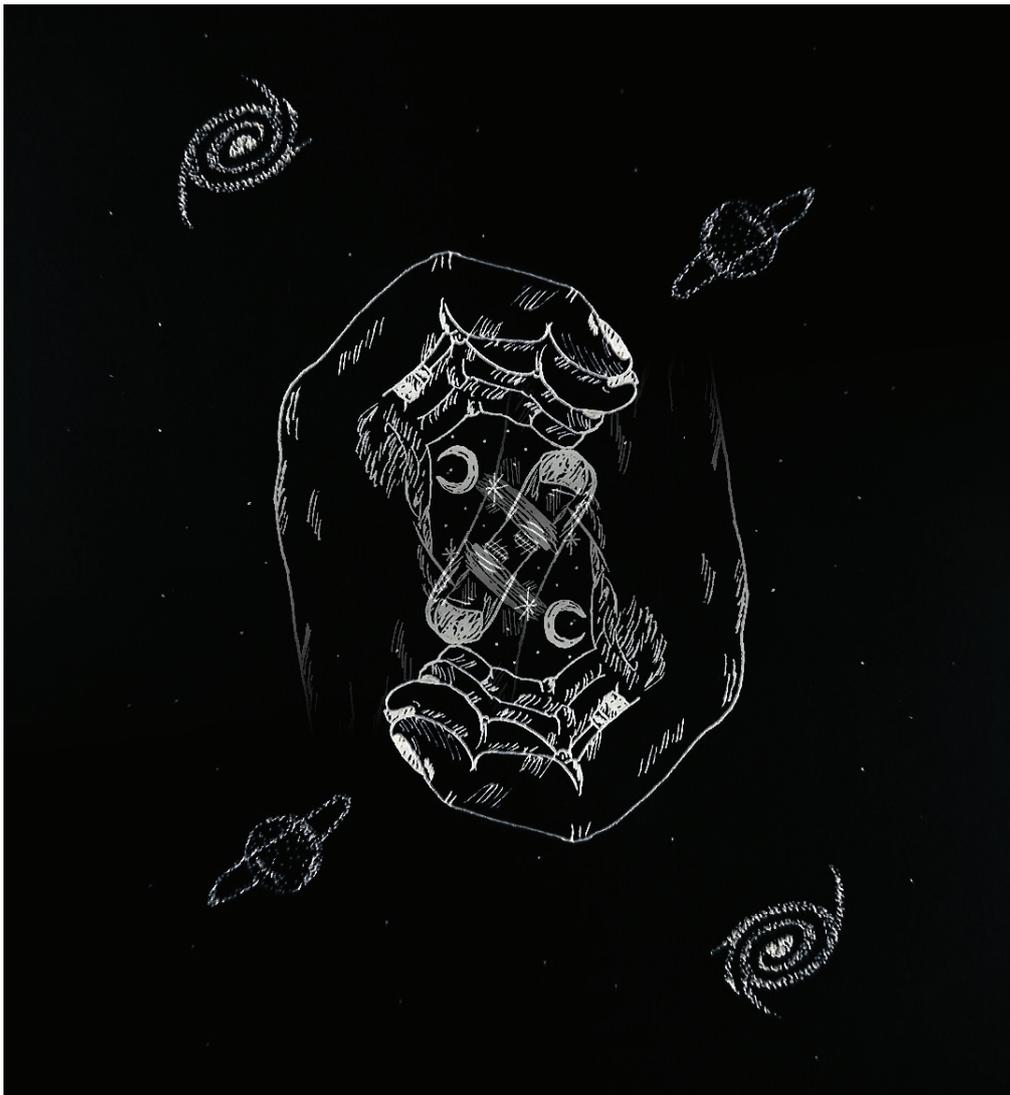


Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **108** October 2021



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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 is owned and run by the National Autistic Society, and 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

Production support: the Content Team

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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.

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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.

Tel: **0808 800 1050** (free from most landlines) or

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 **22 November 2021**

Welcome to the October edition of *the Spectrum*.

I am sorry, I have had to make a sudden change to the magazine.

You can find a full announcement on page 4, but in short: the National Autistic Society has introduced a stricter policy, which means all contributors to *the Spectrum* now need to fill in a permissions form, and the publication of pen-pal adverts has had to end.

You might have noticed that this edition is a few weeks late — publication was delayed by the need to get permissions from all the contributors.

If you receive a paper copy of the magazine, you should have also received a paper permissions form. If you send in a contribution by post, please include this completed form, and

if you submit something by email, either scan the form and attach it to the email or use the online form (the web address is on pages 4 and 19).

My thoughts are dominated by the loss of my friend and one of the most effective forces for change in the lives of Autistic people, Dinah Murray. Her obituary appears on page 12.

It feels strange to look to a future where I will never again talk to Dinah about any and every of a thousand topics, when, on thinking of her, I will not feel sad, when I will casually mention her and then move on without it feeling hugely disrespectful to her memory.

But move on I must, as we all must, into the continuum before us, the one tiny act of rebellion being to remember, and not let that memory be empty and unused,

the Editor

the permissions edition – suggestion for next issue on page 7

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Announcement about the changes to *the Spectrum*

by Peter Watt

Managing Director of National Programmes at the National Autistic Society

Dear readers,

my name is Peter, I am the Managing Director of National Programmes at the National Autistic Society. I am writing to you to, first to introduce myself and second to let you know about two changes to the magazine and how you submit content.

We have been reviewing the content of the magazine against current best practice guidance, for instance around data protection, and have concluded that we need to make two changes.

We are sorry not to give more notice of these changes but we want to ensure that we are meeting best practice guidelines as soon as possible.

The first change is that we will unfortunately no longer be taking new pen-pal requests nor publishing any that have already been submitted nor forwarding on correspondence, though everyone that is currently in direct contact with a pen pal is of course free to continue their correspondence. I'm sorry that we'll no longer

be able to run this section and would like to thank everyone who has contributed in the past.

The second change is that we are now asking contributors to sign a permissions form when they submit content for the magazine, so we are always clear about how we can share their content.

For this edition, a paper form for all contributors to sign is included with the magazine. For future editions, we will have an online form where you can send us your submissions and confirm the permissions at the same time. The form will soon be available on *the Spectrum* pages of the National Autistic Society website — please check back there to send in your contributions.

www.autism.org.uk/spmagpermissions

Thank you for continuing to support *the Spectrum*, and for your wonderful contributions. I hope that you will continue to send your content and we hope that the addition of the webform will allow more people to do this.

Editor's note

In order to have enough permissions to publish a full edition of *the Spectrum* at short notice, I had to ask favours of several National Autistic Society colleagues who kindly agreed to provide articles. This is not *the Spectrum*'s usual practice

of publishing pieces from readers only, so all such contributions include a note that they are either written by an Autistic colleague or were originally submitted to *Your Autism*, the charity's membership magazine.



This feature and two letters on page 10
© Paigetheoracle 2021

I am not autistic; I am neurodiverse

by Jack Howes

a National Autistic Society employee
the views expressed are the author's own

© Jack Howes 2021

Theories are a dangerous thing. We all have them, consciously and subconsciously. Pub bores devise methods of how best to win money on fruit machines. Football fans formulate bizarre theories for why certain referees supposedly give decisions against their team. Commuters work out which train station exits are quickest during their daily journeys to work. Albert Einstein devised the theory of relativity. Whatever our intelligence or qualifications, we all theorise.

Now, it is my time to come up with a theory. I do not have any qualifications, but possess life experience, curiosity and a brain which spends frustratingly little time in the present and a worrying amount of time in the past and future. My new theory is this:

Autism doesn't *really* exist, not in its present sense anyway. Those of us with autism diagnoses — we are not autistic, we are neurodiverse.

For the uninitiated, neurodiversity refers to variation in the human brain regarding sociability,

learning, attention, mood and other mental functions in a non-pathological sense. In a medical sense, various conditions (listed in the paragraph below) which lead to cognitive differences come under the neurodiversity umbrella.

I like to think of neurodiversity as a buffet — you have autism in one bowl, ADHD in another, a smothering of OCD on a china plate in the corner, dollops of dyslexia and dyspraxia next to that, with Tourette's syndrome and dyscalculia on a table at the back.

Now, speaking personally briefly, I have an autism diagnosis and since my diagnosis in 2012, have identified as an autistic person. In job applications, on my social media, chatting to folks in person, I have used the autism label to describe myself, with an official NHS diagnosis as proof.

However, in that time, I have learnt huge amounts about autism and how the brain operates generally. I am aware autism has a

strong comorbidity with the aforementioned conditions of ADHD, OCD, dyspraxia and so on. However, autism is the only diagnosis I have and there is the strong sense, with myself and others, that I am autistic and other conditions are a by-product of autism.

As I grow older, I start to doubt whether this true. I think of my cognitive traits — poor attention span, huge struggles with executive functioning, highly obsessive and repetitive thinking patterns. Now, I don't think these are all consequences of being autistic, but simply various different neurodiverse conditions — elements of autism, OCD and ADHD combining as one. I certainly don't feel as if one of those conditions stands out, or merits priority over the other.

With many of my autistic pals, I notice similar traits which are likely attributed to autism, because that's what they were diagnosed with, when they likely have other conditions too. "Autism" as a stand-alone diagnosis I don't believe to be sufficient.

an article (continued) and a notice

I believe now that we are all neurodiverse, autism being fully comorbid with other conditions, which are often not acknowledged or diagnosed.

This belief doesn't only derive from personal experience. In the light of the Spectrum 10k project (not related to *the Spectrum* magazine), I have been considering the main goals of Spectrum 10k — to research the genetics of autistic people and identify autistic genes in people's brains, which will at least in theory lead to better support being provided to autistic people.

I may be proved wrong, but I struggle to see how one autistic gene could exist which makes clear whether someone is autistic or not. Autism, while I imagine partly genetic, develops through so many different contextual factors. Stimuli is the most impactful of these, but the living arrangements of autistic people, what school they go to, where they work, anxiety levels, physical health and so on are hugely influential in how our autism impacts us.

These beliefs came to me recently when discussing chronic pain with a friend. Chronic fatigue syndrome, or

ME, is becoming increasingly common, especially amongst autistic people. Alongside fatigue and tiredness, chronic pain and discomfort are also sadly ubiquitous. My friend informed me that ME often develops as a psychological response to physical experiences. This means social determinants like racism, poverty and discrimination often cause more intense pain responses for people.

Why would autism, in certain aspects, be any different? Sensory overload may afflict us one day but not another, when levels of stimuli are the same. Autistic traits and the extents we experience them come and go, depending on context and circumstance. The idea then that autism is entirely genetic, context-free and consistent is ludicrous. The same I feel is true of all neurodiverse conditions — consider the impact of the smartphone upon those with ADHD for example. People may not have ADHD or OCD at birth but develop symptoms of those conditions as they grow older.

This adds to my belief that our brains are always evolving and a simple autism diagnosis, easily spotted through genetics, is a nonsense

notion. We are all, in my view, neurodiverse above all else. Of course, some of us may be more autistic than others, in the same way that some struggle more with ADHD with only a dash of autism. But I do not think that one diagnosis is accurate any more. To recognise our brains as being neurodiverse, comprising elements of different conditions, would be far more effective and accurate than the status quo, when autism for those diagnosed tends to loom large above all other conditions.

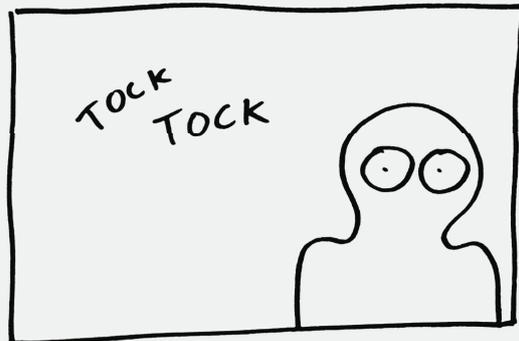
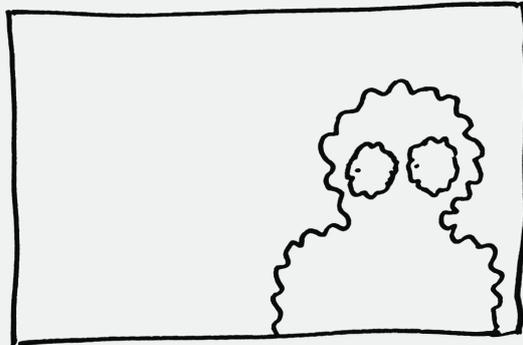
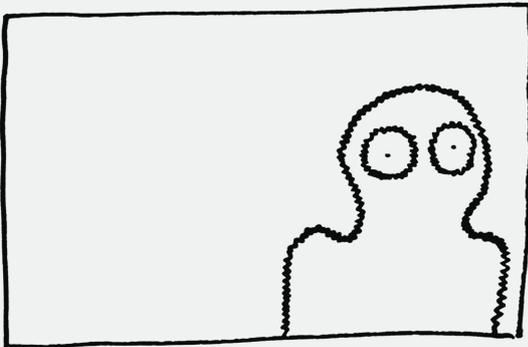
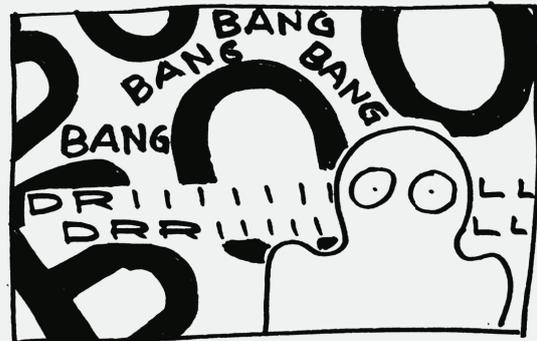
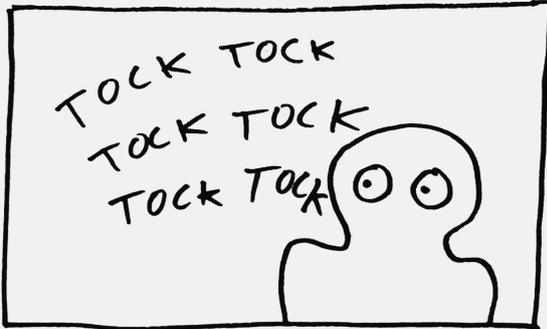
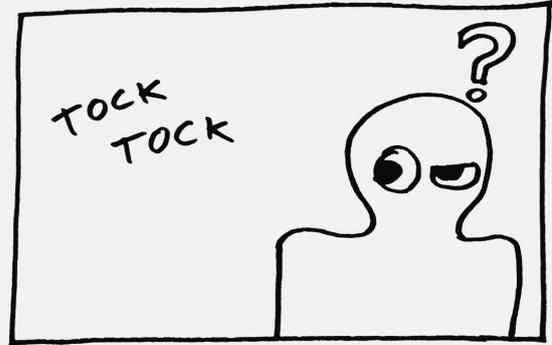
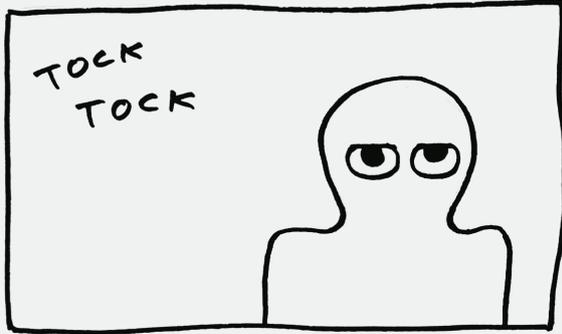
I would hope, if this belief was shared by others, that we could build a better society which truly meets people's needs. We are all unique, have our own needs and if these could be met individually, through one-to-one support, with all autistic people not just being treated the same, we can live happier, more fulfilling lives.

For so many people with autism diagnoses, there will be aspects of their behaviour they don't understand or struggle to control. By embracing neurodiversity, I believe we can better understand people's traits, their support requirements and then meet those in due course.

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for January will be **writing on any subject you like**. 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. Remember, if you want to see different content in *the Spectrum*, the best way to change it is to send something in!

Noise



Being Autistic and BAME

(from a black and minority ethnic community)

by **Hassan Mustafa**

© Hassan Mustafa 2021

I come from a community where hidden disabilities still have a lot of stigma attached to them. Speaking about my autism isn't easy for me. The lack of emphasis on mental health issues, Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is still very evident amongst the Asian community today but I do think things are starting to improve.

The cultural expectations that cross generational boundaries demonstrate that you must learn to accept and behave how society wants you to be, showing your issues is seen as a weakness. I have learnt how to mask my behaviour and I find ways to manage — if anything I manage “too well”.

Growing up belonging to an ethnic minority, it is not widely understood how prevalent these issues are because culture appears to take over and my experience has shown me that these issues are very rarely spoken about.

I grew up in a multicultural part of the United Kingdom and attended a state school.

Having issues throughout most of my childhood life had always been overlooked. I could never understand why I struggled with my education, why I found it difficult to interact in groups or why I felt too nervous to speak or why I found it challenging to feel accepted. I could never understand why I found it difficult to understand people, their emotions or why I would take things on a literal basis. I get upset when I cannot do something at a particular time or carry out my special interests.

Being Asian and Autistic means I have more than one identity. An identity I've found difficult to understand. Something that I will never be able to make sense of.

Fast forward in my life: I have managed to graduate university and I now work as an immigration officer for one of the United Kingdom's busiest airports. I've only just recently been diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder and the struggle continues.

The thought of going in to work frightens me, being around people frightens

me, not having a routine and a set amount of things to do on a regular basis is frightening but I don't seem to be understood — I find work that challenging I have considered quitting on many occasions. The noise and the busy atmosphere and being faced with new situations is a difficult thing to overcome. The lack of awareness and understanding for an adult with ASD is disappointing. I always tell people that children with ASD grow up as adults with ASD. This has given me the courage to speak about my diagnosis at work and openly and do my bit to raise awareness.

I am part of a national committee where I advocate for disability issues. I believe in inclusion, and raising awareness has been a form of release for me.

People's capabilities come in different forms, abilities and a range of colours. My aim is to raise awareness and encourage autistic people to go out into the community and reach their full potential.

You are who you are, you shouldn't have to change for anybody. Embrace yourself.

letters to the Editor

Dear Goth

Here we are, another day, another message written in gobbledegook:

“Searching for signals. No signal. Check signal cable.”

No, press the other remote button to load up the second TV screen.

Every time you turn on the telly you get this meaningless jargon, which throws you because it doesn't relate to anything that is going on (or in this case *not* going on).

It's not just the television is it? Sometimes it is the computer:

“Can't connect. Unable to verify account name or password.”

Again it is absolutely nothing to do with me but

service provider upgrades or you changing your account details and it just needs you to hang on a couple of days, until the software adapts to the changes.

Let's not forget our mobiles in this techno jungle or jumble.

“An unknown device from another location has tried to access your account. If this is you, you need do nothing.”

Well it was me but I am not in London, Glasgow, Bexleyheath or Timbuktu.

Once more the panic button jumps into operation because the implication is that it is someone elsewhere trying to hack my account, when in fact the truth is more mundane and once again, the words do not fit the situation in reality. Location software is inaccurate and this techno God is the

Wizard of Oz, with feet of clay.

Whoever writes these messages that come up on the screen have obviously nothing better to do with their time, other than to scare witless first-time users. They get paid to write this stuff, when it might be better to just play the theme from *Jams* to give us something that reflects the fear engendered in us all by pointless messages and useless, confusing jargon that doesn't mean what it says.

By the way I could threaten them with impunity because I know the software they use would tell them I happened to be on the far side of the Moon.

Oh yes, and we do know that our call is important to you (and other likely stories).

Paigetheoracle

Dear Goth

Lockdown and toilets.

I wonder if anyone else on *the Spectrum* has found using public toilets easier because of lockdown? I normally find it embarrassing to use them but wearing a mask seems to make it easier.

Paigetheoracle

Dear Goth

I have recently developed an interest in the moomin books by author Tove Jansson.

I started reading them because I remembered enjoying a couple of them when I read them as a child and I wanted to see if I still liked them now that I'm an adult. It turns out that I absolutely love them!

The world that the author created whilst writing about the moomins and their friends really speaks to me — I love the characters and the relationships that

they have with nature and with their home, Moominvalley.

I would be curious to know if any other readers have a particular connection to any book or series of books, whether it's something that they remember reading as children or one that they read more recently?

I think that I will be rereading and thinking about the moomins for many years to come, but I also want to reread other books that I remember from when I was young — next up is the Animorphs books!

Laura



by **Charlie**, son of a National Autistic Society employee

Dinah Murray

27 May, 1946, to 7 July, 2021

obituary by **Laura**

The death of someone who has affected the lives of many Autistic people is a rare event, thankfully. But in July Dinah Murray died after a relatively short illness, due to pancreatic cancer.

She gloried in the title of Productive Irritant, named after the irritant, typically a nematode worm or other parasite, which causes an oyster to produce a pearl. “Productive irritant” was used to describe her by the economist Martin Knapp in 2017 at the launch of the report he co-authored, *The autism dividend*.

Dinah was born in Hampstead in North London, her parents, Labour MP Tony Greenwood and designer Jill Greenwood (born Gillian Crawshay-Williams) influencing her radical view of the world and the ways it could be better. She was a life-long political protester.

She studied fine art at Newcastle University, didn't enjoy it, so she dropped out and went on to graduate in linguistics and anthropology at UCL. She married David Murray the following year and had three children, Bruno, Leo and Fergus, fostering a fourth, Eddie.

Amazingly, while still raising four children, Dinah got her PhD in 1986.

I could sum up the rest of her life as “Dinah went on to set up and support many Autistic-led organisations until she died” but it seems too small a sentence to describe such a mass of work. However, I don't want this piece to become a (very) long list of her achievements with a few anecdotes to season. So much of what Dinah did was directly for people. That some of it made the powers-that-be take notice, so much the

better. She was never deceived by the recognition given to her — often recognition is used as a sop so that people feel listened-to, but if it doesn't produce change, so what?

Dinah was a committed supporter of Autistic Pride, Weird Pride, keen to get people to accept themselves for who they really were.

Culminating with publication in 2005, Wenn Lawson, Mike Lesser, and Dinah developed the concept of monotropism to explain Autism. “Monotropism” is literally “single-way-ishness” and describes the way Autistic interests are very focused, Autists often fail to take in the “bigger picture” — spotting the kingfisher but not the cars — and Autists' attention is usually limited to one or a few things at any particular time. On initial publication the response from academia was mixed, but support for the idea has grown.

In 2020 Dinah moved to Fife to be near Fergus, to get away from Tory government, and to further her research in mycology and its role in the wider ecology of an area — she was always full of ideas on all sorts of subjects, and very knowledgable in many of them.

But it is Dinah-the-person I remember fondly, always willing and ready to help others whenever she had the energy to spare, always alert to people in need in difficult social situations.

When I first came across her while she was overloaded it was such a surprise — she had limits to her! Before, she'd seemed superhuman, but no, her understanding and kindness were driven by first-hand experience of the difficulties she helped with.

an article (continued) and another article

In my more typical experience of her, she would flit effortlessly from hard-nosed academic discussion to a broad joke and back to discussion, keeping everyone on good terms, making sure everyone had had enough to eat, lancing in with

an observation that made us all stop and think.

It is hard to express my loss, yet my loss is tiny compared to those closer to her. Dinah will remain in my thoughts.

Relationships

by **Kayleigh Butler**

© Kayleigh Butler 2021

I think relationships are challenging for everyone on the spectrum. Whether it is difficulty in communicating or being alienated because we are different. I have struggled to make friends throughout my life and most of them turned into my bullies, saying horrible things behind my back. I still to this day can only say I have less than a handful of friends, including my partner but I don't hear from the others often.

I have found that my rules of friendship are never respected, and I do feel discouraged when I am always the first to make contact even after weeks or months of not speaking. I find we all treat people the way we want to be treated, it was drilled into us throughout our early school lives (and we are sticklers for the rules). Neurotypicals don't seem to have the same philosophy, which I will never understand. The majority seem to think that they don't have to try and maintain a relationship, which is why I think so many romantic relationships end in anger. I have been with my partner for two-and-a-half years, we live together and naturally lockdown had an effect on us. A lot of our common interests require being able to go out. We like exploring, cinemas, restaurants, sitting in the sun reading. We wanted to go to our local sports centre, go bowling, play tennis. All of these were scuppered as soon as the one daily walk was initiated. The only thing we managed to alter safely and comfortably was our weekly date night for movies. We used our streaming services and second-hand DVDs,

bought a bag of treats with our weekly shop and took to snuggling on our sofa together. We have been trying hard to find other things to do, to be open in communicating our needs. No judgement allowed, only questions to better understand each other. Talking is so crucial, I never could understand the "silent treatment" or screaming obscenities at each other. That is not productive. Growing up I witnessed communication breakdowns, poor relationships that were my only example. It upset me to watch. I knew this was the opposite of what I wanted, the opposite of healthy.

I'd be lying if I didn't say I struggled to communicate or that I didn't get agitated and take things the wrong way. In those moments I have learnt that I need to take a break, and really think about what I really wanted to say. When I was in a good state of mind after one of these difficult situations, I told my partner that when I appear agitated it is never meant to be directed at him, that I am not angry with him (unless I tell him something specific that has upset me due to his actions), I told him that I just feel overwhelmed and don't really know why. He now knows what I need in those moments. I made my needs clear, and he respects that, and I try my best to do the same for him. We spend more time asking what the other needs than focusing on why they are feeling a certain way. It works. I think if we hadn't put this in place, maybe we wouldn't be together now. Kindness and honesty are our

an article (continued) and a story

foundation. The respect and love for each other brings us happiness and a closeness that we don't have with anyone else in this way.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is think about what your wants and needs are and have an open conversation with the other party. Remember to ask what their wants and needs are also. It helps when you feel comfortable to do this. I am not always in a position to have that conversation. I won't always feel comfortable if I am unsure whether I really know the person I am talking to. I trust my gut. Almost as though

it is a sixth sense, I never open up until I am certain I can trust them. Until I know they won't use what I tell them against me — I have been burned before. It took a lot of trial and error to get here, but I can safely say I am happy and proud of my relationship and the friendships that I have formed.

I have a blog at

<https://kayleighcreativeworld.wordpress.com>

I hope you are all okay — **Kayleigh.**

A clear focus

by **S Bee**

© S Bee 2021

“How fabulous!” Jenny, Marsha's best friend, gushed over the phone.

“Of course I'm pleased, but” Marsha stopped, as her thoughts flew back to that morning. Wow. She'd actually won first prize in that photography competition!

The prize was a residential photography course, taught to a small group over a weekend, held in a converted farmhouse in a Yorkshire dales village. This would be the perfect backdrop for capturing beautiful, atmospheric images.

The dales village wasn't far away from Marsha's home town, either.

It was the kind of arrangement that encouraged like-minded chats, to share ideas and swap hints and tips with other enthusiasts.

But a crippling lack of confidence was holding her back.

“Don't throw away this amazing opportunity,” Jenny went on. “You're a truly talented

photographer. That's why the judges selected your work above all the other competitors.”

“Hmm . . .”

Jenny cut in: “I'll never forget your wonderful image of that fox. It took my breath away.”

Marsha's mind flew back — she'd risen at 3am to capture that shot.

She'd waited in the woods, until the shy fox had appeared through the ethereal dawn mist. Then she'd raised the lens and clicked.

Behind the camera was the only place where Marsha felt safe and secure.

“I've decided not to take that competition prize,” Marsha began, when she and Jenny were settled in a cafe.

“Why?” The disappointed tone in Jenny's voice was hard to listen to.

a story (continued)

Marsha fiddled with her spoon. “What if the tutors and students don’t like my photos?”

“What if you don’t like theirs?” Jenny challenged.

“I’ll be a bundle of nerves. They’ll have a good laugh at my mistakes.”

“They’ll be nervous too, and making mistakes isn’t the end of the world. Look, why not contact the tutor, and explain that you suffer from a lack of confidence? They might be able to make allowances.”

“I’ll think about it,” she muttered.

“How would you feel if you didn’t go?” Jenny asked.

She considered. “Disappointed. Sad.”

“In the months to come, would you regret not taking the prize?”

“I know I will.”

Later, Marsha found a message in her inbox from the competition organisers.

“Could you confirm your winning place? If you’ve decided to decline the first prize, we’ll offer it to one of our runners-up. Please let us know as soon as possible.”

She pondered over Jenny’s words.

She hadn’t told Jenny, but motivated by the win, Marsha had framed her fox photo, and taken it along to an arty type of shop.

“Oh, this is rather special,” the shop owner had said. “I’d love to display it.”

They’d reached an agreement over a price, and Marsha had come away with a sense of achievement and pride.

When her photo sold, she was over the moon. “More please!” the shop owner had demanded.

Time was running out.

Marsha needed to stop dawdling about the competition prize, and make a final decision.

As Marsha stepped out of the taxi, she clutched her camera and looked around the beautiful scenery. The sun shone, birds chirped and bees buzzed. Bliss!

A woman of her own age approached her.

“Is it Marsha?”

Marsha nodded.

“I’m Kay. I’m glad you emailed me and told me about your lack of confidence. I see you took my advice to arrive earlier. Please don’t worry — everyone will put you at ease,” she smiled.

Marsha returned the smile. Kay’s kindness and warmth made her anxiety instantly melt away.

Her presence here was all down to Jenny.

She’d finally told Jenny about the fox photo sale.

“A person who gets out of bed at 3 am and tramps to the woods on her own certainly doesn’t lack confidence. And a person who strides into a shop and presents her work to a complete stranger doesn’t, either.”

Hmm, Marsha mused. She made a very good point!

“Enjoy the course — and good luck with your new career!”

Marsha’s spine tingled. New career?

In that case, she thought, I’d better get on and capture some more images . . .

It's the details that count

by **Adele Lea**

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I am an author with high-functioning Asperger's syndrome, and my book, *It's the details that count!* has recently been published. In addition to being an enjoyable read, it has the hope of raising awareness and giving an insight into females with high-functioning AS.

Throughout my life, I have frequently utilised thinking up labyrinthine mystery plots as a coping mechanism in stressful situations — however, with more time on my hands due to covid-19, my family suggested writing one of them down.

Diagnosed with high-functioning Asperger's syndrome at the age of four, from my experience of seven schools, I have become well aware of how people's lack of understanding the way AS presents in girls massively impacts in day-to-day life. Liking some socialising (unlike the autistic male stereotypical form), I didn't just sit in a corner and say nothing, or in contrast, run around the room and dive under tables. Simply because I looked normal and achieved well academically, people wouldn't accept I had any difficulties, insisting on putting everything down to my being an only child.

This was despite my displaying obvious AS signs that people could have easily picked up on with a little awareness. For instance when I was younger, I: took my teacher's metaphors literally, such as being really worried and going to find her when she wasn't back in "two secs" as she'd said she would be; struggled with changes to routine, and group work; lay on the floor due to sensory overload; got into trouble for answering that no, I wouldn't like to open the window; highly exasperated teachers by "interrogating" them due to my anxiety and auditory difficulties; annoyed the local police by actually answering their question in a school talk concerning whether

we could remember what our teacher was wearing over a week before — I apprised them of every small detail and this unintentionally disproved their point about how their work is "highly skilled" because "people don't notice, or remember, information".

However, obviously with age, the signs to look out for become more subtle. Thus, hoping to raise awareness so other people can be better understood, I have given the book *It's the details that count!* the slant of giving an insight into female high-functioning Asperger's. This also helped the fact I had instinctively made high-functioning AS determine the actions of the two main characters, Martha and Nora Quick, (who are aged 16 and 14-and-3/4 years respectively).

By having the local police's undisguised antipathy contrasting the CID detectives' acceptance, I've tried to demonstrate the effect of people's understanding and reaction to some unique quirks caused by their AS (mostly their literal mind and matter-of-fact nature).

I have always loved a good complicated, but enjoyable, mystery, and didn't want the AS explanations to dominate this aspect. Therefore, I have put the explanations concerning the AS behaviours in brackets so it's easier to follow the plot, and isn't too intrusive on the novel if some people aren't primarily interested in this non-fiction part. After all, as is the case with most things in life, AS presents slightly differently in each individual, although the main underlying principles are the same.

After deliberating a way to link AS and a murder mystery, I came up with the important link: details. Small and seemingly insignificant points, that only those with AS would take any

an article (continued) and a poem

notice of, prove to be vital in solving the intricate mystery. I had already unintentionally made them important and so this was not difficult to develop. This, plus the main characters' love of mathematics and counting interpenetrate to form the basis for the link between the plot and AS, and thus the title.

One of the hardest parts of writing the book was not to let the “exuberance of my verbosity” dominate the book! Although the book is written for adults and teenagers to read, I want the insight to be within reach of a wide range of academic levels, and so my nana who is neurotypical has reined in some of the long words when helping to edit the book, as I know not everyone shares my obsession for them!

The setting was difficult to decide on — I originally had it by the sea, then in the mountains, and finally decided on part of Yorkshire where the scars (hills) and lakes would enhance the context.

At one point, the plot became so complicated

and mixed up — some described it as a lot more complicated than any Agatha Christie — that I wondered whether I would be able to complete the book. However, my family (and the comfort of my dog) helped me get back on track with it and write a summary to get things clear in my head. An adapted form of that summary is now incorporated at the end, as I know there's nothing more frustrating than small, but significant, details being left unaccounted for.

It's been difficult getting the right balance between: the book's being a pleasurable read, and raising awareness into the AS difficulties and “silver linings”. However, I hope its being written in the first person of Martha (one of the sisters with AS) facilitates the reader in escaping into the world of the Quick sisters and in better understanding how their AS makes them view it.

You can order *It's the details that count!* by Adele Lea on line. More information can be found on the following website:

byadelelea.wixsite.com/detailscount

• • •

I missed the subtext again

Here I am writing about writing again
typing again

like I'm a tiny stick figure
swinging between space bars
along the ellipsis . . .
trying not to fall through the spaces

(trying to avoid too much word play
because I know it's cliched, but I can't resist it)

Crazy Cat Lady

by **Laura Williams**

article originally submitted to *Your Autism* magazine,

the membership magazine of the National Autistic Society

Working in a cat shelter means that I get the chance to spend time with cats every day. One of the greatest joys is seeing our cats move on to new, loving homes. It is so great to see a nervous cat gradually build trust and begin to enjoy human company.

Then in March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic hit, and everyone was told to stay at home. We had to suspend rehoming, turn away all of our volunteers, and continue caring for our cats with significantly reduced staffing levels. Our volunteers and supporters were often asking how the cats were, and occasionally about the staff too. I was also missing family members who I was unable to visit. I realised I could connect with them by making some videos with cats. I dug out some of my favourite childhood books, and so began my series of pandemic bedtime stories, featuring cats.

Cats do not always behave as expected, and this made for some very amusing videos. Some cats simply sat still, watching events from inside a box where they felt safe. Others emerged for affection or sat on my lap, and others simply walked off. One group of six kittens climbed all over me and even untied my shoelaces.

My mum started sending my videos to her friends. I was able to record a special birthday message for my niece and nephews, that everyone else could enjoy too. One day I phoned my parents and could hear my own voice in the background, as my parents were

watching one of my videos! Although my videos were aimed at children, most of our feedback came from adults who simply enjoyed seeing the cats. I was even interviewed on BBC Radio Surrey about my bedtime stories with cats.

Eventually we developed a special system to rehome cats safely. It was a wrench to see our lockdown cohort of cats move on after we had spent so much time with them, but we were also thrilled for them to finally get the opportunity to have a proper home. This is all keeping us very busy and there is now limited time available for reading stories to cats. I do hope to continue reading the occasional cat story though, as it is important to maintain my reputation as a crazy cat lady!



stuff you might like to know about *the Spectrum*

The rules of *the Spectrum*

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

- 1) *The Spectrum* is funded by the National Autistic Society and readers' subscriptions. We welcome submissions on any topic from people across the whole of the autism spectrum.
- 2) *The Spectrum* is quarterly, published in January, April, July and October. If you do not receive a copy when you expect to, please contact the magazine.
- 3) Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests something different. This is done to protect your privacy.
- 4) Book reviews are the most popular thing with readers of *the Spectrum*, so please consider submitting one. They can be about any book, not just books about autism. If you do not want your review to appear in other National Autistic Society publicity about that book, please make this clear.
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- 10) If you phone and leave a message on the machine, please speak slowly and clearly and spell uncommon words, as the line isn't very clear. Please give any phone number you leave twice for the same reason. Remember to give your postal address so that we can find your record.
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- 14) Although each issue is themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the letters and articles will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel, and for fitting the space available.

The poet

You pulled up one day in a gypsy cart on my estate
Inside I heard the poetry and grace of wondering souls
I wore a white shirt with a stitch of geometric holes across my chest
As a fragmented window, absorbing the sunshine of your lapsing breaths directly into my heart
I followed your people from south to north to east
I sat in the corners and watched the ease of your interactions, bemused and enchanted by the melody
Soul cries, heart bleeds, urban intelligence, ironic humour and the quirks of funk
I spoke only with my eyes
My mouth bound tight
My heart burned in your presence
Communicating in my essence that i get you, but i dont know how to get to you, because I am autistic
If my visibility was but a celebratory balloon to your eloquence
If my mouth was to open, it would only be natural for me to deflate and fly away

by **Chloë T**

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