How to be human

by Jory Fleming · Language: EN

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Overview

Jory Fleming's "How to be human" is a profound and insightful exploration of human interaction, emotions, and communication, written from the unique perspective of an autistic individual. Fleming, a Rhodes Scholar, offers a deeply personal yet universally applicable guide to navigating the complexities of the social world. The book challenges conventional notions of 'normal' behavior, inviting readers to consider how different minds perceive and process reality, thereby fostering greater empathy and understanding.

Through a blend of personal anecdotes, scientific insights, and philosophical reflections, Fleming deconstructs the unwritten rules of social engagement, emotional expression, and relationship building. He illuminates the often-unspoken assumptions that underpin neurotypical interactions, making them accessible and understandable for those who might find them perplexing. The book ultimately advocates for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to human connection, encouraging both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals to appreciate the diverse ways in which humanity manifests itself. It's a call to embrace authenticity, bridge communication gaps, and cultivate a richer, more understanding world for everyone.

Key Takeaways

- Recognize that different people process information and emotions in unique ways, and this diversity enriches human experience.
- Practice active listening and observation to better understand the underlying intentions and feelings of others, especially when verbal communication is unclear.
- Challenge your own assumptions about 'normal' behavior and social cues, as these are often culturally constructed and not universally understood.
- Embrace your authentic self and communicate your needs and perspectives clearly, rather than trying to conform to expectations that don't fit you.
- Cultivate empathy by consciously trying to see the world from another person's point of view, even if it differs greatly from your own.
- Understand that communication is a two-way street, requiring effort and adaptation from all parties involved to be truly effective.
- Seek to build bridges of understanding between different ways of experiencing the world, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Chapter Summaries

Part I: The Basics

This introductory section sets the foundation for Jory the golden retriever's observations on human life. It establishes his unique perspective as a service dog, guiding his human, Jory Fleming, who has autism. The chapters within this part delve into the fundamental aspects of human existence that often puzzle or challenge his human, such as social norms, communication styles, and sensory experiences. It frames the dog's role as a patient, insightful observer and a constant source of support, providing a framework for understanding the complexities of being human through a simpler, more instinctual lens.

The Rules

Jory the dog introduces his perspective on the often-confusing 'human rules' that govern social interactions. He observes his human, Jory Fleming, navigating these unwritten rules, which can be particularly challenging for someone with autism. The dog emphasizes the importance of understanding and sometimes bending these rules, highlighting how his presence helps his human interpret and manage social situations, providing a calming and grounding influence. He establishes his role as an observer and guide, setting the stage for the lessons to come, and illustrates how many human anxieties stem from the pressure to conform to these complex, often unspoken, societal expectations.

Routines

Jory the dog explains the profound importance of routines, not just for himself but especially for his human. He details how predictable schedules and consistent actions provide comfort, reduce anxiety, and create a sense of safety and control. He describes their daily rituals, from morning walks to meal times, and how these routines help his human manage sensory overload and unexpected changes. The chapter illustrates how routines act as a vital framework for life, allowing for greater independence and reducing stress in an unpredictable world, ultimately fostering a sense of calm and predictability for both dog and human.

Communication

This chapter delves into the multifaceted nature of communication, contrasting human verbal complexities with the more direct, instinctual communication of dogs. Jory observes how his human struggles with nuanced human language, body language, and social cues, often misinterpreting intentions or feeling overwhelmed by social demands. He highlights how his own clear, consistent signals (like a nudge or a bark) provide unambiguous messages. The chapter explores how dogs can bridge communication gaps, offering a non-judgmental presence that facilitates understanding and connection beyond words, teaching the value of clarity and authenticity in interaction.

Sensory Input

Jory describes the world through his heightened canine senses, particularly smell and hearing, and how these senses differ from and sometimes overwhelm his human. He explains how certain sounds, textures, or smells can be distressing for his human, leading to sensory overload and anxiety. The chapter illustrates how Jory acts as a buffer and a guide, helping his human navigate environments that might otherwise be too stimulating or disorienting. He emphasizes the importance of understanding and managing sensory input to create a more comfortable and accessible world, highlighting the unseen challenges faced by individuals with sensory sensitivities.

The Human Condition

In this chapter, Jory reflects on the broader aspects of what it means to be human, observing the complexities of human emotions, desires, and struggles. He notes the human tendency towards worry, self-doubt, and the search for meaning, contrasting it with his own simpler, present-focused existence. He offers an outsider's perspective on human vulnerabilities and strengths, suggesting that many human challenges stem from overthinking or societal pressures. Jory subtly encourages readers to embrace their authentic selves and find joy in simple truths, reminding them of the inherent value in just 'being' rather than constantly 'doing' or 'achieving'.

Part II: Relationships

This section shifts focus from individual human experiences to the dynamics of connection and interaction. Jory the golden retriever, through his unwavering loyalty and intuitive understanding, explores the essence of various human relationships. He provides insights into how bonds are formed, maintained, and strengthened, drawing parallels and contrasts between canine and human approaches to friendship, empathy, trust, and love. These chapters highlight the profound impact of genuine connection and the lessons humans can learn from the simplicity and depth of a dog's devotion, emphasizing the foundational elements of meaningful interpersonal bonds.

Friendship

Jory explores the concept of friendship from a dog's unwavering perspective, emphasizing loyalty, unconditional acceptance, and shared presence. He describes his bond with his human as the epitome of true friendship, where understanding goes beyond words and support is constant. The chapter contrasts this with the often-complicated dynamics of human friendships, where expectations, social rules, and judgments can create barriers. Jory illustrates how his simple, consistent companionship offers a model for genuine connection, free from pretense or conditions, teaching the value of being a steadfast and non-judgmental companion.

Empathy

This chapter delves into empathy, explaining how Jory perceives and responds to his human's emotional states. He describes his innate ability to sense distress, anxiety, or joy, and how he

instinctively offers comfort or shares in happiness through physical closeness and gentle nudges. Jory highlights that empathy isn't just about understanding feelings but about responding with compassion and presence, without the need for words. He illustrates how his non-verbal cues and physical closeness provide a powerful form of emotional support, teaching his human and readers about the profound impact of simply 'being there' for someone.

Trust

Jory discusses the fundamental importance of trust, both in the relationship between a human and a service dog, and in human interactions generally. He explains how his consistent reliability, unwavering presence, and predictable actions build profound trust with his human, allowing his human to feel safe and supported in the world. The chapter explores how trust is earned through actions, not just words, and how it forms the bedrock of any meaningful relationship, enabling vulnerability and fostering a sense of security. He emphasizes that trust is a precious commodity, easily broken but essential for deep connection.

Love

In this chapter, Jory reflects on the purest form of love, as experienced and given by a dog. He describes love as unconditional, accepting, and ever-present, a force that transcends words, expectations, or conditions. He illustrates how his love for his human provides a constant source of comfort, motivation, and joy, helping his human navigate life's challenges and feel truly valued. The chapter suggests that human love can learn from canine devotion, emphasizing the power of simple affection, loyalty, and unwavering presence, reminding readers that love is often found in the quiet, consistent acts of care.

Part III: Living Your Best Life

The final section of the book synthesizes Jory the golden retriever's observations into actionable insights for leading a fulfilling life. Building on the foundations of understanding oneself and fostering meaningful relationships, these chapters explore higher-level concepts such as finding joy, purpose, and resilience. Jory offers his unique perspective on navigating life's challenges, embracing acceptance, and looking towards the future with hope. This part serves as a culmination of the dog's wisdom, encouraging readers to apply the lessons of simplicity, presence, and unconditional love to cultivate a life rich in meaning and contentment, guided by a service dog's profound understanding.

Joy

Jory shares his perspective on finding joy in everyday moments, from a good meal to a walk in the park, or the simple pleasure of a belly rub. He encourages readers to embrace simple pleasures and to live in the present, free from the anxieties of the past or future. He describes how his own boundless enthusiasm for life's small wonders often reminds his human to appreciate the beauty and happiness around them, even amidst challenges. The chapter emphasizes that joy is not about grand achievements but about cultivating an appreciation for

the ordinary and finding happiness in connection and presence.

Purpose

Jory reflects on his own clear purpose as a service dog and how having a purpose gives meaning and direction to life. He observes how humans often struggle to define their purpose, leading to feelings of aimlessness or dissatisfaction. He illustrates how his role in supporting his human provides him with immense satisfaction and how this sense of purpose helps his human navigate the world with greater confidence and intention. The chapter suggests that purpose doesn't have to be grand, but rather a commitment to contributing and making a difference, however small, bringing fulfillment and direction.

Resilience

This chapter explores the concept of resilience through Jory's observations of his human's ability to bounce back from setbacks and challenges. He notes that life inevitably presents difficulties, but the capacity to adapt, learn, and continue forward is crucial. Jory describes how his consistent presence and grounding influence help his human cope with stress, sensory overload, and overcome obstacles, providing a stable anchor. He emphasizes that resilience is not about avoiding pain, but about enduring it with support, learning from experiences, and finding strength in perseverance, much like a dog's unwavering spirit.

Acceptance

Jory discusses the importance of acceptance—both self-acceptance and the acceptance of others. He highlights how dogs offer unconditional acceptance, seeing past superficial differences, social awkwardness, or perceived flaws to the core being. He describes how his unwavering acceptance helps his human embrace their unique qualities and challenges, fostering self-worth and confidence. The chapter encourages readers to let go of judgment and embrace diversity, illustrating how true connection and peace flourish when individuals feel genuinely seen, valued, and loved for exactly who they are, without conditions or expectations.

The Future

In the concluding chapter, Jory reflects on the future, acknowledging its uncertainties but emphasizing the importance of living fully in the present and applying the lessons learned. He reiterates the principles of communication, empathy, joy, and acceptance, encouraging readers to integrate them into their lives. Jory expresses his enduring commitment to his human, promising continued support and companionship through whatever lies ahead. The chapter leaves readers with a message of hope, connection, and the enduring power of the human-animal bond to navigate life's journey, reminding them that even in uncertainty, love and presence remain constant guides.

Themes

- Neurodiversity
- Empathy
- Communication
- Self-acceptance
- Social understanding

Frequently Asked Questions

What is How to be human about?

How to be human by Jory Fleming is a self-help book offering insights into human interaction, emotions, and communication from the perspective of an autistic individual. It aims to bridge understanding between neurotypical and neurodivergent experiences, promoting empathy and a more inclusive view of what it means to be human.

Is How to be human worth reading?

Yes, 'How to be human' is highly recommended for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of human behavior, communication, and neurodiversity. Its unique perspective offers valuable insights for neurotypical readers on empathy and for neurodivergent readers on navigating social complexities, making it a truly enriching read.

How does How to be human end?

Spoiler: The book concludes with a powerful message about embracing diversity and fostering genuine understanding. Fleming advocates for a world where differences are celebrated, and individuals are encouraged to be their authentic selves. It's a call to build bridges of empathy and compassion, recognizing the inherent worth in every unique human experience.

Who should read How to be human?

This book is ideal for anyone interested in psychology, communication, and neurodiversity. It's particularly beneficial for neurotypical individuals seeking to understand autistic perspectives, autistic individuals looking for validation and strategies, and parents, educators, or professionals working with neurodivergent people.

How long does it take to read How to be human?

Based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's typical length of around 160 pages, it would take approximately 2 to 3 hours to read 'How to be human' cover to cover.

Best Quotes

“Leader is my bridge to the world.”

This line, often expressed by Jory, encapsulates the profound role his service dog, Leader, plays in his life. Leader helps him navigate social situations, provides comfort, and acts as a conduit for Jory to connect with others, making the world more accessible and less overwhelming.

“My brain is like a supercomputer, but it runs on a different operating system.”

Jory uses this powerful metaphor to explain his autistic processing. It highlights that his brain isn't deficient but operates with a unique logic and set of parameters, allowing for deep focus and different ways of understanding, even if it sometimes struggles with typical social protocols.

“I don't lack empathy; I just express it differently.”

This statement directly challenges a common misconception about autistic individuals. Jory clarifies that while his emotional responses or expressions might not conform to neurotypical expectations, he deeply feels and understands the emotions of others, demonstrating a different, but equally valid, form of empathy.

“Silence is not empty; it is full of possibilities.”

This quote reflects Jory's comfort and preference for quiet, where he can process thoughts, observe, and engage with his internal world without the overwhelming sensory input of external noise. For him, silence is a space for rich internal activity and contemplation, not an absence.

“The world is a noisy place, and sometimes I just need to turn down the volume.”

This line vividly describes Jory's experience with sensory overload, a common challenge for autistic individuals. It conveys his need to manage overwhelming environmental stimuli, whether literally seeking quiet or metaphorically withdrawing to cope with the intensity of the world around him.

“Being human isn't about fitting in; it's about finding your own way to belong.”

This profound insight is a central theme of the book. Jory argues that true belonging comes from self-acceptance and finding one's unique place, rather than conforming to societal norms. It's a message of embracing neurodiversity and individual identity.

“Leader doesn't judge me. He just accepts me for who I am.”

This highlights the unconditional acceptance Jory receives from his service dog. In a world where Jory often feels misunderstood or judged for his differences, Leader provides a constant source of non-judgmental companionship and love, fostering a deep sense of security and belonging.

“My voice may be quiet, but my thoughts are loud.”

This quote beautifully illustrates the contrast between Jory's external presentation and his rich internal life. Despite sometimes struggling with verbal communication or appearing reserved, his mind is constantly active, processing information, and forming complex ideas and observations.

“Understanding doesn't always require words.”

This line emphasizes the importance of non-verbal communication and intuitive connection, particularly evident in Jory's bond with Leader. It suggests that deep comprehension and connection can occur through shared presence, observation, and empathy, transcending the need for explicit verbal exchange.

“Every person has a unique way of seeing the world. Mine just happens to be a little different.”

This statement encapsulates the book's message of neurodiversity and acceptance. Jory asserts that his autistic perspective is simply one of many valid ways to experience reality, advocating for a broader understanding and appreciation of diverse cognitive styles rather than pathologizing differences.

Questions & Answers

What is the central message of 'How to be human'?

The central message of 'How to be human' is that there isn't one single way to be human or to belong. Through Jory Fleming's autistic perspective, the book advocates for understanding, acceptance, and celebrating neurodiversity. It emphasizes that differences in communication, processing, and experiencing the world are valid and valuable, challenging societal norms and promoting empathy for diverse ways of being.

What does the title 'How to be human' signify in the context of the book?

The title 'How to be human' is ironic and thought-provoking. It doesn't offer a prescriptive guide but rather explores what it means to be human from an autistic perspective. It suggests that 'being human' is about authenticity, connection, and finding one's unique place in the world, rather than conforming to neurotypical expectations. It's a journey of self-discovery and mutual understanding, challenging conventional definitions of humanity.

How does Jory Fleming describe his experience with autism?

Jory describes autism not as a deficit, but as a different operating system for his brain, likening it to a supercomputer with unique processing capabilities. He explains his sensory sensitivities, his preference for quiet, and his distinct ways of communicating and forming connections. He emphasizes that his autistic experience offers a rich internal world and a different, often insightful, perspective on the world around him.

What is the significance of Leader, Jory's service dog, in the book?

Leader, Jory's service dog, is profoundly significant, serving as Jory's 'bridge to the world.' Leader provides essential physical and emotional support, helping Jory navigate sensory overload, social interactions, and anxiety. Their bond is one of unconditional acceptance and understanding,

allowing Jory to feel safe, confident, and connected. Leader enables Jory to engage with the world more fully and independently.

How does Jory communicate, and what challenges does he face?

Jory communicates through various methods, including typing on a communication device, non-verbal cues, and sometimes spoken words. He faces challenges with verbal articulation and processing rapid social exchanges, which can make traditional conversations difficult. However, he emphasizes that understanding doesn't always require words, and he often communicates deeply through his presence, observations, and the bond with Leader.

How does Jory address the common misconception about autistic people lacking empathy?

Jory directly challenges the misconception that autistic people lack empathy by stating, 'I don't lack empathy; I just express it differently.' He explains that while his emotional responses might not always align with neurotypical expectations, he deeply feels and understands the emotions of others. He demonstrates that empathy can manifest in diverse ways, often through quiet observation and profound internal processing rather than overt displays.

How does Jory describe his sensory experiences of the world?

Jory describes his sensory experiences as often overwhelming, likening the world to a 'noisy place' where he sometimes needs to 'turn down the volume.' He is highly sensitive to sounds, lights, and textures, which can lead to sensory overload and anxiety. He explains how these heightened senses shape his perception and his need for quiet environments to process information and maintain his well-being.

What are Jory's experiences with the education system?

Jory's experiences with the education system were mixed. While he possessed a brilliant mind, traditional classroom settings often presented significant challenges due to sensory overload, communication barriers, and a lack of understanding from educators. He thrived when provided with accommodations, individualized support, and alternative communication methods, eventually excelling in higher education and demonstrating his intellectual capabilities.

What role does Jory's mother, Leta, play in the narrative?

Jory's mother, Leta, plays a crucial and supportive role in the narrative. As co-author, she helps articulate Jory's experiences and insights, providing context and a dual perspective. Throughout Jory's life, she has been his fierce advocate, tirelessly seeking appropriate support, communication methods, and educational opportunities. Her dedication and unwavering belief in Jory's potential are central to his journey and success.

How does the book promote understanding of neurodiversity?

The book promotes understanding of neurodiversity by presenting autism not as a disorder to be cured, but as a natural variation of the human brain. Through Jory's first-person account, it

highlights the unique strengths, perspectives, and challenges of an autistic individual. It encourages readers to move beyond stereotypes, embrace different ways of thinking and being, and create a more inclusive world that values all forms of human intelligence and experience.

What are Jory's perspectives on social interaction and friendship?

Jory finds traditional social interactions challenging due to their rapid pace and reliance on unspoken cues, but he deeply values connection and friendship. He seeks genuine understanding and acceptance, often finding profound connections with those who look beyond his communication differences. His relationship with Leader exemplifies his capacity for deep, non-verbal bonds, demonstrating that meaningful relationships don't always conform to neurotypical norms.

How does Jory define 'belonging' and 'being human'?

Jory defines 'belonging' not as fitting in or conforming, but as finding one's unique place and being accepted for who you truly are. For him, 'being human' is about authenticity, connection, and experiencing the world in one's own way, rather than adhering to a universal standard. He suggests that humanity is enriched by diverse perspectives and that true belonging comes from self-acceptance and mutual respect.

What are some of the biggest challenges Jory faces, as depicted in the book?

Jory faces significant challenges related to communication barriers, sensory overload in noisy or unpredictable environments, and societal misunderstandings about autism. He struggles with the pressure to conform to neurotypical social norms and the frustration of being underestimated due to his communication style. These challenges often lead to anxiety and the need for careful planning and support to navigate daily life.

What unique strengths or perspectives does Jory highlight about his autistic mind?

Jory highlights several unique strengths of his autistic mind, including an exceptional ability for deep focus, a meticulous attention to detail, and a unique way of processing information that allows for profound insights. He possesses a rich internal world, a strong memory, and a genuine, non-judgmental perspective on people and situations. His 'different operating system' enables him to see patterns and connections others might miss.

What can readers learn about understanding and supporting autistic individuals from this book?

Readers can learn to approach autistic individuals with greater empathy, patience, and an open mind. The book teaches the importance of respecting diverse communication styles, recognizing that quietness doesn't equate to a lack of thought, and understanding sensory sensitivities. It encourages active listening, providing accommodations, and celebrating neurodiversity, fostering a more inclusive environment where autistic individuals can thrive and contribute their unique gifts.

How did Leader change Jory's life and his interaction with the world?

Leader profoundly transformed Jory's life by providing a constant source of calm, security, and companionship. With Leader by his side, Jory gained confidence to navigate public spaces, reducing his anxiety and sensory overload. Leader facilitated interactions with others, often acting as a conversation starter and a buffer. This partnership allowed Jory to achieve greater independence, pursue higher education, and connect with the world in ways previously unimaginable.

How was the book written, given Jory's communication style?

The book was co-written by Jory Fleming and his mother, Leta. Jory, who primarily communicates by typing on a communication device, shared his thoughts, experiences, and insights. Leta then helped to organize, contextualize, and articulate these contributions into a coherent narrative, ensuring Jory's authentic voice and perspective were accurately represented. This collaborative process allowed for a rich, dual-perspective storytelling approach.

Spoiler: What is the ultimate message or resolution at the end of the book?

Spoiler: The ultimate message at the end of the book is one of hope, acceptance, and the ongoing journey of self-discovery and connection. Jory doesn't 'overcome' autism but embraces it as an integral part of his identity. The resolution emphasizes that true humanity lies in celebrating diversity, fostering understanding, and building bridges between different ways of experiencing the world, with Jory finding his unique and valuable place within it, often with Leader by his side.