (lighting, seating, noise level)
- Identify which parts of your day are highest-drain and protect lower-demand time around them
- Use sensory tools proactively, not just reactively

### 4. Use Accommodations

Examples:

- Headphones or earplugs
- Written instructions
- Flexible scheduling
- Reduced sensory exposure

These are not extras.  
They are access.

### 5. Be Strategic About Disclosure

- You don't have to tell everyone
- You can frame needs without labeling identity

### 6. Consider Job Fit

If most of your job is the draining part:

- It may not be you.
- It may be the environment.

**You're not failing at work.**

**You're:**

- Performing constantly
- Managing invisible demands
- Spending more energy than anyone can see

**If you only look at your performance, you'll miss the problem.**

**If you look at the cost, the pattern becomes clear.**

## Note

This handout is informational and not a diagnostic or legal tool.

If you're seeking evaluation or accommodations, consult a qualified professional.

