

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Asking for Accommodations

There may be a time in your life when you need to ask for an accommodation, for example, asking a doctor to put their advice in writing so that you can read and process the news later. It's taken me a while to grow in confidence to ask for things. Here are some tips and strategies I've learned along the way about how to ask and overcoming the things that held me back.

DEALING WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

After I found out I was autistic there were many years when I did nothing about it. I thought that if I asked for an accommodation I'd be taking that away from someone who needed it more than me.

I looked at representations of autistic people in the media, and it seemed you had two choices: being a savant (*Ben Affleck in the Accountant*)/ Nobel Prize winner (*Sheldon Cooper*)/ Sherlock Holmes at one end – or rocking in an institution (*Rain Man*) at the other. I knew I was neither of those things. I have a job, a partner and I can look people in the eyes when I talk to them ... so how could I be genuinely autistic?

It was only when lockdown happened that things changed. Despite the daily bad news coming in from around the world I really liked staying away from other people. I loved not talking to strangers and making small talk, especially when shopping. I liked people staying two metres away from me. That's when I realised that I was much happier making some changes in my life, and I didn't want to go back to the anxiety I had before.

Since then I've been following the hashtag #actuallyautistic on YouTube and Instagram, and found a lot of comfort in seeing people who are just like me talk about their struggles and solutions.

Spending time with people who are just like you, whether you interact with them or not, can be big help with self-acceptance and dealing with imposter syndrome.

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MAKING YOURSELF SUSTAINABLE

Something else that held me back from asking for anything was a loud voice in my head telling me that I was being selfish. I'd spent a lifetime trying to *"earn my place at the table"* by being a people pleaser, and it was really uncomfortable trying to speak up for myself.

Someone suggested whenever I hear the voice *"you're being selfish!"* to change that thought to: *"I'm making myself sustainable."*

I like sustainability: it's about looking after the planet, being green, recycling, and making sure we're all thriving. You are part of the planet, you're allowed to look after yourself too.

Now if I suggest an alternative plan, rather than just agreeing to a request, I tell myself *"you are making yourself sustainable so that you can help people tomorrow."*

UNBALANCED SCALES

The very first time I remember asking someone for an accommodation was a big deal. A close friend was staying in our house and about to pop a cork out of a bottle. I've always hated sudden surprising noises. I remember as a child being terrified when balloons popped. Even a cork popping out of a bottle would give me sticky palms and I'd want to leave social events early.

This friend was close enough, and the time was finally right for me to pluck up the courage and quietly ask: *"could you let me know when the cork's about to pop?"*

He did, and my body had no reaction at all. No sweaty palms, no sick feeling in my stomach. I didn't want to leave and go to bed early.

That's when I realised I have carried a set of unbalanced scales in my head. My whole life I've been weighing up the inconvenience to other people versus the benefit to myself, and only wanted to say something when the benefit was greater than the inconvenience, but the scales were wrong. I've always massively overestimated the inconvenience to other people, and greatly minimised the benefit to myself.

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When my friend let me know when the cork was loose I realised it was no bother to him at all, and a massive benefit to me.

It really was worth asking, after all.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GIVE A REASON

As I grew in confidence I started to ask for more, like asking for a table in a quiet corner of a restaurant. However, I always felt I had to disclose I was autistic when I asked for something, which runs the risk of a bad reaction. *(e.g. "You're not autistic, I know someone and you're nothing like them." ... to which my reply is "do you know someone else gay because I'm probably nothing like them.")*

Eventually a friend said: *"you don't have to give a reason when you ask for something. That waiter will have heard many times every shift a request for a quiet table. You might be on a date, or a business meeting, or wear hearing aids – they don't care. You can just ask."*

That was a huge weight off my shoulders, and has helped me ask for far more things because I'm not having to disclose as well.

I also think just asking without a reason can make you look more confident and professional. For instance, if you're invited to a meeting at work without a subject line you could write back and say *"I need to know what the meeting is about because I'm autistic and lack of clarity makes me overthink situations and then I go into burnout."* (which is true)... or you could say *"Thanks for the meeting invite. If you let me know what it's about I'll be able to prepare."*

These days I use a lot more of the second type of request.

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ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EVERYONE

There are some accommodations that only work if you're the only person that gets them. For example, if you need a quiet room by yourself at work it's not effective if everyone is allowed to use the same room.

I am a big fan, wherever possible, of making accommodations available to everyone - because they are just good ideas that everyone should have access to.

One of my accommodations, when I'm out with a group of friends, is to say to someone *"if I've been quiet for a while, please could you throw me a question. I probably want to join in but don't know how."*

That idea could work for anyone. You don't need to be autistic to struggle to know when to join a conversation.

Another accommodation is my partner and I have a social safe word either of us can use if we want to leave an event – but he uses it as much as I do.

When accommodations can apply to everyone, then it's less about *"fixing the autistic person who's broken"* and more about *"let's do this because it makes life better for everyone."*

Remember that you're on a voyage of discovering who you are - so the accommodations you ask for may change. You're allowed to come back and ask for more as you discover what your real autistic self needs.

If you have any tips that have helped you ask for accommodations, please write and let me know.

Best wishes,

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