



[Katherine Patterson](#)

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Fitting into a world that disables me

Katherine uses the example of a recent work meeting to show ways in which her needs as an autistic person were not met, but could be met quite easily, to make the world more accessible and inclusive.

Last week I had a work meeting.....

I was given an agenda in advance, but the agenda only included venue, date, time and topics. As I arrived at the venue, I was overcome with anxiety as I had no idea where to park, which entrance to use or where the meeting room was.

As I walked into reception, the smell, the sounds and bright lights overwhelmed me. I opened the meeting room door. There were more people than I'd anticipated and I didn't know many of them. "Which table do I sit at? Who do I sit with?"

I escape to the toilets, into a cubicle and breathe to calm myself down and put on my mask... masking is important in these situations in case I say the wrong thing or offend someone.

The meeting starts. People I don't know are presenting - can I respond? I can hear a heater buzzing, the curtain is closed - why is only one curtain closed? I don't like it, it's bothering me. Can I open the water - do I offer everyone water or just pour myself a glass - what is the social norm here?

Oh no, lunch time! Lunch is not in the meeting room - that means I need to familiarise myself with another room - more sensory stimuli! Is lunch going to be standing, sitting, sandwiches, hot food, formal, buffet? This is freaking me out. In the restaurant food is being served from two sides - my heart starts pounding - what is on each side? Which side do I go to? I don't like the smell. I don't like the

noise. I feel sick – the sensory overload is too much. I finish lunch and go straight to the toilets – I sit in a cubicle again and breathe, trying to calm myself before the next part of the meeting.

Group work – panic! We need to develop agreed actions. But how can I do this after only hearing about the updates today? I haven't had time to reflect or process all the information. My brain is overloaded. The meeting ends.

I drive home utterly exhausted. I get home and shut down; I completely withdraw from the world around me. I don't respond to my husband, I can't communicate anymore. I retreat and snuggle up with my dogs who calm me. This autistic shutdown is my response to reaching crisis point today.

There are so many things that could have helped me: a map and layout of the venue, names and organisations of attendees, lunch description, group exercises in advance, and much more.

I am neurodivergent; I am autistic and I have to fit into a world that disables me.

My passion for social justice and fairness

I strive for a world where autistic people are not constantly fighting to be understood and supported. I dream of a society that goes a step further than equality – I want us to strive for **equity** – where we don't treat everyone the same but rather give everyone what they need to succeed.

Imagine how different the beginning of my blog would have been.

I'm asking you to take steps today to make the world more accessible and inclusive for people like me, who live outside society's norm.

Educate yourself and others; take the time to talk to autistic people like me, ask us questions and have honest conversations. This will ensure you and I are 'speaking the same language' so that I, and other autistic people, can thrive and be the best that we can be.

The words of Nelson Mandela really resonate with me: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart."