

# Perfectionism

## ADHD and Perfectionism

### What is Perfectionism? How is it Defined?

Perfectionism is the belief that everything you do must be perfect or done perfectly.

This mentality can prevent you from trying new things and living your life to the fullest.

Perfectionism can also increase feelings of inadequacy and contribute to procrastination and stress.

There are two types of perfectionism: back-end perfectionism and front-end perfectionism.

Back-end perfectionism is getting things perfect once you've started. Front-end perfectionism is about getting things perfect before you start.



# Back End and Front End Perfectionism

## Back End Perfectionism

Back-end perfectionism (BEP) means having high and rigid standards for your task once you've started. When you are a back-end perfectionist, other tasks suffer pile up, and you may procrastinate and feel anxiety. You may also become overwhelmed and dysregulated when you start tasks because you have made them too hard to do. Perfectionism can also cause you trouble with time management, which may already be an issue for you.

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Here are some examples of BEP:

- Feeling like all work-related emails must be answered in a lengthy and perfect way and writing them several times, even if it means staying up late or sacrificing time with loved ones.
- Spending hours obsessing over the layout and formatting of a presentation, even to the point where other tasks and areas of your life suffer.
- Refusing to delegate tasks to others, even when overwhelmed, because you fear the work won't be done to their standards.

# Back-end and Front-end Perfectionism

## Front-end Perfectionism

Front-end perfectionism is a mindset that manifests as rigid standards or preconditions that must be met in order to engage in a task or endeavor. These standards go above and beyond what you would need to get the task done.

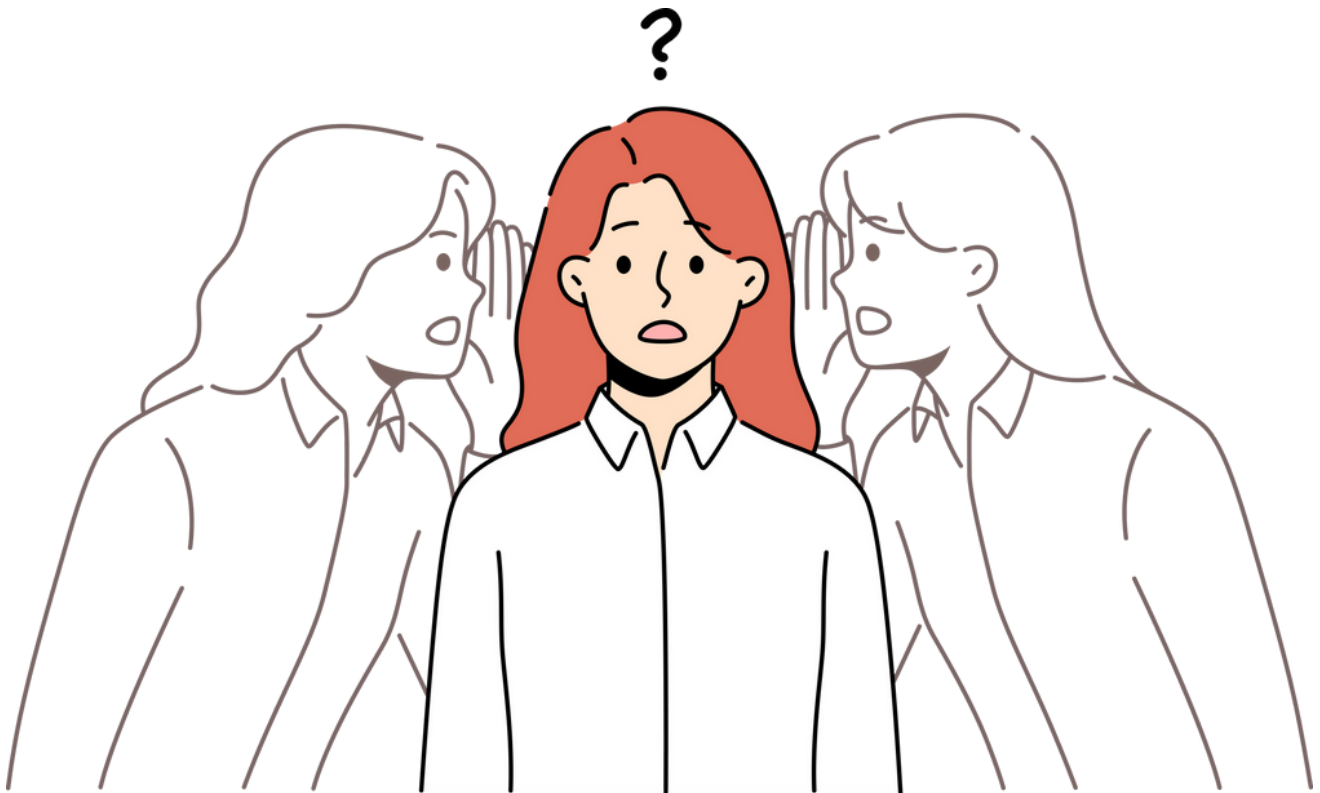
- Feeling like you cannot start your homework unless you have 12 hours of sleep and all the laundry is done, so you put off the task indefinitely.
- Believing that you cannot do the laundry unless everyone is out of the house for the full day, so it never gets done.
- Feeling like you cannot look for a job unless you feel motivated and you lose 20 pounds, so you haven't looked for a new one even though you are miserable.

Front-end perfectionism is the most commonly endorsed kind of perfectionism among people with ADHD.

# A New Definition

*Defining Perfectionism in a new way.*

*Perfectionism is a critical inner voice that leads you to make choices about tasks based on fear of making a mistake*



# Where Does Perfectionism Come From?

There are several common pathways to perfectionism in ADHD women. Below are some you might recognize.

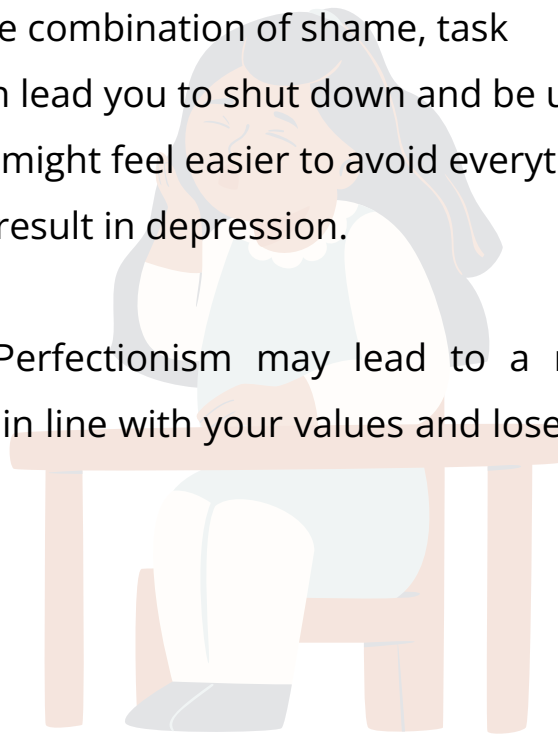
- **Executive Functioning Challenges:** You may develop a tendency to strive for perfection to compensate for executive functioning struggles so others don't notice.
- **Social Expectations:** You may feel societal pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, such as being highly organized, neat, and detail-oriented. Perfectionism is a way to help with this.
- **Trauma or Negative Life Experiences:** You may have experienced criticism, rejection, or failure. Perfectionism may be a way to avoid further criticism or rejection.
- **Co-occurring Conditions:** You may have co-occurring conditions, such as anxiety or depression, which can contribute to perfectionism as a way to manage these conditions.
- **Fear of Failure:** You may have a fear of failure and want to protect yourself from criticism that you received in the past from those around you.
- **Desire to Fit In and be Accepted:** You may feel that you have to work harder than others to meet expectations, and the desire to fit in and be accepted can drive you to strive for perfection.



# Why Perfectionism Might Not Work Anymore

Below are some ways it sometimes begins to fail as a coping skill:

- **Procrastination:** Perfectionism can lead to procrastination if you feel you need the perfect conditions before starting a task, making it difficult to complete tasks in a timely manner.
- **Shame:** If you are struggling to meet standards and fail, it may cause shame. This cycle of striving for perfection, failing to achieve it, and experiencing shame can be emotionally draining and damaging.
- **Decision-Making Paralysis:** The fear of making mistakes can cause decision-making paralysis, preventing you from making any decisions at all.
- **Emotional Dysregulation:** When tasks pile up because of perfectionism, overwhelm can happen and cause emotional dysregulation, burnout, and depression.
- **Shutting Down or Avoiding:** The combination of shame, task paralysis, and tasks piling up can lead you to shut down and be unable to do anything or avoid more. It might feel easier to avoid everything when you get into this place. This can result in depression.
- **Restricted Life Experience:** Perfectionism may lead to a restricted life experience; you may stop living in line with your values and lose track of your strengths.



# Stereotype Threat and its contribution to Perfectionism

Stereotype threat is the phenomenon where individuals from groups that are stigmatized or stereotyped feel pressure to perform to avoid confirming negative stereotypes about their group. This can cause anxiety, self-doubt, and reduced performance.

An example of stereotype threat in ADHD women with perfectionism is when women with ADHD are constantly reminded that they are disorganized, flighty, or have difficulty with attention. This can cause them to internalize these negative stereotypes and develop perfectionism as a way to counteract them. They may feel like they have to work twice as hard as their peers just to prove that they can be organized and attentive.



**Pay attention**  
**Listen**  
**You're so disorganized**



# Perfectionism and Mental Health

Perfectionism is closely related to procrastination, anxiety, and depression, as it can exacerbate these issues and create a negative feedback loop.

- **Procrastination:** Perfectionists often have unrealistically high standards and fear of failure, which can lead to procrastination. This procrastination can cause increased stress, guilt, and frustration, contributing to anxiety and depression.
- **Anxiety:** Perfectionism can heighten anxiety. You might become overly concerned about meeting your own high expectations and avoiding mistakes. This constant worry about performance and the potential consequences of failing to meet their standards can lead to increased levels of anxiety and further procrastination.
- **Depression:** Perfectionism has been linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms. When perfectionists consistently fail to meet their own expectations, they may experience feelings of worthlessness.





# Perfectionism was an old coping skill.

Some therapists call perfectionism a "cognitive distortion," but we won't. Perfectionism protected you. It's one of the skills that your younger self used to help you.

In childhood, perfectionism often serves as a self-protection mechanism that helps children feel in control of their world and gain approval, love, and acceptance from authority figures, peers, and adults.

Similarly, the development of a fear of making mistakes can be protective, as fears tend to develop to shield us from harm. In this sense, perfectionism can be viewed as an adaptive coping strategy that can help protect adhd girls from potential harm or rejection. However, perfectionism can overstay its welcome in later life and contribute to the development of secondary problems.

We can use our new skills to help bridge letting go of some of the perfectionist tendencies. However, as we discussed, you have to decide when and how to let go of perfectionistic tendencies. Do it only when it feels safe.



**Self Advocacy**  
**Self Compassion**  
**Self Care**  
**Self Accommodation**  
**Self Awareness of stress and emotions**  
**Self trust**  
**Embodiment**



# Perfectionism is Unique in ADHD.

The website CCI Interventions has a self-help module on perfectionism with a fact sheet titled "What is Perfectionism." Here is a list of behaviors they list:

- Difficulty making timely decisions (e.g., choosing an outfit for work each day)
- Seeking constant reassurance (e.g., asking others to review your work)
- Over-organizing and excessive list-making (e.g., rewriting daily task lists)
- Quitting quickly (e.g., stopping a new activity after only a few attempts)
- Procrastination (e.g., delaying the start of a project due to fear of failure)
- Persisting in arguments past others' interest (e.g., excessively debating a point)
- Frequent checking behaviors (e.g., constantly examining appearance for flaws)
- Hoarding (e.g., keeping unnecessary documents for extended periods)
- Communicating slowly to ensure accuracy (e.g., speaking carefully to avoid mistakes)
- Avoiding potential failure situations (e.g., not applying for jobs due to fear of rejection)

UNIQUE

Wow! Many of these behaviors listed are typical ADHD behaviors and may be done to either cope with having ADHD or to avoid negative consequences due to ADHD. This is why it's challenging to talk about and understand perfectionism in

# Front End Perfectionism or Accommodation?

Deciding when your own behaviors are "perfectionism": building the skill of self-trust

When working on deciding if a behavior is perfectionistic, it's crucial to ask yourself if it's self-accommodation or front-end perfectionism.

Here's an example of front-end perfectionism: the entire house needs to be cleaned before you can cook, the floor must be mopped, and the stove must be scrubbed. In contrast, self-accommodation would involve having a clean kitchen before cooking to help you focus.

In the first example, the house rarely meets the rigid standard, and the task often doesn't get done, creating possible stress and negative feelings about oneself.

In the second example, it's doable and helps the task actually get done. Self-accommodation helps you do the task better, while front-end perfectionism often leads to more procrastination, task paralysis, and tasks piling up.



## Back End Perfectionism or Conscientious?

Similarly, with back-end perfectionism, it's helpful to determine whether you are being conscientious or perfectionistic. Being careful and responsible is essential for success in life. However, it's crucial to recognize when striving for perfection comes from an excessive fear of making mistakes. To understand this, consider the reasons behind your need to do the task well and evaluate if it helps or hinders your personal growth and happiness.





## Using Self Awareness Skills

Is it causing you to get out of balance with other aspects of your life?

Do you feel fear when doing the task or pride?

Where are you in our stress model?

When you feel fear, take a moment to notice how it feels in your body. Ask yourself:

"Is this fear?"

"What can I do to help with this fear?"

"What do I need?"

"What's best for me?"

Do I need an accommodation?

These questions can guide you in determining how to support yourself. You have the ability to do this with practice.

# Growth Mindset?

Worrying about making mistakes can hinder our creativity and willingness to take risks. This fear of failure can prevent us from living fulfilling lives. A growth mindset helps people view mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures. Teaching a growth mindset to promote resilience and continuous learning is essential.

Acknowledging that different individuals face varying consequences for making mistakes is essential.

Neurodivergence, racial or ethnic background, and socio-economic status can influence the severity of these consequences.

Your child self-intuited this, and it's part of why perfectionism is so common in people with ADHD, especially women. It's crucial for parents and teachers to educate children about the diverse experiences people have with mistakes to promote understanding and empathy. By doing this, we can create a world that values growth and learning for everyone.

The risk of making mistakes may not be the same for neurodivergent women, but it could be safer than you anticipate. Explore your beliefs about mistakes.

It's essential to recognize how perfectionism might manifest in your life and to understand your beliefs about mistakes. Reflect on the origins of these beliefs and consider where you can safely let go of perfectionism.

## How Did Your Family Treat Mistakes?

The way our families respond to our mistakes can significantly impact how we perceive ourselves when we make errors, too.

For example, Spanx founder Sarah Blakely attributes her persistence and eventual success to her father's encouragement to embrace failure as a learning opportunity. By celebrating their daily failures and discussing the daily failures they made around the dinner table, she developed resilience and a positive attitude towards mistakes. She failed her LSATS and many other ventures before she developed her billion dollar company.

How did your family talk about and handle mistakes?

Reflection



# Using self-accommodation when you choose.

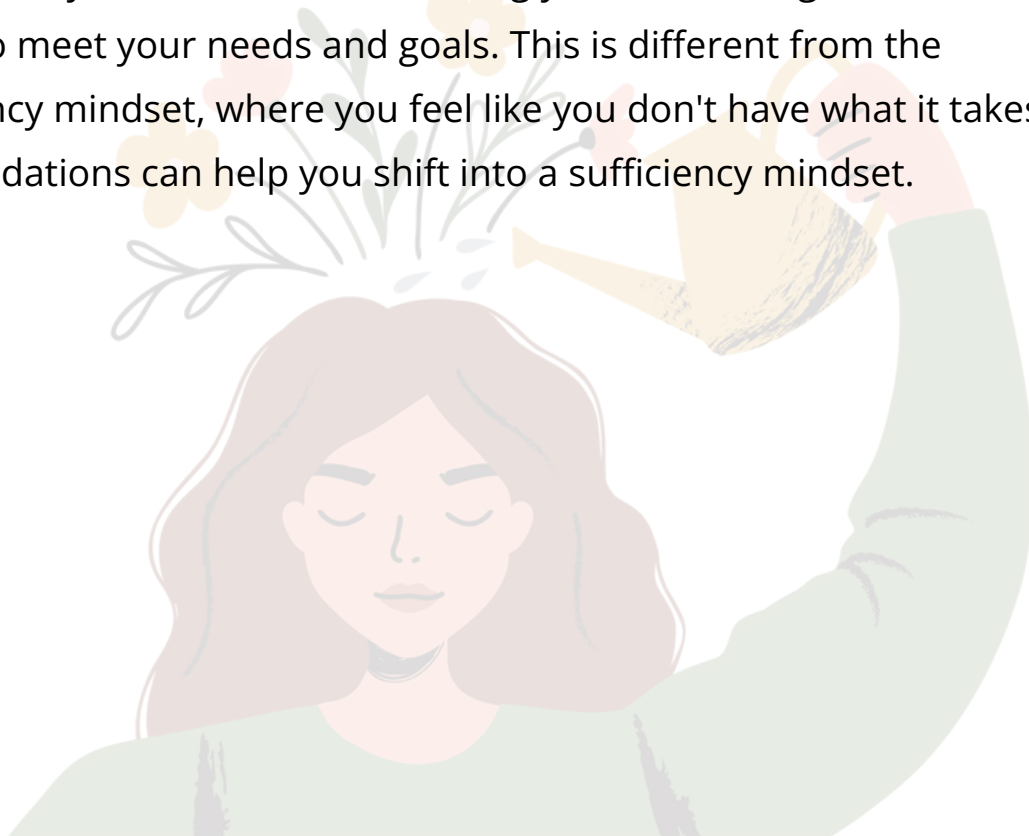
## Mindsets.

### Insufficiency Mindset:

The insufficiency mindset is a way of thinking that makes people believe they're not capable of achieving something or doing it correctly. This mindset can lead to avoiding situations instead of facing them head-on. Sometimes, you might think you can't do something when, in reality, you can. To overcome this, consider making accommodations to help you push through.

### Sufficiency Mindset:

The sufficiency mindset means believing you have enough resources and abilities to meet your needs and goals. This is different from the insufficiency mindset, where you feel like you don't have what it takes. Accommodations can help you shift into a sufficiency mindset.





# Using self-accommodation when you choose.

## Mindsets

Questions to help shift you into a sufficiency mindset when it's perfectionism that's got a hold of you.

- What do I need to complete this task?
- Am I overwhelmed? If so, can I break it down?
- Can I do anything to make it easier for me to get started?
- Do I need music or something to energize me?
- Do I need to make my environment more comfortable?
- Do I need a snack?
- Do I need to give myself a reward?
- Do I need support, like a body double?
- Can I do anything to make the task more manageable or less boring?
- Do I have the materials and information I need?
- Do I understand the task?
- Do I need to delegate or get help from others?
- Is this a task I want or should be doing?
- Is it in line with my values or strengths?
- Have I set realistic expectations for myself?
- Am I giving myself enough time to complete the task?
- Can I break the task into smaller, more manageable steps?
- Do I have all the necessary resources and tools to complete the task?
- Have I set a realistic deadline for completing the task?
- Is the task aligned with my personal values and goals?
- Am I clear on the purpose and expected outcome of the task?
- Am I feeling emotionally ready to take on the task?
- Where am I in my hormonal cycle, and is it a good time to do this task?

# Self Advocacy, Perfectionism, and Mistakes

Here are some of the rights you have as an adhd woman that may help you work on your perfectionism.

- I have the right to make and learn from mistakes without fear of judgment or criticism.
  - My worth as a person is not determined by my ability to be perfect or mistake-free.
  - I have the right to take breaks and prioritize self-care, even if it means not completing a task to my usual standards.
  - I have the right to ask for help when I need it without feeling ashamed or embarrassed.
  - It is okay to start a task, feel overwhelmed, and take a break to regroup.
- I am capable of learning how to tell whether I am accommodating or practicing front-end perfectionism.
- I have the right to prioritize self-awareness, self-compassion, and self-care to manage my ADHD symptoms and work effectively.
  - I have the right to set boundaries and say no to tasks or projects that are not within my capacity or aligned with my values.

# Self Advocacy, Perfectionism, and Mistakes

- I have the right to be celebrated for my successes, even if they don't align with traditional measures of achievement or success.
- I have the right to be proud of my accomplishments, even if they are not perfect or fall short of my expectations.
- It is okay to take a break or step back from a new task or activity that is causing me to be overwhelmed and prioritize my emotional well-being.
- I have the right to seek support from others, whether it be a therapist, coach, or trusted friend or family member when I am starting a new task or activity and feeling overwhelmed.
- I have the right to experiment with different strategies for managing overwhelm when starting new tasks or activities.
- I have the right to communicate my needs and challenges to my loved ones in a respectful and assertive manner.
- I have the right to practice self-awareness and learn to tell whether I am accommodating or practicing front-end perfectionism.
- I have the right to prioritize self-advocacy and advocate for my needs and accommodations in my personal and professional life.

# Self Care for Perfectionism

Setting personal boundaries is a crucial aspect of self-care, especially when it comes to addressing harmful behavior. It involves drawing a clear line between what is acceptable and what is not and lovingly enforcing that boundary. By respecting ourselves in this way, we can maintain safety, health, and smooth functioning in our lives. When we find ourselves stuck in a perfectionistic loop, it may be necessary to employ this strategy, being firm with our self-critical voice in a loving, non-shaming way, like a parent setting limits for a child.

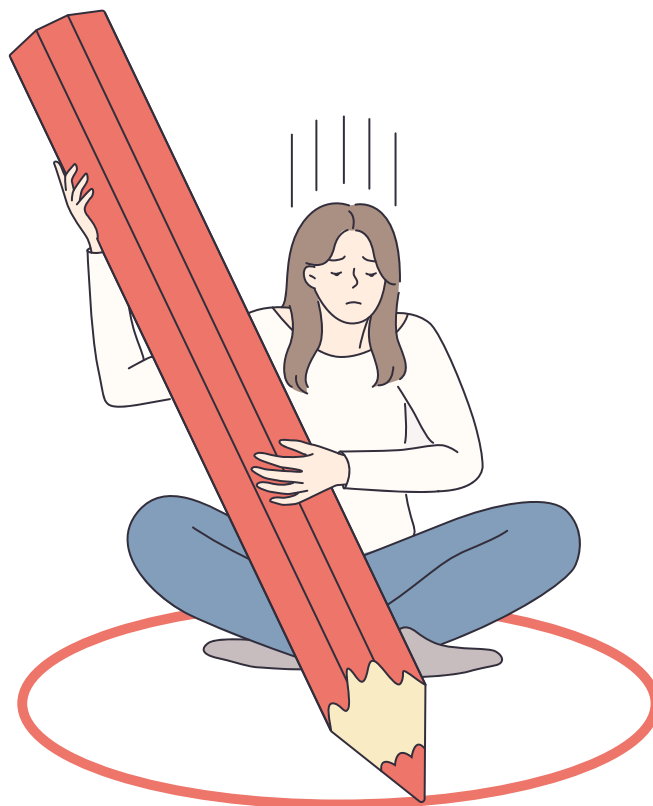
Just as we wouldn't yell at a loved one for making mistakes, we shouldn't treat ourselves that way either. Imagine your friend is a perfectionist who is striving for excellence in everything she does. One day, she makes a mistake or fails to meet her own high standards and begins to berate herself, calling herself a failure and beating herself up emotionally. As her friend, you would never talk to her this way. You would respond in a firm but loving manner, telling her that it breaks your heart to see her talking to herself this way and reminding her that you love her no matter what.



# Self Care for Perfectionism

Similarly, when we set personal boundaries with ourselves, it's important to remember that we are not perfect and mistakes will happen. We need to be firm with ourselves but also kind and compassionate, just as we would be with a friend who is struggling with perfectionism. We create a supportive inner environment that promotes growth, resilience, and self-acceptance by treating ourselves with understanding and empathy.

Psychological “Injuries” “In the psychological realm, injuries come in the form of emotional harm; feeling lethargic, anxious, or depressed are some of the signals that we need some time to recover. Unlike physical injuries, these signals are more subtle and easier to discount. And it is not uncommon for a person to continue working just as hard, if not harder, while the mind and the heart are pleading for a break.



Find a comfortable position and close your eyes or stare at a spot. Take a few slow, deep breaths and notice them with openness and curiosity. You are about to do an exercise in imagination. Some people imagine with vivid, colorful pictures, much like those on a TV screen; others imagine with vague, fuzzy, unclear pictures; while others imagine without using pictures at all, relying more on words and ideas.

However, you imagine is just fine. Now, imagine yourself getting into a time machine. Once inside that machine, you travel back in time to visit yourself as a young girl. Visit this young girl at some point in her life when she made a mistake.

Now, step out of the time machine and make contact with the young girl. Take a good look at her and get a sense of what she is going through. Is she crying? Is she angry or frightened? Does she feel guilty or ashamed? What does this young girl really need: love, kindness, understanding, forgiveness, nurturing, or acceptance? In a kind, calm, and gentle voice, tell this young girl that you know what just happened, what she's been through, and how much she is hurting.

Remind her that the world can be unfriendly towards people with neurodivergence, especially towards women with neurodivergence, and that she does not need to try to mask to be perfect to stop herself from living a joyful life or to hide her true self in order to try to be like other people who have different brains than she does. Tell this young girl that she doesn't need anyone else to validate that experience because YOU know.



Tell her that she survived the experience, which is now just a painful memory. Ask her if there's anything she needs or wants from you – and whatever she asks for, give it to her.

If this young girl asks you to take her somewhere special, go ahead and do it. Offer an ice cream cone, a hug, words of kindness, or a gift of some sort.

This is an exercise in imagination, so you can give her anything she wants. If this young girl doesn't know what she wants or doesn't trust you, then let her know that's fine, that you are here for support and will always be there to do whatever you can to help. Tell this young girl that you are here, care, and will help her recover from this pain to lead a full, rich, and valued life. Continue to radiate caring and kindness towards this young girl in any way you can think of through words, gestures, or deeds.

Remember that this exercise is for your benefit, and if at any time you feel uncomfortable or scared in your body, you can stop.

If you have trauma in your past and triggering or scary memories come up, please stop the exercise and care for yourself. Take a few slow, deep breaths and notice them with openness and curiosity. When you are ready, you can open your eyes and return to the present moment.

This is adapted from the The Reality Slap

