



# My Self Through Film

by Marit Rawley

Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Division

Living with autism has its ups & downs. I think I have a handle on things, but something always comes up that makes it hard.

In my self documentary video, I talk about my autism being a disability where too many signals are sent to the brain all at one time. When this happens, it makes the person with autism think and see things differently. A friend of mine asked once what I see and think. I have thought about this carefully! I know I think in pictures but there are other things that relate to my interest in film as well.

In thinking about this, I was reminded that I was also asked why I wanted to become a filmmaker! I know I've always loved film; watching, studying, and making them. But the root of my interest in being a filmmaker is a mystery. It could've been my interest in the studio logos on posters, the names of directors I've seen on posters/credits, or my childhood cartoons. My childhood cartoons were *Animaniacs*, *Tiny Toon Adventures*, *Freakazoid*, *Pinky & the Brain* & *Toonsylvania*. All were connected to filmmaker Steven Spielberg. Even the cartoon show, *Beetlejuice*, had a connection to my role model Tim Burton. These might be some of the reasons why I wanted to be a filmmaker.

As a filmmaker diagnosed with autism, I have to learn the language of how people talk about the camera and what the camera is showing us in a scene. I use certain scenes from films I have seen to know how I want the scene to look.

Even that is hard because not many people understand what I am getting at when I describe what I want. So then, I have to think about another way to tell them how the scene should look. Drawing a story board is another way to show them that I have found helpful.

Writing a screenplay plays a part, too. I think about characters and what they have to face. This is what having autism is to me; I am a character in my life film, facing challenges with autism & non-autism situations.

In the film world, you have characters overcoming obstacles that usually show what they accomplish or how they overcome that obstacle in the end. Having autism has ob-



*Self-portrait* Artwork by, Marit Rawley

stacles that I've overcome, but new things keep happening that are a challenge.

There are rules and routines that I understand and follow. There are also other rules outside that come up! I understand it right away if it is something I know and understand. The rules that don't make sense are those I don't like and are hard to do.

Changes to my environment are sometimes upsetting, and sometimes not. I like everything the way it is to me! When something comes up unexpectedly, it takes time for me to settle into it. Some changes I'll accept and others I don't. I was introduced to flexible thinking exercises by my Behavior Therapist. These exercises helped me slowly adjust to the changes that I did not like. These exercises help me when I need to adjust to knowing that there is more to come. I still use these exercises to help me get through the day. Mindfulness works too! Mindfulness is when I find something I like to do and I focus on it while my mind relaxes.

Noise is an obstacle that is hard. There are some noises that don't bother me, and there are some I have a hard time with. Babies and small children are what I have the hardest time with! Their cries and screams are like sirens going off unexpectedly. I don't know when it could happen and that makes me nervous to be in the same room with them. The control of it is out of my hands and I don't want to get into a fight with the parent about it. I try to find ways to tolerate it, but it is always challenging.

Touching is a tricky one. I put up with hugs & handshakes from people I know. Doctors touch you for health exams and exercise instructors touch you for correction on form. The outside, unexpected touch is something I can't deal with! (People I don't know and people I am not comfortable being around). Again, I can't control what people do. I have to push myself and try to tolerate it because I want to show that I am a nice person and it's how people do it in the real world. But the feeling of being touched makes my skin crawl. This is when desensitization helps.

Desensitization becomes a tool to help me be less sensitive to touching and noises. It's a hard practice to do because I have to push myself to do things that are uncomfortable (like tolerating noise and touching). However, it's what I do to get through the day.

The hardest obstacle is having sensory overload. I never know when it will strike. Examples are: when I walk into an ice cream shop that has toys and stuff all over the wall; when I walk into a restaurant and there are many families with small children and/or babies; when I go workout and a mom brings her kids/babies and they become part of the workout; when there are too many people in one place; when I come across a word/rule with more than one meaning (For example: No flash photography allowed means no taking pictures with photo/video camera but doesn't say no to use of cell phone cameras); and, when it's a new place. When things like these happen my mind goes blank and I freeze up. It's hard to ask for help when I get overloaded. It helps when a person I know and trust helps me out of the room. When I am by myself, its hard because my mind is racing about what to do and how to do it. My only solution is to leave the area and get to a quiet place. Even that gets tricky.

These are some of the things I find myself facing everyday, living with autism in my film. These obstacles continue throughout my life film. I continue to push these obstacles aside for important stuff to get done but I have to get creative when they show up.

Film plays an important role and continues to throughout my journey in my film. As you watch a film, think about how it reflects yourself and the challenges you overcome.



Tim Burton Artwork by, Marit Rawley

# 5 Brain Exercises to Foster Flexible Thinking by Polly Campbell

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## What flexible thinking does

A more agile mindset allows us to evaluate and adjust to the different jobs, roles and responsibilities we have each day. Sometimes it works to be more rigid, to follow specific rules; sometimes it's better to be more open and loose, Maisel says.

Mental agility is also related to our perceptions, emotions, actions and motivations. A change of environment, attitude or behavior will also influence how we think. When we're feeling happy or optimistic, for example, we tend toward broad and inclusive thinking. [Fear](#) narrows our focus down to specific details. When we're able to make that mental shift without remaining stuck in a particular mindset, we're demonstrating mental flexibility.

"We all vary in how mentally agile we are from moment to moment and day to day," Koutstaal says. "Sometimes we can be very flexible, but at other times we can get surprisingly 'stuck' and become quite rigid or impervious to information that we really should take into account."

A flexible mindset moves us away from limiting thought patterns to a place of openness and possibility. In those moments, when you are feeling stuck, worn out by the regular routine or caught in old habits and repetitive patterns, you can adapt your thinking and behavior in a way that will inspire you and boost your resilience and your chance at success.

## How to develop an agile mind

While some people have an innate temperament toward mental agility, all of us are somewhat mentally flexible. With awareness and practice, we can become even better at it, say Koutstaal and Maisel.

Here are five brain exercises to help you do it:

1. **Change the context.** Take a vacation. Take a walk around the block. Take a coffee break. Change the context or your environment and you'll feel your mind shift. Exercise offers another great mental boost.
2. **Try something new.** Learn to dance, pick up a new language or cook a new recipe. In a study led by Koutstaal, older adults who participated in a variety of novel and stimulating activities over a three-month period showed a significant gain in



creativity, problem-solving abilities and other markers of "fluid intelligence" when compared to a control group. Mental flexibility is aided by novelty, and that contributes to brain growth and development throughout a lifetime.

3. **Question your thoughts and words.** Become aware of what you're thinking and saying. Don't attach to or lock into one way of thinking, Maisel says. Also, notice your language. Dispute those thoughts and words that don't serve you. Then, substitute them with more productive ideas and phrases.
4. **Plan to be spontaneous.** Change up your regular routine. If you're like Koutstaal and take an evening walk, occasionally venture along a new route. Once in a while alter the order of your day.
5. **Mix up the way you think.** Innovative and creative ideas often arise after periods of both focused thought and diffuse attention, Koutstaal says. So, allow time to concentrate on projects or challenges both in a deliberate manner and in an unfocused way while you're doing something else.

These tips will not only help your brain to bend, leaving you feeling more resilient and creative, but you'll also be on track toward your loftiest goals.

"Mental flexibility is not arbitrary or whimsical," Koutstaal says. "It's grounded by our goals and aspirations and a balance between control and spontaneity. When we are mentally agile, we do pursue goals, but those goals may sometimes be changed or modified as we learn about a situation and what's possible."

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## Tips for Success For People with ASD

1. Practice flexible thinking exercises
2. Use mindfulness practices (Things you like to do)
3. Practice desensitization
4. Get creative in common situations to develop routines that are supportive
5. Find supportive people
6. Let people you trust know what is helpful and what bothers you.

## Tips for Success for People Who Are Friends and Co-workers

1. Be patient & understanding
2. Ask the person what helps them and what bothers them
3. Be helpful in situations that are difficult
4. Let the person know if something unexpected is about to happen, or if/when a break in the person's routine will occur
5. Be supportive
6. Share a common interest (books, movies, animals).

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## Resources:

- Fostering Flexible Thinking: GAIAM, [www. life.gaiam.com/article/5-brain -exercises-foster-flexible-thinking](http://www.life.gaiam.com/article/5-brain-exercises-foster-flexible-thinking) for fostering flexible thinking exercises
- Mindfulness: Mindful Living Programs, <http://www.mindfullivingprograms.com/whatMBSR.php>
- Desensitization: Synapse, <http://www.autism-help.org/behavior-desensitization.htm>
- Self documentary: Film in editing process

## Other Self-Advocacy Books:

- The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum, Temple Grandin and Richard Panek, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013
- The Reason I Jump, Naoki Higashida, Random House of Canada, 2013

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## About the Author:

**Marit Rawley** is a filmmaker, writer, actor and artist. She works at the University of New Mexico, Center for Development and Disability, Autism Programs. She is a student to local filmmaker, Dale Sonnonberg. She's happy to be sharing her experiences with you!

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For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Autism Programs call **(505) 272-1852** or **1-800-270-1861** <https://cdd.health.unm.edu/autismportal/>

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