



Challenging Internalised Ableism in Autism and ADHD

We live in a society where being “normal” is viewed as the ideal, and where disabled people (including neurodivergent people) experience daily prejudice and discrimination and stigma for failing to meet this standard. Every member of our society is exposed to these messages throughout their lives. If these messages are unchallenged, they can develop into an unconscious negative bias, known as *ableism*.

When disabled people are repeatedly exposed to these pervasive negative attitudes, they can begin to believe them, viewing their disability as a flaw, seeing themselves as broken, and devaluing their needs as a burden to others. This is known as *internalised ableism*, and it can have devastating outcomes. Once established, internalised ableism can lead an Autistic person or ADHDer to hide their authentic self, feel ashamed of their difficulties, and never ask for help or accept it.

Exploring Your Internalised Ableism

Below you will find some of the key beliefs that underpin internalised ableism in Autism and ADHD, and some of the behaviour patterns that emerge as a result. As you explore these examples, consider the following:

Which of these patterns or beliefs do you recognise in yourself?

What has been the impact of these beliefs on you?

1. Not Asking for or Accepting Help

You actively avoid asking for help and decline support when it is offered, even when you are struggling or in burnout, because you see the need for help as a personal failure or a sign of weakness, and because other people (who don't face the same barriers you do) don't need this kind of assistance.

2. Believing that Your Needs Aren't Valid

You believe that your difficulties aren't "bad enough" to deserve help, that other people "have much greater problems than you," or that you haven't "earned" the right to ask for help, nor worked hard enough to deserve it.

3. Apologising for "Being a Burden"

You feel profoundly guilty or ashamed for inconveniencing others in any way, particularly if this arises from the need for extra support. You apologise excessively when other people need to make even minor adjustments to help you, such as providing clearer instructions or postponing plans due to ill-health or burnout.

4. Refusing Help Because You "Just Need to Try Harder"

The "bootstrap mentality" is the pervasive societal belief that your success depends on personal willpower, determination, grit, resilience, and hard work, and achievements are only valid if they were completed without any assistance from others.

5. Hiding Parts of Yourself that You Find Unacceptable

You attempt to hide or camouflage your Autistic or ADHDer differences, such as your need to stim, your unusual deep interests (spins), or your discomfort with eye contact, because you believe that these differences are not socially acceptable. (Masking can also be an essential safety behaviour to avoid negative judgments, discrimination and rejection. It's important to distinguish when this is the case.)

6. Ignoring Your Sensory Needs

You continue to expose yourself to sensory experiences that are uncomfortable and distressing, believing that you should "just get used to them" because "that's just the way the world is".

7. Rejecting Disability and Diagnostic Labels

You refuse to use the term "Autistic" or "disabled" to describe yourself because you believe that acknowledging that you have a disability would be an admission of failure or would be used as an excuse for poor performance or unhealthy habits.

8. Criticising Yourself for Having Difficulties with Executive Functioning

You attribute your difficulties with organisation, planning, or task initiation to being “lazy,” “disorganised,” or “hopeless,” rather than acknowledging them as largely genetic neurobiological differences that demand a different approach and may need specific accommodations. You don’t allow yourself to use helpful strategies such as timers, body-doubling or getting help from others because you view this as “cheating,” “failing,” or the “easy way out.”

9. Wishing that You Were "Normal"

You wish that you could cure your autism so that you could be like your non-Autistic (allistic) peers, because you believe that being Autistic is inherently inferior and means that you’ll never have a “normal” fulfilling life.

10. Considering Medications to be “Cheating”

You rule out using ADHD medications because you believe that using them would be “cheating” or “taking the easy way out” or because other people may judge you as lazy, missing out on the benefits of medications that can give you equal access to education and employment opportunities as your non-neurodivergent peers.

11. Striving for Perfectionistic Ideals

You set unrealistically high standards for yourself and strive for unattainable ideals to demonstrate your competence to yourself and others. This particularly applies to tasks that you find difficult, such as striving to be socially popular or to manage your time with perfect efficiency.

12. Using Person-First Language or Outdated Labels

Rather than accepting and appreciating your neurodivergence as part of your identity, you continue to use person-first language (“person *with* autism”) instead of identity-first language (“Autistic person”), or outdated and ableist terms such as “Asperger’s” or “ADD.” This distances yourself from your neurotype or parts of your neurotype (such as “hyperactivity” or intellectual disability) that you see as undesirable. (You may also use these older terms because you feel uncomfortable with change and need more time to adjust. Take care to distinguish between these different perspectives.)

Examining Your Internalised Ableism

To review your own patterns of internalised ableism, answer the questions below.

Which of the ableist perspectives outlined above might be reflected in your own attitudes and behaviour?

Check any that apply:

- ☐ Not asking for or accepting help
- ☐ Believing that your needs aren't valid
- ☐ Apologising for being as a burden
- ☐ Refusing help because you "just need to try harder" (the "bootstrap mentality")
- ☐ Hiding parts of yourself that you find unacceptable
- ☐ Ignoring your sensory needs
- ☐ Rejecting disability and diagnostic labels
- ☐ Criticising yourself for having difficulties with executive functioning
- ☐ Wishing that you were "normal"
- ☐ Considering medications to be "cheating"
- ☐ Striving for perfectionistic ideals
- ☐ Using person-first language or outdated labels
- ☐ Other:

Now, review your responses and annotate them as follows:

- ★ Place an asterisk next to the items that reflect beliefs or behaviours learned during your early life.
- f* Place a function (f) symbol next to the beliefs or behaviours that you learned from significant caregivers (e.g. parents, teachers, health professionals).
- Δ Place a delta symbol (triangle) next to any beliefs or behaviours that you'd like to change.

Consider the impact these beliefs and behaviour patterns have had on your life so far.

How have these beliefs:

- *Made it harder to achieve your goals?*
- *Caused you to experience more stress?*
- *Contributed to shame, low self-esteem and self-criticism?*
- *Made you constantly feel like you were failing?*
- *Created distance between you and other people?*

Write your response in the space below.

Challenging Ableist Beliefs

The antidote to internalised ableism is self-acceptance and pride in your unique neurodivergent identity.

Challenging and unwinding internalised ableism is a process that will continue to unfold over many years. Even after you have developed a strong foundation of self-acceptance, you can still uncover unexpected and deeply held ableist beliefs embedded within your expectations of yourself and others.

Consider the ableist perspectives that you'd like to change (such as those you've marked with a Δ above). In the table below, briefly describe your unhelpful beliefs, then outline an alternative perspective that better aligns with self-acceptance, self-compassion, and pride in your neurodivergent identity.

Unhelpful belief	Compassionate alternative perspective
Example: <i>I've always believed that my needs aren't valid, that other people have greater needs, and mine are insignificant by comparison.</i>	<i>"Everyone has a different experience of life. If other people have valid needs, so can I. A person's needs can't be compared to others because each person has a unique experience of disability. Limiting the support that I receive from others does not benefit others; it just makes my life harder."</i>

Consider what your life could look like if you let go of your internalised ableism and develop a more compassionate stance towards yourself, and answer the following question.

If you no longer believe the messages you receive from your internalised ableism, and instead, adopt the alternative, more compassionate perspectives above:

- *What might be possible that was impossible before?*
- *What new support or services could you access?*
- *How could your life become easier and more comfortable?*

Write your response in the space below.

At the end of your life, no one will be handing out prizes for “doing it tough” or “playing life in hard mode.” *You are allowed* to make your life easier and more comfortable.

From today, whenever these unhelpful ableist beliefs show up, take some time to explore some alternative perspectives, and choose to adopt the perspective that will help you to live a comfortable and fulfilling life. Developing internalised ableism was an unconscious process; you did not choose it. Fortunately, with patience and persistence, you can let it go.

About the Author

Jennifer Kemp is a clinical psychologist based in Adelaide, Australia. Her neurodiversity-affirming approach is founded on her own experience of being late-diagnosed as Autistic and an ADHDer, listening deeply to the experiences of her neurodivergent clients and the latest research. Jennifer weaves together acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) with compassion-focused approaches to help her clients improve their mental health and develop greater self-acceptance, self-compassion, and pride in their neurodivergent identity.

Jennifer is the co-author of "[The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD: Cultivate Self-Compassion, Live Authentically, and Be Your Own Advocate](#)" and author of "[The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism: Build Your Best \(Imperfect\) Life Using Powerful Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills.](#)"

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