

What is Autism?

The official definition for Autism is “a mental condition, present from early childhood, characterized by great difficulty in communicating and forming relationships with other people and in using language and abstract concepts”. In today’s blog I am going to talk about Autism from my perspective and what it means to me, I will hopefully answer a few questions and dispel a few myths.

I was diagnosed with a form of Autism called “Asperger’s Syndrome” when I was seven years old, although I had been aware that I was different from other children from a much earlier age. From age three when I started nursery school, I found social interaction with my peer group incredibly difficult; I often didn’t understand the “social rules” which frequently led to conflict and issues. Throughout my time at school I have found myself being bullied for being “The weird kid” or the one who didn’t understand the joke.

I struggle with some sensory issues including, sensitivity to smell, sensitivity to lots of noise and sensitivity to touch. I often find if I am in a room with lots of people that I find it difficult to focus on what one person is saying to me as all the background noise feels a lot louder. Sudden loud noises particularly sirens, fire alarms etc frighten me. I also find it difficult in a crowded rooms to follow all the social cues going on around me. This often confuses me and causes me to behave inappropriately. I also find eye contact difficult I used to make very little eye contact and still when anxious will revert back to this, although I now normally tend to over compensate with over eye contact.

As with many people on the Autistic spectrum I have a tendency to at first instinct take language very literally, I do not understand similes, metaphors, sarcasm and humour, this has often created misunderstandings between myself and other people.

I have spent a lot of time learning as many different expressions and metaphors as I can but unfortunately the English language is full of them, for example I spent many years trying to work out why my grandma wanted me to injure myself before I went on stage to dance, as before each performance she would say “Break a leg”, I now understand this is just an expression of good luck. I also discovered telling my head mistress that her clothes look ugly even if they do is not appropriate.

Another issue I struggle with is change to routine or plans, I find it very difficult if someone changes what we have arranged or if they turn up early or late as this causes me to become anxious.

Unfortunately, as a result of these issues I have frequently been subjected to taunting and bullying by other children at school, which led me to being very unhappy, at age nine I suffered a complete breakdown and attempted to take my own life. At this point I was diagnosed alongside the Autism with severe anxiety, clinical depression and psychosis. As a result of not being able to cope in the school environment I spent eighteen months at home with my mum being home-schooled, for the first three months of this I couldn’t even cope with going outside the flat that we lived in.

Three years ago I discovered music which I have found helps me to deal with some of the anxiety and depression. Through writing and performing music I am able to truly express myself. Also for the first time as a result of music I have met a whole bunch of other musicians who make me feel like I fit in. The music scene in Dorset is now very much my safe place and my family.

There are various myths around autism that I wish to dispel.

1. All autistic people are like Rainman – not true there are many different types of autism which affect people in many ways, Rainman is just one of these
2. You can't have autism because you look and sound normal. - Apart from some extreme types of autism where people may flap or rock most people with autism do not look any different to someone without. It is an invisible mental health issue.
3. Autism is a learning difficulty – not all people with autism struggle with learning, in actual fact many have above average intelligence and some such as Einstein (who was allegedly on the spectrum) are absolute geniuses.
4. Autism is just another label to make excuses for being naughty, that child deserves a good slap – Not true, autism is a real genetic disorder that affects coping mechanisms and can lead to melt downs, the difference between a meltdown and a tantrum is if you give in to a child and give them what they want a tantrum will stop, whereas an autistic child having a meltdown won't, as it is not caused by trying to get their own way but by being overwhelmed and unable to cope with a situation.
5. Children with autism cannot grow up to be useful members of society or hold a job down – Not true many autistic people have successful careers and have much to offer the job world such as punctuality, loyalty, good at sticking to routines and many more attributes.
6. All autistic children are savant at maths or music- not true like normal people there are a whole range of autistic people with many skills.
7. Autism can be cured – unfortunately currently there is no cure but to be honest how can you cure something which is such a big part of someone's personality, you would change the person taking away the good points as well as the bad.

If I was to define autism I would say – Imagine going to a job interview for a job you really want, imagine how anxious and stressed you feel, imagine lots of annoying sensory issues around you and not quite understanding the language people are using when they speak to you. This is how I feel every day.

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