

There's nothing about me that's not forgivable. There's nothing about me that cannot be accommodated. To be misunderstood is extremely frustrating and that happens to me on a daily basis. I'm frustrated that I have to do this everyday and then field off questions like, "But you seem so normal!" Or: "You seem fine!"

My name is Elesia Ashkenazy and I live in Portland, Oregon with my family, my husband, and two sons, and I am on the autism spectrum.

Technically I am profoundly deaf because I have a cochlear implant, and to qualify for a cochlear implant you have to have a severe to a profound hearing loss. Having a hearing loss and being fluent in American Sign Language has made me very sensitive to facial expressions and being able to interpret those.

My husband, who I've been with for almost twenty years -- I should know him really well by now, and sometimes I say, "Are you mad? You look really mad." And he says, "No, everything's fine."

Nothing has come naturally to me other than my intuition. But everything else I do -- my mannerisms, the way that I talk, the faces that I make, the things that I do, how I do them -- have all had to be learned and have all had to run through my internal editor so that they can be compatible with what I am showing or, you know, what I am doing, so that I am not detected [LAUGHS] by the citizens of this world as "she's different."

There's just all of these rules that have to be applied to something as simple as opening the door and inviting someone into your house, and most people don't think about that.

Well, I have a certain way that I get ready every day. If I'm gonna clean my house, then there's a certain way that it needs to be cleaned and needs to be done. And the way I do it is very scripted because that's the only way I know how to do it.

Ballet is one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life. It is extremely demanding. [MUSIC - PIANO] What I like about dance is it's a form of expression without having to speak.

Things might be stressful at work, or certain things could be happening in life, but there's always ballet class. No matter what's happening, there's always that bar and that leotard and those tights that I put on. And when I go in there for that amount of time, my mind goes to a completely different place and it becomes a form of expression where I'm not having to speak or interpret anything, as long as I can get the choreography down.

My youngest son was born in 2004 and I knew right away that he was different. When I see him doing something that I had done in the past, then I immediately -- well, not immediately, but I wait for the right time to pull him aside and say, "Hey, you know, when that happened, these are some reactions that you might want to try out in the future." And then I try to direct him into what he can do when something like that happens. And just trying to help him learn how to refocus and not stay in that state of pain, you know, which I think that I did, and I was analyzing it for like two years after it happened... That such-and-such threw a rock at me and didn't want to play with me anymore. And so that's what I guess I'm looking for, is to help him increase his recovery time between upsets as quickly as possible, so that the damage of self-esteem is minimized.

I feel that if we lived in a world that was more accommodating toward people who are different, a lot of my challenges and frustrations would be non-existent. My goal in public speaking and advocacy work is to bring a sense of reality into the picture, a sense of first-hand experience, and hopefully a large sense of truth.

I don't need to be fixed. I don't need to be cured. And I wouldn't want to be fixed or cured. I want to be accommodated, and I want to be respected. And I want to be understood. [MUSIC - PIANO]