Ep #73: Being Autistic (Part 1) with Else Kramer

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Maisie Hill

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Welcome to the *Period Power* podcast. I'm your host Maisie Hill menstrual health expert, acupuncturist, certified life coach and author of *Period Power*. I'm on a mission to help you get your cycle working for you so that you can use it to get what you want out of life. Are you ready? Let's go.

Okay folks, I am very excited about today's episode. I've been looking forward to it for some time. And I have a guest with me today who has had a significant impact on my life particularly over the last six months. And we're going to be talking about our experiences and our thoughts and feelings about being autistic in this world. And that's a subject near and dear to my heart. And I know many of you are curious to hear more about this. We've had lots of submissions for questions to answer.

But I'm just excited to have this conversation. So I was literally 10 minutes ago kind of leaping around my house before I left just letting some of that excitement out. And so yeah, let's just go for it. So my guest today is the wonderful Else Kramer. Hi.

Else: Hi. I'm so happy to be here. I'm not jumping around with excited energy, yes, 100%.

Maisie: Yeah. Well, it's just really fun to be on a call with someone who is also autistic because it's just, it's so freeing. Just right now in my body I just notice the difference like the things I usually do with my hands below the screen on Zoom. I can do them here with you just because I just felt that I couldn't other times. But it's just that sense of connection and someone else gets it.

This is the idea that I don't need to explain myself, nor that I never do need to explain myself but it's that instinct to explain myself particularly as someone who's autistic when we can often be over-explainers for multiple reasons including trauma and not being accepted for who we are in the world. Anyway, let's see, we're already off. I knew we were going to need lots of time.

Else: It's so good.

Maisie: So, Else, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself before we go any further.

Else: Okay. So there's so much to tell but let me just do a very brief introduction. I am, as you said, autistic. I am also what people would describe as gifted and that is where I do my work, the intersection kind of giftedness and neurodiversity. I have done a shit ton of things in my life. I mean I began as a philosopher. I trained as a philosopher. Well, training is an interesting word. But I studied philosophy at King's in London. Did many different things after that, had a really fun business teaching photography, teaching people to look at the world with fresh eyes.

And eventually after discovering I was autistic and discovering coaching, decided to discontinue my very fun business to go help people like me.

Maisie: I'm just grinning, I don't know if you can hear through the mic. I'm just grinning. And what are your pronouns, Else?

Else: She, her.

Maisie: Okay, thank you. So yeah, so this is where obviously our worlds collided was through coaching. We've both trained through The Life Coach School. And I think we just started messaging over Facebook.

Else: Yes. Well, actually I started messaging you because I was in a group where somehow, I talked about autism and someone said, "Do you know Maisie?" I was like, "No." And they were like, "Oh, well, then you need to get to know her and because she's also autistic and she talks about it on her podcast." So I just messaged you. That's what I do.

Maisie: I never knew how that happened. Okay. So then, yeah, so that's the context. So you heard about me, you got in contact. We started just chatting. And then I just feel…

Else: Magically.

Maisie: Yeah, magically that it was like the universe was really looking out for us. And we both have recently gone through master coach training together which is six arduous months.

Else: Yes, amazing.

Maisie: And we were both put in the same small group together.

Else: So good.

Maisie: And I was just like, what are the odds that we would end up being put together in a group? And it was just so, first of all I feel we just lucked out with the group that we had anyway.

Else: Yes, massively.

Maisie: It was just so great. But yeah, it was really helpful to me especially with all the self-coaching we did, peer coaching, getting coached in a group together like that. The whole experience, it was just so helpful for me to have someone else who's autistic in the group. Because there was times where I'd be getting coached and I'm like is this my thought? Is this an autistic thing?

Else: Right. That sort of touches on a massively important thing which is validation for all of us. We've had so many messages throughout our entire life that invalidate us and our experience. And no, you can't be feeling this. I've even had an experience with – this is a major segue but a dentist telling me, "You cannot be feeling pain right now." And I was still a child, so I actually ended up biting him which I to this moment do not regret.

But just basically invalidating my physical experience saying, "It's impossible. There's so much sedative" or whatever you call it, "in your jaw, you cannot be feeling this." I was like, "Well, you're going to feel this", basically. And yeah, just all that stuff. And that's why it's so important whether it's professionally or in other arenas that we find people who are like us and who can speak about it and validate it.

Maisie: Yeah, because this is an interesting thing, and I was thinking about this in preparation for us talking today about how as coaches we're often talking about people being able to validate themselves and not always be requiring this over-validation from other people in our lives. And it's like, yes, and when you have a history of whatever, when you come from one or more marginalised identities. And you through society, upbringing, daily messages that you are somehow, I'm going to say wrong, then it's helpful.

Else: And your experience isn't real.

Maisie: Yes. So then having someone else there and sometimes I would just see you in the corner of the Zoom screen nodding. I'd be looking for you on the screen, yeah, anyone nodding. Yes, okay, great. And so yes, validation, important to receive it from others. And I think this is the thing about finding community, finding other people who may not have the exact experience as you but who can relate to your experience.

And as you and I have found there are a lot of commonalities, like our struggles with windy days for example, noise, how to exist around other humans who just make human noises.

Else: Yeah, it's a constant struggle. The poor things, they cannot help it but seriously.

Maisie: I know, they really can't help it. And it's just like, I live with two humans who are quite noisy. They just like to make noise whether it's whistling, humming, whooping, just making random noises. And I can accept cognitively, this is just normal human noises. It's great for their nervous systems for who they are to be able to do those noises. And at the same time I just want to run away and hide from it all because it can be so, so challenging and taxing as well on the system.

And it really struck me the other day, I was amazed because noises that are to do with eating are a particular issue for me. And I know they are for many people who listen to this podcast whether they're autistic or not. But Nelson my son was sat on Paul, my partner, his dad's lap the other day. And Nelson was eating, and he was chewing right next to Paul's ear. And I

was just like, “Is that not bothering you at all? What’s going on?” It just made no sense to me.

Else: How is this even possible?

Maisie: And he was like, “No, not at all.” And for days now I have just been reflecting on how that doesn’t bother him at all and yet for me it’s painful. It’s not about not liking the noise. And I think this is a nuance or a kind of misconception when it comes to noise.

Else: Yes, it’s not a preference.

Maisie: No, it’s not I just don’t like it. It’s, no, it’s painful and I may not like it.

Else: Right. And it’s the same with chargers and stuff like that. There is this hum, electrical appliances. And my husband does not hear them, and it drives me up the wall. I just can’t bear it. Constantly unplugging things because the sound of the chargers do my head in.

Maisie: Yes. See, just the validation. Now I’m like, yes. We haven’t touched on chargers before but yes.

Else: We need to get a special room for chargers. That is privilege but still, yeah, it can be a tiny room.

Maisie: Yeah, well, that’s the thing, yes. Well, and it’s interesting that you touched on privilege there because that was also something that I wanted to highlight is that you and I have vast amounts of privilege compared to so many other people. And I just wanted to make sure that we call attention to that as we’re having this conversation and as people are listening. And also that the things that you and I talk about won’t be representative of what other people who are autistic or neurodiverse in some way will experience. So for example I’m pretty sensory avoidant. I think you are too.

Else: Yes, 100%.

Maisie: Whereas there’s plenty of people out there who are also sensory seekers or in some situations, sensory seekers, and others sensory

avoidant. And I think often I do feel like I'm a massive contradiction in terms of there's times when I want sensory stuff, there's times when I don't.

Else: I am actually, when it comes to visual stimulation, I'm sensory seeking. So that's probably why I became a photographer. And I can just look at artbooks for three hours or go to a museum and stay from 10:00am till 6:00. And just constantly look at paintings and look at art, and just be delighted all the time. So that is my way of sensory seeking and it's wonderful.

Maisie: Yes. And I think I'm the same with textures of fabric and things. For me it's a way of regulating myself and soothing. But it's also a stim, a stimming behaviour of just kind of stroking fabrics that feel nice to my fingers. And I spent years trying not to do that.

Else: Really?

Maisie: Yeah.

Else: Why? Oh my God, that seems so innocuous.

Maisie: I know. I know but it was something because it's something that you see kids do, babies, toddlers. And then there's this, I suppose, societal pressure or expectation that at some point you're going to stop doing that.

Else: You're going to be mature.

Maisie: Yeah, you stop sucking your thumb. You stop having a blankie, cuddly toy, all these things. But I kept doing it. And I remember, I wonder if this is partially why me being autistic wasn't kind of flagged up earlier on in my lifetime because it is so great at soothing me. And so I went through school basically subtly doing this, my school tie, or the edge of my skirt. I would find a way of doing it. And I actually when I was seeing a psychotherapist at one point said, "I'm really trying to stop this."

But I was getting blisters inside my mouth from the kind of pressure of trying to stop myself from doing it. And he was just like, "Well, why are you trying to stop doing it?" And I was like, "Oh."

Else: So good.

Maisie: And he was like, “It’s not harming you and it’s not harming anyone else. And it sounds like it is really of benefit to you.” And I was like, “Oh.” And it was such a relief. I can’t remember how we got onto this now. There’s going to be, by the way if you’re listening, there’s going to be so many segues and my brain’s popping off in this direction.

Else: We were talking about how we met.

Maisie: But it is interesting. So many I think of our behaviours, the things that feel good to us we just feel I think often shame or that we shouldn’t do them. And we try to limit which is what costs us so much and we just mask our way through life.

Else: 100%. And it’s not just that we supress it but also that we sort of decide that that part of us shouldn’t be there, which is also incredibly harmful I think, yeah. It’s just so painful to think, okay, that sort of urge that I have or that thing that I want to constantly do, there’s something wrong with me for wanting that regardless of the thing itself. And that is super harmful, I mean that hurts.

Maisie: Yeah. And do you see that a lot in your clients that you work with?

Else: Sometimes. So a lot of them are incredibly successful at masking and don’t even know they’re doing it. And of course not all of them are autistic. I see a great variety of people with ADHD, autism, the whole mix, sometimes both, very interesting. But many of them haven’t been diagnosed. Some don’t even have any idea that they could be autistic or are just recently waking up to it. Because let’s face it, I am turning 50 at the end of this year. When I was growing up, women couldn’t be autistic.

So I was a troubled child my mum would say, and she took me to a psychiatrist, and I was assessed, and it turned I had extremely high IQ and lots of behavioural issues. But autism wasn’t even a possibility for me back then. And now I’m like, I get it, why I was doing that or not wanting to do

that. That makes perfect sense. But that narrative or that way of explaining my behaviour just wasn't available back then.

And I think that goes for so many of my clients. They're like, "Hang on, maybe that thing where I thought I was broken, there was something massively wrong with me. I am finally getting to wake up to the idea that my brain is just wired differently." Which is massive, I mean that was such a lifechanging thing for me.

Maisie: And how did you come to realise or discover that you are autistic?

Else: I found this book, I can't even remember where I saw it or read about it. It's written by a Dutch author, Bianca Toeps and it's called You Don't Look Autistic At All.

Maisie: That's such a good title.

Else: Brilliant. And I didn't start reading it because I thought I was autistic. I was just, I don't know, it was just some nudge. You know how this stuff happens, it's like, I have to read this book. And after I read the book I was like, "Oh my fucking God, what is this book? How is this woman inside my brain, how does she know all the weird things I do?" And then there was a list in the book I think, I do all these things and I feel all these things. And that sort of started my journey of discovery that I was autistic.

And also then saying to other people after reading the book, "I think I might be autistic." And them saying, "Oh, you didn't know?" And other people of course saying, "No, there's no way." But a sort of a mix of reaction where people used to say, "I thought you knew. Well, I did anyway." It's just really interesting.

Maisie: And were they also autistic, those people who were saying it?

Else: No, they weren't, not all of them.

Maisie: Interesting.

Else: No. But they might have known other people who were autistic, family members or friends. And they sort of recognised some patterns, I think. They were like, “Ah.”

Maisie: That’s so interesting because I have definitely since – so much for me of – and I’ve shared before on a previous podcast episode. I can’t remember which one it was but if you want to hear my story of how I came to realise that I’m autistic and being assessed etc, go back and listen to that episode. So, so much of me seeking out that kind of formal assessment was because I wanted to speak publicly about it. And I’m sure we’ll kind of touch on this at other points today. But self-diagnosis/self-realisation is, we would both agree I am pretty sure is so valid.

Else: 100%.

Maisie: Yes. And receiving a professional assessment of some kind isn’t available, accessible to so many people who are neurodiverse. And even the people who you might go to an assessment through may not be equipped to actually provide you with a ‘diagnosis’ because they might say, “Yeah, but you make eye contact, or you understand sarcasm.” And also you might be autistic but maybe not meet the threshold for what is considered being a formal assessment and diagnosis etc.

Else: So that’s what it’s like right now I think in Holland, that you have to be very dysfunctional to even be considered autistic. That’s part of the deal. You can’t be working, making money, getting up in the morning on a consistent basis because then somehow you’re not suffering enough or whatever it is. Which is so – I mean I have so many things to say about this. There of course, there can’t be any internal suffering, can there, like masking, coping, all the things?

But yeah, and I guess when you look at these and they’re always, in my humble opinion, 50 years behind, maybe it’s 10 if you make it less charged, but yeah. So over here there’s also I think a two-year waitlist for diagnosis. It’s insane. And then when you do get diagnosed, there’s not many benefits you can have. I think in the US you can ask for accommodations when you

go to college and stuff. I don't know what it's like in the UK. Over here I don't know where there is that much available.

And one of the downsides is that if you want to renew or get your driving license you have to be assessed by a psychiatrist to see if you're actually, it's safe for you to even drive and stuff like that. And you pay a shit ton of money etc, etc. So yes, think about getting a diagnosis and why you want it and think you need it.

Maisie: Yes. So this is, my brain's firing in all sorts of directions at the moment. So when I shared on Instagram, I'm autistic, I got a few messages from people who were also autistic going, "I was sure that you were."

Else: Right, I knew it.

Maisie: And since then I definitely kind of feel I've got a sense of some – I'm like, you might be. You could be, especially in children, or you can at least see there's a sensory integration thing going on for them, whether they're seeking it or avoiding it. But to come back to your point, quite a lot of people had submitted questions about the benefits to being assessed, what that process is like. I think so many people who listen to the podcast or follow me on Instagram, probably the same for you because of course you've got your amazing podcast as well.

So we'll talk about that in a moment. But for me, well, you tell me, what was that process like for you and what were the benefits? What kind of took place for you afterwards? Talk us through that.

Else: So I am self-diagnosed. I didn't get the diagnosis. And your podcast actually helped me in making that decision. And also figuring out how it worked here in Holland and realising, okay, first of all there is not a fibre in my being that doubts whether I'm autistic or not. And I've spoken since to so many people with autism who have validated my self-diagnosis. But I was like, "Okay, first of all, I do not need a diagnosis for the work I want to do in the world." I do not need the validation because I am 100% sure.

And also, I don't want to take up that space on the waitlist for someone who really does need it, who does need the therapy, the accommodations, all the stuff that is available to them. So that's what informed my decision. I do still get a lot of people, especially men with reactions like, "There is no way you can be autistic." They get very, very angry. But again this sometimes stems from either them having a family member who has a different kind of autism who's maybe non-verbal, who's in an institution etc, etc.

And they feel very offended because they think I am comparing – somehow comparing themselves to that family member and saying, I don't know, saying, "I'm the same but look at everything I can do." Which is of course not what I'm saying at all. But it's important I think to talk about that. And we had these horrible labels of high functioning and low functioning which they finally got rid of. But that is also a tough conversation to have, and I do understand that.

And in that sense I'm immensely privileged that I am what society expects me to look like in so many ways, not in all ways. Or at least I can pretend to be and hide all the rest so well, yeah.

Maisie: Well, that's the thing, because it's, you know, and this is one of the many problems about the low functioning, high functioning label is that, well, when you're seeing someone being productive, performing well, contributing to society in the way that's expected of someone and all those things. Is that you might be seeing someone do that.

But what you're perhaps not seeing is them falling apart after that as a consequence of either the masking or kind of what's being required of them in order to complete a task, even something that is perhaps deceptively simple and most people would see as, "Oh."

Else: Yes. People have no idea.

Maisie: What are some of the tasks or aspects of being human that are challenging or require something of you?

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Else: So this is where my diagnosis, my self-diagnosis has been so helpful in accepting myself more because there is so much stuff that I think a nine-year-old is much better at than I am. And I went through most of my life thinking there's something very wrong with me. My favourite example is the post office, sending someone a parcel is one of my worst nightmares. The whole thing, it can cost me an entire day just to find stuff to wrap the thing in that I want to send then figure out the address, actually get it right.

Usually somehow the way I write it I even mix it up and there's not enough space left on the label. So that is hard. And then there's the whole thing of taking it there, the human interaction that I have to go through. And I prepare for that and sometimes it doesn't go the way I expect. So they'll ask a question and I'll just be completely stung. I thought I would just hand over money, and you would do this thing for me. Then there's an extra step and my brain just fries and yeah, that is so hard. So hard.

Maisie: Yeah. And what you've touched on is quite a common experience in autistic people where we go to an environment, to a setting and we are preparing ourselves for it, thinking about preparing ahead of time to kind of reduce the burden when we're actually there. So it becomes something that's quite scripted, we're actually scripting for it. And for me it would often be – I think I didn't pick up on this aspect of me being autistic because I can just come across as being very confident. And there are times in my cycle where that is genuinely me.

But there are other times where I'm playing a part, I'm thinking about who would I be if I'm someone who just goes in and loves to look at a menu and know what they're going to get or know what they're going to order. So then when there's a question added in that you haven't anticipated ahead of time everything falls apart.

Else: Yeah. You can actually literally fall apart. I mean I've been crying at the pharmacy because I went there to pick up something, a prescription for my daughter. And prepared everything in my head, went there, went through all the steps and they said, "It's not here." And I just started crying because I just didn't know what to do because I hadn't prepared for that

step. And of course this happens when you're already exhausted etc, etc. Or it could be at some point in your cycle, it's not always but it can be so hard. And then like, I am a grown woman.

I run a business and I'm here in a pharmacy crying because the prescription isn't there for some reason.

Maisie: Yeah, it not going to plan or there being something that just hasn't been anticipated. And this is something for me is so much to do with the sensory side of things, knowing what temperature a place will be so that I can wear the right clothes, so that I can at least take that thing away from what will happen. Or it can also be going in and it's the music in my opinion is slightly too loud for the environment. Or the sound of glasses being loaded into the dishwasher.

Else: Oh my God, yeah.

Maisie: There'll just be environmental noise going on but what's interesting is I go to the same café most mornings here in Margate, Fort's, it's amazing. They do great food, incredible coffee. If you're ever in Margate go get your coffee and food from there. And there's the environmental noise there but for me I go there with such frequency that it's become predictable to me.

Else: Interesting.

Maisie: And it's like my brain has got used to the chat that is happening and because I'm often there on my own. And it really throws me when Paul, my other half, will come in and start chatting to me.

Else: Yes. Because you wanted to do something else.

Maisie: Yeah. But it's taken me a while to figure this out because he was just kind of basically probably thinking I was being quite rude and dismissive of him walking in. He always jokes that people in Margate don't know we're an actual couple. So he'll come in and often I'm preparing for the podcast or I'm writing something. So I am often doing deep work. But

there's something kind of alarming about it. And I've recently realised, it's because yes, there's people talking, there's noise going on, there is music but that's all at a kind of level that's manageable for me, it's fine.

But add in a conversation where someone's sat down opposite me and I'm needing to drown everything else out in order to focus on a continued conversation with them. I just don't have that capacity to do it. And that's what's interesting about autistic brains is that we pick up on the small things, well, 'small' things, the detail going on in the background. And at the same time we're unable to kind of process what's in front of us, the loudest thing, or the person whose right in front of us because we're just – I don't know – for me it would be my hands are dry.

Or I'm so aware of my internal experience of my body, I'm like, I'm dehydrated and there's just panic happening, I need to drink, I need to drink. And Paul's just asked me something and I just cannot take it in. I'm just like, "I've got to go and get something to drink."

Else: It's almost like they're behind this kind of glass or something. And you're sort of there and experiencing all that stuff. And it can't even reach you when you're doing that, when you're like, "I have to fix this or I have to figure this out, or get a drink", or whatever. What it also reminded me of, slightly different because you said when someone comes in and I just can't have the conversation. I think this is another cause of massive misconceptions about people with autism, that they can't be sociable, whatever.

I am amazing and fun at having one-on-one conversations. Add one other person to the mix, it gets hard. If I have enough energy, if I'm doing alright, not that dysregulated I can probably still, it can seem okay. Add more people, it becomes a complete nightmare. Okay, what I'll end up doing which can be perceived as very rude, I'll just focus on one person and just have a very intense conversation with them and leave everyone else out. Yeah, so it looks like I am 'normal' because I can be around other people and talk to them, have conversations with them.

But it's actually very different from a lot of other people in the way I experience it especially in groups.

Maisie: Yes. I have the same experience. And other things come in there as well. Sometimes if there's a group of people and there's two conversations going on at the same time and my brain's hearing all of it together, but then there's also something I think in my head, it feels rude that there's more than one conversation going on as well.

Else: Not right.

Maisie: Yes, that's it, it just doesn't feel right to me. Yeah, there will be times where I think, and this is where I have kind of doubted my knowledge about me being autistic and I've felt like I'm an imposter is that the point in my cycle, pre-ovulation where my hormones are really helping me and I'm chatty, and I'm laughing , and I can be in a group of people, and I can do it. But I had this experience yesterday, it was a Bank Holiday here in the UK and we met up with some other families, went to this park and it was such a great day, really nice people.

We were outside, it was just optimal social conditions for Maisie. And still I got home, and I needed to retreat, and it was interesting. As soon as we moved away from the group of people I just stopped hearing things. Paul was talking to me as we were going towards our car, and I just wasn't hearing. And I think that's the other time we can be perceived as being rude or ignoring people. And it's like a protective mechanism has been switched on and we just kind of remove ourselves. We go just very internal.

And sometimes I have very slow audio processing and it takes me a while to actually hear what someone has said and process it. And then even if I'm not masking and I'm just being myself and responding, that's still a slow process. But if you add in the questioning myself, trying to frame it, all the other stuff, and it's no wonder sometimes I'm just like, "What's the point?" I'll just be by myself over here.

Else: Well, and that's the other thing I think that is so hard when it comes to self-acceptance but also accepting your true desires and needs. That it's

very unacceptable, especially for people identifying as women to claim alone time.

Maisie: Yeah. I have learnt so much from you about this. So go ahead, tell everyone.

Else: I mean, Virginia Woolf of course wrote about this so long ago but it's still so hard because we feel we need to take care of everybody else. There's still this society expectation of we need to be there for our partners, our families. And to want to get away from it all whether it's in a room of your own or a shed, or even just the toilet, just escaping to the bathroom which I know so many of us do. It just becomes too much. We just retreat there because it's less loaded than just saying, "Bye everyone, I just need to be alone."

It's just very hard, I think it's not even that other people would say, "You're not allowed to do this or want this." It's that we say, "I can't have this desire to not be with my family because that makes me a bad human being." And yet it's there very much so.

Maisie: Yeah. We were talking one day about how we both have a studio to go and work in.

Else: Yes, thank God.

Maisie: And how great it is to have somewhere to retreat. But you just kind of casually mentioned one day, going there at the weekend and I was like, "What?" And I realised then how it is very socially acceptable to spend time apart from your family at the weekend if you're going to see another human. If it's like, I want to go meet so and so for a coffee, we're going to go out for dinner, we're going for drinks, we're going to do this. No one bats an eyelid. But when it's like I just want to go into my studio and lie down.

Else: Be alone.

Maisie: Or be alone then that's different. And like you said, we're kind of shooting ourselves in the foot often by just already deciding, no, I can't ask

for that. It's not going to be okay. There's going to be an issue. There's going to be problems.

Else: And people are going to wonder, do you even like me if you don't want to spend time with me. That whole sort of train of thinking that goes like, if I love a person I should want to be with them all the time. And listen, I love my family so much, and I so need to be alone on the weekends, during the week. I couldn't do this without my own space. I would be very, very miserable in a very bad way. And that's the other thing I think that my realising I'm autistic sort of helped me see how I have without knowing that I was autistic, designed a life, created a life that works with my brain.

I mean it's insane looking back, oh my God, of course. People have told me so many times, "You're spending an insane amount of money every month on your studio, whereas you're a coach, you could just coach from whatever, your home office." I'm like, "No, I could not." It's not even a possibility because it would do my head in to not have this space for me where I can be alone and sort of luxuriate in my own being, nap when I need to nap. And just be alone, not even be productive, just be alone because that's what my brain really loves.

Maisie: Yes. And I think so it was a huge realisation for me. It was one of those, you don't realise how you've accepted a belief.

Else: Yes. This is why coaching is so awesome.

Maisie: I know. And then someone just tells you something they do very matter of factly and you're like, what, we're allowed to do that?

Else: Is this legit?

Maisie: Yeah. And so that was just so helpful for me when you said that. I was like, "Whoa." And it was also for me then I kind of went on to realise how for me, my work is a special interest. Autistic people often have areas of passion, either one area of passion, multiple areas. And we kind of talk about them as being special interests and they're the things that we love to

talk about, connect with other people on. It's how we like to spend our time, our energy, all of these things.

And I just feel so fortunate probably like you, that I've constructed this life where it's built around my special interests. I get to talk about hormones, the nervous system, how our brains work, coaching, entrepreneurship. I love all of those things and that's my day-to-day.

Else: I know, it's incredible.

Maisie: Yeah. There was a while, I can't remember when it was but there was a while where I was thinking, I need hobbies.

Else: That's cute.

Maisie: I know because my whole life is work. I'm always thinking about the menstrual cycle. I'm always thinking about my clients' brains. I'm always thinking about my brain. I'm always thinking about this software tech stack for a business. I'm hyper focusing on all of these things. And I was thinking I need a hobby. I've got to find something else that interests me so I can switch off from work. And it was just such a kindness to myself to realise, no, these are my hobbies and they're also my work. And it's okay if I want to work at the weekend.

Else: Yes, oh my God. That's the whole idea of this weird idea we have of productivity and work. That it's linear, we need to be in an office, whatever it is, and it needs to be done at certain times. And it's just insane. That's not how brains, well, at least that's not how our brains work. And all the people I work with, all the smart humans they get their best ideas when they're in the shower, on a walk. Their brain is continuously doing stuff whilst they're doing other things. So productivity is a completely different beast to them. And hobby and work, it's completely meaningless.

I don't know where I stop working. Last night I was watching fabulous, Princess and the Frog, Disney film with my daughter. And there is this song and all of a sudden, I was thinking, this would be so useful in coaching, this metaphor, whatever. Maybe I will write about this or use it in the podcast.

Isn't that the best thing ever? It's so fun. And it doesn't take away any of my enjoyment or being in the moment. It's not stressful. It's not like I'm pushing myself to do or be something.

It's just like I am so obsessed in a good way with this thing, and I want to, in any possible way get better at it and create amazing stuff for my people. So of course constantly my brain is on the lookout for things in the world, whatever it is I'm doing. That's so fun and it's so cool. And it makes us unique. And it makes us create unique amazing solutions and content for our people.

Maisie: Yes. I agree wholeheartedly there. And then I think then the other part, now where my brain goes to next is then it's like, yes, our brains have this extraordinary capacity for coming up with ideas, thinking things, just this flow state as well that comes from it when we're just in it and we're just enjoying it. And then not having the expectation of myself that just because my brain can work very quickly and in a very focused way that therefore I should do that all of the time.

Else: Yes, oh my God, I love that you're saying that. That is so important because some people are like, "I'm just going to do that eight hours a day." I'm just laughing because it's so impossible to do that.

Maisie: Yeah. So now I have been reducing the hours that I work this year and just working in a different way, being more effective with my time, using self-coaching, all of those things. And it has helped me so much to reduce the hours as I'm sure it would for anyone just across the board.

Else: All humans.

Maisie: And again I'm in a privileged position where I'm able to do this. I work for myself. I have a setup that allows me to do this etc. But my last year and the year previous, such a huge concern and it was at the forefront of my mind as I made any decision and as I went about any day is, am I going to lose the ability to talk today? Because there would be, you know, when I was going towards burnout and things, autistic burnout then I would

lose my verbal skills and at particular points in the cycle as well, premenstrually, that would really be there.

And I was learning how to work with my nervous system in a different way. Learning how to regulate and kind of process, understanding that I'm autistic and etc, etc. So now that I'm working with my brain in a more compassionate way, and resting even when I don't want to, when I'm like, I'm bored. I've been getting very acquainted with feeling bored, it's just a feeling, like any other feeling. I can process this. I can be bored. So as to give myself adequate preparation for talking, being around other people, coaching people on calls, all of these things.

This morning because I like to record my podcasts first thing in the morning. But I purposefully was like, can we do it in the middle of the day because I knew I was with all the humans yesterday. And I want to make sure that I've got time just recalibrating before our conversation.

Else: That's the other thing, when you learn to sort of create a handbook for how your brain works.

Maisie: I'm glad you're touching on this, okay.

Else: So this is a lot of what I do with my clients and what I'm constantly doing for myself. Then you can make intentional decisions like you did today. So we're not doing the podcast in the morning because I need recovery time. And people will ask me stuff like, "So do you never go to birthday parties?" The answer by the way is no, I definitely don't. But recently my mother-in-law had her 70th birthday and it coincided with my daughter doing some orchestra thing, etc. I was like, "I want to go there."

Is my intention to go there even though I know it's going to be extremely difficult for my brain and I will need probably one to two days of recovery. But I have again the incredible luxury of setting mostly my own schedule. So I could totally do it. Now, do I want to do that every week? Of course not. But we get to be intentional. And then if it's massively important to us we get to go and then just recover in the way we need to and that works for us.

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Maisie: I think what's been useful for me is having that awareness of the things that are a struggle for me on the whole. And then just deciding I'm not available for those things anymore. I'm not going to do those things, whilst at the same time learning to care for myself, work with my nervous system, so that I don't need to be rigid within that. So that there will be times where I choose, no, I do want to do that. And if I am going to do that then how am I going to be flexible within that? What am I going to do in the run up to it? What am I going to do when I'm there? What am I going to do after it?

So it can be both a kindness to say, "No, I'm not going to do that." And that's it. And it may also be, no, I do want to do that. And what support might I need as I do that?

Else: Exactly. And interestingly another thing I used to do which I was like, how can I have done this being autistic? But I used to do a lot of work as a keynote speaker. But the way I managed this, I would go there all over Europe, big stages, do my thing and disappear if I could avoid it. And if I had to do the reception and I wasn't courageous or bold enough to say no or to do the pre-event dinner with the important people, then I would just get this massive, massive, horrible headache. I mean it would be impossible to function.

So somehow, I managed to create a way that worked for me just basically being invisible apart from speaking at the event, doing my thing, which again, which is being in what I wanted to share and teach. And that made it possible for me to navigate all the other stuff.

Maisie: Yeah. And I think that's the thing. I'm very comfortable one-on-one, very comfortable talking to hundreds or thousands of people, anything in between…

Else: Is so hard.

Maisie: But it's like you said, it's because often when we're talking, when we're speaking, we're getting to talk about the things that we love.

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Else: People are always like, “Weren’t you terrified, all those people staring?” I’m like, “No, they have to know this, that’s why I’m here.”

Maisie: Yeah, it’s so compelling, yeah.

Else: Yes, that’s maybe the autistic, not just this hyper interest or special interest but also this sense of justice. We’re always advocating and thinking, this is just not right, and I have to change it.

Maisie: Which is why I think particularly, well, both of our work but in kind of different ways. I don’t know. Maybe not so different ways actually. But I’m just thinking about the work that you do and especially when you’re working with people who are in positions of leadership within different companies and things. So I’d love to hear more about your thoughts on that and kind of how.

Else: That’s the other thing, the way we perceive leadership. So I also do a lot of work in corporate. And there’s still this perception of sadly a leader needs to be this white male dude who is extroverted, charismatic etc, etc. And if you want to become a leader that is what you need to look like to get that promotion, to even be perceived as possible leadership material.

And then this also become internalized. So a lot of people I work with are like, “No, but I’m an introvert. Or I don’t like going to Friday afternoon drinks or whatever, so I could never have that position.” And we need to change that so bad because we need leaders who can listen for example. How massively important would that be? People who know what their team wants, people who are focused on content rather than bullshitting their way to the top, all that stuff. And I’m not saying get rid of all the white dudes. We can keep a couple.

Maisie: It’s okay, my audience are safe.

Else: No, but listen, we need diversity, so we need a couple, sure. And then we need to reframe our idea, what a successful leader looks like, how they speak. Are they talking all the time? Are they massively charismatic or could they also be something else, something completely different? And

that is also part of the work I'm trying to do, in speaking, giving lectures within companies sometimes, all that stuff, to get people to think, what am I missing out on because I'm not seeing those people. Or I'm not considering them as leaders because I have such a limited idea of what that looks like.

And then on the flipside of that, taking away all the internal barriers that the people who could be those leaders have because they have internalised all those beliefs, that could never be me because I'm not like that. They're amazing, they're empathetic. They care so deeply about the companies, I mean it's insane. Especially when you look at a lot of people with autism, they are so incredibly internally motivated and driven. They will do anything. And that is so, usually so unrecognised. And they could be amazing leaders too.

Maisie: Yeah, just over here nodding. The other thing that you reminded me of just as you were talking there was that you had told me about the company, is it Ultranaut's?

Else: Yes, oh my God, so inspiring.

Maisie: Yeah. So you told me because as part of my master coach training project which was basically write my job description then only do my job. And then within that there was all sorts of nuances, extra things that needed to happen. But as part of that you told me about Ultranaut's and how they have a BioDecks for each person who works on the team and within the company. And it's basically like a human user manual.

Else: Yes, so good.

Maisie: And it's so good. So now I've brought that in, I've done one for me, and anyone who works alongside me, the invitation is there that if it feels good to them to do it then they can do that. But it was just really fascinating for me to do for myself. And I've shared it with Paul as well. And he was like, "This is really fancy." It is basically one sheet of information about what are your preferences, what are the things that help you to thrive? What are the things that are going to make your job harder? Those kind of things.

Else: Which makes so much sense to have when you think about it. And just to give people some context if they've never heard of Ultranaut's. I think they hire, 75% of the people who work there are neurodiverse which is compared to the rest of the workplace is incredible.

And they have completely also opened up their hiring process in that you can apply for jobs through chat for example if you're non-verbal, all that stuff in addition to this, what you already mentioned. People have their own kind of manual, this is how you should contact me. Don't send me an email, you will never get a reply or the opposite. Do not ever try to phone me, which by the way also goes for me. I will not pick up the phone, it's not going to happen.

Maisie: But you know what was really funny because I looked at it because I found one of them, the kind of the datapoints that are on that sheet. And one of them is, I felt so much relief even just reading it. If you don't hear back from me, it's best to… And I was like, "Oh." Because that was such a huge barrier for me going to grow my team and bring other people on was knowing that I cannot get back to people and there's so much kind of tied up within that. But just realising, in a company where 75% of the people who work there are autistic, they actually have that on there, if I don't get back to you.

Else: These are the steps. And listen, I mean one of the things I notice when I give a talk about neurodiversity in the workplace, a lot of people come up to me afterwards and say, "Listen, I don't think I'm neurodivergent but the stuff you talk about like the accommodations, that would be so awesome for so many of us too." So this change, if we can make this happen not just within companies who focus on a neurodivergent audience but within all the companies, it would just make life so much easier for maybe 70/80% of the people.

Maisie: Yes, agreed, 100%. Okay, this has been amazing. And we're going to hit pause. Else and I are going to continue talking and we're going to continue recording it. But this is part one of our conversation and there's a

part two that you can come back to and listen next week. So we'll see you then.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of the *Period Power* podcast. If you enjoyed learning how to make your cycle work for you, head over to maisiehill.com for more.