

Space

Spatial awareness isn't something people really think about or even notice, until another person steps dangerously close to or directly into that spatial bubble.

The appreciation for space can dawn almost instantaneously for some people, but for me it is a constant, unending battle for control. I need the socially acceptable number of inches surrounding my body to be maintained at all times. For me, this also involves being extremely uneasy with physical touch by others; I do not wish to be touched by anyone at any time without my explicit consent. Living in a society where touch is part of the day to day, I remain the outlier. I do not think touch itself is detrimental, but being touched by family, friends and strangers alike—again without verbal consent—makes me feel vulnerable and unable to maintain my own space. I honestly detest being touched, and though it is natural to me, its abnormality makes life burdensome.

People tend to use touch to get attention, and signal emotion. Many uses of physical touch are positive and designed to create stronger connections. These moments of physical contact may not be negative in nature, but to me the world spins out of control. This extremely unpleasant sensation isn't within my command. My mind becomes overwhelmed with a chorus of voices screaming their dissent about another's touch, and all I can think about is breaking the connection to the other person. During this time, I am hyper focused on the physical connection, and my brain shuts down all other functions while hesitantly awaiting the person's receding hand. I must explain that this sensation happens every single time I am touched, regardless of the welcomed contact of a friend I have had for years or a stranger. Though disconcerting I live through these experiences every day, so they have become almost normalized.

To combat how guilty I feel when someone I love touches me and

all I can think of is getting away as fast as possible, I've spent a lot of time trying to suppress the squeemy feelings. Trying to at least appear normal is something I continually strive for but seldom obtain. I am cognizant enough to understand that I should seek out my own version of happiness, rather than attempt to control the uncontrollable sensations I succumb to when I am touched. I continually tell people that my behavior isn't something personal they should take offense with; I care deeply for them, but my sensory issues tend to take precedence.

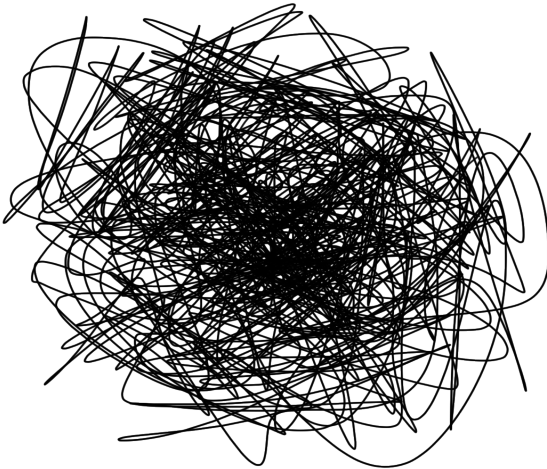
It took significant time to create a viable coping mechanism to be able to handle being in close-quarters with other humans, putting up a mental wall and mimicking what other people do when they greet and spend time with each other. Inside I feel robotic and out of sorts, but on the outside, I think I have created a passable facsimile of what a "normal" human is supposed to look like. I'm not saying it is perfect, or even that it is easily maintained, but it does make being in a crowd—where anyone at any time can brush up against or bump into me—somewhat less than terrible. I can at least deal with it during that moment and freak out later, when I am alone and safe.

In seeking out coping techniques I've noticed that other people handle space differently; some take up a lot of space while others use a minute amount. Some individuals consume space in great heaping gulps through personalities that spread out and stretch thin to fill every nook and cranny. These people suck all the air out of the room, speak too loudly, saturating the air with incessant chatter. Even if they do not physically touch me, their use of space and noise can mentally press into my personal bubble, creating a troublesome, inescapable solidness that saps both my energy and my enjoyment of being around them.

The people that pull themselves into little compact balls and take up very little space tend to be quiet and aloof. Their personalities are restrained, and their words whispered in direct opposition to the raucous and overbearing band of people who feel justified in

taking up more than the socially acceptable amount of space. At time, these compressed people can pass through the world unseen, disregarded, and neglected. In my observations, these people sometimes don't feel solid to me, almost as if they are shades of humans rather than solid corporeal bodies, thin and wavering in an amorphous manner.

I think I fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum; I don't want to be loud and boisterous or quiet and calm, instead using both sides where applicable. In addition, wondering why people take up different amounts of space has been plaguing me for a long time, forcing me to reflect on and become aware of how much or little space I myself take up. Understanding the why of the matter is just as important as good-naturedly teaching others how to respect my boundaries. My mimicry of "normal" humans has never been the same thing as being a normal human, but it does help maintain a sense of sameness with others.



In this quest for normalcy, I have succeeded at taking up plenty of space attempting to appear strong and powerful and have hidden in the proverbial shadows to avoid confrontation and touch. This internal conflict stems from a personally challenging past. When I was a child I wasn't allowed to take up any space. I was told that nice girls stay small, quiet, and out of sight. I was told I wasn't worth looking at or talking to, because I was an unwanted waste of space. I honestly believed I was worthless and that space could be wasted. I never thought to question the people who told me these terrible lies nor did I think to question the concepts they were espousing. It has taken decades to start the process of coming to terms with what happened in my childhood and I can truthfully say that I have been able to successfully confront those concepts and being the process of moving forward.

The feeling of not being allowed to have or take up space, as well as the belief that I was undeserving of personal space, needed to be acknowledged before I could honestly assess how I was going to cope. Initially, to overcome my corrupt beliefs I discovered manipulative ways to envelop entire rooms with my personality, dominating spaces with my deafening voice and obnoxious tone. Angry about being denied space, I demanded to hold on to it, my own personal space by lashing out at others, being vicious and mean anytime someone came too close and going out of my way to avoid social situations. After a while, I couldn't avoid people anymore; it became too taxing and I struggled through my exhaustion to ward them off. Eventually, I drank heavily to numb myself from my friends, the strangers of the world, and from my own emotions and feelings.

This went on for several years, as I tried to drown out the chorus of voices in my head that scorned being touched, the belief in my own worthlessness, and the overwhelming feeling that my boundaries didn't matter to anyone. It got abysmally dark for a while, and then one day I just stopped. Just like that, I stopped needing to drink, to be numb, and to pretend. I guess I was just done being in that mental space, so I walked away from drinking and its numb-

ness. I slowly started to look at my own spatial awareness with a newfound perspective. Watching others approach the space they were allotted allowed me to model and mimic the healthy spatial behaviors I saw and taught me how to express aloud as kindly as I could that I did not want to be touched and that I could appreciate the other person from a safe distance.

I still struggle daily with touch and having to constantly explain to the people who care about me that I mean them no insult when I shy away from physical contact is still hard and sometimes unpleasant. Although, I have come to a neutral place about other people's feelings concerning my sensory issues. I've realized that, no matter what, I still need to be true to myself. I'm still working on those feelings of worthlessness, which may never leave me, but will diminish and eventually vanish completely. I may be able to help others who have dealt with similar situations. I do have this belief that going through awful things and surviving makes me (and any survivor, for that matter) stronger and more attuned to help others. I am sure I will never feel like a normal person, but I think that is okay, as my delusions of grandeur do not involve physical touch but instead being my genuine self.

by Katherine Andrews