Aliona Baranova, ADHD actor, motion capture performance director of Baldur's Gate 3, and Twitch streamer

"A brilliant guide for neurodivergent gamers and anyone who wants to understand neurodivergent people better, and a reminder to be kind to ourselves among the constant obstacles we face."

Jesse McNamara, Plumbella (YouTube and Twitch)

"Navigating a neurotypical world as an autistic person can be difficult, but Stuck on Hard Mode lays out life like a cheat sheet, with guides so useful it feels like you're modding your own character."

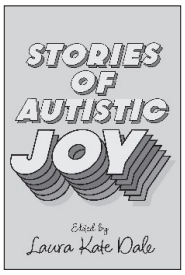
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"Joyful, neuroaffirming, and genuinely useful—this guide hands autistic and AuDHD readers the controller. Clear tactics, smart buffs, and co-op play tips you can use today. I wish I had this at Level 19."

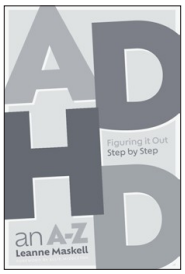
Cranky, West Coast Canadian, autistic Twitch streamer and content creator (CrankyOldDude)

"Anyone living with autism and/or ADHD will find this book profoundly enlightening. It offers clarity, compassion, and practical insight—an invaluable resource for anyone navigating autism and/or ADHD themselves, or supporting friends, family, or colleagues."

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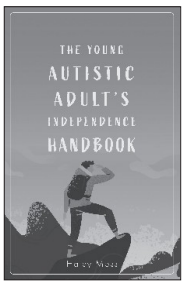
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STUCK ON HARD MODE

The ADHD, Autistic, and AuDHD Strategy Guide for Real Life

Erin Phillips

Illustrated by Charlotte Grange



Jessica Kingsley Publishers
London and Philadelphia

For Kairi. I love you more than there are stars in the sky.

First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
An imprint of John Murray Press

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress

ISBN 978 1 83997 798 5
eISBN 978 1 83997 799 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group

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Jessica Kingsley Publishers
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.jkp.com

John Murray Press
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
An Hachette Company

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland,
8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie)

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The Neurodivergent Gamer's Glossary

I use various gaming-related metaphors and analogies throughout the book; here is a handy reference guide.

- **AuDHD:** Pronounced "aw" DHD. While not an official label by any means, AuDHD is often used in online spaces by people who are diagnosed with both autism and ADHD.

- **Bandwidth:** This is the amount of energy and endurance a person has to work with to get through their day. Bandwidth can vary from person to person, some people being low energy, some high.

- **buff:** In games, a buff is something that helps the character in some way, but isn't always permanent. In this book, the same meaning applies—a buff is when something in particular is at least temporarily helpful to the neurodivergent person, like an accommodation or medication.

- **build/build class/player build:** In games, a player's character build describes the type of play style they will most likely engage in, based on the stats the player has assigned to the character when creating them. In this book, I refer to neurotypical player builds, as well as ASD, ADHD, and AuDHD player builds, because the way our brains work informs our stats, which, in turn, defines our "play style" (the way we function) in real life. See Chapter Three: Stats and Player Builds for more detailed information.

- **Burnout:** The result of an accumulation of stress, overwhelm, and exhaustion from everyday activities, Burnout leaves a person's energy depleted, and lowers their threshold to be able to function and perform their normal tasks.

- **clan:** A group of players brought together by common interests or goals. Clan size can range from as small as a Family Unit, to as large as a multinational organization.

- **debuff:** In games, a debuff is something that hinders a character in some way, but is not always permanent. In this book, the same meaning applies—a debuff is when something in particular hinders a neurodivergent person. For example: if an ASD player whose Bandwidth is already low

is forced to socialize or attend a crowded event, a debuff is applied to their Bandwidth, and their threshold for Meltdown or Burnout status is lowered.

- **default settings:** The original player model a person is born into, both genetically and based on societal, family, and religious norms and expectations. A typically wired (NT) brain is assumed, by society in general, to be the default brain.

- **game modes (Casual, Easy, Normal, Hard, Legendary):** Old-school video games often didn't have game modes, and the gameplay was set at the same difficulty level for everyone. Modern games often have the ability for players to change their difficulty settings, depending on how challenging or relaxing they want their gameplay experience to be. Different games call their difficulty levels by different names, but the settings often range from Story Mode, Casual, or Very Easy, where the focus is more on the story being told in the game rather than the challenge of defeating enemies, to Very Hard, Legendary, or Insanity, where the focus is on defeating very buffed enemies who seem like bullet sponges.

In this book, I liken the ease or difficulty of navigating through life to these different game modes.

- **level/level up:** In games, a player's character "levels up" when they hit a certain threshold of experience points (known colloquially as XP), which are usually earned by either completing missions or defeating enemies.

Because people don't earn XP in real life, in this book, I count each year of a player's life as one completion of the XP meter. Therefore, a player's level is their age, and they level up on their birthday. When I use the terms low-level, mid-level, or high-level, I am basically talking about kids to young adults as low-level, people from their mid-twenties to their fifties as mid-level, and people sixty and beyond as high-level. If you see the term "noob," this is an old gaming term that was born from calling very low-level players newbies. In this book, I use the term noob to mean infants to toddlers.

- **Life.exe:** A reimagining of our mundane existence (you know, life) as that of a video game, where each individual is a player character, and their ultimate life goals, hopes, and ambitions are their Main Quest. There are no winners or losers in Life.exe. The focus of the game is for each player to enjoy their playthrough and find meaning in their quests and their interactions with their parties and clans.

- **MMORPG:** This stands for for Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Players from around the world can log on and interact with each other and the game world, often choosing to party up with other players and work together to complete missions.

- **neurodivergent (ND):** This label is used to describe someone whose brain is not wired to work in the way a typical/default brain works, which often leads to the ND person presenting with disability. There are many types of neurodivergence,

but in this book in particular, the terms "neurodivergent" or "ND" are primarily used to mean players with ASD, ADHD, or AuDHD.

- **neurotypical (NT):** Someone whose brain functions in the typical manner. Most humans are assumed to be neurotypical by default. In fact, prior to being diagnosed as neurodivergent, ND players are often judged by others as "failed" or "broken" neurotypicals who just need to try harder.

- **party:** In typical multiplayer video games, a party is usually a group of up to four players who band together to complete quests. Often they will chat over mic or with keyboard. For the purposes of this book, a party is a group of two or more players (usually less than ten) who often socialize and complete small quests together. Think a Family Unit or a close group of friends.

- **player character:** You. Or someone else. Every human individual in Life.exe is a player character. Every player character has their own sentience, will, motivations, goals, dreams, and of course, their own Main Quest. There are no mindless NPCs in Life.exe. Everyone is playing the game to the best of their ability.

- **spawn:** For the purposes of this book, spawn is the act of bringing a noob into the world of Life.exe. Depending on context, it can either mean to have a baby, or to be born.

- **spec/specced:** A character's specs are their specializations, strengths, attributes, and abilities. In games, these can often be assigned by the player during character creation. For the purposes of this book, a player is born already specced, because specs in Life.exe are based on the player's build being either neurotypical or neurodivergent.

- **traits/neurodivergent traits:** I prefer to use the term "traits" as a replacement for the word "symptoms." "Symptoms" makes it sound as if our neurodivergences are some kind of malady or disease, rather than just how we are. For example, I would say that the propensity of some ASD builds to line up objects is a trait of their autism, not a symptom of it.

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Life.exe

Imagine, if you will, a procedurally generated, open world MMORPG, in which the quest objectives are often vague, as well as different for every player. The game has a real-money economy, based on a credit score that you can't influence unless you already have credit. You have no control over the race or biological sex of your player character, and there are no rerolls, so you can only play the randomized character you are given when you log in for the first (and only) time. While you may be used to MMORPGs that let you decide your own stat spread, this one randomizes your stats as well as your appearance—and very few players get God-rolls. Most players end up with fairly evenly distributed, average stats.

There are others, however, whose stats are unevenly distributed, causing them to start the game with penalties in some areas (but often also with bonuses in other areas). Players who are assigned these spiky profiles may find it a struggle to keep up, in certain situations, with same-level players who rolled average stats. That is because this MMORPG is primarily designed for the players with average stats in mind when it comes to having the optimal gameplay experience. Second chances to complete failed quests are rare in this game, as there is no autosave feature, or even any save points.

The game? It's called Life.exe, and you are already playing it. (Surprise!) If you've picked up this guidebook, you're likely one of the group of players with unevenly distributed stats who start the game with penalties, which, of course, can make gameplay much more difficult than it is for those with less spiky profiles. There are names for these two statistically different groups of players: those with average, well-balanced stats are **neurotypical** (NT), and those with unevenly distributed stats are **neurodivergent** (ND). Welcome to *Stuck on Hard Mode*, the neurodivergent gamer's guide to Life.exe—a guidebook for neurodivergent gamers.

Navigating Life.exe as a neurodivergent player can feel like you're stuck doing a Hard, or even Legendary playthrough, while many neurotypical players seem to breeze through the game on Casual. This book is designed to help you even the playing field, so to speak. Because there are no rerolls in

Life.exe, ND players have to adapt to a world not designed with them in mind, make the best of the player character they've been given, and develop a play style that works for them. To that end, this guidebook includes a number of work-arounds and tricks that can help ND players navigate Life.exe with more ease, so that they can enjoy their playthrough and successfully complete their Main Quest, despite the uneven stats and penalties they were saddled with at the start of the game.



My name is Erin, and I'm here to help you make sense of this player's handbook.

Although there are many different "flavors" of neurodivergence, my primary neurodivergencies are autism and ADHD, so they will be the ones I focus on in this guide. I've been playing this game for a while now, and through trial and error (so, so much error), I have come across the tips and tricks included in this strategy guide. Though there is no magical cheat code you can input to reroll your player character, I hope the information on the available perks and buffs contained in this guide will help you have more fun playing Life.exe, while avoiding the (many, many) errors I encountered along the way.

Like Bringing a Stun Gun to a Plasma Rifle Fight

A loose (okay, very loose) definition of a neurodivergence is: a condition resulting from the way your brain just is. How you're wired, so to speak. You are wired differently than the players with average, well-balanced stats. One might even say—divergently. Your brain wiring diverges from that of the neurotypical brain.

What does neurotypical mean, then? Pretty much what it says on the tin. It means one's brain is typical in its wiring and functioning. It is what society thinks of as the "default brain." Everyone is presumed to be neurotypical unless proven otherwise. This is one reason undiagnosed neurodivergent players tend to struggle so much with self-hatred and internalized ableism—when everyone believes you are neurotypical but you show neurodivergent traits, those traits are often assumed to be character flaws, instead of evidence of a disability.

DID YOU KNOW?



It is common to have co-morbid neurodivergencies. That is, to have more than one. For example, my co-morbidities are autism and ADHD. These neurodivergencies occur together often enough that their names have been combined, in online parlance, into the term "AuDHD."

For the sake of brevity, from here on out I will sometimes refer to the specific types

of neurodivergent people this handbook is written for (players with ASD, ADHD, or both) as ND, and neurotypical people as NT, because I'm going to be using those terms a lot, and typing them out every time would quickly become tedious.

Conditions considered to be neurodivergencies include, but are not limited to:

- autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Down syndrome
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Tourette's syndrome (and other tic disorders)
- dyspraxia
- dyscalculia
- dysgraphia
- sensory processing disorder (SPD).

Note that this list contains the word "disorder(s)" five times, the prefix "dys" (which means bad or difficult) three times, and the word "syndrome" twice—and all the terms listed are considered disabilities, because their effects on us "disable" us, when compared to the abilities of an NT player—they are the reason our stats are often poorly balanced, and we start the game with penalties (i.e. issues we find ourselves dealing with due to our disabilities).

Is it any surprise that NDs tend to have a hard time navigating Life.exe, when the game is designed primarily with penalty-less NT players in mind? "Disabled" is not a bad word—it's just an adjective. It describes an attribute. I support labeling neurodivergencies as disabilities, because it is a label that can allow ND players to access services and accommodations needed to put us on more of an even playing field with NT players. Unfortunately, the very fact that the way our brains work is considered "abnormal" and "wrong" by NTs can make things more difficult for us. Quite the double-edged laser sword, eh? Luckily, it is possible for NDs to learn to wield this double-edged laser sword through visibility in the community, and self-advocacy—but more on that, later.

Being an ASD, ADHD, or AuDHD player build in Life.exe is like being ill-equipped for an event you have no choice but to participate in. Say you're playing a multiplayer space shooter, and an event with a randomized weapon modifier pops up. Everyone queuing for the event appears to be a similar level to you, which seems fair. It's only after you've queued up that you notice the modifier: you can only use energy weapons. Oh. Well, crap. You're not really specced for energy weapons, and even if you were, the only energy weapon you currently have in your inventory is a low-level stun gun.

When you spawn in, you see a few other players (your ND comrades) also wielding less-than-stellar loadouts, but the majority of the players (who are NT in this metaphor) have powerful laser rifles and plasma guns. While you are still able to complete the event, it is significantly more difficult for you and the other ND players than it is for the NT players, and you find yourself at the bottom of the scoreboard.

As you level up and get better gear, you think things will be easier. However, as the NT players level up, they also get better gear than the already-good-gear they had to begin with. It seems like no matter what you do, the similarly leveled NT players are always better equipped than you, which means you are constantly at the bottom of the scoreboard, no matter how hard you try.

The only thing that seems to even the playing field a little is when you have a temporary weapon-damage buff equipped (in Life.exe this buff could be services, accommodations, or in some cases, even medications designed to aid you in areas where your stats are lacking). Your gameplay is only temporarily improved, however, meaning that to continue to play competitively with the NT players, you have to always use the damage buff.

Unfortunately, it isn't always easy for you to obtain the buff. You have to slog through a repetitious boring side quest to get it, which you can do multiple times, but it takes a lot of time and energy. (It isn't always easy to get services, accommodations, and medications for ND players of Life.exe—even more so if they haven't been officially diagnosed as ND.)

When you use this hard-won buff, you hear NT players in area chat complain, wondering why you are suddenly playing better. You find this especially frustrating, because it's not even like you're dominating when you use the buff. You just come in somewhere in the middle of the scoreboard, rather than all the way at the bottom. Still, you hear NT players mutter about cheating over their mics. You want to get on mic and ask how exactly it is "cheating" for you to temporarily be equally matched, damage-wise, to everyone else playing—but you don't. It's not worth it. The NT players have never experienced the game in the same way you have, and will probably never understand how much of a struggle it is to compete with others who are almost always better equipped for the challenges thrown at them.

What's so different about how NDs are equipped compared to NTs? While it is certainly not an exhaustive list, here are some common equipment differences that ND players of Life.exe have from NT players.

Executive Functioning

The ability to...do stuff. To get stuff done efficiently. To prioritize tasks. To complete quests.

In games, quests aren't simply the completion of one, single task. Even your run-of-the-mill fetch quest requires multiple steps to complete. For example: Oh, no! A spacer has had a priceless family heirloom stolen by a swarm of sentient, alien blancmange! The creatures have secreted it away to their lair, a cave on a distant asteroid. The NPC begs you to retrieve the heirloom and bring it back

to them. You are given a map marker to the blancmange lair, and you have not yet explored the sector of space where it is located, so you are unable to fast travel. Instead you must find your way to the asteroid-cave-blancmange-dungeon by traveling across the map the long way.



That, then, is **task one**: getting there. **Task two** is making your way through the cave, while (**task three**) having to defeat attacking gelatinous puddings. **Task four** is defeating Big Boss Blancmange, within whose oozing remains you find the NPC's heirloom. **Task five** is finding your way out of the cave, as the way you came in is now inaccessible. **Task six** is traveling back to the NPC and returning the, uh, "heirloom."

Like the fetch quest, seemingly easy quests in Life.exe are also made up of multiple tasks. Leaving the house in the morning is a good example. Most NTs find it easy to get ready, and out the door in the morning, to be on their way to go about their day. For ND players with executive functioning difficulties, this quest can be quite challenging. Executive functioning (when working correctly) helps the player prioritize tasks, to complete them efficiently.

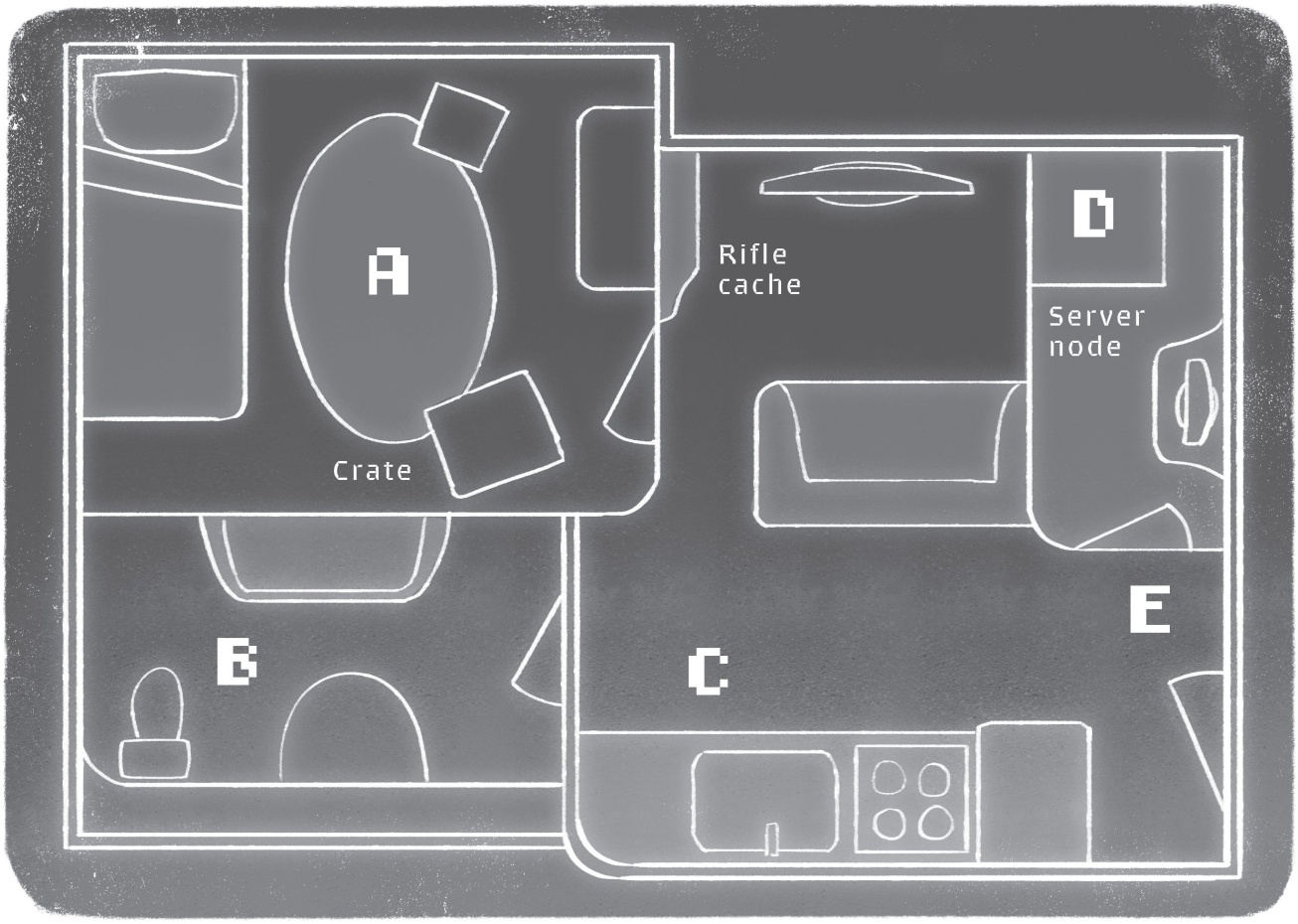
Executive dysfunction, then, can make every leaving-the-house-in-the-morning quest feel like a chaotic mess, where all tasks feel equally important, there is no correct order in which to do the tasks, and nothing is ever simple. Here is what an average "getting ready to leave home base" quest might look like for someone with executive dysfunction...but because the daily grind in Life.exe can sometimes feel quite dull, let's set this quest in the future, in space.

The quest begins at **point A**, the bedroom of your small habitat on the space station.

HELPFUL HINT

If you find yourself running late due to hitting the snooze button multiple times, try placing your alarm clock or phone across the room from your bed, prepped to go off with the loudest, most obnoxious alarm tone you can find.

The act of rolling out of bed to turn the cursed thing off may help jumpstart your day. After all, once you turn the alarm off, well, you're already out of bed. Might as well get ready, right?



Before anything else, you have to wake up, which may happen only after pressing snooze on your alarm multiple times. Frank, the robot, serves as your alarm, and he finds this behavior of yours quite tedious.

Once out of bed, you groggily make your way to **point B** to do your morning toilet-related functions. After that urgent business is taken care of, you must decide to either go back to **point A** and get dressed, or stay at **point B** and take a shower. This choice is often decided by the armpit sniff test, and/or the greasiness level of your hair.

If you choose to get dressed, did you remember to task your robo-assistant with doing the laundry yesterday? If so, where is it? (The laundry, not the robot. Frank is right where he should be.) "Away" is almost never the correct answer to that question. It could be anywhere. (This may require an optional trip to **point D** to check the dryer.) Once the clean laundry has been located: why can't you find any matching socks?

