

Autism &

THE WESTMINSTER
COMMISSION ON
AUTISM

Mental Health

Overlaps, Obstacles, Opportunities

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Introduction

Autism and mental health are two very different things – yet they overlap more than is often discussed. Autism – like dyslexia, dyspraxia, and others – is a neurological developmental condition, a ‘differently-wired’ brain rather than an illness or mental health problem. The vast majority of autistic people do not see themselves as mentally ill, and would not wish to be ‘cured’ of autism, were this even possible.

Yet repeated research has shown that autism and mental health problems do not exist in isolation – 70% of autistic people meet the criteria for one mental health condition, and 40% meet the criteria for two. Despite this, there is sometimes reluctance to speak about the overlaps – for fear of conflating autism and mental health, and causing confusion among the wider public.

But ignoring the overlap is just as harmful – it means that mental health problems experienced by autistic people can go overlooked and not treated. It’s common for clinicians to link mental health issues experienced by autistic patients to their autism – for example, saying “Of course you’re anxious, you’re autistic!” – rather than looking at these as distinct conditions which need different approaches.

Mind has already been pushing work in this area with the report of their 2015 toolkit into Autism and Mental Health, and collaboration with the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism. The House of Commons’ Westminster Commission on Autism is also leading the way with a 2016 report into access for healthcare – including mental health services – for autistic people.

Yet while it’s important to get an overall picture of the issue through statistical reports, it’s also important to hear about the everyday lives of real people with Autism Spectrum Conditions and mental health problems. This booklet is a collection of seven people from all different backgrounds – lawyers, students, authors, community volunteers – connected by their experiences of both.

They’re able to speak on a personal, individual level – in a way data cannot and should not – about what it’s actually like to walk in those shoes. Their experiences of autism are all different; their mental health problems are diverse; and all have a different story to tell. Some speak about the strengths their autism, and coping with their mental health, have given them in work; others about their struggles in life. All are important to listen to.

Jonathan Andrews is:

Westminster Autism Commission Member

Future Trainee Solicitor at Reed Smith

Equality Improvement Champion, Mind

Youth Council Chair, Ambitious about Autism

“At Mind, we are committed to ensuring people from all communities are able to achieve better mental health. This includes people on the autism spectrum; our Disability Equality initiatives have helped us better understand the needs of this group, and Jonathan’s report adds to this awareness”.



“As Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism, I am only too aware of the problems surrounding mental health for autistic people, and am concerned about premature mortality for those with autism, highlighted in Autistica’s recent report. I support Jonathan’s efforts to raise awareness of this crucial issue.”

Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP, Chair of the APPG on Autism



"As the CEO of Ambitious about Autism I'm committed to helping young people with autism achieve. Too many experience mental health problems as a result of lack of understanding and acceptance - it's important for us to talk more about this and to address the issue".

Jolanta Lasota, CEO of Ambitious about Autism and Chair at Autism Education Trust



“I'm the founder and chairman of the Westminster Commission on Autism. The commission is currently looking into access to healthcare for autistic people. In conducting this inquiry and in securing better access to healthcare, it is vital that mental health issues are recognised as being just as important as physical issues among the community. I fully support Jonathan’s booklet for bringing attention to this.”

Barry Sheerman MP, Founder & Chair of the Westminster Autism Commission



“Autistic people, parents, and professional agree that the number one priority for autism research should be to understand which interventions improve or reduce mental health problems in autism. In addition, mental health is one Autistica's three strategic priorities, in recognition of the impact this issue has on everyday lives. More understanding of this area is vital, and Jonathan's report sharing personal perspectives is very welcome.”

Dr James Cusack, Research Director at Autistica



"At Reed Smith, we recognise the talents of people with disabilities and look to recruit the best talent from every talent pool. Jonathan's booklet is incredibly helpful as it sheds light on an area of disability rarely spoken about. People with autism can bring great skills to the workplace and society, but only by truly understanding that each person is an individual with different needs can we create an environment for their talents to thrive. I would commend this booklet to any organisation which wants to better understand mental health and autism.”

Carolyn Pepper, Partner at Reed Smith and Chair of the Disability Task Force



Jonathan Andrews: Autism and Anxiety in life and at work

Jonathan Andrews is a future trainee solicitor at leading law firm Reed Smith and sits on the Parliamentary Commission for Autism, as well as working with the government's Disability Confident initiative. He also sits on the Board of Trustees and Impact Committee at Ambitious about Autism.

Jonathan is autistic and is passionate about helping autistic people succeed in the workplace and helping others understand the complexities of autism. Here, he writes on his own experiences of 'autistic anxiety', and how it can manifest both in employment, and in everyday life.



Anxiety is one of the most common ways autism can express itself – it's believed the vast majority of autistic people experience some form of anxiety as a result of autism at some point in their lives, particularly in their childhoods before they are able to develop any coping strategies. This article won't all be about dry statistics and second-hand sources, however – I want to discuss something I haven't really written about before, which is how anxiety personally affects me.

It's said by many autistic people that 'autistic anxiety' is different from 'regular anxiety' because it is heavily situational; and while I think anxiety is far too varied a condition for any kind to ever be 'regular', and have no idea if others without autism might experience it the same as me, the highly situational nature of anxiety is something I personally experience.

It's very difficult to describe this type of anxiety, though, because on one level it's largely an extreme version of the nervousness most people feel when around new people or in new situations. But because of this, people often respond that 'I do that', so it couldn't possibly be autism. That's true, you say, but with autism it's more pronounced – the anxiety is simply stronger. "How do you know it's stronger than others?" They quip back. "You can't read their minds!"

And it's strictly true, that, no, I can't tell exactly how other people are feeling when they first meet someone all the time, so they might well be worse affected. But if so, they're a lot better than hiding it than I am - few others will be so overcome with nerves that they really have to focus to remain clear, to find themselves stopping and starting their opening words three to four times because there are too many thoughts firing off in their head at once, and generally presenting as very nervous, unclear and unsure of themselves – even if this couldn't be further from the truth.

Internally, I make perfect sense – and once I've been in the environment for a few minutes, this starts to come through – but initially, I'm quite aware I don't come across as calm and composed. I've had different reactions to this – some have said they were startled and impressed by 'how confident I became', others that I am able to suddenly switch from being an introvert to an extrovert.

Some have theorised it's a 'game plan' I have to make people have to really focus on me to hear and understand my contributions before I then reveal my 'true, confident nature'. Some have taken it as a sign my confidence has suddenly shot up for some reason after meeting them the first time – funnily enough, they always cite their own involvement as the key in my 'inspirational journey'.

The truth is rather more mundane. Most of the time, I come across as calm, confident, composed – to a greater extreme than most people. In a new environment, I become anxious and lost – to a greater degree than most people. And that’s the first thing to note about autistic anxiety – it tends to be more stark and more noticeable, but also more situational.

And the situational side of autistic anxiety really shouldn’t be understated. Because I very often find myself meeting completely new people, of a level most would find intimidating – CEOs, Charity and NGO Heads, senior politicians – and am completely calm around them, able to conjure up small talk of just the right complexity and length, and otherwise interact professionally. In meetings, it’s often commented that my points, are astute and valuable – which includes comments on the behaviour and viewpoints of others, something which according to the stereotypes, I shouldn’t be able to do.

In this environment, I’m confident; in the words of others, I ‘own the room’; and I can always make myself understood. But that’s because I have a clear understanding of the purpose and parameters of the interaction. I know the objective I’m meeting for, I’ll often have been able to prepare in advance, and I know everyone is aiming for a tangible result. It makes everything seem rather a lot calmer.

And this calmness and lack of anxiety doesn’t just apply to work situations - once I’m settled in and used to a social environment, it’s just as true. And in some social environments, I find it’s also true on the first visit or meeting – and I’ve tried to find some dividing line to explain why, but can’t. Sometimes I’m anxious, it seems; often I’m not, and often I won’t even know what the case will be until I get there.

Not all autistic anxiety is the same, however – many people report feeling continually on edge, eternally anxious and able to be ‘set off’ by very minor problems, whatever the situation. Some days people say I’m like that, but rarely, and it doesn’t marry up with how I feel inside even then. The vast majority of the time I’m very calm, and I’m told I look it, too. But often when I’m internally anxious, I still look calm; and when I appear unsettled, often I’ll be more in control internally. In that respect, my autistic anxiety factors into another shade of one of autism’s key aspects – that internal feelings and external signals don’t match up, so people interpret your body language, tone or words significantly differently.

There’s a saying that ‘when you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person’; and the same sentiment could just as easily be applied to anxious people. All are different – anxiety can be debilitating, or it can spur people to achieve great things, or both in the same person. Similarly, no two autistic anxieties are the same – perpetually stressed and incredibly Zen people can coexist on the same spectrum, and sometimes the same person can experience both extremes within a matter of minutes, in different situations.

Joely Colmer: Living with Asperger's, Depression and PTSD

Joely is aged 23 and lives in Bournemouth. She has experience of both Asperger's Syndrome and mental health problems, as she has diagnoses of PTSD and depression, but hasn't let this get in her way. Joely volunteers widely, having won several awards for her great work; she's also a media performer, having appeared on BBC Generation 2015, and will be a published author very soon, with her book "My Fairy Jam Jar: Life A.S. We see it".

Her story is an example of how self-employment through passions such as writing can help disabled people find a job, and succeed – both in work, and in general life. Here, she talks about how her Asperger's and depression/PTSD affect her – and how she's achieved success both despite, and because of, these.



I have a rare and unique gift that hinders me with many hidden hardships but also walks hand in hand with the very things I love most about myself. You see, my disability is my gift. My gift is Asperger's Syndrome; a disability on the higher end of the Autistic Spectrum. I wish to infuse an understanding into the hearts of many - an understanding of autism and mental health issues. I am a multi-national-award-winning autism activist, volunteer and soon to be author of a positive book about my life with Asperger's Syndrome and my mental health issues ("My Fairy Jam Jar: Life A.S We See It").

My gift enables me to experience the rich, vibrant tapestry of life in all its glorious detail. Tell me, when you were a small child, did you ever visit a meadow? Ten years on, would you be able to accurately describe everything you saw? From the scientific names of the flowers, clouds and insects to the numbers of leaves on the floor? I can. My superb photographic memory is one aspect of my gift that is unique, positive and empowering.

Good memory is a common trait of Asperger's; I can use my memory and my ability to soak up facts to my advantage. As with many others on the autistic spectrum, I have 'Specific Narrow Interests'. Two of my 'Specific Narrow Interests' are Autism and Ancient history (when I was 5-8 years old I communicated using Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics and Sign Language because I was partially deaf and could not speak). Like many others with Asperger's, my IQ is higher than average; I just find it hard to express that knowledge.

Other 'Hidden Quirks' include

- Passionate and Motivated about their 'Specific Narrow Interest'
- 'Walking Encyclopaedias'; autistic people are very good at retaining information and facts
- Good Memory
- Honest, will always try to follow rules and laws
- Empathy; no matter how hard it is to express

- Loyal, kind and caring
- Ability to notice details others wouldn't

Unfortunately, with the good comes the bad, so as well as hidden quirks, people with Asperger's also have 'Hidden Hardships'.

- Communication in all forms. Understanding language and following social cues
- knowing what is appropriate to say / how to speak
- Problem Solving; very poor Social Imagination
- Inability to cope with Change in Routine
- Meltdowns and Information Overloads
- Understanding the world / people around them and situations outside of their normal routines.

I am a very positive person and I truly do see my disability as a gift, but the hidden hardships I face daily are extremely challenging and hold me back from achieving my full potential. I'd like to tell you a little about how these hardships affect me in an attempt to educate others, so that others with Asperger's can be properly supported.

I get a lot of Information Overloads due to my ability to notice everything in fine detail. These Information Overloads give me extreme meltdowns and chronic pain; sometimes I find it hard to walk, with migraines, seizures and extreme exhaustion every day. I believe that meltdowns turn autism into a physical disability. Due to my meltdowns I have an uncontrollable habit called 'stimming', which is where I focus all of my negative energy on one repetitive movement in the hope of drowning out my offending overloading senses; controlling negative sensory input with sensory output. 'Stimming' is a very common necessity of autism. My 'stimming' includes flapping hands and fingers and hitting myself on the head.

Which leads me on to my next point - meltdowns strike those with autism apart, and can be used as a disgusting excuse to abuse. As a result of bullying and abuse I have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A few years ago my PTSD used to plague me with hourly flashbacks, turning me into a shadow of the woman I have thankfully become now. Flashbacks used to corrode at my happiness. Depression ceased my desire to seek change; eating away at my ability to see positively. Anxiety created a warrior; desperate to break free from my chains of panic attacks and despair, to fight for my right to be happy. It was as if I was simply watching a movie of my own life; feeling numb as if I weren't really living at all. I felt isolated, pained and desperately alone. Let me tell you something; to feel alone in a world surrounded by people is a terrible, tragic thing.

Those flashbacks I described are actually traumatic memories; it is hard for traumatized people to remember the actual traumatic memories because their brains can't handle it. The brain literally goes into shock. Instead, you get flashbacks of these memories until your brain deems you emotionally stable enough to handle the full memory. Every day I was transported back to my darkest moments by flashbacks; forcing me to relive the unjust pain, as if it was happening all over again - and there was little I could do to stop it.

One of the best known aspects of autism is the necessity for truth and honesty in all areas of life. Following exact rules and routines may seem simple enough, but it allows for zero error or impromptu change. This means that anything out of routine or that is 'wrong' (incorrect experiences or behaviours), are wildly upsetting - causing meltdowns.

Those on the spectrum are more sensitive to life experiences and the 'insignificant' everyday experiences can massively impact them, causing anxiety and meltdowns. These tiny things that most people can 'get over' within seconds, like a change in toothpaste, a lost set of car keys or a late bus have huge implications for someone on the spectrum and can potentially ruin their whole day; by negatively affecting their abilities more than usual. If meltdowns and anxiety are a symptom of daily life for those on the spectrum, just imagine what happens when a real big change happens; something really unjust and wrong? Something like experiencing bullying, hate crime, changing school or university, or moving home, anything... What happens then?

I think that it is rather logical that if daily normal life is so upsetting to cause multiple meltdowns - then abnormal and unjustified life with bullying or disability-related hate crime is actually traumatizing; creating a much bigger emotional reaction of Anxiety, Depression and sometimes PTSD.

Statistics show that 8 out of 10 autistic children have experience bullying, sometimes on a daily basis and 9 out of 10 have been robbed with threats or violence in the last year. There is a minimal of 1,200 Disability Hate Crimes every week, with a tiny 1% prosecution rate. Those with disabilities are more vulnerable to bullying and suffer more as a result. This is why I, and many others, believe that those on the spectrum are more prone to anxiety, depression and possible trauma.

My family were shocked at my diagnosis of PTSD and Depression, and they did all they could to support me. They encouraged me to use 'Grounders', which is something that you keep with you at all times that can aid you to calm. This is because 'Grounders' reminds you of happy times. My grounders are my Glastonbury Festival wristbands, which I have worn for years to help bring me back from flashbacks and remind me that happier times are awaiting me. Other methods I use to relax and cope with daily stress include; listening to music, writing stories, keeping a stress diary and creating art (no matter how poor the art may be). The outcome of this is beneficial beyond words; I owe 'grounders', music and art therapy to my ability to calm meltdowns and flashbacks quicker. My wonderful family also encouraged me to start volunteering to give me a positive disability friendly project to focus all of my creative energies on.

Volunteering was the best decision I ever made. Volunteering provides a close knit community, a sanctuary of hopes and dreams; the one place outside of home where I feel safe. This is because real role models, friends and awesome youth workers became a second family and they help you through anything – by inspiring you to use your talents (hidden as they may be) to achieve a positive sense of self. Building up your confidence, abilities and teaching you skills and empowered feelings that you never before thought possible. Volunteering and my supportive family have enabled me to achieve my dreams – and I have never been happier. A wonderful outcome of my volunteering is that I am a multi Award winning Autism Activist and Motivational Speaker. I recently won the prestigious Prime Ministers 'National Point of Light' Award, amongst other National awards for my commitment to volunteering and contribution to community change. Volunteering is rewarding beyond words; making a difference is the greatest 'cure' for mental health issues I could ever advise

upon (In addition to seeking professional medical help, therapy and support from family friends and charity of course!). As a result of this, I've been featured on the BBC as part of their 'Generation 2015' project, speaking publicly on autism and mental health.

And I've been able to achieve a book deal at a young age compared to many – because I've been confident and comfortable enough to be open about my disabilities, how they affect me, and how others in the same situation can achieve.

Remember, individual people every single day shatter the misconception that one person can't make a difference. So let us make a difference together by learning to understand about our differences and provide support and friendship to those in need. All diversity in people is amazing; we are people of intellect, friendship, justice, love and most importantly we are people of inspiring diversity.

Stuart Russell BEM BCA: Being gay and having traits of Asperger's and poor mental health

Stuart Russell is a British podcaster, writer and arts enthusiast trained in radio production. He has received several awards and honours for services to the arts, including a British Empire Medal and British Citizen Award. He is an Associate Fellow of the Royal Commonwealth Society and was one of only thirty young people shortlisted for commercial space travel in 2015. Stuart loves to interview inspirational people across the globe and provide platforms to give him and others the chance to be heard. He is openly gay and has traits of Asperger's, as well as experiencing poor mental health in the past.



I was outed as gay before I ever had a chance to explore who or what I was. It was a stigma gifted to me by a world of judges, I had no jury. It would take me six more years to be told I have traits of Asperger's. I could not understand why I was always called wrong, bad, strange, weird, thick, slow and stupid throughout life. Being gay with slight traits of a condition, I could not get help. It made my life so much more confusing than it had to be.

I was told I was gay aged 13 and at 14 I decided yes, I am gay, even though I really didn't have a clue what being gay was. This was to my disadvantage as at age 14 I was raped by an 18 year old man. I have never spoken about this, it took me years to process and I never reported it. I don't know if having traits of Asperger's had anything to do with making me an easy target. I was always slower at learning, it's all relative now.

Feeling forced out and hiding this from everyone led to drinking, smoking, drug abuse and self-harm. I tried to get help from my school who refused to acknowledge my issues. It's ironic they were my issues as it seemed to be everyone else causing them. I left school and went to art school which I thought would be my big dramatic escape from a small town. It ended up almost killing me. Everything just spiralled out with my control. One of my teachers at art school told me every day I was awful, not good enough, I was strange, not talented. He said I was too common ever to succeed. It was rough on my already fragile mental state and I left art school after one year and several overdoses.

I moved back home with nothing and realised a lot of my problems had stemmed from negative attitudes. Yes I was different, yes I was gay, yes I had mental health issues and yes I learn differently. I had a sort of mental breakthrough and decided I would eradicate everyone from my past and edit my own future. **I believed in myself for the first time. I kicked all my bad habits. I decided I have talent, I am creative, I have ideas, I have the ability to create change, I will not be a product of my environment and I will not be a victim ever.** This inner strength from the universe came partly from my boyfriend who had blood cancer and committed suicide but also from being pushed too far towards the edge and I was determined to take control and choose to live.

In all that I do I use my quirks and traits of Asperger's to work for good. I volunteer; I use my creativity every day and re-trained in media. I use my negative gay experiences for good. I create talk

shows about LGBTI+ rape, abuse, issues and solutions. I have been my own cheerleader in a sense. No one has been rooting for me my whole life. Everything different about me was seen as a negative. I've never been accepted by the LGBTI+ community and I have always been refused support for Asperger's. People fail to realise if you have traits of something, okay maybe it's not diagnosable but not being diagnosed also means no access to a support network.

I'm now twenty four - an award winning artist, presenter and writer with medals from the Queen. I was nominated for space travel, made an associate at the Royal Commonwealth Society and I received international support for two podcasts. I haven't abused any substances for over six years, I have promoted talking about LGTBI+ rape and abuse, I have eradicated everyone from my past and most importantly I have moved on with very little support.

When you are gay you are called derogatory, negative names. These names do not define or represent you. With Asperger's and autism you are often told you cannot achieve, this is false information. It just takes different ways of learning and open attitudes to mental health. Invisible conditions should be visible; it would make the suffering people experience disappear, and life for young people could be pleasant.

I think more LGBTI+ education and mental health support is necessary in high schools. Instead of being told what's wrong with us, let us know what's right! If I had been given a full LGBTI+ sex education from the age of 12, I feel I could have known that rape and abuse isn't just a straight thing, it can happen to anyone. With a good education in mental health issues, or all health issues, I would know my own mind and I would know how to speak up and seek help. If teachers/lecturers were positive about all forms of learning and all forms of people, I would not be made to feel like a failure for most of my adolescent life. The solutions are actually fairly easy to instigate, but it needs to begin early in a child's life. Being different is not a negative thing, I've managed to turn it into my success and I believe other gay people with traits of Asperger's can do the same.

Thomas Kingston FRAS: Mental health during and after an Autism Diagnosis

Originally from little corner of England where Teesside, North Yorkshire and the North Sea meet, Thomas studied Theology at the University of London before moving into studies of Law. He has been awarded a full fees Scholarship from BPP Law School and a Middle Temple Scholarship in pursuit of his studies to be a barrister. He sits as a Youth Patron for Ambitious about Autism and was diagnosed with autism in his mid-teens and major depressive disorder around the age of 13. In his spare time he enjoys travel, rugby, socialising and politics. He is one of the youngest ever Fellows of the Royal Asiatic Society.



I remember the year I turned 13 vividly; it was probably one of the darkest years of my life. I still feel ridiculous attaching that label to it, but had the serious health issues uncovered in that year been physical I suspect I wouldn't feel half as silly.

My parents tell me I was a bright and happy youngster, and I certainly don't remember anything being wrong. I had a loving family with my parents taking an active role in my upbringing and giving me the best of the opportunities they could offer. I found making friends hard, I suppose, but I thought everyone did and maybe I just wasn't as good at being social as everyone else, just like how very few people were as good at remembering facts as I was. I loved sports, putting my all into it and despite being pretty lousy I always got an A for effort and the full support of my parents even though they knew I was far from being the next David Beckham, so when I was diagnosed with Dyspraxia in the final years of primary school a few things made sense, my poor co-ordination etc. were attributable to this issue, but it was something that could be worked on.

I did what the Doctors suggested, from occupational therapy to classes of hula hoop whirling whilst other students worked on English tests etc., all in an attempt to boost my motor skills, my passion for sports and life in general continued. However like most young people Secondary School was a big jump, in one way it was exciting, all of a sudden I had access to in depth resources and teachers that could afford to spend the time indulging my passions for things that were well beyond what I would be learning, but as new friendship groups started to form I started to feel more and more alone, making friends as a 5 year old was easy, it wasn't even that bad when I was 9 and moved schools but at Secondary School it was a lot more intense, I don't think that was solely to blame for what happened when I went into Year 8 but I suppose it didn't help.

It didn't really come from anywhere. **As far as I can remember it was like a wave of despair crashing down on me, the solid ground underneath my feet swept out from underneath me and I was left to fall into the abyss.** My parents tried their best but didn't quite understand and nor did I, something that made things worse. As I said before, I was relatively happy, despite the lack of social life I wasn't too bothered, my own company was good enough most of the time, I had everything I needed and much of what I wanted, so why was I bursting into tears randomly and having anxiety attacks a number of times a day? I was sent to see a Psychiatrist maybe two years into these issues and it wasn't after many sessions that she decided that there was a good chance I had Asperger's

Syndrome, if Dyspraxia answered a few questions, this diagnosis felt like it had lifted a weight off my shoulders, all of a sudden the things that irrationally annoyed me had a reason and my quirks and habits were explainable too.

But my depression persisted and 12 years on from diagnosis is still around. **I don't think depression is an easy thing for anyone to deal with but when your mind runs at what feels like 50x the speed of everyone else and every second is spend analysing about 20 things then it's definitely made harder.** The social anxiety elements came to a fore when I'd miss a lecture or lesson due to an out-of-the-blue depressive episode and just feel incredibly awkward about going back in; I'd make up an excuse to dodge it, which as you'd expect created a never ending spiral – a bad day led to awkwardness which led to another bad day and so on...

Now I'm generally quite positive about my ASD, I think it's given me opportunities that others would love, a focus and drive that are the envy of many, determination to overcome obstacles and passion for things many find boring. But when combined with the black dog of depression it's definitely a negative; the sheer illogical nature of depression plays on your mind, your over-analysis can't make sense of the situation and you end up going round in circles without any end in sight.

Except, perhaps, there is. One of the hardest things for many on the spectrum is to just accept things without asking why, something that can be a major plus in later life and quite a problem when dealing with authority at a younger age, but once I accepted that I didn't have to have done anything and nothing had to be wrong with my life to feel so down and in fact it was just a chemical error that I had no control over it felt like a weight was lifted. I don't know whether this insight will help others but if I can say one thing it has to be an encouragement to just stop asking why and just take things as they are for once, make the most of the good days as they'll help you power through the bad, appreciate your friends and family and be honest with them about your issues. You'll find support in places you didn't know existed and you'll emerge stronger.

Or if that's too ambitious I implore you to do just one thing – never give up hope.

Anonymous – Dealing with Asperger's and Bipolar

Like many people on the autism spectrum, I have more than one diagnosis. I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and a working diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome; and as I sort of have two separate diagnoses, sometimes my symptoms overlap or even contradict. That said, I will try and talk through my experience of employment and what concessions have been and can be made in my context with reference to one or both of these.

First off, the interview stage is very important. In an interview review I was told I often talked 'off topic' - this is a symptom of Asperger's predominantly but also is very apparent in individuals with bipolar when in a higher mood. I can be prompted to stay on topic with reminders. I also have trouble maintaining eye contact and then accused of being 'disinterested' or 'not listening', it should be kept in mind that this is a common symptom of people with Asperger's and I am listening. Unfortunately and in the case of both bipolar in a low mood and Asperger's, it often takes me a little more time to understand and process information so there may be a delay in answering questions. I have the opposite problem in a high mood where I will answer the question too quickly and may provide an irrelevant answer; in this case I can be urged to slow down.

In my current job, I initially found things very difficult. Although I had disclosed my disability, my employers were not aware of what type of symptoms might present themselves. As a carer I was expected to work nights, I expressed concern that my health would be affected if my sleep pattern was disturbed but I was urged 'to try nights' and see how it goes which I did and I unfortunately became psychotic and was hospitalised. This was partly my fault as I should have had enough self-awareness to refuse to work nights and get a Doctor's note to support this but I wanted to 'fit in' to the job as much as possible and show how committed and eager I was. Shortly before I was hospitalised I rang in sick, saying 'I hadn't slept at all during the night' and was greeted with the reply somewhat sarcastically, 'What should I put on your absence form? Just very tired?'

This is the first point I would like to make about employment and bipolar disorder: it is very important for me to maintain a regular sleeping pattern and to get enough sleep, as not having enough sleep will trigger an episode. Therefore, to any prospective employers of those with bipolar disorder, I would urge to take seriously your employee's sleep more seriously than those without and not to undermine sickness based on lack of sleep as it will likely indicate something more serious. After my episode in hospital, I was removed from night work and my shifts were also made shorter (they are usually 13 hours). If it is possible for someone with bipolar to start and finish work at the same time every day, this should be put in place as it helps control circadian rhythm or your bodies awareness of when it needs or doesn't need sleep, something people with bipolar have trouble controlling and will often veer between oversleeping and under-sleeping.

What also happened after this was my employers read my 'crisis plan' which I made in the mental health services. Previously they were not aware I had such a thing. If you have a 'crisis plan' then it is important your employers read it, if you don't and feel you need to, you could make one and include symptoms that can be recognised when approaching crisis. The most important and obvious symptom for me is 'Rapid Pressurised Speech'. This is a very common symptom for bipolar people approaching mania but a lot of people have idiosyncratic symptoms, including twitching my head or being very wide eyed.

I think anyone with any type of disability should have regular opportunities to talk to management which I am lucky to have during supervision meetings. At the same time I think discussion of the individual's wellbeing should be confined to these meetings, something which hasn't been provided in my case. Often my manager will keep asking me how I'm doing and in front of others which I feel disrupts my privacy as it is not treatment afforded to the other employees. It also makes me feel 'babied' and makes me wonder about managements trust in my self-awareness which in turn makes me feel insecure and fixated on my own presentation.

Spectrum Conditions are like Fruit Juice: There are many types

Helen Chuter – Asperger's and Mental Health

I am on the autism spectrum, have experience of mental health issues, and hold various legal qualifications. I sit on the Lawyers with Disabilities Division (LDD) committee of the Law Society and have had experiences of voluntary posts, supporting access to justice for those who are disabled and Diverse or less-able. As a wife and mother, I have worked at, been in charge of, or simply cared for those who are down trodden in life. In my youth I was a professional Ballet Dancer.



The recognition that comes with receiving a diagnosis, and the realisation of how much difference exists within spectrum conditions, impacts upon the soul. Very often, society seeks to lump them all into one bracket. The rights and wrongs of this are not often addressed, and the feelings of the person are not always understood.

In some areas of society there is recognition and acceptance of opportunity of the diversity and its benefits; firms will hold educational events, training days and away day awareness courses. This is absolutely essential and very welcome. Sadly, in everyday life, this utopian style approach is not something which is embraced. In fact it is quite the opposite.

It is well recognised that one in four people will be diagnosed or acquire a disability/mental health condition in their life time. We have seen the death of famous rock stars recently and we have seen others celebrities well known and alike suffer things like cancer in silence, and we seem to empathise as a nation.

Yet as outspoken journalists and advocates across the globe fight for the cause of mental health, there is a lacklustre approach to mental health issues in application. Only recently has society legally recognised the struggles of marginalised people in the Equality Act 2010, which has embraced all protected characteristics including disability. Even in elite professions there is a long way to go – though thankfully there is recognition of this.

Various reform groups and politicians have worked hard like the professions to issues such as why there are high suicides in the prison population, or why there are high stress levels among children; 96% do not get the help when they need it, and access to the services are an issue.

Society at large should accept people, not label people or put people in one expectation bracket or another without asking them. Often these expectations are set out by hard task masters whose lives rarely resemble the facts of a disabled person and the life challenges that the disabled person or the family have to manage. Society rarely asks what people need - or what it's like to actually be disabled in any way shape or form.

In UK primary schools, there is “show and tell”, where you show a picture of your mum or dad and tell the class what they do for a living or talk about your favourite pet and bring that pet into school. Here’s a novel idea – why not find a way to use an opportunity like this to have more diversity and disability awareness in schools? This would make it a norm from as young as nursery school or preschool children, and allow exploration of these important issues which are too often ignored. There are mental health statistics and there is now the recognition that our children in schools are stressed because of too much pressure.

The thing that I have noted is that there is too much mentality of “divide and rule” between different disability strands. The fact that now there’s a big push on mental health is absolutely fantastic but that does not mean that we should devalue other disabilities. As someone with both Asperger’s and mental health, I firmly believe we should look at all issues, and focus on the person as a whole, not their labels. And we certainly shouldn’t allow labels to be pitted against each other, for whatever reason.

We have charity workers, which are brilliant, but sadly there seems to be a lack of resources and employing professionalism is hard – it’s difficult to pay for when there are not enough resources and budget to stretch. Disabled people don’t want to dramatise their status, live under the spotlight, or have to over-compete to cope in life, they just want to be accepted, and that is it.

Stephen Sam: Autism and Mental Health – An Overview of One on the Autism Spectrum with Mental Health Difficulties

I was diagnosed with Autism in 1997 and have since developed a number of mental health problems. I began working in the IT industry in 2012 and took a break due to unforeseen circumstances, assuming IT was not for me. Having said that, after making a number of positive changes in light of my darker days, I have recently decided to take on the next level apprenticeship, starting fresh hopefully in September 2016. To work my way back to employment status, I volunteer for Ambitious about Autism as Youth Consultant, Online Facilitator and Content creator. I am a Customer Representative and a member of the Interview Panel Board for Evolve Housing, the project I currently reside in and offer friendly advice in a life coaching nature to the ones I feel who are in need of it most.

Although Autism and Mental Health are different, they can sometimes relate to one another. Individuals with autism (I refuse to use the term 'autistic individuals') can be affected by mental health problems, and from my understanding and personal research the main ones appear to be:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

However, although these mental health problems appear to be more straightforward and better understood than more complex conditions such as Bipolar, any given Personality Disorders and Schizophrenia they should equally be given the same amount of attention and not ignored as this could result in a more serious problem.

I will now go onto a biography of myself in relation to both Autism and Mental Health. Prior to that, I will mention my support networks, self-help and lastly life prospects.

Diagnosis and Learning Statement:

During 1997, at just 3½ years old I was diagnosed with Classic Autism. I was speaking just simple words presumably to the best of my ability, and to the best of my knowledge was not understood to my best potential for that age. Shortly before my diagnosis, my behaviour and personality seemed to be distinctive to that of my sisters. Basic things, such as taking a long time to do things in an extremely thorough manner such as handwashing – using more soap after rinsing, over rinsing etc. and particularly playing with a toy car and spinning the wheels rather than wheeling the toy along the mat. My Mum took this into consideration and spoke to my GP still providing us with specialist support today. I understand that my doctor had a son who was autistic which led to us being guided by her back then and forever more. After many tests, I was diagnosed by a Child Support team in Bromley. This sanctioned a learning support statement which in 2009 was threatened to be removed, although ultimately, thankfully it was not.

Turning the wheel a few times into later years, when I left secondary school I moved onto college. With the support of my assistant, I achieved 3 Distinctions for this course which is equivalent to 3 A grades at level, being a national diploma.

Mental Health issues:

The above, is an advantage. Though later, as I am currently no longer living with my parents I was used to more support than that is currently available. Sadly, the support on offer may condition individuals into believing that they will have it after school and college years. I relied on them too much, and my parents. And because of being overwhelmed by everything, having to cook my own food, do my own washing, shopping, housekeeping it has led to anxiety related problems which even go as far as depression, feeling hopeless. Because of these struggles, I have a history of self-harm and suicide ideation. I was later diagnosed with Anankastic Personality Disorder which is essentially an Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder. If you are interested, please follow the link below for specifics where an outline of Personality Disorders has been provided by the NHS:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Personality-disorder/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

Support Networks:

On the upside, I found that I am certainly not alone. I have a wealth of support networks available to me:

For Autism:

- Burgess Autistic Trust – The local Autism charity for Bromley, Lewisham areas - <http://www.burgessautistictrust.org.uk>
- National Autistic Society – A large charity with autism specialists - <http://www.autism.org.uk>

For Mental Health:

- Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust - <http://oxleas.nhs.uk>
- Talksafe London, St Pancras – A charity who provides counselling services FREE OF CHARGE to anybody from 10-21 - <https://www.talksafe.org.uk>

Please feel free to visit any of their sites.

What now:

My future remains undecided with some ideas. Such as going back into Information Technology and investigating Counselling or Aromatherapy being two of my other interests and going into business. It is clear that I am currently not ready to go back to work which is why I am volunteering as a Customer Rep within my establishment, where I effectively have the responsibility to take in comments, complaints and praises and forward them onto the staff/managers also attending the customer involvement meetings. Furthermore, I have on already one occasion interviewed potential candidates and have a say in the successful one prior to my training in early 2016. I am volunteering for Ambitious about Autism as a Youth Consultant which involves inspections in favour for the autism society, a Content Creator where I produce pieces of useful information and documents to

inspire anybody affected by autism and lastly an Online Facilitator where I am effectively running chats. For all of these roles both at home and at Ambitious, I have received training.

Voluntary Work can be very good for mental illness, feeling like you have achieved something with future goals in mind. It can also stimulate positive experiences such as friendship which nearly always happens to anyone who volunteers, goes to work anywhere.

I hope this information is of value to you and brings inspiration. Thank you for reading.

Conclusion

by Jonathan Andrews

The number of different ways autism can affect people is almost limitless – Professor Christopher Gilberg in fact believes there as many different kinds of autism as there are autistic people – and the same is true of mental health, since not only is the range of different mental health problems very wide but two people with the same condition are likely to experience it differently, sometimes extremely so. So when autism and mental health are combined, the range of possible experiences is huge – and that’s why it’s important for professionals to look at each person as an individual, rather than being proscriptive.

It’s very important to remember the diversity of autistic people – just like the people in this booklet, they can be male or female, or define as another non-binary gender; they can be straight or LGBT, any race, age, nationality and social background, and can have experience of other disabilities/conditions besides mental health. The average autistic person will meet the criteria for a mental health condition, so it’s vital the overlaps here are recognised, but they might not necessarily be diagnosed with this condition because of reluctance from psychiatrists and clinicians to ‘apply too many labels’. Others will experience traits comparable to a mental health condition without strictly having one themselves – such as the ‘autistic anxiety’ experienced by many (including myself), subtly different from clinical anxiety but no less important to focus on.

The overlaps between autism and mental health are too stark to ignore, yet are too often glossed over for fear of people labelling autism as a mental illness. But work on this front helps the majority of autistic people who experience both. Hopefully, this collection of personal experiences is just the start of a greater push.

Dedicated to the memory of Christina Marian Annesley, 3rd January 1992 – 20th January 2015

Who had her own experiences of mental health, was passionate about advocacy and self-determination, and who fought for all voices – especially the most silenced – to be heard.

