

Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **103** July 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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NAS database support: the Data Services Team

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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Tel: **020 7923 5779** (geographical charges apply)

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 August 2020**

Welcome to the July edition of *the Spectrum*.

I hope you understand that some things have been a bit different for me during the lockdown. The main thing is that it has been difficult to get the post since the lockdown started. Almost everyone at the NAS head office is now working from home. I hope that, in time for the October edition, someone will be able to forward the post to me.

Thank you to all those who have been understanding; I will be tackling the backlog as soon as possible. Remember that the goal is a new normal, not a return to the old normal.

On a cheerier note, although the physical Autscope conference has had to be cancelled this year, the organisers have rearranged it as a virtual conference, as many conferences have been recently. So, while I personally will miss all the hugs, the conference with its lectures, discussions, and music will go on, and maybe some of you who find the thought of your first Autscope too daunting will be able to take a virtual look this year and gain an idea of what to expect in future years.

Yours,

the Editor

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Uncertainty, change, and how to cope

by Emma

I don't tend to watch the news or read papers, I log on to Facebook most days just for a quick browse, so coronavirus didn't fully register with me until it was everywhere. I think the first time I noticed things being a little off was when I was in a supermarket in February and a man asked a shop worker if they had any hand sanitizer, to which she replied no, someone had just bought forty of them but they expected more stock later that day.

It seemed to happen almost over night, no toilet roll, no handwash or sanitizer or pasta, not much of a problem for us as we had stocked up on essentials earlier that week (we tend to do a main monthly shop and then top up bread, milk and so on as and when we need it). Again it didn't really register with me how bad things were going to get, so a few things were low in the shops, the stores just needed to get fresh stock in, a few days and everything would settle back down, or so I thought.

The next time I went to the supermarket, maybe around the twelfth of March, was when it first hit me and I felt afraid, now it wasn't just a couple of things out of stock: pretty much every aisle had empty or barely stocked

shelves. That was when I knew this was going to be bad, a few days later my daughter's school emailed to tell us not to send her back in for the foreseeable future, they didn't have enough staff (due to self-isolating) and it was almost the Easter holidays. That really unnerved me — I knew then they would be shutting all schools, that it was only a matter of time, and I believe it was the next day or the day after that the government announced all schools would close that Friday. All whilst this was going on, my Facebook was flooded with nothing but coronavirus, what was happening in Italy, empty shelves, local businesses shutting down and so on.

The tipping point for me was when my daughter had a slight breakdown over the idea of not seeing her friends — or anyone really — for weeks, maybe months: not going to school, just not going anywhere. I spent the next few days in a bit of a haze, trying to keep her calm (she's also on the spectrum), creating a new routine for us all and having the added pressure of a friend trying to get me to help with a project she'd set up.

There is a national shortage of PPE (personal protective equipment) and

a group was set up to make scrubs for the NHS, my friend became a co-ordinator for two of our local hospitals. I personally don't sew so I couldn't help her in that regard but she knows I'm a very analytical person and highly organised and so she wanted me to help organise as much as possible. I knew this local little group (of a dozen people) was going to explode as the need became greater and I knew I would become totally overwhelmed and would be more of a hindrance than a help, especially as it meant engaging with strangers, so as best as I could I turned her down. Since then, as I predicted, the local group now consists of nearly 1,500 people, with several subgroups all creating various hats, masks, bags and scrubs for the NHS, with my friend as the head of it all. She's posting regular updates of how proud she is of her team and rightly so what a wonderful job they are all doing but I've witnessed how my friend talks about people she perceives as not pulling their weight and I'm sure at some point she's going to turn on me and berate me for not doing anything.

Yes, she is aware I'm on the spectrum but as she often reminds me "you could never tell", which, as I'm sure most

feature (continued), a thought, and a notice

people on the spectrum often do, I mask my disability — the only people who have ever seen how truly vulnerable I really am are my family. I can't tell you the sense of dread I have every time I see her name pop up expecting her to be saying something passive-aggressive because I wouldn't help. I just can't though. Just from witnessing the sheer volume of messages, questions and things day in, day out, I know I would become overwhelmed and there have been several people who have stepped in to help organise and they are doing a great job. On top of my own personal issues with helping out, as a family unit we are having to isolate even more due to being the sole carers for two elderly relatives and one elderly family friend (who has nobody else to help them), so to protect them, we as a family have been strictly social-distancing since way before the lockdown and by helping out with this group it would potentially expose me and in turn them to this virus (due to dropping off and picking up fabric, completed hats, scrubs and so on).

I'm sure at some point, whether it's my friend, a neighbor or society in general, I will eventually be asked, "So what did you do during the lockdown/pandemic?" I've spent my time with my family, we are now doing things as a family unit every day, rather than my teenage daughter up in her room on social media, only engaging with us in grunts at mealtimes. We've been watching a lot of documentaries together and having very in-depth discussions on the topics; we've played lots of games and been on a daily walk together. My daughter is finally figuring out what she wants to do with her life after school; she's focusing on the quality of her home(school)work rather than just rushing through it. I've delved back into online education, signing up for some courses with the Open Uni — this not only keeps my mind busy but also helps with a regular routine — I spend two to three hours each morning on my studies.

For those completely on their own I think it's

important to have some sort of human interaction, even if it's just talking to strangers on line such as on the NAS forum. We are lucky that we have so many online options available to us — I hate to think how isolating and in turn mentally harmful this situation could have been if it happened twenty years ago. At least in this day and age there is endless entertainment available, families and friends can stay in touch easily and many people can work or learn from home.

I think it's down to each individual to find the thing to get them through this situation. For some people like myself, throwing yourself into education or learning a new skill or starting a new hobby helps. For some it will be directly helping with volunteering for various things, for others just binge-watching Netflix is seeing them through. This is a completely new way of living at the moment, so whatever makes you happy (as long as it doesn't cause yourself or anyone else harm) it is the right thing to do.

Hello, Goodbye by the Beatles.

When Asperger's say "Hallo" they mean "Hallo", and when they say "How are you?" they mean "How are you?"

When neurotypicals say "How are you?" they mean . . . "Hallo" . . . unless they mean "How are you?"

Clifford

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for October will be **the continuing consequences and problems of the pandemic**. 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!

Team bonding

by David

He scrambled the last mile over rocks and gorse in a matter of minutes. Thorns pierced his denims and drew blood from his hands and bare feet. His safe return was now assured, but would his explanation convince them?

He surveyed the scene, not as any man should who was in trouble with others, but in the morally nebulous position of someone who was already trying to work out what was and was not plausible. A would-be conqueror, if you like. The training, the weekend, intensive course was beginning to kick in. Well, it was what they were here for, was it not? To sort the goats from the sheep, the wheat from the chaff, the winners from the losers and such. Team-building, he had rapidly decided, was overrated. He had never trusted the concept, anyway. How could there be an egalitarian compromise when nature, as he had now learned, was truly red in tooth and claw; and nurture, he had now decided, did as much, if not more, to fit the bill. After all, what had the recent exercise proved, but that there had to be — there could only be — one significant mark in the profit and loss account. The one that left the last man standing, himself.

The two others were there at the campfire site. They had started off on friendly, first-name terms, and the usual shared interests and common bonds had given way to half-hearted banter and grudging respect for small differences. But now he would have to weigh up what they would and would not accept.

He thought of them now as players in the drama he would cast and, to continue the metaphor, he would cast away:

MAN 1, now: he spoke ponderously, like the way radio announcers would mention a name at the beginning of a news summary, and right away you knew that it was but the funereal first note to the announcement of his death.

MAN 2 now: more quicksilver in his thoughts and actions, but they quickly became solidified, and he found it hard to change once he had made up what he was pleased to call his innermost musings.

Altogether, they were not promising material in which to envelop his version of events, for, he realised now, it was a version — his — of what happened. Unless there was a VCR in the sky, he would have to be believed.

His mind flashed back to the cliff and the fall.

MAN 3 — thought of him in that way now — had leaned too precipitously near the edge. As simple and as fatal as that. He had hardly time to fall and the escaped air of his lungs was soon trapped in nothingness — hardly more than a perfunctory forced exhalation. Had they heard? He doubted it. The task they were given, to find a suitable look-out post, had entailed a walk of fifteen to twenty minutes, and if they had heard, they would have immediately left to investigate.

He composed his features. He was going to make them as mobile as possible to convey all the distress, anxiety he could.

But he had made up his mind. He knew that he would not be believed, so there was only one option: they would have to go, and they would have to go the same way. It was the only complete way to survive.

The rush into the camp — the wild, excited, half-choking explanation — the windmill of arms, the point of fingers, the leading the way, the onrush of blood, the push of bodies, the falling, and then the contrived but convincing explanation of why they had all been too close to the edge, and only he had the presence of mind to step back.

Pen pals

Pen pal number 315

Hi! My name is Dakota. I am a transgender mother of a teenage daughter. We live in an apartment in Ontario, Canada.

I am very shy, and lonely, but also very friendly. Because it is so difficult for me to make conversation and socialize, I am extremely lonely and have no friends.

My interests are varied and flexible so I'm willing to learn about anything that interests you. I am 52 years old and, after leaving an abusive marriage, my daughter and I support one another.

Sincerely,

Dakota

Pen pal number 316

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to ask if you can help me. My son and I are on the spectrum. I am very isolated, and would like to get in touch with other people: having a pen pal would be good for me as I have always felt isolated and that causes depression. Could you please help me with this, thank you.

Yours sincerely,

C Seeckts

Twenty-one 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 317

Dear Sirs,

my name is Tiegan and I live in Bristol and I am in residential accommodation.

I have been diagnosed with autism.

I would be interested in finding pen pals.

I am 32 years old and my interests are bike riding, walking, music, cooking, socialising, shopping.

I like animals.

I have recently been helping with the homeless in Bristol.

Please can you reply in writing,

Tiegan

Pen pal number 318

Hi, my name is Marty, and have recently been diagnosed with ASD/Asperger's at age 49. It came as somewhat of a relief, as an explanation of the difficulties I've struggled with all my life.

I'm happy to hear from anyone, male or female, of any age really, to chat about ASD issues or anything else that we find interesting :)

My interests include science in general, astronomy and cosmology in particular, movies, video games, most sports, but particularly motorsport, cricket and rugby — just watching, not participating. I like to read — I read a lot from the *Star Wars* universe at the moment, but also Marvel comics, I've also read quite a lot of horror and fantasy fiction.

I enjoy learning new things - I've recently started the 2nd year of my 2nd Open University degree.

Pen pal number 319

Hi: my name is Adrian. I am a 61-year-old educated white male living near Bedford (originally from London): I have been unemployed for many years and was finally confirmed with Asperger's syndrome only in 2015.

I do like meeting friendly new people but individually or in very small groups and on the whole really dislike crowds (especially crowded pubs as I am not much of a drinker!). Like many people on the spectrum I do suffer from frequent anxiety and depression.

I suppose I have a big issue with sensitivity as I do feel that I am over-sensitive which I think is a particular problem for a male: unfortunately I get hurt very easily. I try to treat other people with consideration but often feel that this is not reciprocated.

Anyway, with regard to my interests, I am interested in most things and will discuss anything but am particularly interested in astrology, which has been almost a life-long interest for me.

Best wishes!

Pen pal number 320

Hello,

I am a 36-year-old male, living in Cornwall, just looking for more friends.

I have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and find life and love difficult and struggle with many social issues.

It would be helpful to talk to others in the same situation in a confidential non-judgmental manner and hopefully make more friends.

Do get in touch,

lots of love, Peter

Belonging

Too many times
I sought belonging
I cried out to myself
No one sees me really
But how can they?
Miles from the forest
An onlooker gazing at clouds
What's she holding in her hand?
Why does she talk to trees?
When would she grow up?
The scrutiny and whispers
She's eccentric and crazy
We can't handle what we can't explain
She loves silence better than crowds
But everyone dislikes noise
Where does she belong?
I see me as the third person
Then again I am me
I am me and I belong

So the restless poet speaks,

*"Nothing's more beautiful than,
A FREE SOUL in any prison"*

by **Victoria**

I feel like I do not belong in this world and that is okay

I feel like I do not belong in this world and that is okay
I have many friends
But I feel lonely
I want a group of friends
Where I feel I belong
I am strange
But that is okay
Sometimes when people
Laugh at me I want to cry
And then I am
Being myself
I get judged
Voices individually
I hear them
flashing lights
Hate them
And no offence
But I do not want to be hugged
I fear the dark
The tight walls
And the social interaction
If I want to keep to myself I should
If I keep a strict schedule
I do not want to miss it
If you believe I hate you
I don't
It's just that I do not mix well
Like oil and water
I want to talk about science, geography and politics but
I can't because then I am irritating
And I can't read your face like a book
I am not smart I just remember stuff
Why use expressions when you can tell a sentence
Which everyone understands
I feel like I do not belong in this world and that is okay

by **Satzhan**

letters to the Editor

Hello reader,

it is a truism that to get along you *must* go along. But if you have autonomy, you can choose not to go along.

In the January edition of *the Spectrum* there was a story from Sam about fourteen-year-old Alex who had autonomy and choose to go along to get along. Clearly it was the wrong choice.

I give this advice, do not seek understanding, seek acceptance. I think it likely that those who are not autistic will never understand those individuals that are autistic. But acceptance does not require understanding, just benevolence.

Michael

Dear Goth,

to answer the worried student who intends to go to Oxford University — assuming anyone is going anywhere by then:

I facilitate one of the Asperger support groups in Oxford:

www.facebook.com/groups/675221769651724/

— note “one of” the groups. There is a bigger one:

sites.google.com/site/oxfordaspiessite/

It’s also worth noting that we don’t get students because the University has such a good support system of its own.

I think the best advice is tell student support before you arrive and they will already have support in place for you. If you tell them early enough what special needs you have for accommodation I’m sure that could be arranged.

Best wishes,

Mary

Why am I here?

Why me?

Everything seems so overwhelming and I don’t want it to be.

People think I am weird because I don’t like certain smells or places, I hate loud noises and do certain rituals because if I don’t then my heart just continuously races.

I can’t read other people’s facial expressions or understand any sarcasm. I find it hard to carry out simple life tasks such as working out money and so on.

I’m not able to make eye contact which is completely out of my control and if I did then the anxiety inside would start to take its toll.

I doubt myself for not being able to socialise in a way in which I could just talk for days, by sitting and analysing every entire word I should have or wanted to have said.

Negative thoughts soon creep into my head, thoughts that make me realise I do not fit into this world.

I may be autistic but I want you all to know I really do try my best.

I may see the world differently and I’m sorry if I come across as rude or strange.

I’m truly not intending to, I’m just dealing with a condition that comes with so much confusion and unquestionable pain.

Lauren

I think many readers will find Lauren’s feelings and thoughts familiar. I certainly do. Years and years of trying my hardest while being told I wasn’t trying hard enough, and it’s still an attitude I meet regularly, even amongst autism “professionals”. I hope other readers will join me in assuring you that none of us has found life easy, and in broadly similar ways, Editor.

Film review of X+Y

(released in 2014)

A wonderful, rare case of accurately represented autism spectrum disorder

by Sophie

X+Y (2014, also called *A brilliant young mind*) is a heartwarming, inspiring film that comes from the United Kingdom. The film explores themes such as autism, young love, overcoming obstacles, dealing with the death of a parent, and coming of age. X+Y is about an autistic boy named Nathan who is selected to compete in the International Mathematical Olympiad, a prestigious mathematics competition for high-schoolers. Nathan appreciates and understands numbers like no one else does, but has trouble understanding others' emotions. When he meets the other contestants, he is thrust out of his comfort zone. His friendship-turned-romance with Zhang Mei, another contestant, helps him adjust to his new environment. Nathan's emotional journey with Zhang Mei is a realistic portrayal of teenage love and friendship. X+Y is one of the few films that contains an accurate portrayal of someone on the spectrum: indeed, it is based on a true story and Nathan is based off of Daniel Lightwing, a British computer programmer and researcher. Only a fraction of films and TV shows feature protagonists on the spectrum, and only a fraction of those portray ASD realistically. This sends the message that people on the spectrum can only act or look a certain way, when in fact, those with ASD have a diverse range of mannerisms, interests, fields of study, and personalities, just like any group of people. X+Y does not fall into this trap of unrealistic representation, and gives viewers an accurate portrayal of autism. X+Y is a wonderful movie that everyone — not just those on the spectrum — should watch.

Autescape goes online!

notice by the organisers

Autescape is a conference specifically by and for autistic people, although non-autistic people are also welcome. This year due to continuing measures to prevent the spread of covid-19, the conference is online only.

The four-day event will include discussions, social and interactive sessions similar to a typical Autescape, as well as lectures and workshops in a webinar format.

Want to participate? Registration is open, the fee is £20:

<http://www.autescape.org/2020/registration/>

Hello,

I'm interested in putting my work and spreading my message to the autistic public. I have no name, I am 2 days old. Just kidding. My name is Lawlight. I'm 22, a surrealist artist, diagnosed with high-functioning form of autism, and some pieces of my work are on my facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/theloneartist1997/>

I hope this email finds you well, kind regards,

Lawlight

What you're an expert in, you're more than happy to share your knowledge or expertise with. Our ignorance and incompetence cause us to want to withdraw from contact with others and hide because we're ashamed to display our inabilities, instead of exploit them as clowns (pride thing).

by Tony

The transcript

by Barry Hart @neuroTD

This is a transcript of the official interview with MA. Conducted on 2 January, 2020.

Barry Hart Today is January second, 2020. I am here today to conduct an interview with . . . will you please state your name?

MA My name is not important; you can refer to me as MA.

BH Would you like representation here today, or do you waive your rights?

MA I do not need anybody to speak for me.

BH For the tape's benefit, MA is wearing a plain white mask for medical reasons. Are you comfortable? do you need any further support?

MA This is my identity; I do not wish to remove it.

BH We are here today to talk about the abduction and abuse of the man you held captive for 32 years.

MA Allegedly. We have different views of those words and what they mean.

BH Did you not hold a man captive for 32 years?

MA I . . . helped him live. I trained him, built him into the person he is today.

BH Do you truly believe that? The man in question was rescued, and informed of your true actions: he was reluctant at first, but he finally led us to you. Why would he do that if he believed that you helped him, trained him?

MA He has had a moment of weakness, I forgive him for that; he will realise that I am the best thing for him.

BH We have been informed that you controlled his actions for many years, manipulating his fear, his emotions, costing him friendships, relationships and even employment. How would you classify that as helping him?

MA I supported him, protected him. People were hurting him, they were *abusing* him. They were a danger to him, and I taught him how to detect those people, so that he could avoid them and be happy. I saved him pain.

BH You isolated him from the world, it is a miracle he survived that long. He had more pain than you can imagine due to your manipulation; you instilled fear into him. He lost every important connection he ever made, and he never understood why that was happening. *You* caused that. He hurt himself, because of *your* actions.

MA [shouting] *That is a lie.* [sobbing] I was all he had. To rely on. You could say my existence is the only reason he is still alive, without me, he wouldn't have been curious. He wouldn't have made it to where he is now.

BH He is free of you now, he is happy; you are nothing but a bad memory to him. Can you let him go now?

MA I will . . . never be a memory.

BH Do you feel anything for your actions?

MA Well you believe I have no emotions: how can I give you an answer you will believe? My emotions are real; they are deep, intense. You just can't comprehend how I show them.

BH I believe you have very little to no empathy for the man you held hostage for 32 years, have you ever done this to any other person that we need to know about?

MA Not me, I haven't helped anybody else. There are others like me though, helping and supporting thousands of other people.

BH We are aware, and we are doing everything we can to bring them to justice, and freeing those people of the pain that you cause. The man in question has refused any contact with you; you can no longer hurt him. Are you aware of that?

MA I will always be there for him. He understands that.

BH Recently, since I was assigned this job, I have met many like you, I have seen how you affect others. How unaware you are of the pain you cause. Is there anything else you wish to talk about today?

MA I am not unaware, I fulfil my purpose. Your believed purpose is to protect, and save others. A shopkeeper's purpose is to provide a service. Even something as terrible as cancer, has a purpose. My purpose is to cause disruption.

BH So you admit that you have done the things you are accused of?

MA If we only focus on your belief in those accusations, then I guess I am guilty. However, my role in this world is beyond your comprehension. I am here to protect people.

BH This is a never-ending cycle, I am trying to understand your point of view, but the things you are saying are not how the world works. You have destroyed a person's life, losing him his connections, his friendships. He has lost family, girlfriends and a fiancé because of you. You have made employment near impossible for him because of your control: you made his entire life a lie.

MA You tell me that he is better off without me? Do you truly believe that if he wasn't given the knowledge of what I am, that he wouldn't have become the person he is now? How do you know that this wasn't "meant to be"? How do you know that if he didn't have my pain, the confusion I caused — the isolation I created — he wouldn't

be flourishing now? I gave him everything he needed to survive, but how could he ever be aware of his limitations if it wasn't for me? I gave him so many problems and issues to face. That built his mental fortitude; I gave him the understanding of pain so that he could survive to grow into who he was supposed to be. One fateful day I ceased to exist for him. I am only in your head now to remind you of that pain, your life. To remind you to fight for more, go beyond what you knew. I am sorry for what I did to you, but, Barry Hart, you were my vessel for existence. It wasn't always easy but we had a full life together, the longest relationship you have ever had. Your most important relationship. I loved you; all I wanted was to be a part of your life.

BH I hate you, My Autism. You caused me immense, unending pain. 32 years you held me captive and I refuse to allow that anymore. I want happiness now — I want to know that feeling in its entirety. I spent the last year trying to figure out how to exist with the awareness of what you are. Trying to understand you and how you affect me, so that I could *finally* be in control. I don't believe I am better off without you. I need you for reference, on what *not* to do, on how *not* to act. You gave me bad habits, you taught me to be a bad person, but no more. You are my autism, and you will always be with me, but you no longer have the power. I finally beat you, I won. You gave me the roots of being strong, but you held me back from ever attaining my true potential, by bombarding me with nothing but agony and isolation. I am alone in this world and that is because of you. Things are changing though: I am getting better, I am creating my own opportunities, I am helping others in my situation to avoid the pain that you caused. We did have a long relationship, and in a lot of ways it is the most important one I have had, but only beyond you is that true. You are important because of what I can achieve in spite of you. To prove you wrong every step of the way, everything you ever held me back on and told me I wasn't right for. I can do that now.

So, thank you. I forgive you.

My Autism Goodbye, old friend.

My story about Anxiety

part two

by **Eva**

“Yes, this is real. I already planned to visit you in your dreams tonight,” the black entity responds. I nod, satisfied. “I want to help,” Anxiety says suddenly. “I know it seems out of character for entities like myself, but I truly do. I’m the one causing you so much damage and I want to stop.” It looks away. “The only problem is, once you get an entity like me, it’s very hard to lose us. If I could just leave you in peace I would, but it seems that I’m almost bound to you, physically and mentally.” It sighs and looks down, its outline beginning to spark slightly.

“I have an idea,” I murmur and Anxiety turns its head inquiringly and nods for me to continue. “Well, when you get nervous or worried about something for my sake and transfer those feelings over to me, could you try to be more resilient towards it? That way, the waves of distress from you would be weaker, allowing me to be able to control my anxiety and panic attacks more easily.”

Anxiety stares at me for a second before nodding in agreement. “Yes, that’s a great idea! I know I’m a coward, so maybe if I try to be braver, I might be able to help you that way!” it exclaims and its white eyes seem to glow more strongly.

“Hey, you’re not a complete coward,” I smile. “You’re just extra sensitive to your surroundings.”

The next few minutes are spent with me asking Anxiety questions and Anxiety answering them as best it can. Eventually, Anxiety says that I should prepare myself, because it senses that this dream is nearing its end. We stand and emerge from underneath the tree we were under, Anxiety having to crouch to avoid walking into the lower branches. We stand side by side, looking at the scenery. “Anxiety, two things. One, will I ever see you again?”

It looks down at me, “Yes, I would think so, though not every night unfortunately. It takes a lot to be able to appear in your dreams,” it says.

I smile. “That’s fine. Now I know you better, it doesn’t feel so lonely anymore,” I say truthfully.

Anxiety’s form relaxes slightly, “That’s a relief,” it breathes. “And the second question?”

“Well, you’ll need to bend down to hear it,” I say, grinning. Anxiety gives me a strange look before bending down to my height.

“Yes?” it asks. Without hesitating, I fling my arms around its neck, pulling it into a hug. “Thank you for coming tonight to apologise,” I whisper, “I really appreciate that.” I feel Anxiety freeze, stuck for a reply. I’m about to let go, when I feel long arms go round me and pull me close and a moment later I feel Anxiety trembling. I look at it and see its white eyes shimmering more than usual and it takes me a second to realise it’s crying.

“Anxiety, what’s wrong?” I ask in concern. Anxiety meets my gaze, its form shivering and shaking with emotion.

“That’s the first time someone’s touched me or thanked me properly,” it says, its voice choked with emotion. I cuddle into it harder to comfort it. Its body has a strange texture. It’s warm and feels soft and squishy. After a minute of comforting it, I pull away. Anxiety’s almost back to normal, though tremors still pass through its body every now and then. “T-thank you,” it says shakily. “Sorry for getting emotional there. I don’t know what possessed me.”

I take hold of one of its hands and squeeze it. “It’s okay, though I wasn’t expecting you to break

down like that. People have always said that mental health conditions are cold, hard creatures that don't care about you and make you suffer just for the fun of it and that you're the one who breaks down, not them."

Anxiety's eyes widen in horror. "Oh my," it murmurs. "But that is what practically all of them do though." It looks over at me quickly. "I would never do any of that to you, at least, I wouldn't mean to!" it reassures me. "I'm not like that." Before I can respond, it changes the subject, "There's something you ought to know before you wake," it says. I nod my head for it to continue. "You know me as Anxiety and that's what I am, but that is not my real name." It leans down to whisper, "My real name is Atramentous."

"That means black as ink, right?" I murmur back to it.

Atramentous looks surprised. "How did you know?"

I shrug. "I remember looking up shades of black and seeing its description listed," I say casually. Atramentous nods its head in satisfaction. "Do you mind me calling you that now?" I ask. "I think it's a pretty cool name."

Its eyes glow intensely from joy. "I don't mind at all," it says happily. "No offence but I didn't really like being called Anxiety. I know that's what I am, but it just makes me feel like someone's slapped a label on me and said, 'Oh no, another one.'" Atramentous turns to me, "Is it weird that I feel like this? Is there something wrong with me? Because if there is I'll . . ."

"Oh shush!" I snap playfully and I step forward and try to hug it. Despite being 15 and being kinda tall, I still can't give it a hug. Atramentous, being momentarily distracted, laughs in amusement, and I take this moment to tell it, "Nothing's wrong with you, Atramentous. See, this is what we need to work on. We need to train you to not overthink things, because if you do that, I'll do that, and then you'll become nervous

and then I'll become nervous and then I'll start feeling sick. You said you wanted to help and that's something you can help me with . . . if you still want to . . ."

Atramentous realises I'm being serious and leans down. "Of course I'll help you. Why would I still be here if I didn't want to?"

"I guess you're right," I say, seeing the honesty behind its words.

"Oh, by the way, just a few things to say to you," it tells me, seeming to only have just remembered. "Now that you have seen my form, I will now be visible to you and only you in the waking world. We can communicate, but remember to respond inside your head to me," it warns, and is that a gleam of amusement I see in its eye? "Remember, only you can see and hear me." It chuckles softly.

"Don't worry I know, just don't go distracting me during classes, okay?" I say it seriously, but I can't keep a smile from appearing on my face.

Atramentous laughs. "You have my word," it promises earnestly.

"So, is this settled then? That we'll help each other out from now on?"

"Yes, it is indeed," Atramentous says and holds out its sharp-yet-soft looking hand. I take it and we shake on it.

"I will try to think of strategies to help you, Atramentous," I whisper.

"And I shall also do so for you, Eva."

(Bonus scene)

"Sorry for upsetting you earlier, by the way."

"It's fine, Atra."

"That's a relief! I was afraid that I'd . . . wait . . . *Atra!*?"

How psychology can be used to empower people on the autistic spectrum

by Sophie

According to *Autism spectrum disorder*, a *Psychology today* article, 1% of the world's population is on the autistic spectrum. I am part of this population. Symptoms are different for everyone, but they usually mean the affected person has trouble communicating with other people in any of a hundred ways. In my case, I have often misinterpreted or failed to notice people's signals, have had facial expressions that are overly neutral or otherwise do not reflect my mood, and have had trouble "putting myself in other people's shoes". These symptoms have made me feel like I do not have friends for much of my childhood, since I've been unable to interact with people and therefore unable to form deep friendships. Studying psychology can help me learn how people think and therefore, how to communicate, and ultimately overcome the social challenges that come with being on the spectrum.

Even before diagnosis, I have always felt like something was off about the way I communicate. Finding it hard to interject into a conversation is another of my symptoms, and I remember wondering how other children could jump into a conversation so easily and seamlessly. I always felt off, like an outsider, like there was something about the science of interaction that I was always missing. I was right. I watched people talk and plan events and move from strangers to acquaintances to friends to best friends so easily, so effortlessly, and wondered what I was doing wrong. I felt like the only person in my elementary school, in my middle school, in my high school, in the world who was not a member of this universal club called "people who can communicate effectively". Even worse, whenever I tried to ask someone about this phenomenon, I was met with blank stares and responses like "What?" or "Sorry?" or "What do you mean?" This worsened my sense of outsider-ness and made me feel even more insecure about my condition.

Of course, they could not respond with anything else — I did not receive a formal diagnosis until early 2018. Before then, even I didn't know I was on the spectrum: no one did, and definitely not my classmates.

But I was always acutely aware of the sense that I was always interacting differently than most people, and I was determined to figure out why and how to be more like them. I did this by studying people: studying how they think, act, (individually and in groups), and communicate. I was teaching myself psychology using the real world, not a textbook, and applying it to my own life long before enrolling in this class.

Now that I'm studying psychology using the conventional method, I can learn things about people that I never would have figured out on my own. I can learn the formal names for phenomena I've noticed over the years. I can fill in the gaps between my perception of how people think and the cold, hard, scientific facts.

Studying psychology using my own life taught me to appreciate the field in a way I never could have if I had only learned via coursework. That's not to say that you can't appreciate a subject by studying it in school, just that you appreciate it more deeply if you teach it to yourself and apply it to your life. I know that some people denounce psychology by calling it fake science, but I see psychology as a one-hundred-percent legitimate and real field of science with tangible, significant benefits. There are many reasons for this. Not only does psychology fit the dictionary definition of "science", but it acts like a science in practice. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides five definitions of the word "science". The one that applies to psychology the most is "knowledge or a system of knowledge covering general truths or the operation of general laws especially as

obtained and tested through scientific method” — basically, information obtained and tested via the scientific method. The scientific method is central to the study of psychology. According to Dr Gregg Henriques, PhD, author of *The “Is psychology a science?” debate*, an article in the online version of *Psychology today*, “academic psychologists have long adopted the scientific mindset when it comes to their subject matter and have long employed scientific methods” and how psychology was founded using the scientific method and how psychologists train using the scientific method:

“Indeed, the official birth of psychology (Wundt’s lab) was characterized by virtue of the fact that it employed the methods of science (ie., systematic observation, measurement, hypothesis testing, etc.) to understanding human conscious experience. And to this day, training in academic psychology is largely defined by training in the scientific method, measurement and data gathering, research design, and advanced statistical techniques, such as structural equation modeling, meta-analyses, and hierarchical linear regression.

“Individuals get their PhD in academic psychology by conducting systematic research and, if they want a career in the academy, they need to publish in peer-reviewed journals and often need to have a program of (fundable) research.”

There’s no doubt in my mind that psychology is a science. Psychology can help people learn how others think and communicate: the field is especially helpful for those who find it hard to communicate or connect (such as the 1 in 59 Americans with autism spectrum disorder, according to *Autism spectrum disorder*).

One drawback to the field of psychology is that the wealth of information can be overwhelming. The science was founded in Germany in 1879, and after almost a century and a half of research, there’s a lot of information to sort through (Sprung and Sprung, p. 372).

But teaching psychology to myself first-hand

helped mitigate this feeling of being overwhelmed. As I’ve gotten more and more aware of my profile, I’ve noticed how my way of interacting with the world differs from other people’s more and more. Also, I’ve been able to combat my symptoms. Now, if someone asks me, “Hi, how are you?” I know that they are reaching out to me and are not only making small talk, but are also trying to connect with me. One year ago, I would not have realized that they were doing anything other than asking how I was — I may have not even registered the question as significant at all. I performed this work by drawing on a collection of therapists (some specializing in ASD, some not), social groups, movies (some about people with ASD, some not), family members and friends, and my psychology class to systematically analyze every interaction between humans I could find. I thought long and hard about how people interact in different settings and why, and how I could apply this information to manipulate my role in social situations. I thought about how people think socially. I — and other people on the spectrum — can use psychology to learn how people on and off the spectrum think and communicate, and can use the field to change our social skills.

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Autism meltdowns

by Georgia

Do you see that light above you? It's bright, isn't it? But you continue reading this. Now imagine glancing at it but instead of noticing the luminosity and resuming your reading, your eyes begin to feel like they're burning and your head starts to ache . . . but you have to focus on these words . . . and the person next to you suddenly feels like they're too close and you can hear their breathing and feel their physical presence squashing your own . . . but you have to keep reading . . . and the room is full of people: rummaging with paper, coughing, squeaking their chair. A door closes in the distance, a siren from an ambulance. A clock ticking. A pen dropping. But you have to keep reading. Noises build. The room is compact. The words don't make sense. You can't get out. You claw at your skin. You want to slam your head against a wall or pull at your hair — anything to stop the painful accumulation of noises, lights, physical discomfort and frustration. But what can you do? So you hold it in, until you're alone, where you cry so hard you can't breathe and you curl in a ball wanting nothing but to stop existing and not knowing why you feel like you do.

This is what it feels like to have an Autistic meltdown. It's painful to read, painful to imagine but even more painful to experience.

Personally, meltdowns are the most debilitating aspect of having ASD. They're the times I'm at my lowest, most vulnerable and, in truth, the times I'm most embarrassed to be Autistic. Imagine a nineteen-year-old crying, pacing backwards and forwards and shaking, all because their bus was late. What would you think!? But it happened and still now, I cringe at myself and the reaction of the people around me: the shocked stares, the murmurs and judgemental tuts. But was it something I could control? Was it something I could have stopped?

No. Meltdowns are not “bad behaviour”. They are not for attention and they are not intentional. They can be triggered by a variety of environments: change in plans, sensory overload, spontaneity, unfamiliar places or people, confrontation, to name a few. Unlike dimming the lights, or moving to a quieter room, some of the above triggers can't be managed, but, with that in mind, how much nicer would it be to have a world in which Autistic people didn't have to explain themselves or apologise for meltdowns they can't control? Or, even better, a world in which an Autistic person could feel able to say they need to leave the room in order to reduce the risk of a meltdown, without fear of being judged?

Of course, experiences of meltdowns differ from person to person but one thing that I feel would help us all is understanding from the neurotypical population. Talk to us. Ask us questions. Take an interest in our differences, learn the signs of when we are struggling and, ultimately, destroy the stereotypes!



stuff you might like to know about *the Spectrum*

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I received this piece in January — everyone having fun on holiday, but with the apocalypse happening in the background! I always love Peter's work, but the contrast here stood out for me.

I wondered when I'd get the opportunity to use it, and then the pandemic struck. Now it feels prescient, especially as everyone around me has jumped at the chance to picnic on the beach, Editor.

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