

Shattered Illusions: Breaking Free of Our Masks

At thirty-five years old, I never expected to be reassessing everything I thought I knew about myself, my husband, and our marriage. After thirteen years with Josh, I thought we had it all figured out – or at least, as much as any couple could after nearly a decade and a half together. We had our routines, our rhythms: Josh went to work, and I stayed home with our boys, Zac - now sixteen-years-old, and Sebastian - now seventeen-years-old, juggling the chaos of ADHD and autism diagnoses. From the outside, it all looked like a pretty typical life, but beneath the surface, there was always this quiet tension between Josh and me, subtle friction that neither of us could explain.

It all started to unfold when I began researching for our sons. I had always been the one to dive headfirst into whatever the boys needed. Zac, eleven-years-old at the time, had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder a few years earlier, and I had spent countless hours reading, trying to understand how best to support him. As I poured over articles and books and watched an endless number of videos late at night, something unexpected happened. The more content I consumed, the more I saw myself. The constant mental clutter, the racing thoughts, the impulsiveness - it all hit home in a way that left me completely taken aback. I remember sitting there, the realization sinking in, fully frozen in place. Could I have ADHD?

And then there was autism. As I dug into research for Sebastian, learning about sensory overload, social challenges, and executive dysfunction, it wasn't just him I was thinking about – my experiences overwhelmed my thoughts. I had always chalked up my discomfort in crowded places or my sensitivity to noise as quirks, but now I was beginning to wonder if there was something more. It wasn't until I had a quiet moment alone with Josh, late one evening after the kids had gone to bed, that I finally voiced my thoughts.

We were sitting in the dim light of our living room, the soft glow of a lamp casting long shadows on the walls. Josh was scrolling through his phone, half-distracted, while I was nervously fiddling with the edge of my sleeve. "Josh," I started, my voice barely above a whisper. "I've been thinking... about the boys. And about me."

He glanced up, his eyes narrowing in concern. "What do you mean?"

I hesitated, feeling suddenly exposed. "I think I might have ADHD. And maybe... maybe even autism, too."

There was a pause - one of those long, tense silences that stretch out and make you second-guess everything. I braced myself for him to dismiss it, to say I was overreacting. But instead, Josh set his phone aside and leaned forward slightly. "I've been wondering the same thing," he said quietly.

I blinked, caught off guard. "About me?"

"No," he said, shaking his head, "about myself."

That was when the floodgates opened. Josh started talking - really talking - in a way he hadn't before. He told me about how he'd always felt different, especially around other people. How he'd learned to mask his discomfort, to follow routines and social scripts just to get by, but it always left him feeling drained. He confessed that he'd spent years feeling like he didn't quite fit, even with me, but hadn't known how to explain it. His need for structure, his retreat into quiet when things became too much - it all pointed to autism.

As he spoke, I could hear the strain in his voice, the years of frustration and confusion bubbling to the surface. "I always knew I was different, even when I was young," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I didn't realize... I didn't know it was something I couldn't control."

His words hung in the air between us, heavy and raw. It was like seeing him for the first time - not as the stoic, methodical man I had always known, but as someone who had been quietly struggling for years, just like me. And that night, sitting there together in the quiet, we began to piece together the puzzle of our marriage. The late diagnoses that followed - mine with ADHD and autism, and Josh with autism - gave us a new lens through which to see not only ourselves but also each other.

The first thing we had to tackle was communication, which had always been a source of tension. Before, we had constantly misunderstood each other. I had always felt like Josh was emotionally distant, especially after a long day when he would retreat into his quiet space, leaving me feeling isolated. His need for solitude felt like a rejection. I'd be sitting there, craving connection, trying to talk or share my day, and he'd withdraw. To me, it was as though he didn't care. Meanwhile, my impulsivity and

disorganization - the hallmarks of my undiagnosed ADHD - drove Josh crazy. My jumping from one task to the next, forgetting important things like making appointments or adding transactions into our digital checkbook, created chaos in our lives that made him feel like he was always on the edge of losing control.

Once we understood that these behaviors weren't deliberate, the tension began to lift. One morning, not long after our diagnoses, I found myself standing in the kitchen, surrounded by half-finished tasks - a sink full of dishes, a laundry basket on the floor, papers scattered across the counter. My brain was buzzing with a thousand thoughts, none of them coherent enough to act on. Josh walked in, surveyed the scene, and I saw his jaw tighten ever so slightly. Normally, I would have felt defensive, embarrassed even, but instead, I took a deep breath and said, "I am so sorry, I just can't figure out what to prioritize right now."

Josh didn't say anything for a moment. He looked at me, and then at the chaos around us, and finally nodded. "Okay," he said slowly, and although his voice was steady, I could hear the years of frustration he was effortfully setting aside. "I'll handle the dishes, you focus on the laundry, and we can tackle the rest later. And there's no reason to be sorry."

It was such a simple exchange, but it felt monumental. Before, we would have danced around the issue, with me feeling like a failure and him growing silently frustrated. Now, we were learning to communicate in a way that made sense for both of us. Josh needed structure and routine, and I needed to be explicit about what I could handle. We weren't perfect, but we were making progress.

The emotional side of our relationship was trickier to navigate. I'm someone who needs to talk things out, to process emotions out loud, while Josh processes internally. Early in our marriage, I used to feel lonely, craving those deep conversations where we could connect emotionally. I'd start talking, pouring out my feelings, and Josh would sit there, quiet and still, nodding but not really responding. I'd think, why won't he open up to me?

After his diagnosis, it all made sense. Josh wasn't being distant on purpose - he just needed time to process before he could respond. Now, when I feel the need to talk, I tell him directly, "I need to vent, but you don't have to fix anything. Just listen." And when Josh needs space to think, he tells me, "I'll talk, but I need time to sort through my thoughts first." It's not always easy, but we're learning to give each other the grace and space we need.

One afternoon, I was sitting on the couch, emotionally drained from a particularly challenging day with Zac. He'd had a meltdown after a frustrating day at school, and I was feeling utterly depleted. Josh walked in, sensing the weight of the day on my shoulders, and sat down beside me. We sat in silence for a few minutes, the room filled with the distant hum of the washing machine and the faint clatter of Sebastian playing video games upstairs.

"I know it's been tough today," Josh said quietly, his voice gentle. "I don't always know what to say, but I'm here."

As he awkwardly put his arm around me, I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder, and he started wiping away my tears. I knew physical contact was

uncomfortable for him, having autism myself. So, in that simple gesture, I felt more connected to him than I ever had before. It wasn't about saying the right thing; it was about being present for each other in the ways we could.

Our sons, of course, are a big part of the picture. Raising two neurodivergent children has its own set of challenges, and for a long time, we struggled to balance their needs with our own. Sebastian, like Josh, thrives on routine and structure, while Zac is more like me - impulsive, forgetful, and easily distracted. The house is never quiet, and it's rarely organized. But as Josh and I have learned more about ourselves, we've become better equipped to support our boys.

We've found that our individual strengths complement each other when it comes to parenting. Josh is meticulous and organized, the one who remembers appointments and keeps track of school projects. He's the one who makes sure Sebastian has the routine he needs to thrive, helping both boys with homework and making sure they feel secure in their day-to-day lives. Meanwhile, my ability to adapt to chaos and think on my feet helps with our Zac's impulsiveness, as well as helping both boys when things don't go according to plan.

There was one evening, not too long ago, when Zac came storming through the front door, frustrated after another rough day at school. "I hate it there!" he shouted, throwing his backpack onto the floor. "Nobody understands me!"

Josh and I exchanged a glance. I could see the worry in Josh's eyes, his need to fix the problem right away very apparent. But instead of jumping in, Josh made it evident he needed me to take the reins. I knelt down beside Zac, speaking softly. "I get

it,” I said. “School is tough, and sometimes it feels like no one gets what you’re going through. But you’re not alone; dad and I have both been in your situation and we are here to help you figure it out.”

Josh came over and nervously sat down, too. With his voice as calm and steady as he could make it, he said “We’ll work on it together and come up with a plan.”

It was a small moment, but it felt like a victory. We were learning to parent as a team, using our strengths to support our boys in ways we hadn’t before. My ability to handle emotions is much stronger than Josh’s, making me the obvious choice to handle emotionally charged situations like arguments and embarrassing moments. However, communication can be a challenge for me. Even though I have built an extensive vocabulary due to my desire to prevent misunderstandings, it does not always land the way I intend. This is where Josh makes up for my weaknesses.

One wintery afternoon, shortly before Christmas, Sebastian was sitting at the kitchen table watching YouTube videos. Josh sat across from him working on kitchen designs for our upcoming remodel while I was baking cookies and singing along – terribly I might add – to Christmas songs. As I set a plate of fresh-from-the-oven pumpkin chocolate chip cookies on the center of the table, I noticed that my son happened to be watching a video from a creator we had told him not to watch.

“Are you watching something you shouldn’t?” I asked casually as I turned to take more cookies out of the oven.

My son paused the video and sat for a moment then suddenly shouted, “I don’t get why I can’t, he just tests how tough electronics are, what’s so wrong with that?”

I tried yet again to explain that the creator was being sarcastic about “testing” the electronics and that he was really just breaking them for fun. This of course did not sit well with Sebastian who immediately started to argue that the video creator was not being sarcastic. I tried to remind him that he has a hard time understanding tone and context due to his autism, but as I was speaking, I realized that my language was very clinical and that the tone I was using was starting to make him feel like I was demeaning him.

I looked at Josh, who could tell I was feeling like a failure in that moment and took over addressing our son, “You know this is an area you struggle with dude, I have the same issue, but mom is right even though she may not say it the way you understand.”

While Sebastian was still not happy with our decision and wound up stomping off, it was the first time we had prevented a full-blown meltdown due to misunderstandings in communication. Things got progressively easier after that. All it took was for Josh and me to realize when the other was struggling and how we each needed to be supported.

Of course, we still have our challenges. There are days when my impulsivity clashes with Josh’s need for order, or when his quietness leaves me feeling isolated. But now, instead of letting those moments fester into resentment, we talk about them. We’ve learned to pause, to step back and recognize that our frustrations stem from the differences in how our brains work - not from a lack of love or effort.

We still don't have all the answers, even today after eighteen years of marriage, but we've found ways to make it work so that neither of us feels we need to mask around each other anymore. We've stopped striving to fit into a neurotypical mold and instead embrace the unique challenges - and strengths - that come with being a neurodivergent couple. Together, we've created a partnership built on communication, understanding, and a deep respect for each other's differences.

In the end, that's what sustains us. We don't try to change each other anymore. We've learned to love each other for exactly who we are - and that's more than enough.