

Sometimes you are the calm one in the meeting, the person who hits the deadline, the colleague everyone trusts to get things done. And then you get home, close the door, and everything falls apart. This article is about that gap: the version of you that shows up at work, and the version of you that collapses afterwards.

If that sounds uncomfortably familiar, you’re not alone, and you’re not failing. You might just be a neurodivergent person trying to survive in a workplace that was never really built with you in mind.

## Quick Summary

- Passing as “fine” at work often means masking hard and holding everything together until you are alone.
- On the outside you might look organised, calm and capable; on the inside you may be anxious, overloaded and exhausted.
- Many autistic and ADHD people do this to stay safe, keep their job or avoid being seen as “difficult” or “unprofessional”.
- The cost can include burnout, health problems, increased mistakes and a painful sense of being fake.
- This article offers small, realistic ideas to make work 5–10% kinder to your brain, plus thoughts on when the workplace itself is the problem.

## The script many of us learn about work

Most of us grow up with a very specific script about what “being good at work” looks like. You are meant to be reliable, calm, flexible, always available, and able to cope with whatever lands in your inbox. You are meant to separate “work you” from “real you” and leave any struggles at the door.

For many neurodivergent people, that script lands on top of years of feeling “too much” or “not enough”. Maybe you were told you were lazy when you were actually overwhelmed. Maybe you were praised for being the quiet, well-behaved one who never made a fuss. Maybe you were punished for melting down or shutting down in public.

By the time you are in work, it can feel like the only way to be acceptable is to perform the script perfectly. You try to be the calmest, most organised, most reliable person in the

room, because anything less feels dangerous.

## What “passing as fine” can look like

Passing as fine at work does not have one single shape. It might look something like this:

- You go into every meeting having rehearsed what you might say, just in case you are called on.
- You smile and nod when colleagues make small talk, replaying each line in your head afterwards to check you did not say anything odd.
- You read and reread emails before sending them, trying to get the tone exactly right, and worrying about them for hours after.
- You push through noise, bright lights or an uncomfortable chair without saying anything, because nobody else is complaining.
- You work through lunch, stay late or take work home to “catch up”, even when you are already running on empty.
- You never admit you are confused in a meeting; you nod along and then panic later trying to work out what was agreed.

From the outside, this can look like competence. People might describe you as “calm under pressure”, “a safe pair of hands” or “the organised one”. They may have no idea that you are going home, shutting down, crying, snapping at people you love, or lying in the dark trying to recover enough to do it all again tomorrow.

You do not have to tick every item on that list for the pattern to be real. If the basic shape feels familiar, it is worth paying attention.

## Why autistic and ADHD people end up doing this

There are many reasons why neurodivergent people learn to pass as fine at work. None of them mean you are weak or dishonest. Most of them are about survival.

### Fear of being seen as “unprofessional”

Many ND people carry a long history of being judged for things that are hard to control: fidgeting, zoning out, asking too many questions, needing more time, reacting strongly to noise or change. By adulthood, it can feel safer to hide anything that might be judged as “unprofessional”.

You might worry that if people saw how anxious, overloaded or disorganised you *feel*, they

would assume you are incompetent. So you work hard to present a version of yourself that never cracks. The trouble is, holding that mask in place uses a huge amount of energy.

## **Trying to prove you deserve to be there**

If you were late-identified or self-identified as autistic or ADHD, you might have spent years feeling like an imposter. Getting a job or a promotion can feel like a mistake that you now have to justify.

It is common to respond by setting very high internal standards. You tell yourself that because your brain works differently, you must work twice as hard to keep up. You might take on extra tasks, say yes to every request and put pressure on yourself never to miss a deadline.

This can look admirable from the outside. Inside, it is often exhausting and unsustainable.

## **Workplaces built for a neurotypical worker**

Most workplaces are designed around a particular idea of what a “normal” worker is like. They assume people can cope with open-plan offices, long meetings, last-minute changes, small talk, constant notifications and a steady stream of new tasks.

If your brain is autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent, those assumptions may not fit you at all. But the systems around you – policies, expectations, unwritten rules – rarely adjust themselves. Instead, you are encouraged to squeeze yourself into the shape the job expects.

When the environment is inflexible, masking starts to feel like the only option, even when it hurts.

## **The cost of holding it all together**

Holding everything together at work does not just make you “a bit tired”. Over time, it can have real and serious effects.

## **Energy and health**

Masking and pushing through overload day after day can lead to chronic exhaustion. You might find that:

- you wake up tired, even after a full night’s sleep
- you catch every cold that goes around
- you get frequent headaches, migraines or unexplained aches and pains
- you need whole weekends just to feel barely functional again

This kind of exhaustion is often a sign that you are edging towards, or already in, some form of burnout. It is your body’s way of saying “this is not sustainable”.

## Work quality and mistakes

Ironically, the harder you push yourself to seem fine, the more likely it is that your work will start to suffer. When your brain is overloaded, it becomes harder to:

- concentrate in meetings
- keep track of details
- remember instructions
- notice errors before they cause problems

You might respond by working even harder, staying later and double-checking everything. That gives you less recovery time, which makes the overload worse. It is an unfair loop that can be very hard to step out of.

## Sense of self

Perhaps one of the hardest costs is what this does to your sense of who you are.

If you are always performing a calm, competent, easy-going version of yourself at work, it can become difficult to tell where the mask ends. You may start to feel fake, even if you are genuinely trying your best. You may lose touch with what you actually like, need or believe, because so much of your energy goes into guessing what other people expect.

It is not unusual to reach a point where you think, “I do not know who I am outside of work any more.”

## Signs you might be running on fumes

Every person and every job is different, but here are some signs that your current way of surviving work might be costing more than it gives:

- You feel a wave of relief when meetings are cancelled or work is unexpectedly quiet,

stronger than the situation really seems to justify.

- You spend a lot of your evenings or days off lying down, scrolling or staring at nothing because you cannot face doing anything else.
- You have regular “crash” days where you can barely function after a busy period.
- You dread opening your inbox or messaging apps, even when there is no specific problem inside them.
- You notice yourself getting more irritable, tearful or numb, at work or at home.
- Your hobbies, social life or basic self-care have shrunk to almost nothing because work uses up everything you have.

Some of these signs can overlap with anxiety, depression or physical health conditions. If you recognise them strongly, it may be worth talking to a GP or mental health professional as well as looking at your work situation.

## **Tiny experiments to make work 5-10% kinder**

This section is not a list of “shoulds”. It is a menu of small experiments you can try, if and when you have the energy. You do not have to do all of them. Even one tiny change that helps is enough.

### **Reduce sensory load where you can**

You may not be able to redesign your office, but you might be able to nudge the environment in your favour.

Possibilities include:

- using noise-reducing headphones or discreet earplugs, even for part of the day
- turning down screen brightness or using a calmer colour theme
- adjusting your chair or keyboard so your body is under less strain
- asking to sit away from the busiest walkway or loudest machine, if that feels safe to request

Sometimes these tweaks can make the difference between barely hanging on and having a little bit of energy left at the end of the day.

### **Change how you handle communication**

Communication at work – emails, chat messages, meetings – can be a big source of overload.

You might experiment with:

- drafting common replies in a note so you can reuse them instead of composing from scratch every time
- setting a “good enough” standard for most emails, rather than editing them into perfection
- using simple scripts such as:
  - “Thanks for this. I’ll need to look at it properly and get back to you tomorrow.”
  - “Can you clarify what you need from me here?”
  - “I have understood X and Y. Is that correct?”

If you can, you might also set small boundaries like checking email in set blocks rather than constantly, or muting non-essential chats during focus time.

## Break tasks into obvious first steps

Executive function difficulties can make work tasks feel like a solid wall. One way to chip at that wall is to write down very small, concrete first actions.

Instead of “write report”, you might write:

- open last month’s report
- list the new data you need
- create a blank document with the right heading and date

Each step should be so small that your brain says, “I can probably manage that.” You can also give yourself permission to only do the first step on bad days. Starting is often the hardest part.

## Protect small recovery points

In many workplaces, there is pressure to be “on” all the time. Even tiny pockets of recovery can help.

You could experiment with:

- taking a real break at lunch, ideally away from your screen and any main noise source
- giving yourself a few minutes at the end of the day to write down tomorrow’s priorities, so you are not holding them in your head on the way home
- picking one evening a week to be a “nothing new” evening, where you do not schedule social plans or extra work

These are not solutions to structural problems, but they can give your brain a little more space to breathe.

## Deciding what to share (and with whom)

The question of whether to tell people at work that you are autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent is deeply personal. There is no one right answer.

A few things to keep in mind:

- You do not owe anyone your diagnosis or full life story.
- You are allowed to share only what you need people to know in order to work together.
- You can start small, by talking about needs rather than labels.

For example, you might say:

- “I work best if I can have agendas in advance where possible. It gives me time to process and prepare.”
- “I find noise very draining. Would it be possible for me to sit over here, or use headphones during focus time?”
- “I sometimes need a few moments to think before I answer complex questions. If I pause, I’m just processing.”

If you do feel safe enough to mention being autistic, ADHD or neurodivergent, you might frame it as:

- “I’m autistic, which means I process information a bit differently. These adjustments help me do my best work.”

Unfortunately, some environments are not safe or supportive enough for this kind of conversation. If your instincts say that disclosure would put you at risk, it is okay to prioritise your safety and privacy.

## When the workplace is the problem

It is important to say clearly: the issue is not always you and your coping strategies. Sometimes the workplace itself is harmful.

Warning signs of a damaging environment can include:

- constant unrealistic deadlines and workloads
- a culture of staying late, skipping breaks and glorifying exhaustion
- bullying, harassment or subtle undermining that is dismissed as “banter”
- no real process for asking for adjustments, or punishment when people try

No amount of careful masking or clever hacks can fix a fundamentally unhealthy workplace. In those situations, it is not a personal failure if you struggle or burn out. You are responding to something that is genuinely difficult.

Depending on your context, you might be able to seek support from:

- a union or staff association
- HR or an internal complaints process
- occupational health
- external advice services about employment rights

These routes can be complicated and are not without risk, so this is not individual advice. It is simply a reminder that you are not stuck with “just try harder” as your only option.

## When to seek more support

Sometimes the signs that work is costing you too much go beyond “this is hard” and into “I am not okay”.

It might be time to look for more support if:

- your sleep, appetite or basic self-care have changed a lot
- you are experiencing frequent panic, despair or numbness
- you are having thoughts about harming yourself or about not wanting to exist
- your body is in constant pain or illness that does not improve with rest
- your work situation is affecting your housing, finances or safety

In those cases, it can help to talk to:

- a GP or mental health professional
- a trusted person in your life
- support lines or crisis services in your area
- advice organisations who understand employment and disability

Quietly Neurodivergent cannot provide crisis support, diagnosis or legal advice. The



[Disclaimer & boundaries](#) page gives more detail on these limits, and the [Contact](#) page explains how to get in touch about the site itself.

## A quiet closing thought

If you have been passing as fine at work for a long time, you may be carrying a lot of shame. You might feel like you are secretly failing, or that other people could cope with this job easily if they were in your place.

I want to suggest a different reading.

You are not failing at work. You are doing work in a setup that was never designed with your brain and body in mind. The fact that you have kept going this long is not evidence that you were “never really struggling”. It is evidence that you have been working very, very hard.

You do not have to fix everything at once. You do not have to disclose anything before you are ready. You do not have to stay in a job that is destroying you, just to prove you can.

For now, it is enough to notice what passing as fine is costing you, to experiment with small changes where you can, and to hold onto the idea that your needs are real and reasonable—even when your workplace does not act like they are.



[Andrew at Quietly Neurodivergent](#)

I’m Andrew, the person behind Quietly Neurodivergent. I’m an autistic adult who spent many years trying to pass as “fine” – holding things together at work, showing up to meetings, hitting deadlines – and then unravelling in private. I know what it feels like to look competent on the outside while running on fumes underneath.

By day I work with student data in higher education; by night (and very early mornings) I’m a part-time PhD student thinking about education, inequality and how people move through systems that were never quite built for them. I’ve also spent nearly ten years as a town councillor and I volunteer as a Beaver Scout Leader, which means I’ve had a lot of practice navigating meetings, forms, responsibilities and sensory/social overload at the same time.

That mix of lived experience, community work and research shapes how I write here: practical, plain-English pieces that sit somewhere between “this is what it’s like” and “here are some things you could try”.

I’m not a clinician and I don’t offer diagnosis, therapy or miracle fixes. What I can offer are honest accounts of what has and hasn’t helped me with study, work and everyday life, alongside small, realistic tools you can adapt for yourself. If you recognise yourself in the phrase “quietly neurodivergent”, this site is for you.

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