

# Chapter One

Actor and filmmaker Dan Aykroyd has always been intrigued by ghosts and law enforcement. In fact, his interest has sometimes bordered on obsessive, and in an interview with DailyMail he once said that he carries “around a police badge with [him].” Eventually, his obsession drove him to develop a fascination with Hans Holzer, a man he described as, “the greatest ghost hunter ever.” Learning about Holzer inspired him to dream up the movie *Ghostbusters*. That film eventually turned into an iconic series. It’s a series that is now known all across the world; it even inspired a remake in 2016 (Ewing 2013).

But for Aykroyd, his obsession with ghosts and law enforcement is more than just an extreme interest. It’s a symptom of something bigger—a result of a condition known today as autism (Ewing 2013).

Aykroyd only learned he was autistic later in life, after his wife persuaded him to see a doctor (Ewing 2013). This came on the heels of seeing a documentary about the condition and realizing that he could relate to what others were experiencing (All Star ABA Therapy, n.d.). The diagnosis explained the trouble he’d had all throughout his life, especially growing up. As a kid, he often struggled with making friends and navigating social interactions. He also had a tendency to hyperfocus on things that interested him, like the paranormal and the supernatural (Bluebell ABA Therapy 2025).

Aykroyd turned his unusual hyperfixations and his obsessive knowledge into extreme success. Not all autistics will have the level of success that he has had, but by following his example, we can learn a little more about how to deal with the condition in a healthy way. If you struggle with forming connections, maintaining friendships, holding down a job, or even just existing in the world without succumbing to addictions, alcohol, or drugs, then you might take inspiration from the creator of *Ghostbusters*. Because he’s found a way to live by embracing the person that he is, quirks, flaws, and all.

## Autism Explained

If you suspect that you or someone close to you might have autism, the first thing you’ll want to do is learn more about the condition. This can help you in understanding how to best help and support yourself or those close to you.

Autism can be difficult to understand because everyone presents differently. There’s a famous saying by Dr. Stephen Shore, an autistic professor, international speaker, and advocate that goes, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism” (IBCCES 2018). This means that everyone with autism is unique in how they look, act, and need to be treated—there’s no template for accommodating it or adapting to it.

Someone is generally said to be autistic if they have certain problems with social communication/interaction and restricted or repetitive behaviors/interests. Signs of autism commonly include (CDC 2024):

- Trouble with eye contact
- Trouble with showing emotion
- A tendency to play alone as a kid
- Difficulty with noticing when someone is hurt/upset
- A tendency to repeat words/phrases over and over
- Difficulty with accepting change
- Obsessive interests
- Hand flapping, body rocking, or other unusual ticks
- Delayed development as a kid in areas like language, movement, or cognitive skills
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Unusual eating or sleeping habits

This is not a comprehensive list. Autistic people might have some of these symptoms, all of them, or completely different ones. If you suspect you or someone close to you might have autism, it's best to see a doctor. However, even once you learn of autism, it can be a long road to learning how to adapt. In this chapter, we'll talk about one of the first steps on that road—learning to unmask, so you can discover your more authentic self.

## What is Masking?

One of the hardest things for autistic people can be dealing with those who don't accept you for who you are. It's common for autistics to learn early-on that certain traits make them stand out in a bad way. For this reason, autistic people often put on a "mask," presenting themselves as someone different in order to fit in. This usually involves hiding the symptoms of autism, that way their "less-desirable" traits (those traits that are perceived by others as less desirable) are not seen. For example, when masking, you might pretend not to have obsessive interests, maintain more acceptable posture and body language, or hide discomfort in social settings.

If you've been masking, you might have done things like (Henry Ford Health Staff 2023):

- Pretended you weren't bothered by a loud noise when it was actually driving you crazy
- Repressed urges to do stimming behaviors, like shaking your leg or tapping the table with your pencil in class
- Pretended you were following along in a conversation even when you didn't understand a point someone was making
- Scripted what you would say in a scary social situation, like during a conversation with someone you have a crush on

Many people with autism mask without knowing it. The goal is usually to be accepted, but by focusing so hard on that, it causes issues with identity. That's why it's important to unmask—so

that you can learn who you are and what fits you, rather than just how to fit into the lives of others.

## The Dangers of Masking

There are other drawbacks to masking. Those who mask are more likely to (Henry Ford Health Staff 2023):

- **Be Diagnosed Later:** Children with mild forms of autism may be perceived by their teachers, parents, and other adults as not-autistic since they are hiding their autistic characteristics. This means they won't get the help they truly need.
- **Experience Burnout:** Masking is a full-time job. This can make it especially stressful when an autistic person needs to do other work or take a break—it's one of the reasons why autistic people can easily get overwhelmed by stress, criticism, and emotions.
- **Have Mental Health Issues:** Depression is common in those with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) who have been masking a lot; the masking gets in the way of them knowing who they are and feeling genuinely accepted by the world and their communities.

## How to Unmask

Dr. Alice Nicholls, a clinical psychologist who specializes in treating autistic people, especially those suffering from burnout, has a four-point strategy that she recommends for autistic people who are seeking to mask less often. The first thing to be aware of, though, is that the mask exists for a reason—removing it all in one go is seldom a good idea. If you already have things in your life that are working for you, be careful about removing your mask around those things (Nicholls, n.d.).

1. **Stay Safe:** The first point in Nicholls' strategy involves looking after yourself, and only unmasking when you feel comfortable and ready.
2. **Identify "Safe" People in Your Life:** Second, Nicholls recommends identifying people who you feel will accept your raw, unmasked self. Once you know who is safe, practice consciously unmasking around them, a little at a time, and see how it goes. The goal is to create a closer, more authentic relationship.
3. **Start Small:** Third, don't be afraid to unmask slowly. You want to have positive experiences with unmasking, that way you can learn to love your true self. This might mean unmasking around less people at first, or it might mean unmasking in some ways—like by allowing yourself to stim—but not in others, like by showing off your obsessive interests.
4. **Keep in Mind the Purpose of Unmasking:** Finally, keep in mind that being unmasked is about building a stronger, more authentic connection. If you can't fully unmask, think about other ways that you can build that connection. This might mean sharing some parts of yourself and not others, or adapting to different communication styles in a way

that still communicates who you truly are deep inside. Finding “safe” people with whom you can unmask fully helps a lot with this process, as those people will allow you to learn more about who you truly are.

# References

- All Star ABA Therapy. n.d. "Exploring Dan Aykroyd's Journey with Autism." Accessed July 15, 2025. <https://www.allstaraba.org/blog/dan-aykroyd-autism>.
- Bluebell ABA Therapy. 2025. "Dan Aykroyd and Autism: A Journey of Awareness and Advocacy." April 8, 2025. <https://bluebellaba.com/blog/dan-aykroyd-and-autism/>.
- CDC. 2024. "Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder." May 16, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/signs-symptoms/index.html>.
- Ewing, Sarah. 2013. "'I Have Asperger's - One of My Symptoms Included Being Obsessed with Ghosts': Under the Microscope with Dan Aykroyd." Health. *Daily Mail*, December 9, 2013. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2521032/Dan-Aykroyd-I-Aspergers--symptoms-included-obsessed-ghosts.html>.
- Henry Ford Health Staff. 2023. "Autism Masking Is Common. Here's How To Recognize And Offer Support." *Henry Ford Health*, April 20, 2023. <https://www.henryford.com/blog/2023/04/autism-masking>.
- IBCCES. 2018. "Interview with Dr. Stephen Shore: Autism Advocate & on the Spectrum." March 23, 2018. <https://ibcces.org/blog/2018/03/23/12748/>.
- Nicholls, Alice. n.d. "Unmasking in Autistic Burnout." Dr Alice Nicholls. Accessed July 15, 2025. <https://www.dralicenicholls.com/unmasking-with-the-people-we-are-closest-to/>.