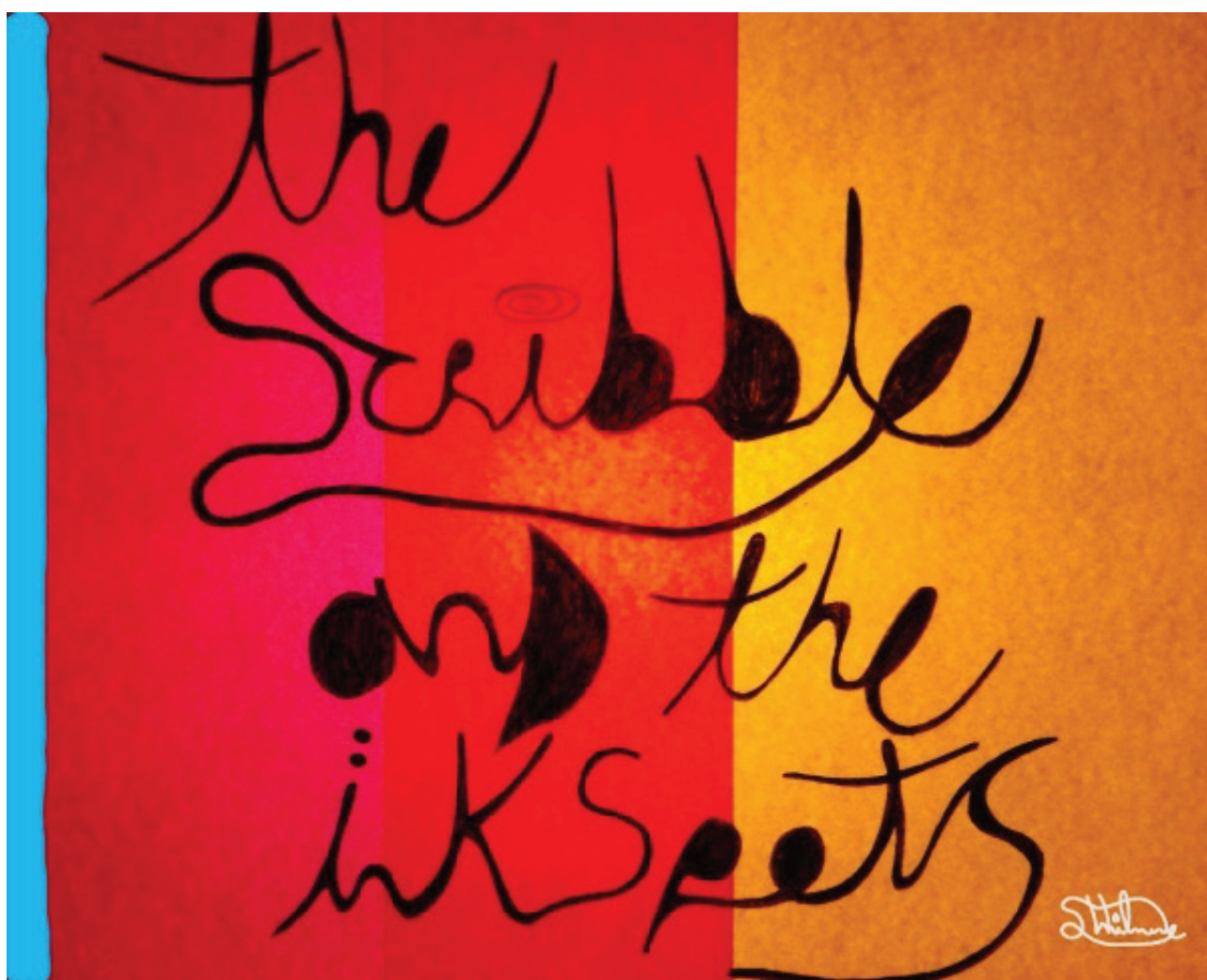


Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **101** January 2020



National
Autistic
Society

The Spectrum

The Spectrum is run by and for autistic adults (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-sixteens). The magazine aims to connect autistic people through their letters and articles and to share information so that they can lead more independent lives.

Please note that *the Spectrum* receives many letters each quarter so it is not possible to respond to every one, nor for every contribution to be printed. Discussions on editorial choices will not be entered into. The magazine protects the identity of contributors by not printing full names unless the writer asks for their full name to be used.

The Spectrum is available at

www.autism.org.uk/thespectrum

or by paying a subscription. To subscribe you, we need your postal address. Please subscribe online or contact the Goth for a subscription form. All contact details are below. Organisations requiring multiple copies: please get in touch.

Editor: the Goth

National Autistic Society production support: the Content Team

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This magazine was founded as *Asperger United* in 1993 by Pamela Yates and Patricia Howlin, in association with the Maudsley Hospital, and Mark Bebbington and Judy Lynch of the National Autistic Society.

This was in response to a recognised dearth of services for people with Asperger syndrome and the potential for self-help and networking as a means of support for this group.

The provisions for editor's and sub-editor's post was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at. This post also provided the possibility of work experience and responsibility and has benefited those who have held the position. These are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the current editor, the Goth (who does not wear black).

Pamela Yates provided support and advice to the editors until the publication was handed over to the National Autistic Society in 2000.

The name *Asperger United* was chosen by the group of original readers as the most "appropriate name" for the publication. This was suggested by Anna Kaczynski. The name *the Spectrum* was suggested by dozens of people and chosen in an online poll in 2018.

Please send all correspondence and subscription requests to:

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All we need is your email address and we will add you to the email notification list.

Please note that the views expressed in *the Spectrum* are not necessarily those of the editor, the National Autistic Society or those involved in the publication of the magazine.

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The Spectrum is available in **large print** on A3 sheets (double the size of this page). If you need large print, please let us know using the email address or postal address above.

Contributions for the next issue should reach *the Spectrum* by **17 February 2020**

Welcome to the January edition of *the Spectrum*.

I feel that we've struck several rich veins of thought recently: significant responses on the subjects of cults, indoctrination, socialising and social problems, and of course sensory differences, have come in.

Naturally, this issue I have concentrated on had the largest response, which was the next-issue suggestion last quarter, sensory stuff. But it seems that a large number of you are worried about when to know when to "do as you're told" and blend in and when to realise that you are being manipulated, when you should fairly and reasonably refuse to co-operate — cults are an extreme example of when you should refuse to get involved, but minor examples present

themselves every day: when it's better to refuse now, so that you avoid the meltdown this evening, or refuse now, otherwise you won't sleep all night. We experience so many variations on this theme.

I feel that this is the biggest aspect of autism that unites our experience of the world.

And finally, Autscope has decided to advertise early — details are on the back cover. I look forward to this conference every year and also to meeting those of you who attend; last year I realised that at least two regular attendees are readers but have never said hello to me! Please don't be shy! I love meeting readers,

Yours,

the Editor

the sensory edition — suggestion for next issue on page 9

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Story

by Sam

I approached the door with a certain caution. I didn't want to go to this party — just hearing the idea repulsed me — but I didn't want to sound rude or unsociable to my friends. From the outside, it didn't look too bad. I kept telling myself that it would all be okay, that I would at least have a good time. I took a deep breath, grabbed the PVC door handle (which I hated the feel of) and pushed forward into the house. "Huh, this isn't so bad," was my first thought — no loud music, no flashy lights, nothing obnoxious or intrusive. I was starting to get my hopes up that I could have a good, perhaps even a great time. I took off my shoes and walked into the kitchen, where everyone else was. Exactly what I didn't want to do, but what I was expected to do if I was to pass off as "neurotypical".

I could've stood there and twiddled and fiddled with my piece of string all day if I wanted to, but if I had to come off as "normal", I knew I'd have to push myself into things I didn't want to do. So, I slowly and cautiously approached the kitchen, and as soon as I caught sight of the interior I immediately wanted to run away. Bright lights hung from the ceiling and scorched my eyes, foodstuffs laid out on the

table made me feel sick and dirty inside, and the faces of everyone in there — fifteen or so people, all turning to me at once — put me on the spot. Now when I say it put me on the spot, I don't mean it as in I felt on edge. No, no, no . . . I felt like I was standing on a little podium with barely enough room for my feet to stand straight, and below me were hundreds of sharp spikes, and one wrong move would see me down there. A lot for a simple social gathering, I know. But there's something I haven't told you: I'm autistic. What does that mean? You'll find out later, don't worry about that for now.

Anyway, the room was quickly filled with many "Hello, Alex!"s and "How are you?"s from all angles, some voices blistering my ears just to hear. The sheer amount of sensory information all at once left me speechless. I had no clue what to say: do I answer truthfully?

Would I come across as rude? Or do I make up a lie and say I'm okay, when I'm really not? Who do I even respond to first? Have I seen any of them before? Any words I attempted to conjure choked themselves in my throat, but then I remembered I had to act "normal", so I forced out an "I'm okay, I guess," and that

was the end of it. I waited for everyone to look away, and, as soon as that happened, I quickly retreated to the room behind me.

I sat down on the sofa and tried to relax myself. "You can do this. You can do this . . ." I thought over and over again, hoping for it to have some positive effect on me. I stroked my hand across the leather surface of the seat, and I suddenly felt a sensation of pleasure run up my arm like little ants. The lovely, stubbly texture of the leather was like rich silk against my fingers. I began to quietly hum to myself, and within a matter of minutes I felt so much better. I focused on the knobbly, rough texture of the leather, sat up in the seat and exhaled a heavy sigh. I looked towards the kitchen and felt as if I could go in there and brave the environment, if I believed in myself. Yes, the lights were blinding; yes, the noise was sometimes unbearable. But if I tried hard enough and kept spinning my piece of string in my hands, I could have a fighting chance at being in there. But what if someone noticed me stimming with my piece of string? What do I say back, "I'm autistic and I love how it feels"? Oh, how silly I would look if I said

that. Let me stress this again: I needed to pass as neurotypical. Nobody would understand, and negative stereotypes would run through their heads. But I put all that behind me, and I got up and began walking over.

Oh, what a mistake that was. I had my hopes up, too. I had managed to build myself back up, and I was ready to face that hellscape of bright lights and inseparable noise, but the moment I was about to walk in, a noise emerged. Much louder and harder to withstand than the others. Music blasted from a speaker at what was most likely full volume, and that was it. I knew I couldn't force myself to go in there, not for even a second.

I ran back to the leather seat and began to run my hand along it, faster and with more pressure than before. I kept telling myself that I was safe here, even if there were a hundred things going on behind me. And I believed myself, until they all came into the same room as me and they moved the speaker in as well. By that point, my heart was racing, my hands were shaking, and I couldn't respond to anyone at all. It felt like I was in a sealed container, unable to interact with anyone or make sense of my surroundings. All these feelings, and I looked completely normal, as if nothing was wrong and I was in my own little world. Little did they know the feelings of

pain and angst I was feeling right next to them. Tears started to run down my cheeks, each one brimming with false promises and embarrassment. "It won't be loud," they said, "You'll be fine," they said. I'll be fine? Sound can be overwhelming and even physically painful, but it's okay because I don't "look disabled", so "I'll be fine," right? Right.

The comments of "Are they okay?" and odd stares started flying in like rocks, although regarded as light as a feather in society's eyes. Everyone went quiet and their eyes fixated on me, stiff as concrete. I literally couldn't move a muscle, I felt screwed in place while I was being stared at. And then the insults started too, whispers of, "What are they even crying for? Nothing's wrong here!" each word laced with misunderstanding. Life on the spectrum isn't that easy, believe it or not. Everything — regardless of size or volume — can annoy us and throw us off, potentially for the entire day. What doesn't annoy you may enrage us, and vice versa. But we experience things to varying degrees of severity, and we often come across as "overdramatic". Let me tell you: we are not being overdramatic. When we say "the fluorescent lights hurt," or something along those lines, we really do mean that literally. And you may look at me in this social situation full of friends and strangers, loud music and

bright lights and dismiss my struggles as "dramatization", but we really do get a hard time in environments like these. And if I wanted to pull myself out of this pit of misery, I knew I had to leave the room and get myself to somewhere quieter and darker.

I managed to wrench myself up, leaving the luscious leather seat behind. My legs were a little shaky, but I started to feel a little bit better as I left all the hustle and bustle of that room behind. I found a similarly sized room with seats in, and immediately I bolted for the door, closed it behind me, turned off all the lights and sat down.

This seat isn't as good as the leather in the other room, but I'd rather sit on the plain texture of this seat in the silence and darkness, over the leather in the other room where booming noises ran riot. I rocked back and forth in this little chair, while my body was enshrouded in darkness and almost silence. I took my little piece of string from my trouser pocket and started fiddling with it, running my fingers along the repeating, frayed texture. Us autistic people call this stimming, where we use our sensory sensitivities in a good way, to help calm us or to help focus. And you might be wondering, "What's so fun about rocking back and forth, or stroking a piece of string?" And, to be honest,

I don't know. But there's something about it that can be deeply satisfying to me. And sure, I might look "childish" while doing it, and it brings me back to my previous point of needing to look neurotypical. Society and neurotypicals laugh at us, because we're "out of touch" or "stupid". They complain and rant about these things yet make no effort to even attempt to educate themselves or accommodate us in society. They look at us like we're freaks, have the audacity to treat another human being like a rabid dog needing to be put down, and then tell us that we "aren't stable enough" to achieve what we want to. Just because we're different to them.

With a frightening crash, the door in front of me burst open and smashed against the wall, filling my heart with fear. The booming noise echoed throughout the room and filled my eardrums, causing a brief discomfort. I stayed still. The lights lit up, searing my eyes on the spot. When my pupils finally adjusted, a figure appeared before me. Our eyes met, and his posture was stern. "Alex," his voice was caring, but had power entwined in it. "Are you ok?" I didn't need questions right now, I just wanted to be alone. I couldn't speak at all, like a hand was choking my words and strangling me. I gave

him a simple nod back with tears slowly trickling down the sides of my cheeks again. "You're not going to speak to me?" I wanted to explain, I really did. But speaking was not my strength right now. A few seconds later, his face contorted into something angrier, and rage filled his eyes. "For goodness sake, Alex, you're fourteen!" His voice had lost all trace of softness and was now corrupt with rampant irritation. "Act your age and speak to me. And stop playing with that damn string while you're at it!" He said no more, turned his back and walked out, leaving the door open and the lights on, erasing all chance of me calming down, leaving me vulnerable to the harsh and loud noises of the house.

This is what it means to be autistic. Each day is a labyrinth of bright lights, loud noises and confusing social situations that we must blindly navigate our way through, with each mistake being a blow to our minds, and people don't tend to help us out most of the time, because we look "okay" or "normal". Simply, there isn't enough understanding. We must change mindsets and challenge stereotypes now.

And if I have to be the one to kickstart it, then so be it.

Processing as an autistic person

by Robert

The autistic mind is an interesting thing. We tend to have many talents as well as many difficulties. One of the struggles I have faced, being on the spectrum, is processing. More specifically, processing what is being told to me.

There have been many times when I have been given many tasks to do at once. I have trouble fully understanding them if they happen all at once, especially in the workplace. If I'm told to do several tasks at once, my anxiety can go off the rails. I get so worried about screwing up and I wanted to do well at my job. Even when I was trying to write down notes, it was hard for me to process.

However, one method that has helped me through this is a type of memory technique called word finding. In this method, when I am given a number of tasks at once, I focus on words in the spoken tasks that seem most important and use them to guide me through the tasks. For instance, if I was asked to both write a report on a meeting that day and then contact another manager, I would focus on the words "report", "meeting", "contact" and "manager."

By doing this for the past few years, I have been able to complete my tasks with no issues. If you find processing to be hard because of autism, I hope you find this to be helpful in life.

Pen pals

Pen pal number 300

Hi, my name is Jennie, I'm 35 years old and live in Crewe. I work for Pets at Home and have been there for almost fifteen years now. Working in an area (of pets and animals) that I love, gives me the confidence to help the customers.

I have a daughter who is almost 3 years old: it's only through having her that my high-functioning Asperger's got diagnosed. It was a relief to finally have a reason why I never seemed to fit in.

My biggest interest is horses: I learnt to ride when I was 13, and I was hooked. I now have my own horse and spend a lot of time at the stables with her. Although, I generally love all animals, so a day trip to a wildlife park or a zoo is enjoyed lots.

I'm also a big lover of the outdoors. I love walking: along canals, through scenic parks. I recently became a member of the National Trust, so enjoy exploring their sites. I love to just hop on the train and go and explore somewhere. I really enjoyed visiting Conway recently. The castle was stunning. I'm no photographer, but I like to take pictures of the places I have been to.

Apart from that I like trips to the cinema, watching a film at home: don't watch many soaps but I do enjoy *Coronation street*.

Looking forward to talking to people who may have similar interests.

Twenty-three pen-pal adverts have been held over for publication in the next four issues, Editor.

How to place a pen-pal advert

- All you need to do is send your advert along with your name and address (and email address if you want) to this magazine. You can use the Royal Mail or email. The next pen-pal number will be given to your advert when it arrives.
- Please note that this magazine does not print dating adverts, as it is unable to provide suitable support.
- Those under the age of sixteen must have parental permission before placing a pen-pal advertisement in this magazine.
- If you get no replies, please don't take this personally.

How to reply to pen pals

- Please remember to let us know the name and number of the person whom your letter is for. (All pen pals are numbered by the editor, not the person who sends in the advert.)
- Please remember to put your address on your letter.
- To contact a pen pal, please send your letter to the Goth, c/o The National Autistic Society, 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG, or email **the.Spectrum@nas.org.uk**
- We will pass your letter on to the person you wish to contact. However, we cannot guarantee the person will reply as that is entirely their decision.
- Please note that all pen-pal letters sent via this magazine are opened before being passed on.

****Important notice — please read****

This magazine is happy to publish pen-pal advertisements but we must stress that we are not a pen-pal or introduction organisation. We do not match people up and we cannot monitor letters (other than the first letter, that is sent via us) so please be cautious when releasing personal details in your letters. The National Autistic Society / *the Spectrum* cannot intervene or be held responsible for any ensuing correspondence between letter-writers.

more pen-pal adverts

Pen pal number 301

Hi, my name is Daniel. I am 43 and live in West Yorkshire. I have Asperger's syndrome. I was diagnosed at age 23. I love music especially David Bowie, New Order, Gary Newman, Katy Perry, a lot of alternative 1980s.

I'm a very expressive person and able to share ideas and feelings through poetry and writing. I have had poems published before. I like the poets: Simon Armitage, Andrew McMillan and John Cooper Clarke.

I have a good sense of humour and I think that's what helps me to get on with people. I watch *The big bang theory* with my girlfriend, *Hypothetical* with my dad. I love Alan Partridge, Ricky Gervais.

I would love to have pen pals to write to or e-mail. I want to connect with people and make friends but don't know how. I would love to learn about others' experiences of Asperger's. I'm a very sensitive person, maybe a bit too much sometimes. But I am honest, supportive and kind-hearted.

Love,

Daniel

Pen pal number 302

My name is Alex. I am 21 and study physics and English. I was diagnosed with Asperger's when I was 13.

My interests include poetry, microscopy, and track and field. I have a dog named Zoe, my favorite poets include Emily Dickinson and TS Eliot, I like running the 1500m and the 5000m, and I love getting letters in the mail!

Alex

Pen pal number 303

Hello, I'm Billy. I'm 20 years old and I have Asperger's syndrome. I live in Leeds and I'm doing an internship at a film production company. My main interests are reading, writing, films, music and researching. I enjoy discussing all of these subjects as well as comedy. My favourite comedians are Harry Hill, Ricky Gervais, Peter Kay, Rob Brydon and Michael McIntyre. In terms of music, I am a massive fan of the Beatles. I watch a lot of comedy films, but more recently, I have been getting back into reading books. I mainly read autobiographies, but at the moment, I'm reading a novel, which I'm enjoying. I mainly research things that I am interested in through Google and Wikipedia. I mainly write scripts, but I also like writing stories. It would be good to hear from you if you have similar interests. I find it difficult meeting new people, so it would be nice to have a pen pal with a view to meeting up.

Pen pal number 304

Hi, my name is Zoe. I was diagnosed with autism May 2017. I'm 28, I have just found this site: I would like to find new pals to chat to on line. As part of my autism I struggle with making conversation and knowing what to say, so making pals this way is much easier for me. My interests are listening to music, drawing, watching *Only fools and horses*, *On the buses*, watching films, like comedy and adventure, walking, playing football games and sims games on Playstation.

I would like messages from people similar to me and would like to hear how your autism affects you.

Pen pal number 305

Hi, I am 28 and an artist. I have ASD but really it affects my social skills, I have lots of interests but find it hard to start conversations. [James did not include his name in the advert, Editor]

Accommodating for neurotypicals

by Seb Pegg

Neurotypicals are fascinating creatures, they perform strange social rituals and talk in riddles and then (rather arrogantly) expect us to conform to these confusing norms that they have invented.

A major problem with these norms is that they seem to be ever-changing. Neurotypicals are very handily able to read social cues with far more ease than us autistics, not making this any major challenge for them, but for us the ever-changing goal posts of social normality (such as one behaviour being socially normative in one situation but not in another) can be utterly baffling and extremely isolating. It can make socialising very difficult; loneliness can become a big problem for us.

A lot of neurotypicals quite often dislike making “special accommodation” (reasonable adjustments) for us. For example, giving us advance warning about change, extra time on tests, giving specific instructions, or using language that is clear,

and so on. Whilst as autistics we, every day, are required to amend our behaviour in order to make special accommodation for neurotypicals. We are constantly required to fit their norms. This can be exhausting.

We are expected to talk at the right times, be quiet at the right times. Learn and memorise hundreds of metaphors and idioms. We can’t be too literal, we can’t be too blunt, we are told it is rude. We can’t go on and on about our special interest(s), it is “weird”, it is “boring”. We are told again and again “Look at me,” “It’s polite to make eye contact,” when for some on the spectrum making eye contact can even cause physical pain. “It’s a joke!” “It’s banter!” The list is endless. Yet when an autistic person has a meltdown in response to the pressure of having to sustain such a high level of neurotypical normativity it comes as a surprise or shock to the neurotypicals passing by and the autistic often finds themselves being told that they are “over-reacting” or having a “tantrum”.

Society is built for neurotypicals. As autistics the world can be a messy place. Viewing an unordered world with a brain wired for order can be challenging (at the best of times) but there is plenty that neurotypicals can do for us to make living in a neurotypical world less confusing or lonely. This may be meeting your autistic friend in places with minimum sensory distractions or using clearer or more literal language when talking with them. Or even just asking about their special interest(s). What is helpful for one person on the spectrum may not be for another (and vice versa) so the best thing to do is ask your autistic friend, relative or acquaintance if there is anything that you could do (or not do) they would find helpful.

As someone on the spectrum, I am simply asking that neurotypicals are more understanding and willing to make reasonable adjustments for us. As autistics are constantly expected to accommodate neurotypicals.

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for January will be **conforming, and why we shouldn’t have to do it**. Vote with your contributions: the more submissions on a subject sent in (from different people) the more likely

that that subject will be the theme. Writing on any subject is still welcome as are ideas for new themes, and artwork. Remember, if you want to see different content in *the Spectrum*, the best way to change it is to send something in!

letters to the Editor

Hi Editor,

I saw Rachel's letter, and it resonated with me.

I'm in the process of seeking diagnosis and am on the waiting list for an assessment. I have had similar reactions to Rachel's if I disclose that to people. My initial response was surprise and to ask what they felt an autistic person looks like, but that can cause defensiveness, so I now normally respond along the lines of, "You can't see what someone's hobbies are, or their sexuality, or whether or not they are prone to depression. Autism can be difficult to see unless you know the person well and how to look for it."

I then sometimes go into more details to help whoever I'm talking to understand how it impacts me, that is, I cannot picture things when I close my eyes, I've never been able to. If I don't have time to prepare responses (especially in high-pressure situations) I can upset people, which (as this is unintended) is very upsetting for everyone when it happens. I get overwhelmed if there are enough people together for more than one conversation at a time to happen — I can't focus on just one. There are also more positive traits: I'm very good at mathematics (I like the precision) and that has led me to a good career as a computer programmer.

I believe it's important to educate people if we are able to. Some of those people will take away a better understanding for when they encounter that situation again.

Hope this helps, and best wishes,

Nick

Dear Goth,

in reply to Rachel's letter to you, I think the response, "You don't look disabled," is very common for any hidden disability. And while a reply telling them you are diabetic doesn't seem to get any more sympathy than being autistic does, it does seem to be something that people will acknowledge as a "proper" disability.

A similar thing happens if your issue is a head injury, but here many more people are sympathetic and helpful, rather than judgmental. I'm inclined to think that the difference is that people feel that a head injury could happen to anyone, but diabetes is your fault because you ate too many sweets and didn't keep fit (this is not true). With autism, I think people just don't understand, and with every badly behaved celebrity seeming to claim that the reason they're behaving that way is because of autism, and every loner who kills someone being labelled as autistic by the gutter press, with insinuations that it was the autism that made them do it, I think it's easy to see why people are disbelieving when you say you're autistic.

As a younger man, in my early twenties, I would, when I dared to say anything more, say

something deeply sarcastic, like, "Ah! You must be very rich, using your x-ray vision to diagnose people at a glance," but it often made people angry and didn't make me feel better, so I stopped. The loneliest you can be is when the people around you treat you like you are completely alien and unwanted, totally misunderstood, and that is how I feel at times like this. Being totally alone at home for two weeks is so much, much less lonely and upsetting than having a you-don't-look-autistic confrontation.

It always leaves me angry and upset. It's such a thoughtless thing to say, and I suspect what some people mean is that I am not walking in a crouched way, making noises and dribbling, like someone more "severely" autistic.

These days, if I can summon the nerve to say something, I say something like, "[pleasantly philosophical eyebrow raise] Well, autism is mostly a different way of thinking and of experiencing the world, so unless someone has other disabilities as well, there's nothing to see until I accidentally say something rude [resigned mouth compress, then pleasant smile]" I change the "something rude" to whatever is relevant to the situation, if it wasn't me

letters to the Editor (continued)

maybe being rude that initiated the conversation.

Sometimes this gets blank incomprehension, sometimes people seem to understand, or at least not want to seem rude themselves, so they behave more sympathetically. I hope sometimes it does some good.

Also, sometimes it's all I can do not to burst into tears when I get the you-don't-look-autistic response. It seems more likely to happen when I'm struggling that day, and then it just feels like the last straw, much too much for me to handle.

I hope that Rachel can relate to my experiences, and that she finds some ways of coping with the emotional upheaval of that response from people,

with much love,

Jay

Dear Editor,

my name is Selina, I don't like some noises. I specially don't like the noises of sit-on lawnmowers and I also don't like the noise of road sweepers. Sometimes I wish I could get out of my fear of those noises, because at the moment I put my fingers in my ears or walk another way if I see one.

From,

Selina

PS. I also like smelling things, like pages of books, as well, or some new things.

Dear Goth,

re sensory sensitivity and stimming. After my diagnosis, about eight years ago, I gradually discovered that I had sensitivity to loud sudden noise in my vicinity. Examples: someone dropping a plate, or anything else, in the kitchen; doors opening suddenly; anything else "crashing" nearby. Police sirens and noise from crowds at sporting events are no problem. It's those loud, sudden, close-by bangs that set me off. It results in me squirming, scrunching up my eyes, and can have a temporary impact which kind of numbs me. Stimming wise, I recite my son's name about a hundred times a day (okay, that's a slight exaggeration!) whilst at home, or even out on my own. Plus I add funny words to the end of his name. If I'm out and overhear people speaking in a foreign accent, I'll try and repeat it.

Autism and sex (the letter from Nicky). For many years I felt my attitude towards sex was different, but I couldn't grasp it. Although I'm heterosexual, I eventually looked at the Kinsey scale and came out as a 2, which is "Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual". So, how does all of this manifest itself?

- There's a gay bookshop in town, and if I'm passing I always look in the window;
- I have one or two gay social friends (men) and like interacting with them;
- I consider myself an LGBTQ+ advocate. I also read a lot of stuff about women, women's sexuality, feminism, sexual harassment. I suppose I consider myself a feminist (although there is maybe an argument as to whether men can class themselves as feminists, but I think they can);
- I listen to women's podcasts and love *The guilty feminist*, a podcast and a live show;
- I'm in a writing group and have gradually introduced more, more and more gay women into my writing;
- If I had my life over again, I think I'd love to experience life as a woman;
- I think some of this, especially around advocacy, is down to my sense of social justice and fairness, which is a common Asperger's trait.

David

Self-improvement and the zombie apocalypse

by David

I love horror films. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves — if it's gruesome, I'll watch it. In most horror, the fear is delivered by a monster which has some power or ability that makes it superior. Zombies, however, are different. They aren't super-strong, they can't fly or read minds; they are limited by just what humans can do. In fact, they are less able than you or I, given that they are normally slower, and always less intelligent.

Why, then, are these films tense or scary? That comes not from a zombie's ability to kill, but our inability to survive. For this reason, I am of the firm opinion that zombie films are the best. I don't just watch them, I devour them.

Zombies don't come alone. They come as a hoard. There are always too many of them to face single-handed, and lone-wolf characters tend to come off badly in these films. Those that work together and rely on others, however, succeed. The protagonists in these films are usually ordinary people, who have very little in the way of preparation or resources. They, therefore, have to rely on finding a group, pooling resources, to survive. I think that zombie films are here to teach us a lesson — to cooperate. Or, as it's put in rule #49 in *Zombieland*: "Always have backup."

So, what is cooperation? Two elements come to mind. The first is deference to someone else, that is, accepting that not everything will go your way, and you should put your group's interest before ego. The second is reciprocity. If you are being given something (resources, knowledge, shelter) then you should give something in return. These two factors underpin cooperation, and those who abide by these rules tend to do well, zombie apocalypse or otherwise.

Deferring to others, be it to a leader, or just someone with a plan of any sort, means thinking of the group's survival as primary. Your ego is

secondary. In the seminal *Night of the living dead* Ben is a survivor in Harry's house. The two men are at odds over the best way to survive, arguing endlessly. Finally, zombies break into the house and, rather than help Ben to fight them off, Harry attacks Ben and tries to steal his gun. In the ensuing struggle, Harry is shot, killed, and devoured by his reanimated daughter. Harry didn't cooperate, and was punished for this expediently. By contrast, in *World war z* we see that those who do cooperate with Brad Pitt's character Gerry (tend to) survive. The Israeli lieutenant, the WHO doctors, a small boy: those who recognise Gerry's experience and leadership are rewarded with survival, while those who don't perish.

Being in a group is a two-way street. If you are doing something for someone else, they need to do something for you. Quid pro quo. For example, in the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the dead* a group of survivors finds shelter in a mall which is controlled by a trio of security guards. The survivors relinquish their weapons to the armed guards, giving the guards a sense of safety, while the guards in turn give them safety within the confines of the mall. Neither is happy with these choices, but both recognise that they need to give something up to receive something they need in turn, be it safety indoors or safety in numbers. Or even, in *The girl with all the gifts*, the human-zombie symbiont helps the survivors navigate dangerous land and avoid zombie hordes while they, in turn, give her kinship and treat her like a person and friend, rather than a prisoner and threat (which she had been at the beginning). Conversely, those who selfishly take and give nothing in return do not survive.

So, cooperation is what zombie films want us to do. It is what they are showing us is best. The next question is: why?

To answer that, we can quote Bertrand Russell: "The only thing that will redeem

an article (continued) and a letter

mankind is cooperation.” This idea, that cooperation is a path to improvement, is central to zombie films. In fact, this precise quotation is used by Shaun in the denouement of the wildly entertaining *Shaun of the dead* as a means of convincing others to help him.

In countless zombie stories on screen, the central character begins with a flaw or failing. In *Scout's guide to the zombie apocalypse*, *The walking dead*, and *Shaun of the dead*, for example, the protagonists are neglecting their relationships with others. They then re-forge their relationships through working with their friend or partner, and end up with a stronger friendship or more secure romance. In *Resident evil* or *Train to Busan*, the main

character starts by having an immoral job which harms others but, by working with, and sacrificing for, a group of strangers, they prove that they are indeed moral people and deserve redemption.

Zombie films, when well-made, are much more than they first seem. They aren't gore-fests, or mindless plots with a few jump scares thrown in. They are elevated to a higher class than other horror films. They have a real lesson to impart, real morals which are questioned. They take ordinary people, put them in an extraordinary situation, and use this to test fundamental questions about what is right and wrong. Zombies, it seems, are the catalyst for redemption.

I was in Scientology once. We were told that God was of no concern to the organisation but that didn't mean they were atheists, just that it was outside their remit. They too, like Richard's group, were registered as a charity for tax purposes and were likewise pretty ruthless. We were told that everything was free for members of staff (cheap labour by those who couldn't afford the ever-increasing prices of services) but the public paid through the nose for it (the idle rich). The Catch-22 was that if you left, you would be billed for all the services you got as a staff member — the old debt trick.

We were told that we were saving the planet and that as we were eternal beings, we were expected to sign a five-billion-year contract. Like Richard I was socially inept and therefore easy meat. I had just been dumped by a girl, who I had chased from Cambridge to Stirling. I had never heard of them, so was in a vulnerable position because of my emotional state. I got caught up in their personality test, like most people get caught up in things that pamper their ego or exploit their weaknesses. I was then sent to their world HQ in East Grinstead after completing their basic communication course and being recruited as a member of the “elite” Sea Org.

I too started a relationship and just like Richard this was frowned upon (get married

or stop the relationship, period! Tabloid papers were apparently on the lookout all the time for scandal to do with the group and free love would create one, it seems). The relationship didn't last long and I was kicked out because I was assigned a boring job (filing clerk) that was chaotic and had less control over what went on there than in a regular office situation (people would walk in, take files out and leave no details of who took them, where they went or when, even though the system was organised to deal with this).

This was a con trick, carefully thought out but badly run. That such ideas catch out the young, innocent and unwary is something that doesn't surprise me, with hindsight. It used lie detectors to supposedly reveal the truth and had its own police force. It wasn't as bad as Stalin's political advisors that interfered in everyday life or spied on its citizens. After I left, I heard disquieting rumours about heavy-handed tactics and watched documentaries, like the *Panorama* exposé. I also met ex-Scientologists who, like me, saw the potential of the organisation but were disappointed by the reality of how it was run. More recently some have compared the founder, L Ron Hubbard, with Donald Trump as fantasists of the highest order and being equally dangerous for that reason, that is, not being grounded in reality.

Tony

Pastiche of Joyce Grenfell

by Sammy

Scene: Groundhog Day School
for Girls and Boys

Group Therapy: *Telling Tales*
— *something we don't do*

"Right, children, *music* and *movement* today, and we will start our lovely hour with a short story and a little light piano tinkling in the background with our new teacher, Miss . . ."

"Sixty minutes to an hour, Miss."

"Yes. Thank you, Ben."

"Sixty times sixty seconds equals 3,600."

"If you say so, dear. Children, say hello to Miss Wright."

"Hello to Miss Right."

"She's got a funny hat on."

"No dear, that's Miss Wright's hairdo. They can be too honest, no sorry, I'll stop digging."

"Digging? You're not digging, Miss."

"No, Alun, you are right, I'm not. Miss Right is."

"Right, let's make a circle, shall we?"

"A circle is 360 degrees, Miss."

"Thank you, Adrian. Let's make a big circle, then we can sit down and get ourselves comfortable? Sorry? You don't want to make a circle?"

"You don't want to look at each other. Well, if you're sure."

"We can make a neat line together so we can hold hands. Yes, Jess, we like to hold hands. You don't like holding hands, and especially not with Sarah? Why, dear? She holds hands too tightly. Well, today she won't."

"Happy on your belly, Jonathan? You're doing press ups? Good, good . . ."

"Are we all lying, sitting, looking very uncomfortable?"

"Then I'll begin. 'Once upon . . .'

"Sarah, dear, don't pinch Alun."

"No, it's not nice. I can see he doesn't like it, let him go. No, there's a good girl."

"You don't like the colour of his sweater? *Orange* makes you feel sick."

"Right, let's concentrate."

Music, maestro.

"'Once upon a time there were three little pigs . . .'"

"You mean three piglets, pigs are huge, Miss, so they must be piglets."

"'Once upon a time there were three *piglets* who wanted to build three houses.'"

"Why don't they build one house, and live together, Miss? It would be much cheaper. The price of land is just so costly . . ."

"Well, they want to live on their own, Craig."

"I don't like to think about that, being alone, it's sad."

"It's only a story, Jonathan."

"Can I do sit ups now?"

"I don't like the number three."

"Alun, leave Kevin's hair alone."

"But it's lovely and soft, like cat fur, Miss."

"It's not cat fur. No, don't rough it up, you know it took his mother months to get him back to the barber's after the incident."

a pastiche (continued)

"Kevin, don't cry, it's only a little scar.

"Why don't you like the number three, Ben?"

"Two threes together make the number eight which isn't logical."

"Yes, well, only with a mirror, so don't worry.

"A little tinkling on the ivories, please, Miss Wright.

"*'Once upon a time there were three piglets* who wanted to build a house of straw . . .'"

"Have they got names, Miss?"

"Who?"

"The Piglets, Miss."

"One pig, two pig, three pig . . ."

"Fat pig! Oink, oink, oink."

"That's not funny, Craig. Well I don't think so.

"Calm down, dear, you are becoming too excited. remember last time.

"Tinkling is for the piano only. Miss Wright, from the top.

"*'Once upon a time . . .'*

"Jess, dear, stop climbing the walls, it's not that time of day.

"Please come back and join our story group. Don't shake your head, give me a nice smily face. That's a grimace.

"You want to be alone? Sarah wants to hold your hand . . .

"She says she'll be kind.

"Craig, take Ben's shoes off, they are not gloves and they're probably sweaty and I don't like the look of Ben's socks."

"They're my lucky stripe pair, I always wear them on Tuesdays."

"They are not looking very fresh."

"Can't wash them, Miss, won't be lucky."

"Ben, put your shoes and your lucky socks back on, please, there's a good boy.

"Jonathon, dear, stop running around the room so fast. You are making me dizzy. You're training for the London Marathon? Jess, don't join him. Both of you come and sit down and enjoy the story.

"You want to be seagulls? Can't you just perch?"

"Seagulls don't perch, they are not passerines, Miss."

"Thank you, Adrian.

"Kevin, what on Earth are you doing? *Smarties* tubes are not binoculars."

"You can see the wind . . ."

"Sarah, why are you crying?"

"They were your *Smarties* and Kevin's eaten them."

"I've saved her all the orange ones. Look."

"But they are all covered in fluff, not very edible, I think.

"That's very naughty, you shouldn't have been in Sarah's satchel.

"Don't wipe your hands on Ben's socks."

"He'll have to wash them now, Miss, hal"

"Sarah, don't throw Ben's shoes. Where are the *Smarties'* lids?"

"I'm blind, Miss!"

"Alun, give them back to Sarah. Give them back, there's a good boy.

"You know very well it's taken weeks to get the letters to make up her name, and in yellow.

"Today we were supposed to be kind to each other. Well, there's the dinner bell. Same time next Tuesday. Goodbye, children."

"Bye, Miss."

"Yes, Miss Wright, you'll find it's always the same. Tissue?"

an article with an introductory letter

Hi,

I've written an article on sensory over-awareness. My family don't accept my diagnosis so I'll have to have a pen name. Is that possible? I'd like to be called JB if you ever use anything of mine?

My article doesn't mention autism as such in the actual article but it could have an intro stating that I'm 67, single and I was late-diagnosed in 2018? I've noticed that the January issue has a theme of sensory issues so maybe it might be a good time to send my fridge article!

Me and my fridge

by JB

My fridge definitely talks to me. I know this because the fridge manufacturer sent a fridge language book with her. So you know when she says, "Mmmmmmmmm," it's time to shut the door and if she burbles, "Bububububub," that means she is working on cooling things down a tad.

Anyway, when she first came, I did try and learn her lingo. We did some bonding sessions but it was all a bit one-sided. There was no real communication. Plus there was an element of hypochondria on my side. If the fridge started murmuring words which were not in her book (off page) I went into a frenzy of fridge worry.

The first time this happened was around 4am the first night she was with me. I woke up to hear a high pitched "Eeeeeeeeeeee" coming from the kitchen. I jammed on my Crocs and stumbled into the kitchen.

The fridge was making a terrible screaming noise. I opened her door and she stopped.

Abruptly, immediately, instantly. All of those. I stared at her in disbelief. I pulled the book of words out of the kitchen drawer and flipped through it anxiously. Lots of mmmmmms and bububububububs but no mention of a scream. No eeeeeeeeeeee. The book was silent.

I peered inside. Not enough milk, just enough yogurt and too much alcohol. The fridge burped.

"Pardon you," I said firmly. The fridge had to learn the house rules. I was the boss around here.

I shut her door and stared at the steel-coloured face of the fridge.

"I'll see you in the morning. Proper morning. Okay?"

The fridge stared silently back at me. I snapped off the light switch and headed for my bedroom.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

The fridge was screaming again. It was then that I realised the truth. The fridge was afraid of the dark! I switched the light back on again and padded over to the fridge and yanked open her door. The screaming stopped almost immediately.

I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Look, I am not leaving the light on, right? It's too expensive and I like it dark and I can see the light under my bedroom door because this is a poxy rabbit hutch of a flat. Right? So pipe down."

The fridge gave a little shudder. I shut her door carefully and crept back to the light switch and turned it off cautiously. Silence. Nothing. I tiptoed back to bed like a hopeful van Winkle and dived under the duvet.

The peace lasted less than five minutes. I was just dozing off when the fridge started screaming again.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

I rammed my head under the pillows but nothing could stop the high-pitched noise reaching my ears. I stormed into the kitchen and pulled the fridge's door open. Instantly the noise stopped.

"Look," I said, angrily, "This has to stop. Now. If you start that noise again I'll call the engineer. Got that?"

I swear the fridge giggled. I looked round for the handbook.

"You don't believe me, do you," I snarled. I found the call-out number and strode confidently over to the landline. I dialled the helpline. The fridge whimpered.

The phone clicked and whirled. An electronic voice purred in my ear.

"Sorry, we are closed right now. Please ring back between 9 am and . . ."

I slammed the phone down. The fridge shuffled and burped. Triumphantly.

"Shut up!" I shouted. "This is your last chance!"

I shut her door firmly and stamped back into my bedroom. I pulled the duvet round my ears, bracing myself for the next screaming fit. I didn't have long to wait.

"Eeeee . . .!"

I rushed into the kitchen

and pulled out the fridge's plug.

The silence was almost tangible. I breathed out slowly and stumbled back to bed. I felt like I'd killed someone but even fridge death was better than the interminable screaming.

In the morning the fridge was a silent replica of her former self. I opened her door. No light came on. I hadn't put anything in her freezer drawers apart from one packet of frozen peas so there wasn't much to lose.

I crunched my cornflakes, keeping an eye on the fridge. The milk was still cool, but not as icy as I liked. I wasn't looking forward to warm yoghurt or tepid white wine if the screaming fits carried on.

"I'm calling the fridge doctor the moment they open," I told the fridge. "This has got to stop."

She stared balefully back at me.

As soon as the clock said 9 am I hit the fridge helpline. Option 3 answered pertly. I struggled for words.

"It's about my fridge-freezer. She's afraid of the dark. She won't stop screaming and it's not in the book."

Option 3 soon put me right. She asked me how full the

freezer bit was. Fridge-freezers need their drawers to be kept full of frozen food. If I had looked in the troubleshooting section it would have explained that my fridge would emit a high pitched alarm if she was too empty. The alarm stopped if you opened the door. It wasn't about the dark.

I put the phone down and went over to the fridge. I clenched my fists and held them down by my sides.

"Sorry, my fault."

I plugged her in and she made a low whirring noise. I patted her door sympathetically and went out to buy a shed load of frozen vegetables. I staggered back up the stairs with them and stashed the freezer bit of the fridge full with frozen veg. The fridge chuntered happily.

"Burrrrrrrrr."

After that we never looked back. The fridge settled in happily and I kept her well stocked.

She slept through the night and so did I.

I decided she needed a name. Freda. Freda the fridge. A nice bit of alliteration. Not that she is a person or human. Don't get me wrong. I'm the only human in my flat.

Tonight we're watching Frozen, the movie. With ice-cold white wine.

Both sides of the coin

by Aiden

There are lots of things that I don't really feel.

I don't feel temperature. When I was a kid, I wore shorts everywhere, in all weather. If it looks warm to me (read: if it's sunny), I'll go out lightly dressed. If it's hot, I'll forget to drink water.

I don't feel hunger. When I say "I'm hungry" I don't mean "I feel like I need to eat something," I mean, "I want to eat something." It's good that I enjoy the taste of food, or I probably wouldn't eat much at all.

I don't feel physical pain much. I often find bruises on myself and can't figure out where they've come from. Ear piercings and injections don't feel like anything to me. I've fallen off my bike before and injured myself and just gotten up and kept on going.

Just because I don't feel something doesn't mean that I'm not affected by it. Sometimes I notice my hands shiver from (what I'm told is) the cold. I can get emotionally unstable when I haven't eaten in a while. An injury unnoticed gets worse.

My hyposensitivities mean that my life requires more planning. Every day I check

the temperature outside so that I'm not inappropriately dressed. I eat at set times of the day. I've been told that if I fall off my bike or seem injured, I should stop what I'm doing and ask for advice. These things don't come naturally.

There are lots of things that I feel intensely.

I feel sights. Bustling crowds are chaotic. Looking people in the eye is painful. The constant flicker of fluorescent lights feels like someone is stabbing me.

I feel sound. High-pitched sounds grate away at me. A loud club or bar is endurable only with alcohol. I went to the dining hall maybe ten times in two years because it was just always so loud.

I feel smells. I can identify people by the way they smell. Perfume and scented products make me dizzy. Cigarette smoke makes me want to throw up.

My hypersensitivities would be the way to cause me pain. Naturally, I've developed strategies for these as well. I look at

people's foreheads. A pair of noise-cancelling headphones is my constant companion. My favourite accessory is a scarf: I can use it to block out the smells.

This isn't about inconvenience. There are loads of fun things that come with these senses: spinning and jumping and stimming. Equally, my life isn't completely controlled by the inconveniences. I'm getting better at implementing my strategies and being independent. My great love is chemistry, for which I can put up with the smells. I can do anything I'm interested in doing. It just takes a bit more creativity and effort.



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stuff you might like to know about *the Spectrum*

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(contact information for *the Spectrum* is on page 2 and again on page 20)

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Autscape 2020: an *Autistic* conference

Giggleswick School, Giggleswick, North Yorkshire

Monday, 27 July – Thursday, 30 July, 2020

by the organisers

An annual residential conference and retreat organised by and for autistic people.

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- A welcoming environment for all (including non-autistic people)
- Workshops, presentations and discussions
- Autistic-friendly leisure activities including a sensory room, 'Sparklies in the Dark,' crafts, guided walks and more
- Day time childcare
- Full board – three meals a day plus tea and coffee breaks – included in the price
- Support with travelling to/from the nearest station to the venue

This year's theme: Vision.

Registration will take place via our website and details will be posted there. Also on our website is further information regarding the conference, registration and fees:

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