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## The Autistic's Guide to Working in Residential Life

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## The Autistic Guide to Working in Residential Life

Catherine Meyer

A day in my life as an autistic residence life professional usually goes something like this.

I wake up late because I overextended myself on call last night, spending an hour trying to calm down from an angry parent calling the emergency line to curse at me for quarantining their COVID-positive child. Either that, or I wake up an hour early and can't get back to sleep because my brain remembered that I have to remember to take the dog out before I go to work. I have work-related stress dreams all night.

I go to the bathroom, take my meds (sertraline for the debilitating depression and anxiety, vitamin B12 for chronic fatigue, vitamin D for the seasonal affective disorder, and cetirizine for seasonal allergies), and brush my teeth with the stiff, old toothbrush on my sink. I remind myself to buy a new toothbrush for the millionth time this month. I'll forget again in 5 minutes.

I make the exact same breakfast every morning: this month, it's a bagel, frozen from my favorite bagel shop, with maple jalapeno cream cheese and an iced vanilla chai latte with oat milk. It comforts me to start my day with a little bit of predictability - plus it tastes delicious. (Sometimes I don't have enough money left to buy more cream cheese, or oat milk, so I just won't eat. Better to just skip it than to waste precious energy on making that big of a decision so early.)

I check the weather, assess my energy levels, and try to decide what clothing to wear that looks acceptable for the office but won't trigger the shit out of me after an hour or so. I'll probably end up changing into something softer, stretchier, with fewer tags at lunch anyway. One of the reasons I started learning to knit my own clothing was to be able to wear tagless clothing - even

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the scissor-sharp stubs itch like wildfire.

I unlock my office door and turn on the twinkle lights hanging on my wall. I've curated the perfect space to make me want to exist in my workspace. Stick-on brick texture wallpaper, fake ivy vines everywhere, color-coordinated throw pillows, door tags and memorabilia from my own Resident Advisor days, and a massive lending library filled with novels that I've read, loved, and now lend out to my students when they need a pick-me-up.

(I have a library tracking app on my phone, so that I can remember who borrowed which book. Otherwise, I'd never get any of them back.) When I started my job at UAlbany in August of 2021, I couldn't function in my office until it looked nice and felt like a welcoming place. Now, I actually feel good and get work done, because I'm comforted by the sensory input around me. The light gets filtered through privacy-glass window clings before it can burn my retinas. My twinkle lights help me focus, so that when I start spiraling from overstimulation and oversocialization I can watch them slowly flash and fade until my breath returns to normal again. I have a couch with pillows and a cozy knit throw, for my students to feel welcome in but also so that I can switch up my sitting position when my body starts to hurt, and I get overwhelmed.

I go through my emails, marking them as read and sorting them into the 50-plus folders and subfolders I've created in Outlook to organize my work. In grad school, I tried just freeballing my inbox, and I could never find anything even with the search bar. I organized my inbox my first day on this job.

I respond to the emails misgendering me first, so that I have enough energy to stand up for myself before I waste it on minutiae. I think it's really freaking awesome that so many autistic people like me are trans, but some days it's exhausting to deal with both kinds of tired at once.

I have to remind myself to open every email with a greeting. Otherwise, I'll be told during my performance review next week that I'm too cold. For some reason, people tend not to take very well to emails that get right down to business without any niceties. I think they're a waste of time, but I do it anyway because dealing with the backlash hasn't historically gone well for me.

I try not to schedule student meetings before lunch, because the earlier it is, the harder time I have of making sense of my words or helping people effectively. I work on administrative work: processing conduct cases, creating training plans for student staff, responding to emails, or catching up on tasks

from the day before that I didn't have the spoons to get to.

A fire alarm dumps unexpectedly. I shut my windows and put in earplugs. I have to force myself to text the group chat that myself and the other professional staff on my living area have started: "do you need backup for crowd control?" If it's me on duty, I cry internally and steel myself. I put on my neurotypical face and go get the master keys and wait for the fire department in the cold. I have to deepen my voice and act like a dudebro, or else I'll be "ma'am" and "miss"-ed all morning. If it's me that's responding, I will likely lose my entire morning and a chunk of my afternoon to overstimulation fatigue, and probably won't get much done at all today.

I lose focus about thirty times before I finally put reality TV shows on my second desktop screen or play a podcast. The white noise helps me focus. (My favorites are *Survivor* and *Chopped*.)

I hop on Zoom for a meeting. In order to keep my focus, I knit a sock, or organize my Post-It notes, or reorder my dry erase markers by color. If I don't have a menial task for my hands to do, I will forget everything that's been said in this meeting. And anyway, the agenda is already in writing, and I've already absorbed all of the content we're discussing at a cursory glance. I really only need some context, so busy hands it is. (If you think neurotypical people hate meetings that could be emails, imagine being an autistic person who thinks every meeting should be an email.)

By lunch, I'm so tired that I have to decide whether to eat or nap. I go home to my on-campus apartment and kiss my dog. I hug my fiancé. Depending on the day and how tired I am (read: how terrible I look), they ask if I'm okay. I have to choose whether to cook food, eat the scant leftovers we keep in the fridge, or order something. I usually don't have the extra money laying around to eat out much, but there are some days that it's literally my only option for food.

Today, it's leftover butter chicken and basmati rice that I cooked for dinner a few days ago and have been eating for lunch every day, just so that I don't have to spend energy on making a decision. I am basically Chidi Anagonye from *The Good Place*.

I get overwhelmed by the dirty dishes in the sink, the laundry on the floor, and the messy, sauce-stained stovetop. I can't do shit about it right now, but by the time I get home at 5, I really won't be able to do shit about it.

After lunch, I'm so tired I have to drag myself out of my apartment and back to my office. I always have to block off the half hour after lunch, because I have to shut myself behind my office door and sit in silence and minimally answer emails before I feel like a functional human again. This usually involves copious amounts of caffeine to chase away the after-lunch sleepies. I bought a tea kettle specifically to keep in my office, because it takes so much strong black tea to keep me upright post meridiem.

If I have meetings with students scheduled, they happen in the afternoon. My office becomes a revolving door in the afternoons between conduct meetings, staff check-ins, and roommate conflict mediations. One-on-ones with the Resident Assistants I supervise refill my social well, but while it feels great to connect with them and share stories and hang out, it's equally draining of the little energy I have. These students are bright, compassionate, and insightful, and I always leave our conversations feeling socially energized, but any socializing, no matter how much I enjoy it, always takes its physical toll eventually. I don't like having to choose between loneliness or exhaustion.

I hear students outside my window getting out of class, starting to get together with their friends for the evening. There is a group of students living upstairs from my office who like to yell the latest TikTok meme to each other across the quad – this week, it's an impassioned “BING BONG!” I won't be able to stop repeating that one to myself all night. Echolalia is something that a lot of people think is annoying, but I just think it's funny. I'll probably mutter it under my breath while making dinner without realizing and have a good laugh about it with my fiancé.

It's housing sign up season, and the hotline linked to my office phone is ringing off the hook. I have no way to silence the calls even when I'm not on shift, so I just suffer through the sensory overload.

I disassociate through an entire Zoom meeting. By 4:00pm, I'm running on fumes. I pick out a stim toy from my collection and fiddle with it until I'm either forced to say something or I see the pop-up window that says, “meeting ended by host.” My favorite stim toy is a floppy sheet of links made out of plastic that my supervisor 3D-printed for our staff's White Elephant gift exchange this past winter break. It's a great texture, and reminds me that it's nice to have a supervisor who lets me have enough autonomy to decide what's best for me as I navigate my days.

At 5:00pm, you can't get me out of my office quickly enough. Most days I really do like my job, and I enjoy the tasks I do and the conversations I get to have with students. I love being in the college environment for the most part. But there comes a point where I am just so tired, so drained of energy, that I literally can't function until I lay in bed with my dog absently watching Food Network or playing Pokémon or rereading the same four lines of a novel over and over for at least an hour. I call it "horizontal time."

My fiancé gets home from work around 6:30 every night. We hug and kiss each other and by then, I have the energy to start thinking about dinner. It almost always involves a frozen meal or our Instant Pot – I'm a big fan of meals that take almost no effort but taste delicious. I pour myself a glass of cabernet and finally feel myself coming back to my body. I love to cook, even though it's tiring. I'm pretty good at it and it's a creative outlet. My fiancé lets me have most of the control over dinner, and I appreciate that. I like to say that my love language is food, but really, it's because some nights certain textures are no good for me to eat because it'll set me off, so I want full control over what I eat so that I don't melt down.

I hear something concerning outside our apartment window and have to call that night's professional staff on duty to give them a heads-up. I'd want them to do the same for me, but it always jars me right back into work mode, and it's tiring. My brain is hard-wired not to be able to come down from that for at least 15 good minutes.

My fiancé goes to the gym, and I read or write to escape away, and usually end up at it for several hours. I can count the number of books I've read with an autistic main character and written by an autistic author on one hand.

I don't want to talk about resiliency. I shouldn't have to be resilient. This world hurts in a way that is entirely manufactured by those who were lucky enough not to be born like I was.

I still think I'm the lucky one, though. Even if no one else agrees.

I fall asleep eventually, sometimes so tired I wish I could stay cemented to my pillow forever.

I wake up, and I do it again.